

The Growth of Dalit Literature

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Abstract

The present paper, titled, “The Growth of Dalit Literature” seeks to trace the development of Dalit literature. The paper also delves into the conditions which engendered the sprouting out of most Dalit literature, especially in the post-Independence India. The paper takes into consideration the various texts in different genres that highlight the plight of the outcastes. The study is based on the articulations by renowned Dalit and non-Dalit critics, intellectuals and litterateurs. It also lists some very notable texts which narrate Dalit life and present a nuanced understanding of the Dalit situation. Further, the paper also examines the history of caste-based discrimination and untouchability.

In ancient India, untouchables were the class of people thought to be polluted spiritually. Society was divided into four classes on the basis of their professions. The kings and their relatives were called the kshatriyas. The men in the army of the kings and the ones who looked after the administration were also called the kshatriyas. The people who performed the rituals and religious activities were called the brahmins. They were considered as the most virtuous and learned people. The third class comprised of those people who pursued trade and business. They were called the vaishyas. The shudras, who performed the menial tasks for the other three classes, stood last of all. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar gives an account of the origin of the caste system in India in his article: “Who Were the Shudras?”(Ambedkar). He writes that initially the shudras were a part of the kshatriyas and did not constitute a separate varna, or class stratification. However, with the passage of time, their relationship with the brahmins got impaired. Due to their

inimical attitude toward the shudras the brahmins refused to perform the 'Upnayana', the sacred thread religious ceremony of Hindu boys at puberty. Eventually, this attitude reduced their status in the hierarchy of society. Inheritance replaced functionality in the varna and the caste, jati, became fixed and rigid.

Further down in society, there was yet another class of people which did not belong to any caste and was not included in the varna system. This was the scavenger class. They included the people who cleaned and carried away human excreta, the street cleaners and the like. In an introduction to Joothan, Arun Prabha Mukherjee gives an account of how the scavengers lived. The scavengers lived outside the villages of the savarnas, i.e., those included within the varna system. As they were not included in any caste, they did not follow the norms or religious customs of the savarna society. This indifference to the writ of the varna system further exacerbated their excoriation by the savarnas. Bhagirath Poddar in his book *The Untouchables in Modern India* states:

“Scavengers in India are the lowest among the lowly and the untouchables amongst the untouchables. As outcastes and rejects of Indian society, scavengers have suffered myriad human indignities throughout the ages.” (20)

The varna system gradually took vicious shape and the shudras also began to be perceived as 'acchuts' or untouchables. Naturally, a hierarchy operated among the Dalit communities too. The Dalits at the lowest level were bhangis, the scavengers. Others near the bottom of the ladder were: chuharas, the sweepers; chamars, the leather workers; mahars, the carcass handlers; and doms and chandals, hangmen and cleaners of the cremation ground. Barely half a notch higher were the landless peasants, labourers, servants, many artisans and craftspeople, folk artistes, and hunters. Under the influence of the Arya Samaj, the untouchables in North India accepted the new caste name Valmiki, after the writer of the Ramayana, who belonged to the hunter caste. In his book, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, Mark Juergensmeyer notes: “Valmiki was said to have come from a

lower caste, hence served as an appropriate symbol of lower caste cultural integrity as well as a link with the high tradition” (170).

During the freedom struggle the untouchables were included within the fold of the mainstream Hindus by the Congressmen. However, there was a conflict of ideologies between the upper-castes, the low-castes and the outcastes. Many former untouchables did not accept the Hindu Arya Samajist nomenclature of Valmiki and sought other definers. The term Depressed Classes was used in the southern parts of India. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi replaced the term untouchable with the word Harijan, or people of God, to give them acceptance within Hindu society. They were soon disenchanted of the term, which they came to believe became patronising, at best, and reinforced their alienation and oppression, at worst. Dr B. R. Ambedkar played a very important role in the movement of the liberation of the untouchables and untouchability was legally abolished in India with the adoption of the Constitution on 26th November 1949. Then, an administrative term, Scheduled Castes was attached to the untouchables as they were given certain rights to reservations in the Constitution. Article 330 of the Constitution reserves seats for the Scheduled Castes (S.Cs) and Scheduled Tribes (S.Ts) in the Lok Sabha. Article 332 reserves seats for them in the legislative assemblies of the states. Article 335 reserves services and posts for them in the government sector. Article 338 provides for a National Commission for the S.Cs and Article 338A ensures a National Commission for the S.Ts. The Article 339 states that there must be control of the union over the administration of the scheduled areas and the welfare of the S.Ts. Article 340 lays down that a Commission should be appointed to investigate the conditions of the backward classes. In the last few decades of the 20th century, the formerly untouchables and low castes gravitated toward the name Dalit for themselves in spheres away from the administrative.

In her introduction to Joothan, Arun Prabha Mukherjee also gives an explanation of the term Dalit: “The term ‘Dalit’ forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root ‘dal’ which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth, and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grain and lentils”(Mukherjee xi).

However, the term Dalit was given a new dimension by Kancha Ilaiah when he proposed that the term should cover all those who are victims of poverty and exploitation. The founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Kanshi Ram, a Dalit from Punjab, used the term bahujan instead of harijan, underlying the numerical strength of the Dalits. However, despite their resistance, struggle and assertion as well as playing an increasingly decisive role in the politics of the country, the Dalits still face social, religious, cultural and economic discrimination.

In due course, the experience of this discrimination found literary expression with Dalit writers of Maharashtra leading the way. They found writing the most appropriate medium of enunciating their protest and were able to make a great impression not only in the sphere of literature but also in the polity and society. A lot of Dalit writers criticized the ‘mainstream’ writers for having ignored the marginalisation and sufferings of the Dalits through the centuries. Also, M. N. Wankhade asserted that the high caste Marathi literature was artificial and false. “A Marathi writer’s understanding of life is restricted...He has never seen that outside there is a vast world—a suffering, distressed, struggling, howling world, burning with anger from within like a prairie fire (qtd in Valmiki xxvi).

On the other hand, the caste-Hindu writers who have written with some insight about the Dalits protest the non-inclusion of their writings as Dalit literature. To this the Dalit critics respond that outsiders cannot realize the agony of being treated as untouchables other than Dalits themselves. For example, Om Prakash Valmiki takes up

the issue with a Hindi writer Kashinath Singh who said, “‘One does not have to be a horse in order to write on one’ [by retorting]: Only the horse, tethered to its stall after a whole day’s exhausting labor knows how it feels, and not its owner” (Valmiki xxvi). Arun Prabha Mukherjee gives an account of this rationale of the Dalit critics: “They claim that the Dalit literature can be written only by Dalits: ‘Dragging and cutting dead animals—how will non-Dalits write about this experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination?’” (Mukherjee xxvi) Some of the significant writers among the Dalit writers, like Sharan and Kumar Limbale, hold the same view.

The term ‘Dalit Literature’ was used for the first time in 1958, at the first ever Dalit Literature Conference held in Bombay. However, the word Dalit came into prominence in 1972 when a group of young Marathi writer-activists founded an organization called the Dalit Panthers. The name expressed their feelings of solidarity with the Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for the rights of African-Americans in the United States of America. The name was accepted by the untouchable communities all over India. The word Dalit expressed the feelings and the social and the political positioning of the untouchables, unlike the words *acchut*, *Harijan*, etc., which evoked pain and were closer to the caste system. The words of Arjun Dangle a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther Movement are quoted in the introduction to *Joothan* : “Dalit is not a caste but a realization and it is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society” (Mukherjee xiii).

Many poets who belonged to the low castes articulated their protest through their writings. The Dalit poets played a major role in this context. For instance, Lal Chand Rahi in his poem, “*Swatantrata ke Baad*” (“After Independence”) says: “*Pandrah August ke din phool chadhane par/ Dande mile pande Devpal ke achhut ko./ Usiki Beti ke sath balatkar hua/ Aur mandir apavitr nahi hua/ 26 January ki raat ko swatantr bharat ke ek chhote se ganv me*” (Singh 65). In these painful and raw lines the poet underlines the situation of

the Dalits as he narrates the thrashing of the Dalit bonded to a brahmin when he dared to offer flowers in the temple on 15th August and asks why the rape of the man's daughter on 26th January does not desecrate the same temple in a small village of 'free' India. Sohan Pal Sumanakshar in his poem, "Phoolan Humara Aadarsh Hai" ("Phoolan is our Ideal") on the gang rape victim-dacoit-political leader, Phoolan Devi, says: "Phoolan. Dalit shoshit samaj ka pratik hai. chahe use kitna hi badnaam karo / Tohmat dharo. Veh/ Humari hi nahi. Saari naari jaati ki shorya gathha hai" (Singh 66) The poet here valorises Phoolan Devi, the cast out, ridiculed Dalit woman, as the symbol of Dalits and her earlier, armed and later, political struggle against the upper castes as the heroic epic of all women.

Apart from these writers, there are many other poets who gave vent to their feelings through the medium of their writings: Horil, Mataprasad, Purshottam Batohi, Jaiprakash Navendu, N.R. Sagar Oaj, Tejpal Singh Tej, Kusum Meghawal, Sushila Taakbhore, Kaveri, Sunita, Machendra, Devendra Deepak, Malkhan Singh, Sukhbir Singh, Prem Shankar, Chandra Kumar Warthe, Sheoraj Singh Bechein, Om Prakash Valmiki and Jai Prakash Kadarm are some of the writers who brought out their agony through poetry. Jai Prakash Navendu's passion is unbridled in these lines:

The experiences of the Dalits have not found expression only in poetry. Dalits have also chosen literary criticism as their tool. When one talks about Dalit literature one cannot forget the name of one of their most popular and influential leaders, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, even though his works were more political than literary. From 1920 onwards he published various newspapers and, at times, included his poem or a story in them. The newspapers signified the literary and journalistic success of Ambedkar. In fact, newspapers became a favourite vehicle for the articulation of the Dalit cause and in 1962 A. S. Rampise published a list of newspapers started by the depressed caste people of India. They numbered one hundred and twenty (Basu185). Along with the impact of Ambedkar was

the inspiring influence of Mahatma Phule in the social struggle of the Dalits. Jyoti Rao Phule, revered as Mahatma Phule by the Dalits, is known especially for his efforts toward the upliftment of women and the removal of untouchability.

In North India, autobiographies and biographies are the dominant genre of Dalit writings, most of them in Hindi. The first effort was made as early as in 1927 when Bhagwan Dass, born in Shimla, wrote *Main Bhangi Hoon*. It is written in the first person but it is not his personal story and the narrator represents the Dalits generically. Mohan Das Namish Ray who has been a major contributor to Dalit literature in North India with poems and other writings on Dalits also wrote his autobiography, *Apne Apne Pinjre*. It is known as the first Dalit autobiography in this region. Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*; Prof. Shyam Lal's, *The Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*; and *An Untouchable in the I.A.S.* by Balwant Singh have drawn a lot of attention and appreciation in recent years. The Dalit writers, by and large, favour the genre of autobiography and several Dalit autobiographies have been published throughout the country, for example, *Akkar Mashri* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Uchalya* by Laxman Gaekwad, Madhav Kondwillkar's *Mukam Post*, Laxman Mane's *Upaara*, *Tees* by Dr. Amitabh, Shantabai Kamble's *Mere Janm ki Chitra-katha*, *Anthsfot* by Pawde, *Band Darwaje* by Mukta Sarvgoad, *Ramnagri* by Ramnagarkar, Ramakant Jadhav's *Ramakant Ki Yaaden*, Murlidhar Jadhav's *Karyakarta*, *Gharana Lot Natakon* by Shashikant Tasganvkar, *Tara-Antral* by Shankarrav Kharat, and Baby Kamble's *Jin Amucha*. The first Dalit autobiography in Punjabi, *Gair Hazir Aadmi* was written by Prem Gorkhi and, the recently published, Balbir Madhopuri's *Changia Rukh* continues the tradition.

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