

DALIT LITERATURE: AN INTROSPECTION OF GENESIS AND GROWTH

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Abstract

The paper informs us about the origin of Dalits, who were Dalits in past history and who are Dalits in present India, general presentation of the social, literary phenomenon of the "dalit literature" -- literature of the oppressed -- is firstly required to realize the specificity of that significant trend in the recent dalit literature (since the sixties) in the state of Maharashtra and in India. An analysis of various definitions, major trends, themes, aesthetics, aim, growth etc. of Dalit literature and its comparison with mainstream literature and with grand style.

The roots of Dalit can be traced back to the Purusukta of *Rigveda* where we find the first reference of the caste system. The hymn describes:

Brahmnossaya Mukhamasit
Bahu rajanayah Kruta
Uru Tadasay Yadvaishya
Padabhayam Sudro Ajayat

(X-90-12)

According to this hymn, Brahmins born from the mouth of Brahma, the *Kshtriyas* from his shoulders, the *Vaisayas* from the thighs and *Shudras* from his feet. Hence, Brahmins are the most superior and *shudras* are most inferior in this hierarchy. The Brahmins have established the theories that caste system is God made and not manmade. In the subsequent ages, Manu, an ardent supporter of the caste system made it a code in his *Manusmriti*. The division on the basis of class is universal phenomena, but the characteristic of Hindu caste system is that it is based on birth not on aptitude. Because of the rigidity of the caste system, *Shudras* are considered *acchuta* (to whom one can touch) Hindus. They were living upon the mercy of upper caste. According to *Rigveda* and more rigidly in *Manusmriti*, *Shudras* have only one duty that is to serve the upper three *varnas* and they have no rights. If you are think that upper three *varnas* were merciful towards *Shudras*, you are wrong; actually this was necessity for them to give *Shudras* the right to touch them because they were in fix, they have no alternative for this and if they were not do so then who cut their hairs, who washed their clothes, who grew crops for the, who sew their clothes, who massaged their bodies, who cooked for them etc. So these were the sole reasons for the upper three *varnas* to give the right of touchibility to *Shudras*; this was the only and only right for *shudras* after the right of serve them.

There was another group of people which was out of *varna vayvastha* called *Atishudras*, Untouchables, and outcaste Hindus. They were not coming under the four groups of so called *varna vayvastha*. They have no right; they were living outside the towns and villages, especially near the dirty pond in which all villages' dirty water was collected. They pulled the dead bodies of upper castes' animals and ate the meat of these dead animals and made lather work from the skin of dead animals. Their second work was to wash the latrines of upper castes. They have the right of service in this sense. In the present times, they are constitutionally recognized SCs (Scheduled Castes). So, mythologically and historically, we find a number of names from the

time of Rigveda to the time of Mr. Gandhi like Shudra, Atishudra, *Bahiya* (outcastes), *Panchama*, Untouchable, and *Harijan* as Mr. M.K. Gandhi especially named them. Now the word ‘*dalit*’ became the new identity for these depressed class.

Dalit (oppressed and broken) is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as Untouchables. Dalits are mixed population, consisting of numerous social groups from all over South Asia. There are many different names proposed for defining the group *Panchmas* (“fifth varna”), as *Asprushya* (“untouchables”). Later, political fighter of these sections Kanshi Ram, as people named him, tagged these classes as ‘*bahujans*.’

So, Dalit is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in 1930’s as Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed classes’ a term Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and after him British used for what are now called Scheduled Castes. But Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra in his research article wrote:

“In 1970’s the ‘Dalit Panthers’ revived the term and expended its reference to include Scheduled Tribes, poor, peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the names of religion. So dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.” (2)

Another definition of ‘Dalit’ in contemporary usage has been given by Gangadhar Pantwane, a Professor of Marathi and founder editor of *Asmitadarsh*. He says:

“To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of the country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, soul, Holy books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they had made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revoltion.” (3)

These definitions suggest that Dalit rejects the main-stream tradition, and for dalit literature low-caste men and their sufferings are of prime importance. Baburao Bagul, a well known Dalit short-story writer says:

“Dalit literature is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spread hatred. Dalit sahitya- first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reson it is an historic necessity.” (56-57)

Dr. Dharmvir, a well known Dalit writer of Hindi literature countered the given definitions of dalit literature by Gangadhar Pantwane and Dr. Jugal Kishore Mishra, and said:

“That definition of dalit literature is absolutely dangerous in which kept this possibility that non-dalit can also write dalit literature. It is considered, in that definition, that literature can be produced on contract. It is a matter of representation and no one can represent dalit’s holy representation except him. It is a case like marriage of daughter in which during the time of wedding ceremony any dacoit from enemy side abducts the bride from marriage pavilion.”(20)

According to him dalit literature is:

“Dalit literature is that to which dalit writer writes. He can write superior and less superior literature. But condition is that that a non dalit writer cannot write any kind of dalit literature.” (20)

When we compare writers first two are brahmins and other is a dalit/bahujans writer we come to an analysis that Dalit literature is a work of representation and only a dalit can represent it purely. Arjun Dangle, the editor of *Poisoned Bread*, a collection of Dalit writings writes:

“Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with the movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people.” (266)

All these observations about Dalit literature clearly establish the fact that Dalit literature has a separate identity from main-stream literature.

The first aim of the Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. Dalits struggle against caste Hindu tradition of inequality has a long history. For example in Kannada, it goes back to the first vachana poet of eleventh century, Chennaiah, the cobbler challenged the Brahmins in the following words:

“Those who eat goats, fowl and any fish,
Such, they call caste people,
Those who eats the sacred cow,
That showers frothing milk for shiva:
Such, they call out-castes.”

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit literature has got impetus in Maharashtra. But before the name came into being in 1960's, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, and Shankarao Kahrat were already creating Dalit literature. In its formal shape it sprouted out of a progressive movement called “Little Magazine” which was a kind of rebellious manifestation of educated youth of those days against the establishment. These Dalit youth found inspiration in the movement of Blacks in the distant land of North America; their black literature and Black Panther became the role models of sort of them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit literature.

Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective ‘Dalit is Dignified’ thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the brahminical social order.

While dealing with the trends of Dalit literature, we also need to make a humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context it can be said that Dalit literature has questioned the mainstream literary theories and brahminical ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. It is experience based. This ‘anubhava’ (experience) takes precedence over ‘anumama’ (speculation). Thus to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hall marks of Dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the out castes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the oppression of Dalit writers has become sharp.

In their search of alternatives, Dalit writers have rediscovered the low caste saint poets of Bhakti Movement, but actually it was an era of social change and the saint-poets were *Shudras* and Untouchables as well as their voice was the voice of voiceless people and they started a movement against this established system of inequality and injustice. Even they found relevance in Buddhism. Referring to folklore, they make an assertion that Dalits were members of an ancient primitive society and of Indus Valley Civilization and were uprooted by alien brahminical civilization. These writers make after vent plea for a complete overhaul of society. As Arjun Dangle, Marathi Dalit writer put it, “Even the Sun needs to be changed.”

In 1969 Diwali issue of *Marthawada* Dr. Wankhade Baburao Bagul rejected the mainstream literary tradition. It is based on varnas and varnaashramas. Any brahminical text begins with the depiction of Dharma and ends with *moksha* (salvation). The story of kings and queens and the glorification of their lives is the main theme of main stream literature. The ordinary man

from the lower classes is out of the picture and his life experiences and feelings are never the subject of art. Critics hail the tragedy of an intellectual artist rather than a mediocre man. Against this, marginal bahujans' literature including feminist and black literatures express the harsh and stark brutality of personal experiences.

The problem of Shankarao Kharat in *'The Burden'* where a Mahar Kotwal refuses to help an educated Mahar who has returned to village saying, you felt my pain and that is why you held the umbrella over my head in the soaking rain. It is all very well. You may hold umbrella over my head now. But what about tomorrow Rain is there. Heat is there. The burden on the head always there. In *'The Crier's Call,'* the Mahar village servant has to go out to drum and announce the need for all villagers to come to be inoculated by the visiting doctor, even though himself he is so sick, he falls, vomits and dies as he attempts to shout and drum. These examples clarify that dalit literature neither an ideal representation of life nor an individual commitment, but a social commitment.

The city world of dalits is the most cruel in Namdeo Dashal's poetry. Vijay Tendulkar, the well-known Marathi dramatist while introducing Dashal's *Golpitha* writes:

"In the calculations of white collar workers, "No man's land" begins at the border of their world, and it is here that the world of Namdeo Dashal's poetry of Bombay begins. Mercy, grace, peace do not touch Golpitha; Dashal says, here all seasons are pitiless, here all seasons have a contrary heart." (8)

The hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses, the problem of untouchability, the exploitation of dalit women by higher castes men, are the themes of dalit literature. The aim of dalit writers is to expose the evil of the caste system and injustice done to them by higher caste. The dalit writers write what they see, feel and think in the social environment.

Main stream literature use metaphysical, philosophical, symbolic and imaginative language. Depiction of physical beauty and the heroic qualities of the characters is chief area of interest of these writers, hence their language is complex and far from reality. For them present meaning of the text is not important but the metaphoric meaning is more appealing to them. They talk about God-man relationship in the most poetic manner. As Rabindernath Tagore says:

"Every moment and every age,
Every day and every night
He comes, comes, ever comes."

(XLV, *Gitanjali*)

Dalit writers express their experiences in the most realistic way using their native speech, their languages as well images come from their own experiences instead of from their observation of nature. The language of main stream literature presents romantic view of life, while dalit poetry presents the realistic view of life. Dr. Mahesh Pandya's Gujrati poem, 'Uttar Gujrat ni Jivali' is one of the best illustrations of the language of the dalit poetry:

"Let us go to the village
O Jamini
I want to buy a gun
Gun? Why Jivali?
Are you mad?
Why do you need a gun?
Ali Jamini you do not know
Poor Shambuk
Was meditating and practicing Vedas

And then?
Rama killed him mercilessly.
Now
I want to shot Rama
And also
I want to kill Drona
Who demanded
Eklavya's thumb as
Gurudakshina" (6)

Since dalit literature rejects canonical literature, it also rejects the established standard of evaluating literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure. Though traditional aesthetics talk about three basic principles of literature, satya (truth), shivam (goodness), sundaram (beauty), it is never realistic. On the contrary dalit literature is based on reality and for it man is superior even to God or the nation. It rejects western theories like Freud's psychoanalysis, Barthe's structuralism or Derrida's deconstruction. Dr. C.B. Bharti in his Hindi article, "The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature" talks about dalit aesthetics. He writes:

"The aim of dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create separate aesthetics of dalit literature, an aesthetic based on the real experiences of life." (10)

We cannot evaluate the beauty of dalit woman by keeping Shakuntala's concept in mind. The beauty of dalit woman lies in the web of perspiration on her face while she works in the fields.

Thus, the contribution of Dalit literature has been immense; first and foremost, it effectively threatened the Brahminic hegemony from literature. Second, it consentized Dalit masses from assertion, protest and mobilization. Third, it stirred up thinking in the Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed creation of organic intellectuals of Dalits. Fourth, given that the level of literacy been particularly low among Dalits, the emergence of Dalit literature where both the writers and readers are mostly Dalits, is itself an evidence of a profound change taking place in Indian society.

Arjun Dangle in his article, "Past, Present and Future of Dalit Literature" writes:

"The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society change and as long as exploitation exists." (266)

Till date we have dalit poetry, short-stories, autobiographies and novels but the field of drama is yet neglected. In the coming years, Dalit literature has to create its own myth and develop dalit literature to cross the boundaries of national literature and has to create a space in world literature like Black literature. From the personal sufferings, Black literature raises to universal literature in the writings of Toni Morrison, Maya Angello and Alice Walker.

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