Dalit Literature: A Voice of the Voiceless

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Dalit literature is a post-independence phenomenon. India being the largest democracy of the world still holds the indifferences in terms of caste which is a credo of major Indians. Indeed, the term ‘Dalit’ refers to the oppressed which is a self-chosen political name of castes. It is very difficult to distinguish the Dalits from the others in India. The complex Indian constitution approves the scheduled caste as Dalits. But this segregation doesn’t fully penetrate into the pith and core of Dalit identity. However, ‘Dalits’ or the ‘Untouchables’ share a large segment of India’s population i.e., nearly 20%. ‘Dalit’ the term having been used by Jyotirao Phule for the first time in 19th century has widened its use in subsequent years. The origin of Dalits as a clan can be traced back to the Rigveda. Varnas known as castes are of ancient origin. Manusmriti is considered to be a legal text among the religious texts of Hinduism Hinduism defines it with clarity and precision. Brahmins, Vaisyas, Kshatriyas and shudras are the primary varnas that existed but later divided into many. However, Brahmins are considered as savarnas and Sudras are asavarnas. The discrimination between these two has been an age-old phenomenon.

Indeed, ‘Dalit Literature’ in India emerged as a voice of protest by the oppressed group against the atrocities and injustice caused by the dangerous caste system. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as one of the torch-bearers of this Dalit movement not only popularized it but was also instrumental in awakening the revolutionary spirit among destitute / subalterns to rebel against the upper class society.

However, Dalit literature emerged out of racial discrimination and exploitation caused by the higher caste people. Dalit writers were influenced by the philosophies of Goutam Buddha, Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and so on. Dalit literature appeared in 1958 in Maharashtra as a protest against the tyranny of so called upper class people. The writers of Dalits have seen and experienced it all: the brutality of the higher class people, censorship, exploitation, ruthlessness, discrimination. They have been a part of it all with just pens in their hands. Not just pens but the sentinel of their conscience, voice for the speechless
masses and a cry for the social flux and bigotry. The plight and predicament, suffering and humiliation and oppression and subjugation are the main theme against which this literature has been built up. Things have changed considerably so are the customs and traditions. Still the old ways prevail, the deep-rooted ill feelings among the higher caste people about the Dalits. A few decades ago the Dalits were considered as ‘outcaste’ and were denied participation in socio-cultural-politico affairs of society. As a result they lost their identity and self-esteem.

The Dalits were at times treated as untouchables. They were deprived of formal education. They were cut off from the main stream of the life of the society. Thus castism triumphed over humanism and the maxim of Upanishad, “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” sounded blasphemous.

However, the Dalit poets and the writers waged a war against the so-called Hinduism designed by Brahminical society. They too highlighted the issues which were antihuman and antisocial in their works of art with an intention to make their fellow Dalit people aware of the agenda of the higher class people. Their protest against the orthodox and conservative Hindu society was by and large a movement against the social evil.

Dalit literature is an emerging trend in the literary firmament of India. It is seen that the Dalit writers of India have mostly written in regional languages and therefore, Dalit movement lost momentum to become a national movement. However, some of the writings are translated into English which effect drawing attention of the large public. The horrific experience of the Dalits juxtaposed with the mockery of the so-called democracy gave rise to communal violence.

The tragedy of Dalit women is overtly drawn. The women of this category are prone to brutal patriarchy, gender discrimination, and sexual violence. Thus, the Dalit women writers championed the cause and voiced their protest against such social evils. Feminist movement in India by and large supported these destitute women getting their right. The female Dalit writers too demonstrate oppression confronted in their lives. Meena Kandasamy thus laments in one of her poems Evil Spirit;

“They suck with their vampire tongues
To drink our anemic blood –
Leave their puncture marks, which  
Can be faintly seen on our black skins;  
Skins that bear greater scars,  
Reminders of large, human cruelty…”

However, autobiography is a powerful genre that directly vents out the anguish and frustration of the Dalits. Although autobiography depicts the personal experience it transcends to the universal. The exploitation and oppression that perpetrated upon the Dalits by the upper class is dealt with concern in Dalit autobiographies. In poetry, drama, novel, arts, fine arts, music too we notice the voice of protest in an unprecedented vehemence with truth being spoken candidly.

Dalit poems occupy a place of prominence in the literary firmament of India. These poems are not just the voices of impoverished millions; they too depict the power of creativity. The poets too articulate the texture of ordinary despair. Nevertheless, their attempts to establish identity in the society have been manifested in their poems. Their revolutionary spirit has been picturised in the poems which are in a way protest against the age old established norms of Indian society. In addition to the above discourse a point that perhaps hunted the Dalits is identity crisis. Quest for identity perhaps enforced the Dalit writers and poets to express their misery through literature. They yell and rant for their fundamental rights. Literature therefore, became the medium of their expression of anger.

One thing that oozes out from their poems is the Marxist thought. All most all the Dalit poets are influenced by Marxist ideology. Their concern for the Dalit people is therefore evident. The drudgery of the Dalits ranges from butchery to all sorts of unsophisticated work estimated non-prestigious.

If the surrounding socio-moral order is stifling, one doesn’t always raise hands in despair. She/he revolts against injustice and disorder. The Dalit poets therefore, protest vehemently, applying themselves to meaningfulness.

Even if the contribution of the Dalits towards production is very significant, they are undermined and looked down upon. The cobbler, potters, construction workers, agriculture laborers, sanitation workers are mostly the Dalits. The people of this category are called as dirty people and therefore inferior. They are forced into a life no better than hell. The
overpowering effect of Hindu hegemony shatters the identity of the Dalits. The oppression of the oppressed by the oppressor becomes unbearable which at times make the oppressed vocal.

This class distinction is aptly portrayed by Cheran:

When you are oppressed,  
You see the blood of tears,  
When you are oppressor  
You see the tears of blood. (Cheran, 71)

However, the panzer attack of the Dalits on Indian culture is quite evident in the poems of Hira Bansode. He vehemently criticizes the culture that denies education to the women. She too was a victim of cultural deprivation. She had to struggle a lot for formal education. Her experience with the unfriendly culture provoked her to say the motherland “evil step-mother”. She condemns the pages of the book that she read where she was taught the greatness of Motherland and asked to honour her. She contemplates on her social status forced on her and sarcastically say’s

But today the school book’s lines infuriate me.  
We are assumed to call you mother.  
You maybe a mother to some, but to us you are an evil-step mother.  
(Twice Dalits: The poetry of Hira Bansode)

The cry for justice and resistance against the orthodox Hindu society are very prominent in the writings of Dalit Women writers. Brutal patriarchy, gender disparity, sexual violence are perhaps the principal reasons for the rise of feminist Dalit movement in India. It is difficult to figure out the occurrences of such casualties every day. But the numbers of officially reported cases are matter of concern. This debacle actually redeems humane values. Out of desperation Mrs. Bansode once again writes:

This complaint of mine is against the orthodox culture…

We are rejecting this  
Unclean, poisonous life  
And to escape from these cruel curses  
Will you give me  
A bright and auspicious moon?  
My countrymen, to your court  
I have brought a complaint
The dismal and tragic condition of dalit women is reflected in the poems of Kusum Aatram, a Maharashtrian woman poet who portrays the plights and predicaments of tribal women candidly spoken by an innocent girl in a melancholic strain. The damsel laments when the fellow women of her village are attacked by the naxalites and sexually assaulted. She cries for help and requests the sisters working for the distressed women:

Today I am their Dropadi
Oh! My sisters those from the Women’s Movements
Can you stop me from becoming a Bandit Queen?

(Amhi Suryachya Laki translation)

A powerful, albeit violent, expression has been witnessed in Pa Rajnith’s recent script that has been made into a blockbuster cinema – Kabali. The protagonist, Rajanikanth, the famous cine-star from South India, having been at the receiving end of the oppressive caste system plaguing the society, is out to avenge all the wrongs done in the past. The audience identifies itself with the protagonist’s flight of fancy – like Norman Holland proposing that readers use literary texts to fulfill their fantasies and thereby legitimizing their personal fears and desires into more acceptable forms of sublimation through these pictures and images (i.e. the film).

In the era of globalization, the metanarratives of the oppressors have given way to the mini-narratives of the oppressed not through force and violence, but through the vivid images spun in these powerful poems and writings by the people who have had to bear the brunt of the caste division that still resides in Indian societies.

Works Cited

3. Jean Francois Lyotard’s The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.
4. Norman Holland ‘s The Dynamics of Literary Response (1967)
   (Necessary translation made by me) https://www.youtube.com/watch

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Dr. Chittaranjan Bhoi is a celebrated scholar of English Literature and Language. He has been teaching English Literature and Language for last 20 years. He is a critic, translator and a bilingual poet and an author. He has several papers published to his credit in International and National journals of repute. He is in the Editorial Board of a number of research journals. Dr. Bhoi previously worked as Associate professor and Vice-Principal, Hi-Tech College of Engineering, Bhubaneswar. Now he is working as Principal, K M B B Junior Science College, Cuttack, Odisha.

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