

Dalit Literature: A Quest for Identity and Social Equality

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The term "Dalit" and "Dalit Literature" is a new phenomenon in history of India. Indian Dalit writing is emerging as a powerful voice and claiming a place for Dalits. The word "Dalit" is a Sanskrit word, which means downtrodden, oppressed, exploited, or condemned to peripheral living. In India, the word "Dalit" is used for the people of downtrodden community: untouchable (Harijans) mahars, mangs, mallas, chamars etc. According to Sharankumar Limbale:

Harijans and neo-Buddhist are not the only Dalits. The term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Advasis, Landless farm labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging economically will also need to be included. (11)

The Dalits of today were known as "untouchables" for centuries. British administration changed these degrading terms into "Depressed classes" in 1919. Gandhiji gave them a new name, Harijans" which means People of god. Ambedkar did not accept the term. He demanded an alternative for the "Depressed classes". In 1930's the term Dalit was used as a Hindi and Marathi translation of "Depressed classes". In 1935 the British Government defined them as the "Scheduled castes". In 1970's the followers of the Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra accepted the term Dalit'. Today this term is used frequently and has become popular among the Dalit people of various regions and protest movements.

Studies about the origin of Dalits tell us that they were the people without name and with no place in the social organization of the time. They were ostracised from the society and given the status of "untouchables". They were also subjected to various kinds of oppression and exploitation, which was supported directly or indirectly by the religion. Dalits lived the life of unending injustice, torture, and heinous treatment. Dalits were treated worse than animals. They were not allowed to enter the upper-class localities. Upper caste Hindus consider their touch and even their shadows impure. It was a believe that,

“lower castes should come out only between 3pm and 9pm, because before 9am and after 3pm their bodies cast too long a shadows, and whenever their shadow fell upon a Brahmin, it “polluted” him so that he dared not take food or water until he bathed away the “polluting” effect”(Basu xviii). At some places they were bound to hang clay pots from their neck so that may not pollute the street of uppercastes by their spit. Brooms were tied to their bodies so that while passing through the street of the privileged they can wipe away their footprints. “There was even a caste of 'Unseeables' who washed the clothes of other 'Untouchables' by night and hid their 'polluting' selves by day'(Basu xix).

The work of the Dalits was to maintain the upper caste Hindu's purity and make their social life clean and unpolluted. They had to clean latrines and skin dead animals and remove the carcasses. If Dalits did not do the menial jobs, the social life of these upper caste Hindus would be diseased. Limbale says “Dalits made pure the upper caste social life and become impure in the process” (3). For thousands of years Dalits were kept away from power, property, and position. Upper caste Hindus said that God created this hierarchy, so that Dalit would not rebel against this social order. Thousands of generations of Dalits accepted this injustice.

Upper caste Hindu literature deals only with the life and aspirations of caste Hindus. It never talks about Shudras. As they are absent from the upper caste's society and localities, they are also not present in their literature. By keeping them away from their literature they make sure that the untouchables would not pollute their world even by touching it. Brahmins never allowed their pens to depict the life of Dalits. However, we occasionally find a mention of shudras or lower caste people in earlier works, like Eklavya in Mahabharata and Shambuka in Ramayana. This made the whole of Hindu literature the literature of the upper castes.

According to *Manusmriti* the whole Hindu society was divided into four Varnas, i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Brahmin stood at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy and never cared for other Hindus. The shudras or the untouchables were at the lowest rung. Tapan Basu writes:

Brahmins drew an ideal picture of what they thought the social organism should be. In this “ideal Picture” of the castes sketched out in vedic literature, especially in the famous passage interpolated into the Rig Veda around 1000 BC in which the order of the castes was visualized in terms of the parts of the human body, the Brahmin occupied the top most position, succeeded by the Kshatriyas (warriors) and the Vasihyas (traders and

farmers). Together, these varnas or ceremonially ranks, each of which accommodated several hereditary groups or jatis in society, mostly with region specific or period specific variations comprised the upper castes, who were categorized as dvija (twice born) because the males among them went through an initiation ritual (upanayana) at which they were ritualistically re-born. This was symbolized by their donning the sacred thread. The above scheme did not include the remaining varna, the Shudras (menials), who comprised the numerous lower castes of society (xvii).

The art of reading and writing has been monopolized by the uppercastes. Shudras were not allowed to read and write. Shudras found to be listening to the Vedas were to be punished by pouring molten lead into their ears or by some other ways. For example, in *Mahabharata* Ekalaviya had compelled to cut his thumb. Without acquiring the art of learning, reading, and writing it was impossible for them to write about their own life. As a result, in the vast land of India, whereby a rough estimate the upper castes are 24% of the population, 76% population of the people, who belonged to lower existent caste, were condemned to a peripheral living. In addition to these four castes Hindu laws give us the fifth Varna i.e. Panchamas, which include Paryas and untouchable. They did not have place inside the village. It was the Panchamas who were the real outcastes. Until the mid-nineteenth century not a single Dalit was literate. Therefore, one should not wonder that Dalit literature was non-existent. It was after Bhim Rao Ambedkar's efforts that the condition of Dalits started changing. Dalits found their hero in B.R. Ambedkar. He started his writing on the tragedies and agonies of Dalits and depicted their pain and suffering. It was not the pain of one person nor was it of one day, but it was the anguish of entire outcaste society experienced over thousands of years. The anguish of Dalits is the progenitor of Dalit literature.

Dalit literature talks about age old oppression and exploitation of lower caste people of Hindu society. It is a new literary stream of the post-independence period. Its purpose is different; it is not simply a literature, but Dalit literature is a kind of movement to bring change. R. J. Jhadav in his article entitled, "some reflections on Dalit literature" argues that:

Dalit literature focuses attention on fundamental human values to re-establish secular values like individuality, identity, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Dalit literature began as a voice of protest an unjust social order. Today, it has attained the status of a distinct, creative world of literature which reflects the plights of Dalits and highlights the struggle of the human spirit against age old oppression. (Aston 11)

About Dalit literature Limbale says, "I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its dalitness and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (19). Therefore 'Dalit' now is not a term to denote only a caste, but it has become a symbol of changes and revolution. The basic aim of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Arjun Dangale, the Marathi Dalit writer and activist says, "Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality" (quoted in Limbale1). He traces the origin of Dalit literature to Ambedkar. Dalit struggle against caste system has a long history. It is not that before Ambedkar no one was writing about Dalits. There were people like, Raidas and Ramanand in North, Chaitanya and Chandi Das in East, Ramanuja and Basave in the South and Chokhemela and Eknath in the west, were making literature through the devotional "Bhakti Movement". They did not write in the high classical languages of the society, but in the vernacular of the common man. Dalits have presented their condition in various forms other than writing for example Lawani (ballads), Pawada (Panegyric poetry) and Folk dramas called Tamasha, but such forms were anonymous and never considered as respectable literature.

Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule worked to eradicate the caste system and to establish social equality in Indian society. By caste he was mali, so he too was a victim of casteism. As a socialist he opened special schools for untouchables and started a reform movement known as Satya Shodhak Samaj. He wrote pamphlets and books. Some of his books are *Gulamgiri*, *Shetkaryancha Aasud* and *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*. Next to Phule is Krishna Rao Bhalekar. In 1888 he started a non-Brahmin newspaper 'DeenBandhu'. Some other important writers from Maharashtra and others part of India who were writing before Ambedkar are Pandit Kondiram, Kisan Phagoji Bansod, Shivaraj Janaba and, Gopal Baba Valangkar. Gopla Baba Valangkar was the only writer of that time who wrote in English. He was a retired Hawaldar from British army. His first booklet *Vital Vidhransak Pustika* was published in 1888. The works of these writers were not large in quantity but can be considered as the beginning of Dalit literature. Writings of Dalit writers were different from the Hindu upper castes works, but Dalit writers were continuously writing and made every possible effort to be heard.

B.R. Ambedkar started his weekly paper Janta' in 1930. To Dalit writers Ambedkar came as a ray of hope and for Dalit people he was like a messiah. He put forward the case of untouchables from the boundaries of villages to "Round Table Conferences of British Empire" (Aston 49). The British

Government took a few steps in this regard. The Social Disabilities act of 1850 and the Queen's proclamation of 1857 threaten the social structures, which grant inborn honour and facilities to upper caste Hindus and dishonour and disabilities to lower caste Hindu.

Ambedkar was a thinker, leader, and activist. He worked for Dalits. He founded Siddhartha College in Mumbai in 1946 and Milind College in Aurangabad in 1947 for higher education of Dalits. All that Dr. Ambedkar wanted to achieve through his social and literary activities was to make Dalits assert their position as human beings. He asked Dalits to 'educate, organize and agitate'. His first agitation was Mahad Satyagrah. Ambedkar with Dalits went to Charadav Lake to drink water. It was not that after drinking water from that lake they could become immortal, but they wanted to assert that Dalits also have the right to drink water from the same lake from which upper castes drink. Dr. Ambedkar was not in favour of Hinduism. Once he said, "I was born a Hindu, but I shall not die a Hindu, I shall abandon Hindu religion" (quoted in Limbale 130). On October 14, 1956 mass religious conversion of Dalits took place under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. He and other Dalits dropped Hindu religion and adopted Buddhism.

According to Dr. Ambedkar *Manusmriti* is a symbol of injustice under which Dalits have been crushed over centuries, therefore such literature should be burned, followers of Ambedkar burn copies of *Manusmriti*. The story of Dr. Ambedkar's life, his works and messages awakened the Dalit society and Dalit writers. His ideology is the true inspiration for Dalit literature. Ambedkar himself wrote books and some of his famous books are *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *Who Were the Shudras*, and *Annihilation of Caste*. Thus, Ambedkar alone stands as an ideal for the people of downtrodden castes. He is close to Dalit's hearts, Dalit writers like Jalsakar K.K. Salri, Valangkar, Bhimrao Kardak etc. in the early phase of Dalit literature express gratitude to Ambedkar through their writings.

The first conference of Dalit writers held in Bengali High School, Dadar on 2 March 1958. At this conference, a resolution was passed that the Dalit literature should be acknowledged and recognized. This was a kind of push to Dalit Writers. Dalit writers have presented their thoughts in the form of poetry, plays, novels, short story and non-fiction. Dalit literature has a number of poets and a few of the important anthologies of last two decades are, *Golpitha* Namdev Dhasal, *Kondwar*: Daya Pawar, *Utkhanan*. Keshav Meshrama and *Surung*. Trayambak. In fiction we have writers like Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Bandhu, Madhav, Daya Pawar and Arjun Dangle. Though Dalit literature took birth in Maharashtra but writers from other parts of India, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu etc, are also

writing. Some of the Gujarati short story writers are, Madhukant Kalpit who has written *KulKatha*, *Maara Gam* by Pravin Darji. Joseph Mocwan who has written the first Dalit Novel in Gujarati, *Angaliyat*. In Hindi we have works like, *Joothan* by OmPrakash Valmiki, *Chittkobra* by Mridula Garg and many more. Devanoor Mahadeva has written *Kusumabale* in Kannada. In Tamil there are writers like, Bama and Rajam Krishnan.

Dalit plays also have an important place in Dalit literature. *Ghotbher Pani*, a one act play written by Premanand Gajvi has had thousands of performances and his new play *Tan Majori* is also very much talked about. Another name is of Datta Bhagat, some of his important plays are *Thamba Ramrajya Yet Aahe*, *Kalo-Khachya Garbhat* and *Sakshi Puram*.

Among non-fictional works some of the important works produced by the writers are *Ambedkar and Marx* by Ravsaheb Kasbe, *Anatmavaad* by Vasant Moon, Arun Kamble's *Ramayanatil SanskritiSangharsha* etc. Autobiographical novels have opened a new window to Dalit literature. Daya Pawar's *Baluto* which has been translated in Hindi under the title of *Achhut. Upara* by Laxman Mane, *Taral Antral* by Shankarrao Partha Polo's *Abharn Kharat*, Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*. Dalit women writers have also made a place for themselves in the field of autobiographies. Some of the works of women writers are Bama's *Karukku*, Kumud Pawade's, *Atmasphot*, Baby Kamble's *Aamachjanam* and *Majya Jumachi Chitarkatha* by Shantibai Kamble.

Today we hear loud voice of protest in Dalit writings. Writers like Anna Bhau Sathe, Daya Pawar, Yashwant, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Laxman Mane, Bama, SharanKumar limbale and others have caught the attention of readers through their writings and themes of rejection and revolt. Such themes chosen by these writers are the natural outcome of their experiences. Shame, anger, and sorrow are the essence of Dalit literature. since they have been oppressed from many centuries, so their expressions have become sharp. Rejection, revolt and protest in Dalit literature have taken birth from the womb of Dalits' pain. According to M. D.Nalavade:

All the Dalit writings have common themes which can be divided into five categories:

1. Against social disabilities forced upon Dalits.
2. Hindu caste system and inhuman treatment to Dalits.
3. Dr. Ambedkar's demand of social equality.

4. Dr. Ambedkar's stand for social justice.

5. Buddhism and social and economic democracy (Aston 51).

Dalit writers are engaged in a search of their true selves to achieve self-respect, and they reject traditions and a religion that opposes their self-respect. These writers express the pain of those who are not treated as human. Dalit writers put forward their experiences with a desire for freedom. They reject the unequal order and demand equality, liberty, fraternity and justice. It is rebellion against the caste system. In such condition according to Limbale "Dalit means not only caste, but it also refers to those who were yesterday exploited and now fighting back"(Limbale 42).

The human being is the focal point of Dalit literature. It opposes the notion of race, religion and caste. "Humanity is the religion of Dalit literature; therefore, in the world of Dalit literature no imaginary or worldly object is greater than the human being" (Limbale 51). Dalits use literature as a vehicle for their pain and suffering. According to Limbale:

Dalit literature will have two dimensions. One will be to familiarize Dalits with their past, to explain to them that they are enslaved, to show them that they are human beings and it is their duty and their right to fight for the rights of human being. The other dimension of Dalit literature will involve working on the hearts and minds of Savarna society in order to persuade them about the rights and entitlements of Dalits, to make them see that these are human beings and have been suppressed, and convince them that they must change(125)

This can be said that "the fountain head" for Dalit writings which started to emerge in a steady stream from the 1950s, and the 1960s onwards, initially from Maharashtra in the wake of the Ambedkar - inspired Dalit Panther movement, and then by 1970, and the 1980s from Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh & Orissa. In its present phase, Dalit writings are coming out also from Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab & elsewhere across the country, and have earned literary recognition from literary reviewers at home and abroad. Many seminars and conferences have been held on Dalit literature. These are attempts to formulate a separate poetics for Dalit literature. This is a journey of oppressed from quest for identity to social equality through their literature.

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