



AN OVERVIEW OF DALIT LITERATURE: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MARATHI DALIT LITERATURE

Vijay C. Thange

Associate Professor, Department of English

K. J. Somaiya College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Kopergaon Dist. Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract: An anthology of Dalit literature, *Poisoned Bread*, stirred the literary world not only in Maharashtra but in the whole country. The editor of this anthology is Arjun Dangle, an eminent scholar, who wrote about the past, present and future of Dalit literature. He explored several issues related to Dalit Literature such as B. R. Ambedkar's influence on the Dalit Literary movement, Progressive Writer's Association with Dalit Literature, the caste system in India, Little Magazine Movement, Dalit Panthers and Dalit Literature, the importance of Dalit autobiographies in Dalit Literature, etc. The host of Dalit writers like Anna Bhau Sathe, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Arun Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Uttam Bandu Tupe, Bandu Madhav, Sharankumar Limbale, Waman Nimbalkar, and Bhimsen Dethe have enriched Dalit Literature with their bitter life experiences and literary sensibilities. The most crucial motive of the Dalit Literature is the liberation of Dalits from exploitation and clutches of social evils of caste.

Key Words: Dalit Literature, autobiographies, literary sensibilities, liberation, exploitation, caste, subaltern, downtrodden, etc.

I. Introduction:

Dalits, the exploited and oppressed, are considered to be the lowest section of the Indian hierarchical caste system. Being a subaltern community, they have been subjugated and persecuted for hundreds of years together. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar preferred using the term 'Depressed Caste' all through his writings consistently and it could be said that it is his philosophy and awareness among the downtrodden that spurred the emergence and the popularity of the term 'Dalit'.

B. R. Ambedkar and Dalit Literature

Ambedkar used the word 'Dalit' in his writings in *Bahishkrut Bharat* in 1928. Dalit is not a caste but it refers to an untouchable or an outcast. The neo-Buddhists denounced the term used and advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, *Harijan*, meaning the children of God. Gandhi strongly recommended this term for lower caste people. This term was coined by Gujarati saint-poet, Narsi Mehta. The Neo-Buddhists strongly opposed this term because of its derogatory nature. Yagati Rao opines, "Another attempt to subtle segregation from the rest of the society."¹ In legal discourse, the term scheduled caste has been used since colonial rule as the British government had prescribed schedules for various castes and tribes. However, the form of 'Scheduled Caste' is devoid of any political connotation and so intellectuals preferred the term 'Dalit'. In the seventies, *Dalit Panther* came on the political horizon of Maharashtra; it was a social organisation to fight against caste discrimination. The great litterateurs founded it in Marathi, Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar and Raja Dhale. The Dalit Panthers filled the vacuum after B. R. Ambedkar's sad demise and it led to a renaissance in Marathi literature and art. They followed the ideologies of B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Karl Marx. The Dalit Panthers strongly invigorated the term Dalit to refer to lower-caste communities. The Dalit Panther's manifesto clearly stated that "The Dalit is no longer merely an untouchable outside village walls and scriptures. He is untouchable and he is a Dalit but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian."² Further, the manifesto reads "Who is a Dalit? Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion."³

The lower caste people were leading a life of humiliation and indignity for hundreds of years. They were not allowed in the mainstream life and were restricted to the periphery of villages. Bama, a famous Dalit writer, talks about the lower caste people as:

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Where you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy.⁴

Dalits, being exploited and harassed for hundreds of years, wrote their stories of humiliation. They voiced their protest against the physical and psychological attacks on them through their memoirs initially. In the 1960s, Dalit literature emerged in Marathi literature and it soon was followed in other languages too. The origins of Dalit literature can be found in the Buddhist literature and the poems and *abhangs* of the *Bhakti* poets like Gora Kumbhar, Raidas, Sant Chokha Mela and Karmamela.

Modern Dalit writing received strong impetus through the writings of Jyotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Swami Achutanand Harihar, Sahodaran Ayyappan, and others. These democratic and egalitarian thinkers wrote extensively against the oppressive practices of the upper castes. For the first time, the term “Dalit Literature” was used in 1958 at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in Mumbai at which Anna Bhau Sathe was the inaugurator. Dalit literature revolted against the cultural hegemony and dominant ideology. K. Satchidanandan writes, “Dalit Literature empowers the marginalised by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by casteist powers.”⁵

The colleges formed by Ambedkar, Siddhartha College in Mumbai, and Milind College in Aurangabad played very crucial roles in creating awareness among the youth to express their angst through writings. As a result, many first-generation young learners came forward and wrote their first-hand experiences of pain and agony. P. I. Sonkambale, Laxman Gaikwad, Laxman Mane are some of the examples of it. The first conference of Dalit writers, inaugurated by Anna Bhau Sathe, was an essential event in the history of Dalit literature. One of the noted writers, Sisir Kumar Das, wrote about Dalit literature as:

Indian literature discovered a new potentiality in the life of the low and the lowliest, the deprived and the humiliated. The hero-centric world would finally vanish yielding place to the anti-hero. The Dalit literature, however, was yet to emerge but the signs had already appeared. The poem “*Violence Zaf*” (The Tree of Violence) by Namdeo Dhasal, the founder leader of the Dalit Panther Movement, is only two decades far from the midnight of Indian independence.⁶

Dalit and Non-Dalit Writers

Though it was argued that only Dalit writers could present the pains of Dalits in their writings, some non-Dalit writers also wrote about the untouchables. Premchand was at the forefront of all such writers; he was followed by Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, Arvind Adiga, etc. Some of the critics criticised it by saying that it lacked intimate knowledge and experience of the agony of the untouchables in the writings of upper caste writers as they lacked authenticity of their experiences. Only their progressiveness and empathy cannot make them Dalit writers. This argument was further supported by saying that the imaginative construction of Dalit lives by non-Dalit writers cannot catch the nuances of the humiliation of the Dalits. One of the allegations on the non-Dalit writers was that they created the life of Dalits as pitiable and not rebellious. One of the notable Dalit writers, Sharankumar Limbale, wrote about Dalit literature as follows:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform the Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper-caste Hindus.⁷

However, some of the critics counter-argued this and called any literature representing the pains and agonies of the exploited as Dalit literature. As a Marxist critic and noted Hindi writer, Dr. Namvar Singh opined, “... Dalit experiences, values, restlessness, curiosities and questions may be called Dalit literature without considering its author.”⁸

Dalit literature by a Dalit writer or a non-Dalit writer is a contentious issue, and many writers and critics have written for and against it. One of the very famous Dalit writers in Hindi, Omprakash Valmiki says about it as:

If non-Dalits are unfamiliar with the burning miseries of Dalit life, it is because of the distance between, Dalits and non-Dalits that have been created by the Indian social order. When they do not know the reality of this Dalit life, whatever they write about it will remain superficial, born out of pity and sympathy, and not out of a desire for change or repentance.⁹

The same line is toed by another noted writer Mohandas Namishrai and says that a non-Dalit cannot describe the experiences of a Dalit merely with the help of imagination:

Dalit literature can be of Dalits because they have experienced life in hell, and that is not imaginative. It is their experienced reality and a document of their liberty. It is the rising sun of awareness. In it, anger and hate are self-experienced by Dalits. It does not need any cheating for tomorrow.¹⁰

However, this was again refuted by Kashinath in the book written by Omprakash Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundrey Shastra* (Aesthetics of Dalit Literature), in which he talks about the non-Dalit writers “It is not required to be a horse for writing about a horse.”¹¹

To sum up this contention, it would suffice to quote Arjun Dangle from his *Poisoned Bread* “It was not the literature of a particular caste or class.”¹²

Sharankumar Limbale’s Views on Dalit Literature

According to Sharankumar Limbale, literature produced by upper caste people about Dalits is filled with pity and indeed, we do not aspire for pity; we want dignity as human beings and equality with others.¹³

Further in that interview, Limbale says that the progressive upper castes are sympathetic towards lower castes and consider them their brothers; but we do not want their sympathy we want our legal rights as human beings. He says further “Our literature is a movement for social cause and a struggle for humanity at large. Our words are weapons and we aspire to change this society through our words.” Limbale does not deny the contribution of upper caste writers like Mahasweta Devi for providing a platform for Dalits.

The inclusion of writings produced by non-Dalit authors had certainly enriched the corpus of Dalit literature and broadened its horizons. Especially Dalit literature had been flourished in Maharashtra with the inspiration and motivation by the great social reformers and writers like B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. Phule, through his books, like *Gulamgiri*, *Shetkaryancha Aasud* (Whipcord of Farmer’s) *Brahmananche Kasab* criticized the social and cultural dominance of *Brahmins* on other castes pungently and vehemently, also criticized the exploitative practices of *Brahmins*. He created mass awareness among the untouchables and downtrodden about their plight and created awareness among them for their fundamental rights as human beings. Getting inspiration from these two lower-caste stalwarts, B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, the writers from the untouchable communities like Bandu Madhav, Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, etc. wrote about the plight of untouchables and expressed their pains and agonies through their writings and paved the way for other Dalit writers. B. R. Ambedkar’s ideology provided the initial spark for the development of Dalit literature. Arjun Dangle says that “... history shows that it was Dr. Ambedkar, who was the pioneer of Dalit literature.”¹⁴

The enlightened Dalit intellectuals like Bandu Madhav talked about the spread of Ambedkarite ideology through writings in villages. In an article written on February 15, 1958, in *Prabhuddha Bharat*, he opined:

Just as the Russian writers helped the revolution by the spreading of Lenin's revolutionary ideology through their works, our writers should spread Dr Ambedkar's philosophy to the villages... politics is just one way of attacking the opposition. Unless we attack from all sides, we cannot defeat those who have inflicted injustice on us for the last thousands of years.¹⁵

Initially, the writing by Dalit writers was relegated to the periphery, like the life of Dalits, but now many publishing houses and institutions are desirous of promoting the literature of the marginalised. Dalit literature had to face stern criticism of lacking in artistic fineness; even Anna Bhau Sathe also faced such criticism about his novels and short stories. Dalit literature was branded as propagandist literature motivated to capture the momentum of the period and was highly subjective and partial. However, it was not the reality. Dalit writers never considered artistic fineness as their goals of writing, but they were more interested in expressing their anguish and the evils of the caste system. Sharankumar Limbale in this regard wrote:

...it cannot be said that the entire corpus of Dalit literature is propagandist. Since Dalit writers see their writing as a means of human liberation, expressing emotion is integral to the literature they produce. Intense lived and felt experiences could not be called propagandist.¹⁶

It is quite right that the voices of protest with reverberation and rage cannot be called either propagandist or univocal and monotonous. This commonality of experiences is one of the essential characteristics of Dalit Literature. In the paper entitled, "A Critical study of Dalit Literature in India" Dr Jugal Kishor Mishra wrote:

Shame, anger, sorrow, and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of anger against the age-old oppression, the expressions of the Dalit writers have become sharp.

To sum up, it could be said that Dalit literature, "the literature of the oppressed", made a profound difference in the field of Marathi literature. It presented Dalit milieu, culture, and life faithfully with the touch of realism. To quote Sharankumar Limbale:

Equity, freedom, justice and love are the essential sentiments of people and society. They are many times more important than pleasure and beauty. There has never been a revolution in the world for the sake of pleasure and beauty. Many governments have been overturned for equality, freedom and justice. This is history... The literature that promotes equality, freedom and justice is revolutionary and emphasises the centrality of the human being and society.¹⁷

Dalit literature is based on the ideology of B. R. Ambedkar and hence there is no scope for spiritualism and abstraction and its aesthetics is materialist and not spiritualist. It is written with hope for justice, equality and freedom for the untouchables and to attain its goal; it is rebellious, fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary in nature.

Talking about Dalit and non-Dalit writers' voices reflected in the literature, the translator and critic, Arun Prabha Mukharjee, in her translation of Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jothan: A Dalit's Life* talks about the meek presentation of the Dalits by non-Dalit writers in their writings. The characters by them have been often shown as passive and patient to the oppression. She puts her views in 'A Note by the translator' in the autobiography *Jothan*:

My Hindi literature school textbook included a poem by Siaramsharan Gupt. This poem, entitled 'Achut Ki Aah' (*The Sigh of an Untouchable*), narrated a sad story of an untouchable denied entry into a temple and how it broke his heart. Such portrayals of Dalits as mute and pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression, are characteristic of high caste Indian writers ... Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* or Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* are also written in this appropriate voice, a voice that contains, rather than expresses, Dalit experience.¹⁸

Conclusion

Although Dalit literature is termed as protest literature, it does not show only their oppression, but it also shows a vivid representation of their socio-cultural ethics. Arjun Dangle has rightly pointed out that. "Dalit Literature is marked by revolt and negativism since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic, and cultural inequality.

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