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DALITS: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The Dalits were the suppressed and oppressed community in India for centuries and we can say they still are. They were segregated and alienated from the mainstream of the society. They were treated as untouchables and not permitted to enter schools, temples and the villages of the upper caste society. Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar the chief architect of the Indian constitution demanded a ban on Manusmriti and publicly burnt the copies, as it brought about the caste system and discrimination in the society. Dalit literature started with the non Dalits writing about the Dalits either to uplift them or to criticize them. Education reached the Dalits only during the later part of the colonial period. The oppressed people began to express their agony in writing in the form of poems, short stories and novels. The language used by the Dalit writers in literature may be termed as harsh or violent. The mainstream tradition had not recognized the Dalit's writings as they did not meet their literary and aesthetic standards. It is improper to say that the language is scandalous as Dalit literature is culture specific. Dalit literature is compared with African- American literature in issues related to inhuman treatment. Dalit literature is authentic presentation of the social traits and is testimony of Dalits' suffering, oppression and exploitation echoing in their writings. The Dalits' quest for identity and social equality continues to the present day.

Key words: Dalits; Language; Literature; Segregation; Suppression; Identity

Introduction

India is a country with diverse cultures and languages, religions and communities with multi-culturalism prevailing from centuries. According to government religion census 2001, Hindus constitute 79.80%, Muslims 14.23%, Christians 2.30%, Sikhs 1.72%, Buddhists, Jains and other religions constitute the remaining percent. There are again divisions based on caste lines where Scheduled Castes constitute 16.6% and Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6% and 37- 40% other backward castes. The Indian mind-set is always pre-occupied with caste and prejudiced about caste and

community even to this day. Modern education has not helped the people to grow beyond caste. This caste system has a significant role in limiting progress in various business lines and worst of all even in educational institutes. Occupations are organized on the basis of caste. Sanitary related cleaning, sewage removal and physical labour is often done by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Caste system was introduced by the Aryans who invaded India centuries ago. The classification of caste was determined on the basis of the occupation or trades practiced by the people. The Aryans who lived in mountains and unyielding areas left their

country in search of better living conditions. They came down to northern part of India around 1500 BC and fought with the natives. They started treating lower caste people like animals. Hence for centuries the lower caste remained 'Chandala' or

'Avarna'. Varna in Sanskrit means type, colour or class. The society was divided into four groups or varna which was a hierarchical social order in ancient India. There was a fifth group, outside the system known as chandala. Chandala is a Sanskrit word for someone who disposes corpses. Avarna is a Sanskrit word which means one who does not have a varna or caste.

Segregation of Dalits: In classical Sanskrit the word Dalit means divided, broken, scattered. It was a word used for people excluded from four-fold varna system of Hinduism. The word Dalit was perhaps used by a social reformer Jyothirao Phule. In the 20th century the word 'Harijan' was coined by Mahatma Gandhi. The translated form of Harijan is people of God. But many found the word to be derogatory. The British Indian

Empire passed the 'Government of India Act 1935' and identified the Dalits as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled Castes is the official term for Dalits. Welfare schemes were introduced by the government to uplift the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The government yet could not change the lives of the people as the mindset of the society could not welcome them into the mainstream of the society.

The Dalits were separated from the mainstream of life. They were segregated from the main village and were not permitted to stay in the limits of the main village. They were not permitted to enter schools or temples. Education eluded them. They were discriminated in every aspect and they remained as the suppressed and oppressed people of the society.

Dalits and Language: The Dalits were denied education and basic amenities as they were oppressed throughout the recorded history of India. Fa Xian, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim recorded his visit to India in the early 5th century. In the context of chandala community he writes, "Throughout the

country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat garlic or onions. The only exception is that of chandalas. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that the men, know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them." Fa Xian, 399-414 CE

To understand the Dalits and their language, first their environment must be viewed. The Dalits in India had for centuries remained as untouchables and experienced an exiled life in their own country. They were not allowed the right to education. Even today Dalits who seek education are ignored and humiliated. The upper caste, still think that Dalits are dull and different. Dalits were fighting for their right to attend schools. Dalits won their rights to attend schools by the time of independence in 1947. They fought not just to attend schools but it went beyond that. Their fight was for equality, emancipation, empowerment and dignity. The Dalits as they were economically poor, their children were sent to municipal schools where the facilities were very poor. The teachers and students humiliated them and worst of all the teachers used corrosive language against them. They were caned frequently and disciplined to the cultured speech. The Hindu society has been seen as extremely callous, indifferent and positively antagonistic to the socio-economic advancement of the Scheduled Castes. There will be a rapid progress towards goal of economic development only when the Dalits are able to overcome the psychological, cultural, economic and social difficulties.

The Dalits had been devoid of any literary tradition because the main stream tradition had not recognized the Dalits' writings as it did not meet their literary and aesthetic standards. The language used by the Dalits is distinct. The dominant language norms are broken. Because of their distinct use of terminology Dalit literature translation cannot capture it precisely. Hence at the beginning of the text it is necessary to explain in introduction, prefaces or list of unfamiliar words for the benefit of the readers' understanding. It is a social context where the approval of a Dalit and non Dalit agent

authenticate both the linguistic and cultural translation. The language used by Dalit villages is vividly translated and the reader has the impact of the exact language used by the Dalits. Hence the kind of language used in the writings gives an authentic picture.

The harsh words used, in Dalit writing which may be termed as violent language, points to the fact what the Dalits had directly faced, experienced and undergone in their daily life at the hands of the so called upper caste people. Abuses hurled at them, is the language that they have been exposed to outside their villages. This is the main reason that we find a particular kind of language in Dalit writing. The abuses used in the language have been learnt from the higher caste people. It is clear that the blame goes to the high caste people who used such vocabulary to the uneducated Dalits. Hence it is improper to say that Dalits use scandalous language. It exhibits the culture of the Dalits and the culture under which they were brought up. It is their identity. Since they were marginalized communities the language is closer to their lifestyle. They had lived for centuries as a cultural community outside the main villages as untouchables and experienced an exiled life in their own country. Only a hegemonic culture according to Lannoy (1974) stresses obedience, order and adherence to taboos. The language is devoid of adornment. It is a kind of straight forward language of Dalit language and style.

Dalit literature movement: Dalit literature started with the non Dalits writing about the Dalits. The Dalits themselves were uneducated as they were banned from entering schools. Only during the later part of the colonial period education reached them. The educated Dalits were still the oppressed, so they wrote about the atrocities they faced and about their struggles and liberation. The real life experienced by the Dalits is depicted in Dalit literature. Short stories and poems of their writings gave an insight of the Dalit identity. Hence Dalit writing is not fiction but a great presentation of their authentic experiences. Dalit literature is filled with anger, sorrow and shame. They expressed their agony in writing and this movement produced poems, short stories, novels and research articles

The term Dalit literature was used for the first time in 1958 at Mumbai where the first conference of 'Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha' was held. Namdeo Dhasal founded the Dalit Panther and the movement from Marathas spread to other states and there was Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu literature. All the Dalit writers of the various states in India shared the common cause and the common identity.

Common protest: Black writing was the cry of the writers of African descent in the United States. It was a cry of protest against racial discrimination. The Dalit literature too was the cry of the exploited community in India. The African Americans were treated as a commodity in the slave trade. They were neither allowed to attend schools nor allowed to read, write and learn. They experienced the horrors of family separation, sexual abuse and inhuman treatment. The Dalits too were treated in a near similar manner depriving them of education and equality. Just like the 'Black Panther movement' started in America, the Dalit Panther movement started in India. Both were engaged in liberation movements. Both of the African Americans and Dalits experienced suffering, segregation, hunger, humiliation, denial of education, denial of entry into churches and temples, and suppression and oppression.

Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhole in April 1972 established the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra. Later Baburao Bagul, Maharaj Phule, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarao Kera created Dalit literature. It sprouted into progressive movement called 'Little Magazine'. The Dalit youth found inspiration in movements of blacks in North America. The Black literature and Black Panther became role models to them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of new literature called Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature: The journal Asmitadarsha became a mouth piece of the Dalit literature. The Dalit literature and movement aimed at the liberation of Dalit people from the oppressive structure of the Indian society. Many writers strongly condemned in their writings against the insensitivity and ruthlessness of the upper caste educated people against the Dalits. They also rejected the upper caste

writers writing of the Dalit life. There was an upheaval both in the political and literary world.

Jyothirao Phule was a prominent Marathi writer. His books *Gulamgiri* and *Shetkaryacha Aasud* were translated into English titled as 'Slavery' and 'A Cultivator's Whipcord'. In his writings he exposed the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits. Jyothirao Phule gave a momentum to the social reformation movement in Maharashtra. His writings are a mirror image of the evils of the society towards the Dalits. His mission and longing was to uplift the oppressed community. Namdeo Dhasal's poems include many words and expressions which only the Dalits normally used.

Dalit literature started with the non Dalits writing about the Dalits either to uplift them or criticize them. The Dalits who were shunned from schools and with no education got the opportunity to attend schools during the later part of the colonial period. The educated Dalits could express their plight and misery in writing after education reached them. The Dalit literature is therefore not fiction but real facts of their history of oppression. There is absence of fabrication or fantasy but their literature is filled to the brim with the presentation of their authentic experiences of sorrow, anger, humiliation and horror.

Dalit literature is an offshoot of Indian literature which is directly focused on the social injustice and the exploitation of the Dalits by the upper caste people of the society. Dalit literature is seen as liberation literature in parallel to the black literature, the feminist literature and the communist-socialist literature. Dalit literature which depicts the struggles of the Dalits could not be digested by the upper caste of the society. Their writing which was written in the various regional languages or in English was unpalatable to the upper caste as the language was against the standard language or academic language. It may not be acceptable but it remains the language of the Dalit community. Irrespective to standard language or not, Dalit literature without comparison remains as Dalit literature, the literature of the suppressed, downtrodden Dalits.

Literature and language has various forms and it must be taken as it is presented. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits

from being the oppressed community. Traditional Tamil literature never raised a voice over the demand for the liberation of the Dalits, instead the Dalits were depicted as sick people. It was the perspective of the non Dalit writers who totally ignored the fact that those wretched conditions were brought upon the Dalits by the upper castes themselves. The perception of the Dalits is clearly visible which was witnessed in their writings. The humiliation and cruelty faced by the Dalits is expressed in the Dalit literature. Obscenities and ornamental language may not be accepted in literature, but they were part of Dalit literature and Dalit culture.

Eminent Marathi writer Jyothirao Phule's writings are a reflection of the inhuman life that Dalits faced in the society. He exposed the evils of the society toward the Dalits. He was a social reformer and a trendsetter for the other writers, not only in Maharashtra but in different states of India. Some of the other important writers are Rangal Rathore, Arjun Dangle, Perumal Murugan and Rabi Singh. Perumal Murugan's fiction echoes the everyday brutality of caste society. Gitanjali (1913) by Rabindranath Tagore, talks about how the 'untouchables' had been subjected to humiliation in our country. Narayana Guru a social activist born in Kerala (1854) talks about the oppression Dalit people faced. The chief architect of the Indian constitution Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar who is considered the father of our constitution wrote several notable works, including the highly famous *Annihilation of caste* (1936). He publicly burnt the copies of *Manu Smriti* and demanded a ban on it as the four caste system brought deep discrimination in the society. Dalit Panthers was founded in 1972 by Dhasal, J.V. Pawar and Arun Kamble which advocated the ideologies of Jyothirao Phule and Dr Ambedkar. Bama a Dalit writer activist from Tamilnadu was a Dalit feminist writer. Some of the present day Dalit writers are P. Sivakami, Vijila Chirrapad, Dev Kumar, Meena Kandasamy, Arvind Malagatti, Gaddar, Manoranjan Byapari, Omprakash Valmiki, Gogu Shyamala and Ratan Kumar Sambharia.

All the Dalit writers in their writings shared their personal experience of caste discrimination. Majority of their writings were autobiographical.

But the authors' experiences represent the experiences of their entire community. Their writings clearly show how their lives are completely controlled by the society around them. One must be sensitive to the distinctive aesthetics created by Dalit writers. Their language is direct and harsh. Their vocabulary differs from the mainstream writers. They use the pronouns I, We and Our representing Dalits and you, yours, they and their in addressing the non Dalits. Hence the study of Dalit literature requires an in- depth contextual knowledge.

Conclusion

Dalit literature readers have a first-hand experience of how the community lives. The Dalit autobiographies also stand as the history of the community in India. There is an emergence of a new sense of identity through Dalit literature. The Dalits are seen fighting for their causes through literature. The fact is, literature of the Dalits is influenced by the realities of the societies. The future Dalit literature may see aesthetic form of language. Dr. Ambedkar stated in the preamble of Indian constitution that transformation can occur through individual dignity and equal opportunities. And this would undoubtedly bring real aesthetics into Indian literature not just into Dalit literature. Dalit literature was conceived as a transformative social revolution for equality and justice of the marginalized section of the society. Like all literature Dalit literature promises liberation. This literature should be viewed not as a literature of vengeance and hatred but as a literature of freedom and greatness. The Indian government has taken remedial measures to address the social exclusion of Dalits. However, much more needs to be done and the quest continues.

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