

DALIT IDENTITY NOT AS A SUBJECT BUT AS LOCATION OF RESISTANCE THROUGH PARODY

Rinita Mazumdar, Ph.D

Assistant Prof. Philosophy & Culture Studies,
Central New Mexico Community College,
Affiliate Prof. Women Studies,
University of New Mexico
United States

“A Brahman is known by his sacred thread, but what is the sign of a Brahmani, a mussalman is known by his circumcision, what is the sign of a mussalmani”

-(Lalon Fakir, 19th century Sufi of Bengal, who inspired many of Tagore’s songs and poems).

In this paper, I wish to explore the problem of making “dalit” an identity category that acts like other identity categories by the policy of exclusions and then show that “dalit” can be used as a category of resistance to disrupt the hegemonic order in the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent. Throughout this article I shall use “dalit” as a category opposed to “Brahman”, as the subaltern in the ideological construction of “India”. The standard *shastras* texts like *Purushsukta* and *Manusmriti* tell us that the *Brahman* is born of the mouth of Brahma, while the *Sudra* from the feet. I take the modern form of category, “dalit” as a politically correct version of the word “Sudra”, although the cultural implications are the same. As per the standard *shastras*, the Brahman is the holder of speech or discourse, the Sudra is the “doer”, the laborer, on whose labor the Brahman and other classes survive. This interpretation implies two things that are significant for this article: First, as the holder of discourse, the Brahman, in this schema is privileged not only as one who is the creator of discourse, but one who can define himself (I am specifically using the male gender here for women with a privileged caste position has a different location in the scheme of things) and also the “other”, the *dalit*. Indeed the *Brahman* defines the entire cultural thread by virtue of being the owner of the discourse and is thus the *Subject* of discourse. In this discourse, the “dalit” is defined as the “other” for the only reference point for anyone other than the Brahman is the Brahman, everyone else is the non-Brahman. Who the “dalit” is, what his job is, what his being is, is defined within the discourse of the Brahman, and hence “dalit” in the cultural ideology is a creation of the Brahman. There is a second implication of this discourse, the “I”, the Brahman, in this discourse is the “pure”, the “absolute” the undifferentiated, the unadulterated one who elaborates and creates discourse, words, and texts, the ruler of life and death, the definer of all categories.

Now that we have located the identity categories of a “dalit” using a kind of quasi exegesis of the texts, using Foucault’s theory of power we can say that identity categories are instruments of regulatory regimes both as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures and also the point of departure for revolutionary praxis, we need to explore into the contested category of the “dalit”, which within this elaborate sign system of the *shastras* cannot be positively defined, but only can be defined as the “other” of the Brahman (the creator of speech, word, discourse).. From this it follows that signifiers like “dalit” is an extension of that very castist language that it seeks to contest, hence to some extent has to be castist as it is carrying within it the same power structures. And yet, as Foucault tells us, while all identity categories are effects of power, they can also be the starting point of alternative discourses of resistance. Like all identity categories “dalit” is unstable, having encompassed within it identities of class, gender, ethnicities and to install oneself under that identity category means one turns against the aim of the category “dalit” as a liberatory category. Within the hegemonic construction of , “dalit” (as the “other” of Brahman), this category becomes that which controls all identities and circulates them (as the “Brahman” does, and so does the “dalit” for “dalit” is a mirror opposite of the hegemonic identity category). There is, to quote Derrida, always an “excess” that escapes this category and hence is excluded by it and will remain to haunt it so long it does not recognize the existence of this “other” within itself.

So far we were considering the categories of “dalit” and “Brahman” in a philosophical context, but the more troublesome part comes in the context of politics. To rally for an oppressed position within the cultural context of “India”, the category of “dalit” plays a major role. I shall next show how the category of “dalit” can be used to disrupt the purity of the “I”, the Brahmanic position, and thus disrupt hegemonic discourse, and form a point of resistance.

“Dalit”, it seems. is derivative of a “pure origin” the pure “I” the Brahman and nothing more. So, the paradox of power here is that within the matrix of power “dalit” is compelled to reiterate, to keep the “purity” of the Brahman, while also stand as something “other than” or opposed to Brahman. Here we can say that “dalit” in this discourse as the “other” is a bad copy of Brahman and this copy has to repeat itself and thus show the “naturalness” of the pure “I”, as Brahman cannot exist without its bad copy. Thus “dalit” is the parodic repetition of “Brahman”, the latter becomes possible and have its superiority kept alive and the more does the repetition, the more “Brahman” as a pure or superior category reveals itself as illusory. There is no pure “I” no pure “Subject” that constructs and holds the texts or the systems of power, everything is illusory and needs to be repeated and keep repeating to show its illusion. In this sense, “dalit” becomes a point of resistance, not as a “Subject” or an “I” but as a *location* to contest hegemonic power, an empty place like the “x” in algebra that can be filled up with individuals from all class, race, genders; the empty place will not make any judgments so long as they can create the parody to show the illusion of the power of “Brahmans” to interpret the texts and history.

The way “caste” is “performed” in India can never be fully expressed. For example, the “purity” of the “Brahman” as the quintessential “vegetarian” gets countered as Bengali, Oriya, and Assamese Brahmins are far from being “vegetarian” and even within each of these groups, the Barendra Brahmin in Bengal have different practices from the *varh* depending on the location or origin. Part of what “caste” is will never appear fully within its category and thus one has to keep the idea of “caste” closeted as when it is fully revealed, it will fail. So, to success “caste” has to play out castily, that is in its inverted relation between its caste position, ethnicity, and its practice expresses itself via its performance in ethnicity and class and are constituted by the possibilities that they are constantly excluding.

References

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PurushaSukta

Manusmriti