

Dalit: From a Political Term to Literary Tradition

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Abstract: India has been a very stratified society, more so than others, and the caste system is very entrenched. The links between caste, social hierarchy and slavery are strong, and it condemns individuals from birth to a life of marginalisation. Such marginalized section of Indian society who consolidated themselves as 'Dalits', is now reflecting the growing identity, awareness and consciousness in their writings. The objective of this paper is to discuss the historical context of the emergence of 'Dalit literature', and to analyse the nature of literary representation of Dalit problems with main thrust on Balwant Singh's autobiography 'An Untouchable in the IAS' (English, 1997).

Keywords: Dalit, untouchables, Dalit Panther movement, Dalit consciousness, Dalit literature

In Indian society, the entire Hindu population is divided in social hierarchy as the upper castes and the lower castes. This social division is itself backed by laws encoded by Brahmins in a number of Hindu religious scriptures collectively known as Dharma Shastras. They administer religious sanctions to the lower castes based on the concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution'. Thus, the 'untouchable', 'un-seeable', 'un-hearable', 'unapproachable' Dalit has an intrinsic relationship with the nature and character of Indian caste society. They were considered as the lowest of the low and treated worse than animals. Their caste status meant that they remained illiterate, poor and down-trodden throughout the history.

Dalits constitute about sixteen percent of the country's population- they are socially frail, economically needy and politically powerless. Dalits, however, are now a bit conscious of their right to live with dignity and self-respect and, therefore, have been questioning the authority of Brahminical institutions. This can be seen being clearly reflected in the recent emergence of Dalit literature, which is a part of the Dalit liberation movement.

Dalit activists and writers came hand in hand in 1972 to launch a united Dalit movement in Maharashtra, famously known as the Dalit Panther Movement. J.V. Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale were the founder members of the Dalit Panthers. Eleanor Zelliott, an American scholar who has justly compared the Dalit Panthers to the American Black Panthers, also writes,

The Marathi word "Dalit", like the word Black, was chosen by the group itself..... There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, Karma and justified caste hierarchy.

The connotations of the term 'Dalit' has been changing and evolving ever since it was coined. And so is the rising Dalit voice. Dalit consciousness is emerging out of age-long Dalit pang. Limbale describes it as being 'like a flood, with its aggressive character and an insolent, rebellious attitude.'

Dalit creativity, therefore, is a cry for freedom of people who were earlier denied their human rights. Dalit literature is, therefore, a literature of dignity.

At the onset, Sanskrit was the language of knowledge and wisdom accessible only to upper castes. Thus, the 'untouchable' art could not flourish in spite of all its potential. In a society conducive for the development of upper caste art, culture and literature, the 'untouchables' were depicted as thieves and robbers. An alternative narrative could not be heard until the period of Bhakti movement when Chokhamela, Namdev, Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu Dayal, Gora and Sena among others started singing their songs of protest.

The lack of formal education prevented the lower castes from protesting against the monopoly of the established literary canon. After the introduction of Macaulay Minute in 1835, English education overpowered itself. Now, the 'untouchables' got a slight opportunity of formal education due to efforts of Christian missionaries.

As the nineteenth century ended, many prominent upper caste Indian writers discussed the cause of the 'untouchables' in their writings. Potheri Kunhambu's *Saraswativijayam*, Joseph Muliyil's *Sukumari*, Unnava Lakshminarayana's *Malapalli*, Premchand's *Rangbhumi*, K. Shivaram Karanth's *Chomana dudi*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Thottiyude makan*, Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* are few early writings with Dalits as their central characters. Essentially, the representation of the sufferers in their works was bound to be different from the self-representation of Dalits- a trend which began in the post-independence era. As S. Sreenivasan, in his article 'Why Does Dalit Literature Matter?', emphasizes,

Those who are outside the fold can imagine,
sympathise or write about, but they cannot feel
the pain and the humiliation in the way a Dalit feels...

With the start of the Dalit Panthers movement, the modern Dalit literature emerged in Maharashtra in the early 1970s. But it is only after 1991-92, that Dalit writing began to be translated in English and became available to the English-reading people in India and abroad. Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) was the first edited anthology of Dalit writing to come out in English.

Dalit literature, apart from trying to deny caste inequalities and injustices, also aspires to bring marginal voices to the centre. Compared to upper-caste progressive writers, Dalit writers realistically portray their lives, environment and situations. Their vehicle for this truth-telling is often the brutal, coarse and crude language of the slum and village, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence.

Speaking of important genres in Dalit literature, autobiography is the most commonly used genre after poetry. Of late, fictional representation in the forms of short stories, novels and drama has also begun. Throughout the writings, it can be seen that the 'untouchable' self still lingers around even when the person has individually achieved professional distinction. Such is one autobiographical work by Balwant Singh- *An Untouchable in the IAS* (English, 1997). The autobiography provides a detailed account of the circumstances that led Balwant Singh to quit the covenanted administrative service.

Young men like him joined the Indian Administrative Service, he observes in his book, in the hope that this "prestigious service would be responsive to the common man and provide relief and succour by alleviating his sorrows and sufferings." But five years in the service "totally disillusioned" him. "The IAS was still the protector of the rich and the socially privileged and the man in the street did not count much in their scheme." The distinction between "their" administration and "the man in the street" is a recurrent motif in Balwant Singh's autobiography. The low caste officers were "tolerated" if they accepted upper caste ways and attitudes, they were never fully accepted socially. They suffered from much social indignity and humiliation. Any expression of discontent from them was met with the response that these were "trivial", "inconsequential" matters.

To conclude, it would be apt to say that the Dalit writers are now systematically creating a new literature with a new vocabulary. No need to say that a new aesthetic based on the ideas of liberty, equality and human rights is emerging. An effort must be made to appreciate and understand the Dalit aesthetics and dynamism.

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