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From Tradition to Modernity: *A Critical Study of Y.B. Satyanarayana's 'My Father Baliah'*

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“An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts”

- ‘Annihilation of Caste and other Essays’ by D.R. B.R. Ambedkar

Abstract

This research paper attempts to explore the idea of tradition and modernity found in Dalit autobiography through the text of Y.B. Satyanarayana's *'My Father Baliah'*. It delves deep into the strength of Dalits which helped them to resist the affixed order maintained by the mainstream. The element of modernity stands responsible for the growth of untouchables with the aid of education, job opportunities, gender equality and social inclusion in the society. With the advent of Britishers, modernity became focal point for development of excluded section of Indian society. The aim of the paper is to locate rising stature of the outcaste with the weapon of modernity over the obsolete tradition. It interrogates the way through which Dalits overcome the stringent regulations set by caste-dominated people. Gradually, the space of the desire is caricatured by the serious actions taken towards the upliftment of one particular section through railway jobs. By following the textual analysis, the objective is to reflect the potency of modernity behind the pinnacle of success.

Keywords: Modernity, Dalit, Tradition, Conflict and Education

Introduction

Indian society was stratified into four levels of class order named as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The hypocrisy of the system is maintained by dominant discourse to enjoy the fruit of higher position. The division of people on the basis of caste ceased with the arrival of the British empire, who ultimately reacted against the act of slavery and proposed the modern notion, which left a great impact on the minds of Dalits. From here onwards, the journey of progression commenced and marginalised section became capable of situating oneself in a state of utopia. There has been stereotypical thought of upper class to see an outcaste as someone who follows their command otherwise, the circumstances become the opposite of normativity. Shudras were kept away from the education and developmental activities they were consigned to menial tasks, but the entry of Britishers broken down the restriction of knowledge sharing. Instead, they promoted the relevance of education, gender equality, financial independence status and inclusion of Dalits on social platform. According to the work *'Varna, Jati, Caste: A Primer on Indian Social Structures'* of Rajiv Malhotra and Vijaya Viswanathan states that:

“It is widely assumed that education in India, whether in the ancient period or up until British rule, was the privilege of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. This view maintains that Shudras became emancipated only when the British introduced English education in India and provided them equal opportunities” (Malhotra and Viswanathan 59-60).

The cognizance of English language changed the life of Dalits that is depicted in the saga of Satyanarayana's '*My Father Baliah*' known for giving tribute to his father for a commendable job of educating their children beside having so many obstacles in life. It was originally published in 2011 with the relentless efforts of Prof. Satyanarayana who also dedicated this book to his unlettered mother Narsamma. He is the sixth child of his parents and acts as the co-founder of the centre for Dalit Studies, Hyderabad. The story unfolds with the description of village setting along with intense urge of Baliah to keep his children away from the environment of pollution and purity, thereby, he employed at railways under British administration. In this respect, D.R. Nagaraj work '*The Flaming Fleet and other essays*' pointed out:

“The social policy of the British Raj, in combination with an intense urge desire for upward mobility among the lower castes, had generated quite strong optimism among the Shudras” (Nagaraj 28).

The idea of caste gradually flipped with the element of modernity found in community of the Dalits. Although, tradition also moved ahead along with the new way of life to capture things with a lively perspective. As far as, this memoir is concerned about the upheavals of the author and how he overcome it with the assistance of education and fixed income of his father from railway job. The motif left this book on coming generation to kick off all kinds of predicament by using the reachable unit known as modernity. It is the journey of a family belonging to the Dalit Madiga community of Telangana in Andhra Pradesh. The motive behind this paper is to interrogate the ability of Dalits through which they came out of the chamber of rigidity and became an impeccable set of success story. It demonstrated the evil practices of the untouchable society which was assigned by authority to reside in the bleak world of illiteracy and backwardness. But their reach towards higher education altered the topsy-turvy association. It built their identity and existence optimistically as rightly expressed by D.R. Nagaraj in the above quotation.

Discussion

The notion of self-development has key role in the narration of Y.B. Satyanarayana's "*My Father Baliah*" in addition to central point of tracing back the changing factors in the lives of outcaste who, over the period of the time became victim by the hands of the mainstream. The idea of modernity struck when grandfather of the author decided to join railway in order to protect son after the death of his wife, from the prejudiced treatment of the authority. His grandfather received a piece of land from the Nizam of Hyderabad in return for beautiful pair of shoes, whereas biasedness initiated by Zamindar, who was not able to digest bigger area of land in the pockets of lower caste people, then gradually he snatched the most of the piece of land just to caricatured the goodwill of his class (upper order). Despite having modern ways to tackle with the predicament, there was consistent struggle for all the members of the Yelukati family to cross it. The author himself states in the narration as follows:

“In order to avoid pollution (from the casteless untouchables) through wind to caste Hindus, the house of each varna (caste) are built in such a way that the wind blows from the dwellings of the Brahmins to the rest of the village” (Satyanarayana 4).

The father of the author decided to make his abode far away from the ambience of dirt. Rather, they established in railway colonies so that growth became epicentre without any restriction of caste-conscious people. Not only this, men and women had egalitarian position in the memoir there is no such difference revealed in the saga, unlike the tales of other Dalit writers. Even the women's sphere had a dominant stature by vibrant expression of their contribution to the income of family while working in the agricultural farms and handling little kids. The women portrayed altogether in different limelight by being surrounded with the treasure of knowledge and holding a great post in their respective field. Beside facing hurdles for daily expenses of seven children, Baliah not left any opportunity to maintain the decorum and discipline in the house. In this regard, Nicholas B. Dirks work "*Caste of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*" states that:

“What was useful for British rule also became available for the uses of many Indians who were recruited to participate in one way or another in the construction of colonial knowledge” (Dirks 14).

Simultaneously, Baliah and his children took the pleasure of colonial knowledge and service by serving at the lowest rung known as pointsmen. Although, his third son Abbasayulu, progress had been vividly featured when he obtained higher post at the officer level, thereby, followed by the success of Doctorate degree, first member of his community to be felicitated with an honorary award. After him, there was an overt dedication of younger ones to gain bigger achievements in life. Also, their staple food consisted of dal, wheat and rice instead of scrap. Despite this, technology played a crucial role in changing their lives such as facility of transportation through railways, moving from kerosene lamps to electricity and etc. The mobility among the individuals helped in pursuing the higher education and exploring the outside world of hustle-bustle.

In addition to it, even after adoption of newer ways of dealing with various aspects they never turn away from the traditional rituals of their community. For instance, after the wedding ceremony girls adhere the rule of living with parents until she reached puberty. For the very first time, author himself asserted that he became the eye witness of marriage held in a banquet hall that is of his own brother. In this regard, Satyanarayana pointed out “We were seeing a wedding performed in a banquet hall for the first time- that too my own brother’s!” (Satyanarayana 142). With reference to it, one can restore their essence of carrying the tradition but not the ignorance and superstitions which generally part in narration of the Dalits. The quintessence of the same is trapped when disease spread among people and writer himself stood against the ill practice of scorers, which his mother followed instead he articulated the rational perspective of visiting the doctor. One such incident happened when Balraj’s daughter Shama was fell due to high temperature and family visited the scorers formerly, but after having no sigh of relief, they rushed to hospital over there her ailment was tracked as an attack of polio which made her handicapped for a lifetime. Soon, this girl overcame all hardships by receiving post graduate degree in chemistry, followed by post of lecturer in government college. The holistic view is not only extended to the modern ways of survival, but also the modern thinking which folks perceive to run their lives.

Therefore, social inclusion of Dalits by the efforts of Britishers in public discourse built their confidence to deal with hodgepodge matters of current time. The dwelling in the colony from different walks of life gave inner strength to reside in a tranquil state while maintaining dignity for everyone. Wisdom and desire to opt modern appliances, likewise, radio witnessed in the narration stand as contributory factor behind the growth and development. Hence, Satyanarayana tries to depict other side of outcaste that was how they tackled the hurdles of casteist society.

Conclusion

To sum up, the whole idea focus emphasised on modernity and tradition among untouchables of Andhra Pradesh. The memoir presents the simplicity and internalization of Dalit writer on behalf of entire community. Its primary attention drawn towards capturing the modern elements through which the lifestyle of untouchables got upgraded with the advent of British administration and their guidance helped the youth to become educated with the schools affiliated to railways. Moreover, tradition also made its place while having fear of disclosure of the actual identity. In a logical order, these people adhere tradition whereas refuting the evil practice of superstitions. Hence, tradition and modernity go hand in hand with each other, reflecting the accessibility of growth and development. It is a portrayal of newer ways and thinking of the Dalits.

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