

**THE FORMATION OF CATEGORIES OF HURT AND INJURY: A
READING OF DIFFERENT CONSTITUENCIES IN SHARAN KUMAR
LIMBALE'S *HINDU***

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Abstract

The novel, *Hindu*, traces the developments of the Ambedkarite movement and ideologies within the author's contemporary society, a single village. It also sketches the new formations in the organization of the society by meticulously engaging with the details of different constituencies that emerge after the casteist hindus encounter the revolutionary and reformist beliefs and principles that inform the dalit movement. These constituencies inform not just the religious identity of the characters, but also their political identities. Furthermore, these constituencies facilitate the solidification of their as well as the belief patterns of the 'other'. To study the different jargons of language that operate as instruments and characteristic features of each of these constituencies becomes equally pertinent, as it enables the understanding of the categories of hurt and injury. The socio-cultural, historical and political analysis of the society in flux of change is permitted through the lens of a narrator, who on encountering a eunuch metamorphoses into a woman, initiating the discussion of the 'Woman's question' or the gendered politics that informs the comprehensibility of the text.

“While every splinter, every particle of the movement is self generated and self-inspired, at the same time, it is also an organization and a collectivity” (Limbale, x)

Sharankumar Limbale's Marathi novel, *Hindu* (2005) is the writer's endeavour to advance the politics of “collectivity” among the politically conscious sections of the democratic country, for studying history as an important vehicle of the past that would help them anticipate a more desired future, only by critically analysing the contemporary present of the casteist/secular India. The text is also the writer's manner to perform the duty of a social doctor and dress the open wounds of the society. It is, at the same time, extending and sharing this task of

responsibility with those “assumed readers” who may be affected by the chaotic atmosphere of their society, as the writer himself is:

“How I wondered, would I preserve the integrity of my voice in this soul-killing environment, refusing the inviting glance of the auctioneer of human values in the crowded bazaar, keep my lips tightly sealed before the unruly goons?...Let every blind person read this text and find implied meanings according to his or her own blindness” (Limbale, ix-x).

In the ‘foreword’, ‘Straight from my Heart’, it is made clear right at the onset how caste continued to be a detrimental factor in shaping the lives of the individuals of the Independent and democratic India even after more than five decades since untouchability had been legally and constitutionally annihilated. The text, therefore, becomes a quintessence of writer’s hurt as well his hope for curing this category of hurt and injury that has developed in him and the other members of the society, at large:

“*Hindu* is not just a literary text, but also about my literary role. It is my response to the casteist climate of my country today” (Limbale, xii).

In my paper, I wish to examine Limbale’s *Hindu*, as exposing the different facets of the caste system, operative in the formation of different ideological constituencies and the impact of these constituencies on the religious identity of the people, within a single village. Therefore, on one hand, the text exhibits an emerging Dalit consciousness, and on the other hand, it demonstrates the hardening of the Hindutva forces prevalent among the upper caste section of the village. It is, however, interesting to note how each of these two constituencies contributes not just to its own but also to the solidification of the ‘other.’ These two constituencies would also be discussed both as religious as well as political configurations. Therefore, the need to discuss two different jargons of language, the language of religion and the language of politics, respectively, employed in the text becomes pertinent. However, this examination of language enables the interpretation of another type of language, specifically the language explicit with sexuality, which is an integral part of the language used by quite many important characters in the text. This, sexual language, further facilitates the formation of another constituency, which unconsciously transcends the barriers of religion, caste and class. Thus, gender, as a point of intersection between the two major groupings in the village makes the “woman’s question” integral to the discussion of categories of hurt and injury, oppression and exploitation of the marginal. Finally, one needs to address the questions that the open-ended and ambiguous ending of the text hints at, by its allusion to the shaping of an alternative identity, through a detailing of the dream-like metamorphoses of the narrator, Milind Kamble.

“It’s fine if birds and beasts drink from your well, but it’s not fine if an untouchable does so, because he is a ‘Hindu’” (Limbale, 1).

The novel opens with the threat that this awareness poses to the Hindu religion and the repudiation of the Hindu religion for which an ongoing process of conversions was responsible. Significantly, after the conversion of Ambedkar along with a thousand of his followers, conversion among the lower castes was no longer viewed as a matter of personal choice but an exercise of political agency:

“A storm called Babasaheb Ambedkar had engulfed every hutment” (Limbale, 10).

The novel opens and ends with a society in a state of flux, a society in its transitional phase. Reservation of seats for the dalits, the election campaigns, the threat of dalits converting to Buddhism or Islam and Christianity, the new State order and its spotlight being on curbing

atrocities on Dalits, and various such socio-political factors add on to the sense of instability in the village. The novel, therefore, describes a disordered and chaotic society by illustrating diverse dispositions of the villagers, whether belonging to the upper or to the lower castes. Thus, on the one hand, it describes the faith that the lower castes had begun to invest in religion to which Ambedkar converted:

“Each pore of my body recited ‘Buddham sharnam gacchami.’ (I go in the name of Buddha)... should devote my remaining life to religious devotion. In my imagination, I was building stupas of determination” (Limbale, 1).

At the same time, the text describes the atmosphere of disappointment and frustration among the caste Hindus of the village:

“The villagers found it hard to accept that their village was known by a Mahar’s name” (Limbale, 11).

Even within the self-conscious section of the dalits who were closely and prominently associated with the dalit movement in the village, a sense of fractured religious identity becomes highly visible. The topographical description of the narrator’s domestic space offers a vivid understanding of this intermediary phase:

“While our drawing room sports portraits of Babasaheb and Buddha, the kitchen belongs to the hindu gods and goddesses... Whenever I feel weak and helpless, I stand before the Hindu gods and goddesses with folded hands. And when I am bloated with self-confidence and dreaming of revolution, I go and stand with bowed head before Babasaheb Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha figurines” (Limbale, 6).

The narrator’s close alliance with the twins, Gopichand and Manikchand, the Hindutva followers, replicates this perplexity.

The caste Hindus, are similarly seen to be grappling with the two-fold reality of the Dalit identity. Their traditional understanding of the meaning of a dalit’s life, coming from the scriptures; and the important category that dalits had become by the State determined policies was at the root of their bafflement:

“Shankar Pujari became mentally disturbed. His belief that it was not a crime to kill a dalit who went against religion was shattered... For the first time, those who refused to accept dalits as human beings were made to feel that everyone was equal before the law” (Limbale, 34).

The novel, however, portrays with great success, a third category among the villagers which is characterized by a growing sense of identity, linking their identity with a powerful assertion for a respectable location in the society. Tatya Kamble, Kabir Kamble and Rohit Kamble fall under this category. Electoral processes, policies of positive discrimination and affirmative action, and the ongoing process of democracy enable these characters, especially Tatya Kamble, to claim the knowledge resources in the society. The narrator introduces the central figure of the novel, Tatya Kamble, not directly but by describing the admiration of the dalits for Tatya Kamble and the influential role as a public orator and activist that he executes:

“Anybody can do a Patil’s job, but no one else can replicate the way Tatya Kamble enacts the insolent Patil in his jalsa...These two (Tatya Kamble and Kabir Kamble) are like the two eyes of our movement” (Limbale, 5).

The refusal of Tatya Kamble and the other Mahars to perform the traditional duties assigned to them by their caste identity and hosting pageants to impart the significance of

Ambedkar and Ambedkarite movement highlights the emerging self-consciousness among the dalits and details the long trajectory that the dalit movements and campaigns have travelled:

“Goats can be penned together for a night for fear of the wolf, but not forever...I recalled Ambedkar’s oath: That I was born a hindu was not in my control, but I will not die a Hindu” (Limbale, 4).

The Ambedkarite echoes in Tatyia Kamble’s speech, “Goats, not lions are sacrificed”, “I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu” (Ambedkar,) are quite obvious. Taya Kamble becomes the new face of the emerging Dalit consciousness, carrying forward with great care and pride the legacy of Ambedkar, he pleaded everybody in the basti to “accept Buddhism.” The fictional counterpart of Ambedkar, in the character/figure of Tatyia Kamble, becomes a project whereby the past is invented and reinvented for the sake of dalits. The ‘tamasha’ form employed by Tatyia Kamble as a piece of art is comparable to the author’s artistic piece, the novel, in imparting information and disseminating new cultural narratives. Badri Narayan, in his essay, ‘National Past and Political Present’ published in the Economic and Political Weekly, describes this tendency in dalit authors as a need to glorify and pay tribute to their leaders, the sacrifices committed by them for the upliftment of the dalit community. At the same time, it also describes their disillusionment with the movement of the past, since the fruits of those struggles could not percolate to the grass-root levels.

Therefore, the narrative describes how the affirmative actions are not adequately translated into material benefits for the dalit masses:

“O God, we spurn freedom. Just give us our daily bread. Let the status quo that provides us our daily bread prevail” (Limbale, 47).

The failures of the Ambedkarite movement in converting the struggle for cultural rights into economic mobility for the dalits are highlighted as proportionately as the romanticization of the Dalit leaders.

Nonetheless, the mode of pageant used by Tatyia Kamble has a widespread impact on the dalit as well as the casteist sections of the society. The second time when the narrator describes the impact of Tatyia Kamble’s speeches is through the lens of an upper caste male and female perspective:

“Prabhakar Kavale came up on the roof and burst out angrily at Sonali: Watching the Mahars dance, are you a Mahar too?... To Sonali, the sound of Tatyia Kamble’s speech felt like an erupting volcano. For the first time in her life, Sonali had heard such a blunt critique of the Hindu religion. Its other face was made visible to her today” (Limbale, 49, 51).

It is precisely this impact of Tatyia Kamble on the lower and the upper caste Hindus that instigates the Caste Hindus to kill Tatyia Kamble. The sense of disempowerment of the Caste Hindus as the guardians of the Hindu religion becomes a governing mechanism behind Tatyia Kamble’s murder, as a contrivance to reaffirm their discourse of power:

“...Tatyia Kamble abused Hinduism in his speech. Hindutva is the soul of this country. The village youth got mad. They must have done something” (Limbale, 12).

Tatyia Kamble, whose little presence as a living character and an “absentee presence” for the rest of the novel enables the fluid religious identities of the characters in the contemporary power politics to be solidified. His murder leads to the crystallization of the religious identities of the people; their formation into two polarized groups, the Hindutva forces and the strengthening

Dalit voice. At the cross roads of the formation of these two groups is also the role played by the State machinery and law:

“The government pampers the dalits. That’s why they have become insolent. Nobody gives a damn for the savarnas. We have become like stepchildren” (Limbale, 28-29).

“Dalits stopped performing their traditional menial jobs, making the villagers’ blood boil. At last dalit self-pride had awakened. If anybody deceived them, they filed a police case against him” (Limbale, 34.)

The murder of Tatyka Kamble is followed by a catalogue of activities listed at the end of those who aligned themselves with Hindutva and the dalits, each competing to assert their power. In this sense, Hindutva and the emerging Dalit consciousness become mutual feeders for each other:

“Bhau, seventy generations of Tatyka Kamble lived off the scraps we would discard. But Tatyka Kamble did not respect our charity” (Limbale, 17).

“ As long as the murderers remain at large, we will not take the body for cremation, Prof. Rahul Bansode declared” (Limbale, 24).

The slogan of “har har Mahadev,” shouted by the Hindutvavadis that reverberated the air was equally matched with the intensity of chants by Dalits, “jo humse takraega, vah mitti mein mil jaega.”

“Dalit consciousness had taken strong root among the community’s youth. Like famished men gorging on food, they greedily devoured Babasaheb’s writings” (Limbale, 96).

“The village youth was angry. They too got together and formed an organization called ‘Shivshakti.’ If dalits are getting organized, so must we” (Limbale, 94).

This neat polarization is further illustrated in the text marked by a division of spaces to claim power. A visual representation of this becomes the road on which Tatyka Kamble was killed. By his followers the road was named, ‘Hutatma Tatyka Kamble Path’ and the main road joining this road was named after Jagannath Pandit, one of the accused in Tatyka Kamble murder case who committed suicide in the jail.

The imagery of these two roads, named after a dalit and a Pandit, respectively, and the topographical detailing that describes Tatyka Kamble Path joining or merging with Jagannath Pandit Marg, becomes a metaphor to discuss two important issues- the association or the disassociation between the Hindutva and Dalit. It is interesting to note, that the term ‘Hindutva’ was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923 to describe movements advocating Hindu nationalism. A philosophy that becomes popular in the late 1980s with reference to two cases, the Shah Bano case and the 16th century Mughal Babri Masjid case in Ayodhya. The Hindutva philosophy that is well-known for its anti-tolerant stands towards Islam and Christianity, the foreign religions respectively. And as an acknowledgement and acceptance of the traditional caste-ridden Hindu religion, Hindutva is known for its associations and paternalism towards the dalits, as part of the Hindu fold. In the text, however, Hindutva is not so much seen in its relation with the other religions as with the avarna category of the Hindu fold:

“Muslims don’t kill dalits, nor do Christians. Buddhists don’t commit atrocities on dalits, nor do Sikhs. Then why do Hindus torment dalits? Don’t they accept that dalits are Hindus too?” (Limbale, 27).

The complex relationship between Hindutva, dalits and the foreign religions give much of the religious and political overtones to the events that unfold in the course of the novel.

“Today the Mahars have refused to perform their traditional village duties.

Tomorrow the Mangs will follow the suit” (Limbale, 28-29).

The hindutvavadis, though, consider dalits to be a part of the Hindu fold, do so only through reinforcing the traditional hierarchy that operates between the two castes. They voice Gandhian philosophy of a need to maintain the “organic order of the society.” However, in the face of the religion being threatened by conversion, especially to Islam or Christianity, the importance of dalits increases manifold:

“We should give up the Hindu religion, become Muslims or Christians...Unless we do that Hindus would not understand that we mean business” (Limbale, 96).

The hindutvavadis begin to have discussions, and become willing to pay money to the dalits as well as to do away with pollution purity norms, and drink water from the dalit homes, sit on a satyagraha and so on, so as to prevent conversion:

“It was the first time that the village had taken the dalit problem seriously” (Limbale, 113).

These instrumental strategies devised by the hindutvavadis mirror Gandhi’s strategic fast unto death to prevent the separate electorate award to the dalit constituency, “change of heart”, each upper caste man cleaning his own toilet and Gandhi visiting the dalit households completes the Gandhian critique, in the face of threat from outside. If Tatyta Kamble is an inheritor of the Ambedkarite movement, then Hindutva becomes the new face of Gandhian instrumentalism. Such joining of the Hindutva and the Dalit forces on the surface, therefore, is as shallow as that of the ‘Hutatma Taya Kamble’ and ‘Jagannath Pandit’ margs.

These strategic devices also merge the language of religion into the language of politics, in which discarding the long-standing religious norms of pollution and purity is merely a political ploy of the upper castes. Sadanand Kamble, the brother of Tatyta Kamble, is used as a pawn by Manikchand and Gopichand for political gains. Sadanand Kamble, after becoming the sarpanch, is restrained by the villagers to hoist the national flag as his touch could pollute it. However, at a later stage, the villagers add on to the vote bank of Sadanand Kamble when they realize that he would not surpass his status as an untouchable. The manipulative modes employed by various other activists on both the upper caste and dalit sides, highlight the dynamic struggle for power. The text highlights how the struggle of the dalits for claiming a political space within the mainstream politics or an alternate politics may lead to their absorption in the dominant meta narrative which is the politics of the dominant elite section.

Besides the religious and political jargons, the language that is highly explicit with sexual content and innuendos is employed. Manikchand and Gopichand’s use of religious language is over-powered by their use of derogatory terms used to address women.

“We did good deeds in our past life, so now we want to sin, Manikchand said. You must have sinned in your past life. That’s why you were born a Mahar, Gopichand teased” (Limbale, 7).

The firm connection between the hindu doctrine of ‘karma’, the deeds of past birth, as detrimental in the ascribed status of an individual, that is his caste in the hindu social order is replaced by a celebration of the power gained by this status to “sin” and enjoy sexual pleasures.

“To this day, a dalit cannot sit together with savarnas as an equal to drink water, but I drink liquor with them” (Limbale, 8).

This awareness of the notions of purity and pollution are surpassed willingly for baser physical pleasures:

“Though I drink liquor, I am a Hindutvavadi, a right wing Hindu. You are against Hindutva. I think we should keep ideology and life styles separate. I can drink liquor with you because at the level of flesh and blood we are all the same” (Limbale, 92).

This is not any common instance of paying allegiances to fake identities or a case of mutual inter-dependence between the two castes. It is interesting to note, that at the level of satiating baser sexual needs and exploiting women as a commodity and a “sex object”, the discourse of caste is unconsciously transcended. Manikchand and Gopichand, Milind Kamble and Vishnu Pujari, representative figures of upper caste, lower caste and religion, respectively seem to come together in forming an all together different constituency, as that of a male sexual predator. Interestingly, the various women who become targets of this “male gaze” are similarly a homogeneous group of women as commodities, irrespective of their caste/class identities. Rama Babbar, Surekha Mane, the dalit woman who is raped at the beginning of the text, a nurse, a waitress, Draupadi, all fall under the same category:

“Draupadi: How can I come in/ My place is at the bottom of the steps... God will be defiled... Visnu Pujari: How can god be defiled by a human being?” (Limbale, 129)

Vishnu Pujari on being rejected by Draupadi, a lower caste woman, describes his insult as:

“The godly skin encasing the body was coming out...If Draupadi recounts this incident to someone then my godliness will evaporate like droplets” (Limbale, 136).

Vishnu Pujari uses the same jargon, whereby the caste identities become fluid. At the same time, his notion of “godliness” indicates self and identity to be detachable masks that allow you to camouflage your identity as per the need. This raises pertinent questions about the permanence of an individual’s ideology, as the text is abundant with characters that disgrace the movements for personal selfish interests. Also, questions about the nature of alternative identity that the text seems to offer as a model remain ambiguous, as alliance of men (upper caste and lower caste) at the cost of objectification of women is not the solution that has been offered:

The scene describing the stripping of Draupadi,

“A crow sat atop the temple and crowed, ‘Look, here lies the corpse of humanity...The village watched all this like the blind Dhritrashtra” (Limbale, 147).

The transforming possibilities of the marginal section of the society are left open-ended and ambiguous, as the crystallization of the Hindutva philosophy or the Dalit consciousness does not restore the lost order of the society. The figure of the narrator, however, on encountering a eunuch, metamorphosing into a woman makes us question if Limbale consciously chose a subject completely stripped of identity as ‘the chronicler’, retrospectively analysing the socio-cultural-political history of a community.

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