

## **RISE OF TAMIL DALIT LITERARY MOVEMENT: A STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

Tamil Dalit Literature identifying itself as the literature of protest it found its impact on form and content which frequently influenced the language and styles of the writers. The writers challenged the stereotyped and not only wept, accused, and abused but also laughed, loved and celebrated. The composition of the Oxford Indian Anthology of Tamil writing from 1890-2010 came out as a book edited by Ravikumar and R.Azhagarasan published Oxford University Press represents the collection of good writing from Scholars and students of comparative literature, translation studies, human rights, caste studies, Indian literature especially Tamil writing in translation. It includes a period of 100 years of the creative expressions of the Tamil Dalits of nineteenth century of 78 selection and 41 writings covering poetry, fiction, drama, autobiography, biography, prose and archival storage. The proposition of the paper will deal with the rise of the Tamil Dalit literary movement.'

**Keywords:literary;Dalit;Third keyword;Tamil;genre.**

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence of the Dalit literature started in Maharashtra and spread like a forest fire to different states like Karnataka, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Many works were translated and it gained a momentum and various people read the writings which were translated by the non-Dalits. The 'Translation Revolution' which was started in the 1990's introduced the Tamil Dalit Writing in English and it is the first book to focus exclusively on Tamil Dalit writing so far even in its native spheres. Dalit literature traces its origin from the Ancient Buddhist or the medieval anti-caste movement, even before the birth of the word 'Dalit' the literature about the untouchables existed to fight against the discrimination. Sangam period shows the existence of the untouchables some argue that untouchable were based only on profession and not of Caste. In Purananuru the Parayan who are classified as Scheduled Caste are refer to clan and not caste. Mangudi Kizhar says:

“Tudiyān, Paanan, Parayan, katamban endru In-naangu allaadu kudiyaṁ illai”

The above mentioned lines means other than the Tudiyān drummers and the Paanan singers Katambans and the Parayans there are no clans as 'kudi' in Tamil denotes as clan and not caste. Pulayan and ilicinān in the Sangam songs refer to the people engaged to unclean work. Iyothee Thass claimed that “the 'Knowledgeable Dravidian Buddhist' were defeated by the 'crooked machinations of ārya-mlechchas' and the defeated Buddhist were later relegated to the category of 'untouchables'”. (xvii- Ravikumar & Azhagarazan)

Iyothee Thass states that the practice of Buddhism was one of the reasons for the origin of the untouchability and even Ambedkar will accept it. To substantiate that “when certain non-Brahmin caste accepted the supremacy of Brahmins and became caste Hindus, those who resisted the very entry of Brahmins into their settlements and remained outside the Hindu fold became today's 'untouchables'”. (xviii Ravikumar & Azhagarazan) Gnanasekaran and Guruswamy Shiddar believe that the Pallars were the ruling community as they are the original decedents of Pallavas and claim them as Devendrakula Vellalars who trace their lineage to Lord Indira. Arunthathiyars are termed as Sakkiliyars by Nayaka Kings according to K.S.Singh they are the migrates from Andhra Pradesh during the reign of the Telugu kings in Tamil Nadu and they claim themselves

as Adi Tamilar. As Epigraphist Y.Subbarayulu views on caste is that it might have originated in the ninth and tenth century. The inscription of Rajaraja I in Thanjavur AD1014 gives information regarding the separate landholders of artisan (ur-irukkai) and the Paraiya (Parai-cheri). According to Iyothee Thass ,

“the unscrupulous ‘pseudo-Brahmins’ spread themselves all over the Tamil country and killed the Bhuddist kings and Monks by impaling them and crushing them in oil-presses. They also captured the Buddhist monasteries, demeaned the Buddhist by terming them Parayars, and concocted several stories about ‘paraya lowliness’. (xx-xxi Ravikumar & Azhagarazan)

The inscription on the Gangaikondacholapuram mentions about the seven villages and Thanjavur Big Temple gives information about the thirty-three temples. It tells about the three types of settlement of ooraar called oor-nattham, para-cheri and kammaana-cheri. Other than this there were other places like place where the kudi lives (kudi-irukai), place of the toddy-tappers (eezha-cheri), the place of the untouchables (theenda cheri), the place for the people who operate the canal irrigation (thalaivai-cheri), the place for the temple settlers (thani-cheri) and the place for the washer people (vannara-cheri). The annihilation of Buddhism and Jainism led to the upliftment of the Brahmins. Some people from the north west claim that Buddha is the incarnation of Vishnu and the inter-caste marriage between the Saiva devotees vaishnava devotees with the Buddhist became common it was a way to peacefully set the Jainism and Buddhism away. The followers of siva in the south began to violently suppress the Buddhism and Jainism and on power to it the Pallava and Pandiya kings slaughters the Jains.

According to Stein “it was the enthusiastic participation of the non-Brahmins that led to Buddhism and Jainism in TamilNadu being destroyed, the vedic-Brahmin religion taking root, the caste system getting strengthened, and untouchability becoming entrenched”. (xxiv Ravikumar & Azhagarazan). The unique nature of the Hindu society as Ambedkar comprehends is

“Men live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge, a common

understanding. Or to use the language of the Sociologists, they must be like-minded.... Participation in a group is the only way of being like-minded with the group”. (xxv Ravikumar & Azhagarazan)

Ambedkar puts forth the relationship between the touchable and untouchables as the evil of isolation and benefits of endosmosis in the social group as

“The significant fact about the Hindus is that before they are Hindus they are members of the same caste. The caste are so exclusive and isolated that the consciousness of being a Hindu would be the chief guide of a Hindu’s activity towards a non-Hindu. But as against a Hindu of different caste, his caste-consciousness would be the chief guide of activity.... From the point of view of communication, the Hindus, in spite of castes, divide themselves into two groups- the touchables and the untouchables. The touchables have enough communication between them to enable us to say that the conflict of like-mindedness so far as they are concerned is not much to be dreaded. But there is a real difference and consequent conflict between the like-mindedness of the touchables and the untouchables. Untouchability is the strongest ban on the endosmosis between them”. (xxv-xxvi Ravikumar & Azhagarazan)

Hinduism consolidates itself by suppressing “Hindus have always isolated Buddhist, Jains, Untouchables, and other religious minorities, and treated them as the ‘other’. (xxvi Ravikumar & Azhagarazan) only a qualitative approach can calm down the atrocities of the Hindus on the others. When British left India the political power came to the elites who occupied the upper position well educated Brahmins and the untouchables were not even able to reach such heights. Though the untouchable has the numerical power but they were deprived of the political and economical power by that the religious and caste power gained strength. With the emergence of the political power the power of caste also grew in the hands of the upper caste people.

Ambedkar says:

“In India, the majority is not a political majority. In India the majority is born; it is not made. That is the difference between a communal majority and a political majority. A political majority is not a fixed or a permanent majority. It is a majority which is always made, unmade and

remade. A communal majority is permanent majority fixed in its attitude. One can destroy it, but one cannot transform it". (xxvii Ravikumar & Azhagarazan)

The significant moment in Tamil Nadu political history was the formation of the South India welfare Association in 1906, the launch of the Non-Brahmin manifesto in 1916 and the construction of the Justice Party in 1917. The Justice party formed the first non-Brahmin led ministry of the legislative council election in 1920 and won the election by reserving the government jobs for the non-Brahmin communities in 1921. Many high non-Brahmin like the Reddiars, Naickers, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettiars benefited much. The struggle of the backward caste for reservation after the independence led to the formation of the first post-independence non-congress government the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(DMK) in TamilNadu in the year 1967. The alignment of the Thevars with M.G.Ramachandran led to All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) from 1972. The Vanniyars started a fight and the momentum peaked in 1987 as a result of it the government created the category called the 'Most Backward Classes' as MBC within the Back ward class (BC). The struggle of the Vanniyars for the reservation gain brought out the Mandal Commission report in 1990. 27%of reservation in the public sector brought for the other backward caste (OBC) hit the headlines and a massive violence began against the other caste and to the Dalits. The students who belonged to the lower caste with the minimum marks were given seat in the university and jobs that created violence in the society. Even before the Mandal commission the Dalits faced the violence through mass killings like the massacres of Kilvenmani (1968) in TamilNadu, Belchi (1977) in Bihar, Karamchedu (1985) in Andhra Pradesh. Long before this only individual killing, property destruction, taking over women was done but these three massacres brought the true face of gruesome group killing of the Dalits.

Dalit assertion in South India started only from the establishment of Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in Karnataka (1977), Dalit Panthers of India in Tamil Nadu (1982), Dalit Mahasabha in Andhra Pradesh (1985), and Pudiya Tamizhagam (1998) in different states reduced the atrocities done to the Dalits and Human Rights commission voiced out for it.

Though Dalit literature originated in Marathi in 1970's even before that a century old Tamil history and culture about the Dalit are found. 1980's saw the rise of small scale Dalit movements and people who showed interest in Dalit literature were from Marxist background. Periyar saw the Dalit literature as non-Brahmin literature and Marxist saw it as class oppression. Iyotha Thass's Dalit Sahitya Academy writings became the major intellectual writing, the similarities and difference of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin writings are seen in poomani's *Piragu* (1979), gender wise issues were also addressed by the works of P.Sivakami and Imayam, the inter-caste conflict was portrayed by the writings of Bama in *Vanmam* (2002), the anguishness, desire, aspirations are seen in the stories of Cho.Dharuman, Sudhakar Khathak, J.B. Sanakya and Thenmozhi, and also in the poetry of the poets like Sukirtharani, N.D.Rajkumar and Ravikumar. The Tamil Dalit writing has produced autobiographies, novels, poems, short stories and got a separate sphere to express the pain and suffering in different forms. It focuses on the enriched content, creative writing with different style and approach.

Dalit Poetry started in the 1990's with the Dalit movement and it subverted and dismantled the mainstream form of writing. It captures the reality and the dialect to convey the totality of the Dalit experience. "Dalit poetry has sometimes been critiqued as relying almost exclusively on harsh and even abusive language to convey its message... Poetry is the art of challenging the boundaries of language without being limited by those of ideology". (Satya & Susie) Dalit poetry portrays the real self-exploration, discovery of the human condition with transformation. Sukirtharani, Ku.Umadevi, S.Thenmozhi, Parthiba Jeyachandran, and Bama are the women poets who put forth the Dalit feminist sufferings into their writings, N.D.Rajkumar writes to challenge the mainstream writers, Ravikumar uses the poetry as a vehicle to transport the readers from familiar path to the unfamiliar one, the writings of Mathivannan, Yazhan Aathi, P.Mathiyalagan, Kabilan, and Indran brings the harshness in words.

Short story started getting attention in the Tamil literary history in 1960 with the rise of the magazines like *Kanaiyazhi*, *Gnanaratham*, *Deepam*, *Ka Sa Da Tha Pa Ra*, and *Nadai*. When writers like Puthumai pithan started writing short story became a literary form of expression to experiment the style, theme, freedom of content and flexibility. "By deliberately using literature as a tool of social activism, Dalit writers often embrace the short story as a semi-fictionalized

record of events and recollections that amplify the resonance of caste and highlight the response of Dalit”. (OTA Ravikumar & Azhagarazan) Reading the Dalit short stories will give the readers wretched emotions, raw angst and irony of the realities that exist in the Dalit society. All writers like Ravikumar, Bama, Sudhakar kathak, Imayam, J.B.Sanakya, Abimani, Cho.Dharuman and S.Thenmozhi’s writing narrative portrays the life time suffering of the Dalit community with their own dialect.

Drama in the ancient Tamil history was not a distinct form of genre as it was blended with dance, songs, and other ritualistic performances. Dalit theater emerged by adopting the folk traditions which fuse them with the invisible theatre, theater of violence, native theater, feminist and black theater. Dalit theater portrays the stylizing ideas and exposes the caste based violence faced by the Dalits in the hands of the upper caste people. K.A.Gunasekaran in his work *Thodu* represents the male voice and the female voice is represented by M.Jeeva in *Cheriyin Thalattu*. Dalit Drama are being staged in two ways one which is staged during the cultural festivals which are written by the activist and the second is staged by the Dalit activist who are students and scholars in the seminar, meetings in the University and collages. In 1992 first Dalit cultural fest was conducted in Pondicherry then in 1993 in Neyveli. It was initiated and conducted by the Dalit resource center in Madurai. Drumming Parai is the important instrument in the Drama and it has gained more attention as the activist and scholars act with emotion which was silenced all these years. Drama has become different form of art which shows the cultural, social, economical aspect of the Dalits through their real performance. Dalit autobiographies, speeches, essays also started to gain attention Bama’s Autobiography *Karuku* is the first Tamil autobiography and then P.Sivakami wrote *Grip of Change*. Archive collection in Chennai has the storage of the East India Company writing, pamphlets, journalist collections and the works of the colonial rule are found.

The betrayal of the Dalits is not done by a singular or an individual it is done by many strands of betrayal through government, politics and Brahmins. OBC emerged as a separate political force as a national political party like Samajwadi party in 1992 by Mulayam Singh and Rashtriya Janata Dal in 1997 by Laloo Prasad Yadav. Those who publically fought were called as casteist

and the people who silently and denied caste were considered to be secular and casteless. Caste is seen as a form of power and privilege

“the history of caste is part of the history of modern India. The experience of the dominant castes- their authority, visibility, power, economic presence-as well that of the lower caste- their subordination, oppression, invisibility, and economic and political marginalization- is a modern Phenomenon”. (11 Satya &Susie )

The life of the Dalit world is suppressed when the upper caste people bring out their culture and self- esteem to the society. When the focus is on the upper caste people automatically the observation and interest goes to it and the lives of the Dalit are undermined, devalued, stigmatized, their culture art and history are obliterated. “The monopoly of the uppercaste in education, employment and the political arena and the absence of Dalits and OBC’s in these domains, revealed caste dominance in Indian public institutions”. (12 NAI) Dalit critic’s tendency to treat the caste rather than the treatment of oppression, violence and dehumanization but to see it as a creative identity of self assertion and pride is the new approach. In 1988 Scheduled Caste Liberation Movement was started and the first conference was held in Chennai in 1988 August. Anbuselvam quotes the words of Kanshi Ram as “More than the fact that Dalits of Tamil Nadu have come together under the single banner of SCALM, our true victory lies in the fact that all of them have come out of the dominant political parties that were cheating us all along”. (21,Satya &Susie) In 1990’s the Dalits politics gained strength through Viduthalai Chiruthaigal, Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation and Adi Tamilar Peravai. Dalit Panther of India was formed in 1980’s and it was taken over by Tirumavalavan in 1990’s as Viduthalai Chiruthaigal – Liberation Panthers. The Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation was started by Dr.K.Krishnasamy in 1995 against the atrocity of Pallar-Devar clashes in southern Tamil Nadu. It later became a political party and was named as Puthiya Tamizhagam and its aim was to bring equality among castes and to form a new social order. The Pariahs had the upper hand in DPI and Arundathiyar supported them in the election but they felt they were left out and the sub-caste Arundathiyar started the Adi Tamizhar Peravai in 1994 which was based on the ideas of Periyar, Marx and Ambedkar. Many literary magazine were started after 1990’s in 1994 a special Dalit issue *Nirapirikai* was published.

“In 1995 in Tamil India Today brought out a special annual issue on Tamil Dalit writing that included Raj Gauthaman’s critical essay, stories by Sivakami, Idayaventhana, Bama, Ravikumar, Cho.Dharmam and Imayam and poetry by K.A.Gunasekaran and Pratibha Jeyachandran. This moment can be described as the birth of Dalit writing in Tamil Nadu”. (29 Satya & Susie)

Many magazines like *Dalit Murasu*, *Puthiya Kondangi*, *Dalit*, *Bodhi*, *Manusanga*, *Thaiman* and *Adi Tamizhan* were launched into the literary world to bring out the writings of Dalit. M.S.S.Pandiyan in his article in 1998 states that the Chera, Chola and Pandya dynasties kings and the people surrounding them the Brahmins cherished but the Dalits served them and worked for the upliftment of the people. The writings of Ambedkar inspired the Tamil Dalits and made them to come out of the caste oppression and to produce their own writing. Imayam points out that “Good Literature takes a person to silence. Political writing has a goal, a target; literature does not. Literature’s task is not to provide information; it should be to create life”. (59) Likewise the writing of the Tamil Dalits is to bring the reality of the suffering which is being silenced by the mainstream writings and to bring out the Dalit assertion in the society.

## References

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