

DECONSTRUCTING THE HINDU MYTH: DATTA BHAGAT'S *WHIRLPOOL*

Rajkumar Karmveer Telgote

Assistant Professor in English
R. B. M. College, Chandgad,
Dist: - Kolhapur (MS), India. 416509

Abstract

Untouchability was a unique feature of the Indian society. A major portion of population was considered polluting. It had religious sanctions. The scriptures were given as testimony for its persistence. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar rose as a champion emancipator of the Untouchables during the first half of the twentieth century. He changed the plight of the Untouchables. His relentless struggle brought change in the lives of millions of downtrodden. In order to free them from the shackles of Brahminism he gave them the egalitarian Dhamma of the Buddha. His struggle gave them access to education. The first generation of the untouchables after Dr. Ambedkar started questioning the religion that persecuted them for generations. Their voice was reflected in a new genre of literature popularly known as Dalit literature. Datta Bhagat's *Whirlpool* poses some questions and brings to surface the suppression of the Untouchables by the upper castes. Untouchability persists even today but in more subtle and varied ways. Bhagat highlights the myths propagated by the Brahmins i.e. the priestly class, to enslave the Untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar, his movement of emancipation and his philosophy is the driving force behind *Whirlpool*.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Brahminism, Caste, Conversion, Hindu Society, Hinduism, Myth, Untouchability

Myth, as stated in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, is 'a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of people; this type of story'¹. It is 'something that many people believe but that does not exist or is false'² or which is nothing but a '*FALLACY*'³. In short, a myth is a notion, a phenomenon or a psychological conception. It is manipulated, propagated, infiltrated and penetrated into the collective consciousness of the masses for generations together. It is aimed at creating the mentality of the people. The legends and folk tales also contribute in making the mind of the society.

Since ages *Hindu Myth* is created in India which was a consequence of the Varna System and it later resulted into the stratification of the society into Caste system. The Hindu society is characterized by graded inequality and it was justified through the Brahminical scriptures which propounded different myths making the people submit to the superiority of their upper caste

status. For instance, the *Purusha Sukta* of *Rigved* provides the genesis of the Varna System through the myth of *Purusha* as the creator of the Varna System. According to it the four classes were produced from four different body parts of the *Purusha*.

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.

His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.⁴

However, the theory is challenged by thinkers as baseless and eccentric, because each human being is born through the reproductive system of a woman. Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar ascertained that behind the myth of *Purusha* as the creator of the Varna System there was the politics of creating stratification of the society and to give it religious sanctions so as to deem it as perpetual and infallible.

The scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* is unique, inasmuch as it fixes a permanent warrant of precedence among the different classes, which neither time nor circumstances can alter. The warrant of precedence among the different classes, which neither time nor circumstances can alter. The warrant of precedence is based on the principle of graded inequality among the four classes, whereby it recognizes the Brahmin to be above all, the Kshatriya below the Brahmin but above the Vaishya and Shudra, the Vaishya below the Kshatriya but above the Shudra and the Shudra below all.⁵

Manusmriti was the text that governed all affairs of the Hindu society. The sole purpose of its laws was to maintain the hegemony of the Brahmins. Although it made first three Varnas the beneficiaries of the social stratification the last Varna of the Shudras was supposed to serve other three.

One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Sudra, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes.⁶

Dr. Ambedkar challenged the very authenticity of the Hindu religion and its associated myths. The question of untouchability and the religious sanctions given to such a heinous practice were questioned by him. The same spirit was inherited by the writers from downtrodden castes who interrogated the Hindu religion. A new body of literature emerged into the 1970s which was designated as Dalit literature. Dr. Ambedkar was the sole inspiration behind Dalit literature.

Data Bhagat's Marathi play *Aavart* which was later translated into English as *Whirlpool* by George Nagies, Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot proved to be instrumental in challenging the Hindu myths which kept a vast portion of population underprivileged and dispossessed. The inspiration behind the rebellion and the deconstruction of the Hindu religion is obviously Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The play begins with the representation of *Tamasa*, a popular folk form of drama in Maharashtra, wherein a *Dindi*, the famous pilgrimage of *Varkaris*, is heading towards the deity of *Vithoba* at Pandharpur. *Tamasa* usually begins with a Radha-Krishna tale. But, in 1970s a self-styled saint-figure Datta Bal pleaded to purge *Tamasa* of its traditional Radha-Krishna scene because he felt that it was blasphemous. According to him it was disrespectful to God Krishna worshipped by the Hindus. Despite the objections raised, the dramatist pokes fun at the Hindu deity Krishna with the intention of myth breaking.

STAGE-MANAGER ... Datta Bal has forbidden the Radha-Krsna tale ... he has prohibited making fun of Radha and Krsna ... Ridiculing God Krsna is unacceptable to him.

JESTER Now that God Krsna will not appear, I'll have the chance of teasing Radha.⁷

This is in correlation with Dr. Ambedkar's questioning the very godliness, sanctity and piety of Hindu gods Rama and Krishna through his famous text *Riddles in Hinduism*. Krishna's life was lustful, deceitful and full of 'illicit intimacy' called as 'Rasalila'. Dr. Ambedkar poses a question: "Does Krishna really deserve to be called God among men?"⁸ The answer is in negative as he proves it in the succeeding part of the text. His licentious affair with Radha, who is married to another man, is depicted in Mahabharata. How can be a person having extramarital affair be called God?

The fourth Varna was divided as touchable Shudras and untouchable Shudras. The untouchables' lives were made miserable by imposing heavy inhibitions compelling them to live a life of dust. Dr. Ambedkar described how untouchability had become a socially accepted phenomenon among the Hindus.

The old orthodox Hindu does not think that there is anything wrong in the observance of Untouchability. To him it is a normal and natural thing. As such it neither calls for expiation nor explanation.⁹

The play presents the story of three generations of an untouchable family – Tukaram, his father and his son, Manohar. It is through them that the dramatist exposes the ordeals the untouchables had to undergo through. Even their touch was regarded as polluting. Although *Varakari Sampradaya* (a sect in Maharashtra which reveres *Vithoba* of Pandharpur) boasted of equality, the caste hierarchy was strictly followed in it. Tukaram's father, an untouchable *yeskar*, was killed for touching the feet of an upper caste Cintaman Maharaj although he meant it as an act of reverence. His 'sin' of polluting an upper caste was taken to be responsible for the outbreak of cholera in the village. Consequently, the sin had to meet the redemption. To balance the sum of sin and redemption the goddess demanded the sacrifice of Tukaram's father. Thus, it was a sort of ritualistic killing called *jalasamadhi* (to get oneself drowned into the river) which had the sanctions of the religion.

JAKHU Hey, Cintaman Maharaj is a *Bhamburda* and this *yeskar* low caste grabbed and touched the feet of the maharaja... He got beaten up, but why? Because he abandoned the customs of his caste... The God was putting him to trial... The cholera broke out in the village... On the first day Cintaman maharaj departed to the other world... Goddess... demanded Tukaram's father as sacrifice... in this well over there Tukaram's father threw his body.

(Bhagat: 658)

The dramatist juxtaposes the very act of reverence by the lower castes to the upper castes which results into their killing. If a religion does not treat the humble attitude of the lower castes towards the upper castes, intended to show them respect, with sympathy, compassion and dignity what is the use of such observances– the inquisitive mind poses a question. Therefore, there is an urge to abandon such customs:

JESTER But why did he lower his head to the feet of the maharaja?

(Bhagat: 658)

It has reference to Dr. Ambedkar's movement of protest which appealed the downtrodden to defy the customs of the caste which demeaned and dehumanized them. The untouchables submissively endured all the tortures and tribulations meted out to them in the name of religion just before the advent of Babasaheb on the social scene. But, his arrival transformed the mindset of the untouchable youths who vehemently challenged the caste inhibitions. Manohar, Tukaram's son, is the representative of those youth.

PIRAJI Manohar is not listening to anyone... He tells them to give up the caste duties in the village. He is following Bhim Baba (*Dr Ambedkar*) now.

(Bhagat: 659)

Dr. Ambedkar launched social reform movements like the Satyagraha at Mahad and Kalaram temple entry Satyagraha. He wanted to obtain humble rights for the untouchables like access to water through common reservoirs and temple entry. In reality, he intended to show the untouchables that although they belonged to the Hindu religion, the upper caste Hindus would never be ready to treat them as their equals or even as fellow human beings. Manohar, the rebellious youth, ignited with the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar is determined for temple entry:
MANOHAR ... We will go to the temple. We will worship the deity.

(Bhagat: 660)

But, the path of revolution is never smooth. One has to undergo through steep trials. The upper castes were not willing to let the untouchable desecrate the Hanuman deity lest the religion would be spoiled.

KISAN Well, the untouchable Mahar boys listened to him and are now bent on entering the Vithoba temple of Pandharpur... the fruit of Kaliyug is the origin of future misfortune. Four classes, eighteen castes will dine together.

(Bhagat: 663)

The protectors of the Hindu religion are never ready to give up their hegemony so easily, because they are the fruit gatherers of this discriminating social system. They are not ready to give up their social, cultural and political privileges. Therefore, they are bent to the mean act of killing the rebellious Manohar.

MAHADU What we did to his grandfather, we are going to do with him.

(Bhagat: 664)

It is evident that challenging the myths is never easier and that to challenge Hindu religious myths is very arduous. The privileged never let the myths be uprooted so as to maintain their socio-cultural hegemony. Hence, the plea of the untouchables for changes in Hindu fold remained unheard, unnoticed and unanswered.

MANOHAR If we enter the temple will it desecrate your deities?... Your deity is that impotent? It will be polluted? ... Isn't that temple ours too? ... Is God the patrimony of any one caste? ... Is it in this society an offence to have knowledge?

(Bhagat: 666)

Dr. Ambedkar realized that to be a part of the Hindu fold and to aim at challenging and changing the Hindu customs and practices was never possible. No reformation is possible in the Hindu religion. He appealed the untouchables to abandon the Hindu religion. This spirit is evident through Manohar's defiance:

A deity that is desecrated by our touch is not our deity. That religion that keeps us away is not our religion. It's better to live one day the life of a lion than to live thousand days as a meek sheep, that's the message given to us.

(Bhagat: 667)

The Hindu religion denied the Shudras the right to education through *Manusmriti*. They were prevented even to listen the Vedas. It was ordained that the recitation, study or teaching of the Vedas must be stopped (or should not be done) 'in the presence of a (man who lives unrighteously as a) Sudra' (Muller: 146). And, whoever strived for equality was killed in the struggle. Tukaram's father was killed, then Tukaram and his son Manohar. Nobody succeeded in challenging the Hindu religion and obtaining the equal rights. The social stratification originating out of Hinduism was a vicious cycle. A person born in a lower caste could never aspire for any

betterment in life. Every generation was supposed to be ruled, demeaned and degraded. Hindu religion was a snare, a 'whirlpool', where there was no way out.

JESTER Wherever one goes, the dhak leaves remain three (= *there is poverty and helplessness*).

Tukaram's father, Tukaram, Tukaram's son Manohar, they are always the victim.

STAGE-MANAGER Meaning what?

JESTER In what manner does the spinning top move? Gar, gar, gar, but on one spot only.

Tomorrow Manohar's son will move around like that, too.

(Bhagat: 669)

Manohar's father's name, Tukaram, is quite symbolic. It reminds of the great revolutionary Marathi Saint poet Tukaram who challenged the Brahminical hegemony and the authority of the scriptures over the lives of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras. He challenged the blind adherence and allegiance to the precepts of the Brahminical texts as being infallible and ultimate. He says:

We alone know the real meaning of the Vedas,

Others only bear the burden of it;

Food eaten is not to be compared with food seen,

It is like a hired servant who merely carries the burden of goods;

The creation, preservation and destruction of life is left to God.¹⁰

Saint Tukaram also criticised the inhumane treatment given to the Untouchables by Hindu upper castes through his poems (*Abhangas*).

A Brahman who gets angry after touching a Mahar is not a Brahman,

Suicide is the only expiation for such a man.

(Nemade: 52)

What was the outcome of Tukaram's rebellious outbursts? He was tortured by the Brahmins charging him of blasphemy. His house and property were confiscated and he was compelled to drown texts of his *Abhangas*. Even his end creates suspicion in thinking minds. The Brahmins alleged that he transported to heaven and that too with his material body. Surprisingly, his corpse was never found. Was he murdered? There are ample instances in history to show that whoever questioned the authority of the custodians of the religion were either tortured or were terminated. Charvaka, the atheist philosopher known to history, was burnt alive. Even in the twenty-first century social reformers and thinkers like Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, Comrade Govind Pansare and academician Dr. Malleshappa Madivalappa Kalburgi were killed. The perpetrators of the crime and the masterminds behind are not traced yet. In this context, the tragic end of Tukaram's father, Tukaram himself and his son Manohar becomes quite symbolic.

The epic *Ramayana* has produced the myth of Sambuka to deprive Shudras from *Tapasya* (ascetic exercise) which aimed at the spiritual upliftment and ultimately reaching the *Moksha* (salvation). The sin of Sambuka was that he attempted to practice *Tapasya* and thereby crossed the boundary of the religion that did not bestow on Shudra the right of ascetic exercise. His sin resulted into an untimely death of a Brahmin's son. He was killed by the ideal king Lord Rama, the protector of religion and the Brahmins, as punishment for his crime. The scripture glorifies the act of killing Sambuka by calling that it was for the salvation of Sambuka. Thus, right to practice rites was denied to Shudras forever by inculcating the myth of Sambuka in the collective consciousness of the masses.

JESTER Because beginning with Sambuk, it seems to everybody as if Rama's killing him was to his own good.

(Bhagat: 670)

ONE ... He is the sinner because of whom the son of this poor Brahmin has died.

(Bhagat: 671)

Dr. Ambedkar in *Riddles in Hinduism* has questioned the very godliness of Rama. He criticised heinous act of Rama's killing of innocent Sambuka – "He took upon himself to redress the wrong but in doing so committed the worst crime that history has ever recorded. The incident is known as the murder of Sambuka the Shudra (331-332)". He challenged the religion and gods which propagate inequality and justice. He ultimately came to the conclusion that Hindu religion will not allow the untouchables to raise themselves; rather it will suppress and demean them as it did for generations. Therefore, in 1935 he vowed to convert to another religion. Gandhi was a staunch supporter and believer in Hinduism and wanted to bring *Ramrajya* (the rule of Rama) as an exemplary ideal state. Dr. Ambedkar challenged *Ramrajya*.

MANOHAR I'm the same sinner Sambuk who crossed the boundaries of your Aryan religion. (Bhagat: 675) ... I'm the one (*Dr Ambedkar*) who challenges the father of the nation (*Gandhiji*).

(Bhagat: 676)

Manohar was adamant for temple entry but it was considered as an act of defying the religion. As penance Tukaram and Manohar were asked to dig a well for the village and were killed by the upper castes with dynamite explosion. Although the well belonged to village, the access to its water was denied to the Untouchables. The conspiracy of exclusion continues, the whirlpool of caste has drowned many generations of the Untouchables. The term Hindu had a foreign origin. It was used in a derogatory manner. Dr. Ambedkar deconstructs the Hindu myth when he says:

The first and foremost thing that must be recognized is that Hindu Society is a myth. The name Hindu is itself a foreign name. It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammedan invasion.¹¹

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was deconstruction of Hindu society. It aimed at reconstruction of the society and not just the destruction of myths. Thus, the revival of Buddhism in India was a new myth-making not based on fallacy but on more humanitarian and egalitarian grounds. While justifying his intention, long before the conversion, on 17 May 1936, he had proclaimed:

If you continue to remain in the fold of Hinduism, you cannot attain a status higher than that of slave.... it is for your emancipation and advancement, that the conversion appears to be very necessary to me.

To change this degraded and disgraceful existence into a golden life, conversion is absolutely necessary.¹²

References:

1. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2000*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 842
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Rigved*, P. 469, <http://www.sanskritweb.net/rigveda/griffith.pdf>, accessed on 18/04/2015, 10:10 am
5. Ambedkar, B. R. *Who Were the Shudras: How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society (1990)*, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra: Mumbai. P. 26
6. Muller, Max (Ed). *The Laws of Manu (1886)*. Trans. Buhler, G. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2008. P. 24

7. Bhagat, Datta. “Whirlpool”, *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (2000). Ed. G. P. Deshpande. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009. P. 654
8. Ambedkar, B. R. *Riddles in Hinduism* (1987), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra: Mumbai. 1996. P. 333
9. Ambedkar, B. R. *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1990), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s Writings and Speeches, Vol. 7. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra: Mumbai. P. 241
10. Nemade, Bhalchandra. *Tukaram* (1980). New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. 2009. P. 31
11. Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste* (1937). Aurangabad: Samata Prakashan. 2004. P.38
12. Ambedkar, B. R. *Conversion as Emancipation* (2004). New Delhi: Critical Quest. P.7