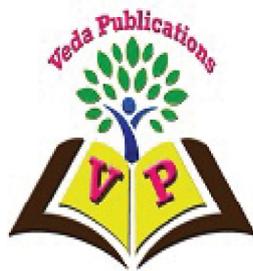


POWER RELATIONS AND DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Indian society, by its very nature, does not allow an individual self to grow. Since caste system is a fact of life, every individual becomes part of a greater community, thus, losing one's individual identity. The difference between the works of the two kinds of writers is not just because of their castes but also due to differing experiences and their ways of interpreting them. Thus, though caste is at the root of most Dalit literature, as its literary manifestation is based on its experiences, the horizons of Dalit literature is expanding. But the non-dalit writers do not like to call themselves Dalits. They feel that to do so is below their dignity. As a result the process of expansion of art is retarded. To use Marxist jargon, many authors avoid joining the 'D' class. This is not only true of non-Dalits but also of the educated and the secure among the Dalit themselves. The reason for this is that the word 'Dalit' traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. Hence the term has become derogatory. The non-dalits hence pose the question: Why should we call ourselves Dalits? Dalit means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country.

Keywords : Dalit, Literature, Caste.

An anonymous Dalit poet in 1985 wrote:

*"Life is a myth, world is a myth,
Everything really always a struggle
A vain struggle, never ending struggle
We struggle, always for survival
You for your life, life of comfort
Wealth and power, Leisure and Pleasure,
Thinking stupidly, these are Developments!
You keep running, without stopping ever!
While we struggle, work and plough
Sow and Reap, Create and Produce
Everything just, for a slice of Bread
To keep the soul and bodies together!
Always a struggle, never ending struggle!
You are struggling, for Butter to Butter
The Bread you have stolen from us!
A vain struggle! Never ending
struggle!"(Prasad 20)*

The complexity of caste in our Indian society has been the focus of the work of Marxist scholars for a long time. Omvedt observes that caste is analogous to class insofar as, like class, caste is a system of expropriation of surplus labor from actual producers by owners of the means of production. Nevertheless, unlike class, caste is a social construct not of the methods of contraption in the material alone, but of the operations of reproduction in the ideational arena. The logic behind the caste system is that it is an inherited institution of division of labor within the community, consecrated by religion as well as by tradition, which frequently works in tandem with the class mechanisms of modern and capitalist society.

As Uma Chakravarti argues, asymmetrical access to authority and affluence, in other words a class system, is an intrinsic condition of the caste system which therefore takes the caste system beyond the abstract high-low and pure-impure categorizations. The lower castes are certainly dictated by the upper castes regarding the purity and impurity divisions and about polluting the upper castes. The pollution of sacred places, such as temples, for instance, constitutes the worst kind of pollution. Often there is no

correlation between the threat of pollution apparently posed by a certain caste and the actuality of non-polluting occupations of its members. What remains constant, however, is the real power wielded on the basis of the pollution threat by the upper castes over the lower castes.

IN PURUSUKTA OF RIG VEDA, ONE CAN FIND THE FIRST REFERENCE OF THE CASTE SYSTEM. .

The hymn describes,

*"Brahmnoasaya mukhamasit
Bahu rajanayah Kruta
Uru Tadasay Yadvaishya
Padabhayam Sudro ajayat" (Prasad 3)*

As this hymn says that the Brahmana sprang from the mouth, the Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaisya from the thighs and the Sudra from the feet. In the translated version of the hymn, Brahmin was born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. Hence Brahmins are the most superior and Shudras are the most inferior. It is believed that it was during Pushyamitra Sunga's rule that the practice of untouchability began. Pushyamitra is understood to have killed Bruhadatra and established Brahmin rule. Fearing that the Shudras would organize and revolt against his action, Pushyamitra asked Manu, a Brahmin Pandit of his time, to do a favour. In order to suppress the potential revolution, Manu codified all inhuman and unethical laws against Shudras on the name of religion. His work was later known as Manusmriti or Manushashtra. It is with the Manusmriti that the full elaboration of the caste hierarchy can be seen. This was the beginning of Brahminism. It is said, *"The wicked Shudra-race is manifestly a burial ground. Therefore the Veda must never be recited in the presence of a Shudra"*. (Prasad 34) During this time Brahmins were given the highest status in society and caste divisions were enforced by the kings. The role of the king was seen to be in protecting dharma or the law of the castes. To keep the interests of the upper castes, varnashrama dharma was supported, propagated and reinterpreted through the Upanishads, the Sutras, the Smritis, and the Puranas, which altogether known as Dharma Shastra today.

The word *Shudra* comes from the word *úchât dravanam* (Prasad 34); a person who is in suffering or mourning with pain and needs mental or physical cleansing. This theory is however proposed to degrade the significance of the Varna system. *Shudra* was a common Sanskrit word, any person regardless of his/her Varna to could be addressed as *shudra*. Thus, through centuries, the ancient Dharma Shastra of the Hindus imposed a series of social, political, economic, and religious restrictions on the lower castes, making the untouchables completely dependent on the higher castes of the Indian society. As the result of this, the panchamas lived a life of physical degradation, insults, and personal and social humiliation for quite a long time. They were relegated to menial occupations only. They lived outside the village and fed on the leftovers of the high caste people. Physical contact with the untouchables was said to be polluting and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling. Even as late as the early part of this century, the untouchables had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools, markets etc. The most distorted practice of untouchability was that compelling the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputa should not fall to the earth and pollute others. Another such practice was the obligation to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes upon them. All these forced conditions made the untouchables destitute, deprived and the most depressed section of human beings. As a result, they remained socially degenerate, economically impoverished and politically the servants of the upper castes. This is precisely what happened in the history of Hindu society. The supremacy of the higher castes became all-pervasive because of all knowledge which was actually generated and processed by them. People who enjoyed the fruits of knowledge and power did not let it go out of their hands. Some of the immediate effects of this policy were the non-proliferation of the Sanskrit language and the creation of an outer group, the *shudras* and anti-*shudras*, whose sole purpose of existence was to serve the interests of the upper caste people. As a result, for centuries a community remained permanently at the periphery of society, even though they very much participated in the

process of production. Thus, even if the people at the lowest stratum were considered untouchables, such was not the perception about the goods they produced. Because of the education in the hands of upper castes people, lower castes people denied of this basic right to education and hence neither able to recognize themselves nor in the condition to revolt against the discrimination.

There are a number of initiatives taken by un-touchables around the country during this period. First, the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha, whose members were the Dalit Pariah community, came into existence in 1890. It demanded agrarian rights for untouchables in Tamil Nadu and a lowering of the standards required for access to subordinate services. Second, the Adi-Andhra Mahajan Sabha was begun in 1917 under the leadership of Guduru Ramchandra Rao. It addressed the untouchables in Andhra Pradesh as Adi Andhra, and demanded educational right in public schools, representation on city and village councils and boards and the provision of drinking water. A similar Dalit organization led by K. Kelappan and C. Krishnan was begun in Kerala in 1927 and its programme included the education of the untouchables and their right to walk on public roads. Among the well known Dalit consciousness in North India was the Adi-Dharam founded by Mango Ram in Punjab in 1926. This group followed the teachings of Ravidas, believed that the Dalit communities known as Chamar, Churha, Sansis, Bhangrer and Bhils were the original inhabitants of India. They taught that there was no discrimination at the time of the creation of human beings, but all were equal. Another well-known Dalit organization, which was founded in Uttar Pradesh, was the Adi-Hindu movement, begun by Swami Achhutanadji in 1921. Adi-Hindu, which rejected the teachings of Brahmanical Hinduism, believed in one God and the equality of all human beings and taught that the religion of saints is the true religion of India. The so-called untouchables were the original inhabitants of Bharat (India).

One thing is clear: approaches towards un-touchables during British rule opened the window for them and gave them courage to resist and fight for their dignity and also to negotiate with upper castes for their benefit. Here we also get to know that

in the last two millennia there have been many revolutions against the caste system in India. India approaches to the welfare of untouchables are basically based on two ideologies: that of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi. The first autonomous anti-caste anti-Hindu stance crystallized in the 1930's, epitomized by the controversies between the two historical figures B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi. These controversies are of significance for an understanding of today's Dalit movement, because Dalit activists in their discourses now constantly refer back to this historical period. Most Dalits' NGOs and members of civil society who are working for Dalit Human rights and elimination of the caste system in India follow approaches based upon the ideologies of Gandhi and Ambedkar. And also today's Indian government policy towards welfare of SC and ST is reflection of this Gandhi/Ambedkar ideological struggle.

But there is no doubt that the most important figure who really succeeded to fight for the Dalits is Bhimrao Ranjio Ambedkar. He dedicated the Dalit struggle in 1919 and dedicated the rest of his life upto his death to working for the Dalit community. He believed in the total liberation of the Dalits. To achieve this goal he prescribed a formula which included self-organization, education and protest. He started a weekly paper 'Mooknayak' (Leader of Dumb) on 31st January 1920, to mobilise untouchables for their struggle. Ambedkar deeply craved a new social order based on the lofty principals of "*liberty, equality, fraternity and justice*" (Bhardwaj 44). These principals are the core of his philosophy. In 1924, he established the 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha', the untouchable's welfare forum. The aim of which was to prepare the untouchables for future struggle. Through this Sabha, Ambedkar gave a clarion call to his peoples to "*Educate, organize, and agitate*" (Bhardwaj 45). He looked upon law as a vital means for social change or social engineering, the aim of which should, of course, is social justice. The concept of social justice is at the center of Ambedkar's socio-legal philosophy. Though analysis of the problems of untouchables as put forth by Ambedkar may only be an indicator of the prevailing system and condition of his times, His ideas continued to guide the successive

government in formulating the welfare policies for Dalits and others depressed classes.

Dr. Ambedkar's attack on the caste system was not merely aimed at challenging the supremacy of the upper castes but had broader implication of economic growth and development. He argued that the caste system had reduced the mobility of labour and capital which in turn, impeded economic growth and development in India. It is with B.R. Ambedkar that Dalits able to fight for their rights. Dr. Ambedkar was a towering figure of an amazingly uncarry foresight, who many times lasted out against social and economic inequality and desolate Varnashrama system in this country. He believed in the conscious of the Hindus to bring home to them their sins in keeping all the Shudras and Untouchables in everlasting degradation. Luckily all that stormy dust has now settled down and our people are now seeing him in his true light as a great patriot. Ambedkar has tried to uplift the depressed classes. He has dealt at length with his campaign to save the integral unity of the country. Ambedkar has taken social reform approach at low level; one, at the level of the Hindu family and another at the level of Hindu society because, he endeavoured to reconstruct the Hindu society from the grass root level. The problem regarding the child marriage, widow remarriage, cremation of Sati and post cremation (Sati) relate to the reform of the Hindu family. The problem of the untouchability and the caste system and the modify action of the laws of adoption, marriage and succession related to the reform of the Hindu society. Dr. Ambedkar has spoken and written against the Hindu social order which is based on graded inequality with the superiority of the few and degradation of many. To him this cannot continue for long and if this ambivalent state of society continues those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political Democracy. Politics cannot be the monopoly of a few and other cannot remain either beast of burden of prey. He passionately criticized the theory of birth, death and rebirth which according to popular Hinduism is bound up with the development of caste system. The capacity of man to shape his own destiny is not recognized in this system. Such inequality cannot establish a healthy society. There cannot be the real unity in this country unless the caste system is annihilated.

The caste system according to Babasaheb Ambedkar is an integrated part of the Hindu civilization and culture and therefore there are always feud and conspiracy of caste to enchain the weaker section. According to him to get economic equality, it is necessary to complete, bargain to fight, but caste prejudices, ultimately result in conflict and conspiracies to suppress the weak. They result in vested interest and monopoly of only one or two higher castes. The unity of the country is therefore blown up by the caste system and there is no coherence. It can be controlled by providing special safeguard to the minorities and certain classes, who are socially and educationally backward. Through these safeguards he sought to instill in the minority the spirit of nationalism and tolerance, to accept the rule of the majority even though the majority in India is a communal majority and not a political majority. The untouchables and other backward classes in India have been enabled to make some improvement in their social, economic and educational situation because of the special safeguard, provided in the Constitution on a privileged basis. Such safeguards are necessary in order to remove the age old disparities existing between the upper caste majority and outcaste minority in India, so that the progressive integration of latter into the mainstream of social and national life would ultimately lead to the insolvency of minority.

Even after seventy years of Independence, Caste continues to be a major theme in Indian politics. Many political parties try to make caste an issue in the electoral arena and cash in. They denounce it as a social evil and attack others for being 'backward-looking' and 'casteist'. Many aspects of the contemporary caste-life in India echo the principles found in classical Indian religious scriptures. But in the West, neither race nor class can be related to any comparable body of codified texts and teachings. For all its diversity and its points of comparison with schemes of social differentiation to be found in other parts of the world, Caste stands alone, as a mode of thought and action. This distinctiveness is undeniable, even though caste certainly has much in common with other complex invented traditions, most notably those of nationhood and ethno-religious community. India's nationalist and communal religious ideologies have

both interacted with the ideas and experiences of caste, sometime reinforcing their claims and sometime challenging them, but never fully overriding or replacing them.

Caste is an unchanging reality of the Indian society. It is very ironical that a person's status and respect is based on caste. The Dalit's experience with untouchability and extreme exploitation and discrimination is compelling. The exploitation of a section of people by their own fellow beings on the name of caste is a part of the history of India for many centuries. It is a history that can never be denied and justified. According to Ambedkar, "... *the Indian society was formed with an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt and gave no scope for the growth of sentiment of equality and fraternity.*" (Naik 46) It is very sad that a section of people considered being untouchable. Not only they are untouchable but also treated as inhuman by the dominating castes. The ruling caste hegemony is the root cause of the poverty, suppression, and miserable condition of Dalits.

Dalits Literature thereby needed to represent Dalit's consciousness and help them to resist against this prevailing injustice within this Indian society on the name of caste system. Dalit Literature, literature about the Dalits. Subjugated and segregated for centuries, the Dalits in India have occasionally expressed their voice of protest before independence, and with the inspiration provided by Babasaheb Ambedkar their voices of protest have found an ideological base. Despite the constitutional protection and guarantees, their suffering continued unabated in most parts of India. Any liberation movement that finds its voice in literature, especially in its nascent stage, speaks of a language of violence. When it finds its moorings, its much needed dignity, the voice of stability permeates through its literature. Apart from social backwardness which is a fall-out of caste system in India, the Dalits constitute, economically, the most disadvantaged sections. It is in this context of double marginalization that the literature of Dalits must be viewed. But with the inspiration provided by activists-writers in recent times, people who lived on the periphery for centuries are gradually moving into the

centre, and their literature is forming an important segment of the mainstream literature.

Gurram Jashuva' Gabbilam (The Bat) was perhaps the first attempt in Telugu to express pain and hurt at the centuries-old exploitation and oppression suffered by Dalits in a moving manner. Post independent Dalit poetry in Telugu literature reflects the protest, resistance, and struggle for social and economic empowerment. It also mirrors country life. It portrays as to how the members of Dalits live outside the village. They are forced to perform unpaid labour. They are denied basic requirements like access to public land and water. They clean stinking straw beds in the castle sheds of upper caste-dominated villages. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his "Towards Aesthetics of Dalit Literature" says that while non-dalit literature emerges from imagination, the Dalit literature emerges from experience. Most of the Dalit writers corroborate with this view that their life is their literature.

The different facets of Dalit poetry in Telugu literature could be seen in the contemporary Telugu poetry. One can now listen to the warm sounds of alphabet from mild silence and traditional horn of Dalits. Their poetry is a collection of words breaking the clutches of economic chains rolling from their own blood. Insecurity, instability and segregation in their lives provoked them to take to the weapon of poetry, to record their voices of protest. Their poetic collections released in the recent years not only re-write the history of dehumanization of the Dalits in the name of caste-hierarchy but also puts forth the argument forcefully that the real working class in the country is only the Dalits. They destroy and reverse the established symbols and myths; and construct their own myth in the process of subversion. They created an alternative aesthetic by exploring new horizons of experience that have so far been kept in darkness. Their poetic eye is set on stark reality, on the details of centuries of suffering and the need to assert their dignity. In a defiant mood they opine that history in this country has been full of pythons which swallowed truth. So they draw a conclusion that history itself is the first enemy to the dalit movement. Unlike the pre-independent Dalit poets, contemporary Dalit poets including the above mentioned four poets are now making use of explosive language to explicate their

volcano-like ideas stating that no one can stop them in making independent, assertive, alternative postures even as they look forward to a new era of hope and equality. The new phase of Dalit writing seems to be more mature, sober, larger in its concerns, more conscious of form, less angry and complaining. Dalit writers use images as well as words, which come from their own lived experiences. They feel that their vision and sensibilities must be translated into art honestly, in its raw undistilled form, without euphemism. The language they use is often brutal and crude, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance, anger and violence. The agony of the poor and dispossessed finds powerful expression in their writings through poignant and explosive words. Sometimes it is interspersed with abuse too. But, nevertheless, there is an attempt on their part to evolve a new aesthetics because they feel that the gentle expectations of the existing elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of the life they know and render in writing. Their protest is not against any individual or group but society as a whole. They reject the so-called "tradition", which helps upper caste writers in legitimizing existing structures of inequality. It is in this sense, Dalit literature is engaged in two functions: demolition and reconstruction. It is keen in destroying what is considered as "dead wood", decaying components of existing social and cultural order. But at the same time, it is anxious to transform the social reality in the direction of total freedom, equality and human dignity. Thus, Dalit literature in all its forms interrogates the world-view of the upper caste and institutions and demands social practices based upon its transformation.

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