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NATIONALISM AND DALIT LITERATURE – A STUDY



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Abstract : *This article deals with the aspect of the Dalit National Movement and its representation in literature. The first section deals with the Nationalist movement, which happened to be the mainstream movement led by Bala Gangadhar Tilak, Gandhi and others. The mainstream Nationalist movement is presented in opposition to the sub-national movements spearheaded by, among others, the Dalits, women, Muslims, and Adivasis. The second section of the article deals with the Dalit National movement as it is manifested in the Dalit literature. It is argued in the article that the Dalit literature helped the social reformers and activists in taking the message to the people effectively.*

Keywords: *National Movement, Sub-national Movement, Adi-movements, Social Movements, Reformation, Dalit Literature, Autobiography, Poetry, Novel.*

Introduction

Alongside the mainstream movement, there were, what may be termed, the sub-national movements, one of which was the Dalit National movement. The Indian National Movement was seen as a mono-dimensional, unilinear movement. Its main objective was to rally and awaken Indians together to fight against the British colonialism. Ultimately, they could succeed in overthrowing the British in 1947. There were two streams during the colonial period. One stream was based on a pan Indian identity combating colonialism and the other was based on regional identities. The second stream was working hard towards self-assertion, which may be termed sub-nationalism. New aspirations, demanding complete independence continued to surface. In the shadow of the pan Indian anti-colonial national movement, the sub-national movements continued. Some social conflicts aroused but were not considered as

isolated. Instead, they were an integral part of the freedom struggle. When India was fighting against British imperialism, simultaneously the Dalits were fighting against higher castes, against the hegemony of Brahmanical ideology and for the eradication of their historical backwardness.

The Dalits have been denied access to vital resources such as food, water, housing, education, economy and participation in India's national identity. Dalits were denied some basic human rights such as social, economic, political, cultural and civil rights. Many social reformers like Mahatma Jyothiba Phule, E.K.Nayar, B.R.Ambedkar, M.K.Gandhi, among others raised their voices against the upper caste exploitation of the Dalits. The first person who revolted against the exploitation and discrimination of the marginalized people was Mahatma Jyothiba Phule (1828-1890), who revolted against the practice of Untouchability.

Phule envisioned freeing Dalits from financial, traditional and religious slavery. He wanted to empower the downtrodden sections, Dalits and especially women. He strongly felt that lack of education was the primary factor responsible for the vulnerable condition of the Shudras. The harsh truth has been enumerated by him as, "Vidhya Bina mati gayi. Mati Bina neeti gayi. Neeti bina gati gayi. Gati bina vitt gya. Vitt bina shudr gye. Itne anarth ek avidhya ne kiye." (Banjara 28) Phule thus added that without knowledge, intellect was lost; without intellect, morality was lost, without morality, dynamism was lost, without dynamism, money was lost. Without money shudras were degraded, all the misery and disaster were due to the lack of knowledge. Inspired by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, Phule strongly felt that education alone can unite the Dalits in their struggle for equality. Dr. Ambedkar carried the movement forward to give the Dalits, their right to equality. He also contested with Gandhi. His slogan was 'Educate, Organize and Agitate.' Mahatma Gandhi wished for a nation based on the principles of freedom and equality, and he has total control over the National movement in the second decade of the 20th century. Verma writes, "His aim was to establish a society where everyone progresses; all are happy and devoid of pains. Thus, freedom of nation was the primary aim of Gandhi". Mahatma Gandhi was also very much concerned about Dalits.

The very base of the Indian National Movement that India needs to be liberated from foreign rule was rejected by the Dalit perspective as the Indian National Movement did not strive for the emancipation of the Dalits. Their perspective could be better understood from the opinion of prominent leaders like Jyotibha Phule, Rama Swamy, and Ambedkar towards National Movement and Indian National Congress. They were very critical of the Indian National Movement. Ambedkar felt that it was a movement of Indian bourgeoisie seeking overall economic and political control. Oppression due to Brahmanical supremacy was worse than foreign rule. He opined that India lacked the feelings of brotherhood and fraternity and considered emotional integrity as an important aspect. He strongly believed that the Congress party should accord

importance to the social issues as well. He felt that political rights cannot be enjoyed without achieving social equality. He wanted the socially segregated also to be politically segregated. Hence, he supported separate electorates for Dalits in the Second Round Table Conference.

Contemporary sub-national movements emerge successful in achieving an increased level of national inclusivity and challenge their own exclusion after taking part in the transnational social movements. The Dalit movement is attempting to enter into national politics and it seems it is necessary to reframe nationalism as it is often a part of a national project constructed by elites in order to maintain control over inclusion and citizenship. It is necessary to link the nationalism debates with nation and race when considering the Dalit movement. The history of Dalits as a group have certainly been transformed and altered by a lengthy period of colonization as well as by the Indian society.

Ambedkar states, "it must be recognized that there never has been a common Indian culture, that historically there have been three Indians, Brahmanic India, Buddhist India and Hindu India, each with its own culture" (qtd in Omvedt 43). Instead, pre-colonial India maintained pockets of local or regional identities, often affiliated with the territories, languages, and religions. (Omvedt 2006; Zavos 2000; Hansen 1999).

Dalits, taking lessons from Phule, found a way to highlight their differences to upper-caste Brahmans and their colonizers and did not allow Hindu nationalist claims to resonate by founding various Dalit organizations including the Adi-Hindu in the north-central state of Uttar Pradesh and Hyderabad of Andhra Pradesh, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Dravida and Adi-Karnataka in the southern region of India. These organizations are regarded as social movement organizations (SMOs) by scholars. But these all did not lead to a national level organization until Ambedkar became involved in the movement. He is thought to be the "most articulate Dalit leader" (Omvedt 44). Ambedkar finds fault with the construction of the Hindu caste system and he does not claim an indigenous identity. For that reason, he declares in 1935 that he was 'born a Hindu but would not die a Hindu' (Ambedkar.org). He created (ILP) the Independent Labour Party in 1936 to fight for the Dalit cause from inside the political sphere. It was a worker-peasant party with goals like getting rid of caste discrimination and it also focused on problems with capitalism, wealth discrimination and equal access to resources. But ILP faded away after the death of Ambedkar in 1956 and later Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was formed as another Dalit-based political party by Kanshi Ram in 1984. In 1972, Dalit Panthers was formed and there was a western influence on the way the Dalit movement was organized and framed its goals which are very important due to its internationalization of movement tactics and frames. It originated as a militant youth organization without any clear leadership in Bombay and had connections with other ideologies and movements such as Naxalites a communist movement. (Omvedt 73). The Dalit Panther manifesto from 1973 states:

We want the rule of the whole country. Change of heart, liberal education will not
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end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of the giant mass will come to the tidal wave of revolution. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and Varna system that thrives on people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberates the Dalits.... Sympathizers and members of the Dalit Panthers are ready for the final struggle of Dalits. (qtd. In Omvedt 1993).

II

The aspect of the Nationalist movement carried out parallelly by the Dalits is manifested in literature. Dalit Literature evolved in the twentieth century and is an important and innovative stream of Indian literature. Limbale writes, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits. The literature is but a lofty image of grief". The portrayal of hope, anger, shame, and sorrow are the major subjects of Dalit writing and it is a clear example of their voice of revolution and change. According to Arjun Dangle "The literature is closely related with the hopes of freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality" (xxii). Further, Omprakash Valmiki adds, "Dalit literature is human literature that is Mass Literature. It is also the literature of action which opposes the feudal mentality of human values. Dalit literature is born out of the opposition and struggle." (Valmiki 15)

Dalit literature is a literature of personal experiences in their own language to convey experience and to portray the bitter truth of life which helps to raise the voice against the exploitation. In establishing itself, Dalit literature faced enormous resistance and pressure from Hindi regions. Premchand plays an eminent role in the tradition. In Progressive Writers Association he stated, "Those who are Dalits, exploited and unaware-whether an individual or group; then support and advocacy is the primary motive of Dalit literature. The only literature which will meet the expectation of mainstream literature will be the one with supreme thoughts, free from restrictions, aesthetically influential, have the soul of creation" (Chaube 105).

The period from 1920 to 1956 was influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's pen, speech, and work. As it has always been the custom of the upper castes to keep the Dalits deprived of their rights, they have always been exploited on a social, cultural, political and economic basis. Dalit literature is the result of Socio-cultural, economic and political struggles in countless centuries. Dalit literature has given a voice to silent people and it is not just an expression of their suffering but is an attempt to build their identity. It can be said that the word Dalit is an indicator of the cognition of identity as in the context of Dalit literature. Vimal Thorat opines, "Dalit literature is the appearance of that revolt which is not against any particular caste or individual, but in search of 'self' it is a revolt against the former traditions of the entire society and is an attempt to

establish its existence" (in Valmiki 64).

Dalits were portrayed as subhuman: as thieves, criminals, quarrelsome, drunkards etc in the mainstream literature and it has failed to recognize the rich values and culture of the Dalits. The 'co-existence' and sustainable development which is now being discussed, though was a part of the Dalit culture was never accredited to them. As both power and knowledge are concentrated in the hands of the upper caste Hindus, the decisions of the powerful and intellectual few seem to be serving better in the interests of the powerless and the ignorant, the 'other', who constitute the majority. Therefore, the holy scriptures have been so systematically written to justify the serfdom and slavery of the Dalits. Denial of knowledge is the denial of power. Caste system in the Indian subcontinent has for centuries controlled, regulated and hierarchized knowledge.

The powerless are never seen as credible sources of knowledge. Values, attitudes, status, and power towards writer and writing are all closely interconnected. Therefore, it has become important to know about who writes, what, about whom and for whom. It can be noticed that the disadvantaged are mostly written about, sometimes written for. But to know what one feels or thinks is to ask him/her, not somebody else. The self-evident truth is ignored when Dalits are merely the subject to be written about and not the ones who are writing. The professional historians have always attempted unconsciously or consciously at dehistoricization of Dalits. The dissenting voices are from the lower strata of society. Dalit writers have offered challenges to critics who are dismissive of Dalit writing and also have made an effective intervention in formulating radical, innovative experimentation in aesthetic and linguistic paradigms. They are expanding the limits of literary language and are experimenting in terms of genres. Their use of myths, legend, and folklore render their narratives closer to everyday life. They have employed various genres for self-articulation making significant reformation leaving a positive impact on mainstream literature.

The Dalits have been exploited politically, socially and economically and for centuries have been deprived of the rights. They are humiliated and are made to think that culture is mean and low. The mainstream writers and historians have paid the least attention to the culture and historical life of Dalits and also their historical evidence are neglected and have been presented as people lacking a history of their own. Most of them had to accept what the mainstream writers wrote about them.

There are two primary aims of Dalit Literature. Firstly, to revolt against the practice of caste system and secondly to replace it with a new social structure. The main characteristics of the system are fundamental rights of people: freedom, equality, fraternity and exploiting the people financially, psychologically and socially. Dalit Literature aims at providing freedom to the citizens of such a nation. (Ram 1)

Bama, the well-known Tamil language writer describes the motive of Dalit

Literature as the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics and takes the form of protest. The Dalit experience in their poetry was categorized as inferior in the elite scheme of things and was judged not on the basis of its spirit but was based on who framed the discourse. But the very spontaneity in the Dalit creative expression was admired at another level in European romantic expressions that priorities spontaneity and regional and cultural specificity and otherness.

Dalit literature is heading off along a different trajectory and also it is not possible for the non-Dalit to create and portray the experiential world of Dalits as reflected in the stories written by Dalits themselves. Many discernable trends are available in Dalit critical writing: pro-Buddhist, pro-Ambedkarite, anti-Marxist, and neo-Marxist, pro-liberal and pro-feminist. But the writers negotiate and encounter their world in diverse ways with different styles of presentation. Dalit literature has been misunderstood as anti-savarna propaganda precisely because of the failure to understand the different aesthetic sensibility. Dalits who had access to higher education expressed their experiences with a new insight or sensibility and revealed their hopes for freedom. A great flowering was seen in the 1990s in Dalit song, short story, essay, novel, and poetry.

Dalit writers radicalized technique and language using different symbolisms. They did not aim at acceptability but instead, they aimed at affirmation of their identity, culture and their right to equality. It is a fact that the elements of modernity in social constructs, the postmodernist thrust on celebrating diversity and the self-representation in politics are the strong points of Dalit writing. In fact, Dalit writings are ahead of postmodernism in representing the question of subordination within diversity. A transition from an undesirable past to a cultural present, from agitation to transformation, from humiliation to humanism is seen in Dalit writing. The Dalit intelligentsia has been resisting the socio-cultural subordination in the post-Independence period challenging the Left, the other disguised anti-Dalit thought, the Nehruvian Socialism and the revivalist Hinduism. Conscious Dalits have initiated a cultural and literary movement against Brahminical hegemony in all ways possible and they began to reinvent their own culture from available rich resources they have. A song is the living cultural tradition of Dalits; oral culture is the primary source of knowledge for them. Dalits resisted the dominant discourses of the elite consciously and asserted their own identity. The educated Dalits with their cultural and literary performance attempted to record their struggles. If Lenin had been born in India he would first eradicate casteism and untouchability from among workers for without that they could get no concept of revolution. (Omvedt 2011. 254)

The recent period witnessed a fresh upsurge of interest in Dalit writing and

politics. Being mnemonic and experiential, most of the Dalit genres being autobiographical form the important part of Dalit writing. Some of the educated Dalits also have written personal narratives. Novels, poems, and histories written during the period share a common Dalit identity politics and counter-cultural and rebellious aspects were regarded as the fundamentals of such writings. The perception of Dalit literature as literature on caste led to the production of a class of literature justifying caste. Non-Brahmin writers have turned to their regional past to revive dialect and the folk idioms which are anti-Dalit and the stress on caste identity has only intensified. Some publications which started journals and publishing houses to secure recognition for their castes in the intellectual domain later published on their caste. Some writers later attempted to recover their own caste identity; non-Dalit non-Brahmin as it may be and compare it with Dalit personalities with a view to highlighting the difference. This was considered as a democratic move as it tries to give equal treatment to the oppressed as well as the oppressor.

As the man stands divided based on language, religion, and race, he has been rendered as a prisoner of identities such as linguistic identity, religious identity, and racial identity and he no more possesses the power to control them. Through the course of history, we can discern how the power struggle has led to bloodshed, on many an occasion manifested as fierce battles. Recent history tells us that for about four decades, only battles against identity-based domination have been conducted. Such ethnic liberation and national struggles became prominent, particularly in Asian and African countries. These struggles are regarded as resistances to the forms of exploitation which alienate an individual from the objects he produces. The rise of Dalit writing is one of the important developments in twentieth-century Indian literature.

The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing presents Dalit perspectives on caste oppression and bear witness to the diversity of Telugu Dalit writing which is deeply embedded in modernity, in the changing paradigms of culture, and in the politics of the region and nation. The thought-provoking selections range from songs and poems in short stories, critical writings, excerpts from novels, and more.

The tradition of using the song to reach out to people was first identifiably used by seventeenth-century mystics Potuluri Virabrahmendra Swami, Yogi Vemana and Siddaiah, who educated people by singing songs about evil practices and social inequities. The sociopolitical ideology embedded in entertainment accounts for the popularity of the song and makes it easy to deliver the message. The earliest of the Dalit songs such as 'Maalavandra Paata' and 'Jambavapuram', both of anonymous authorship, were instrumental in consciousness-raising amongst Dalits. During the nationalist moment, Kusuma Dharmanna with his song 'We Decry This Brown Supremacy', a repartee to caste Hindu Garimella Satyanarayana's 'We Decry This White Supremacy' organized Dalits.

Also, short stories written by Dalit writers present Dalit life in its varied

manifestation, each with a note of optimism or dissent, victory or protest. The change in Dalit expression reveals the maturity of the short-story genre. In the Telugu speaking regions, Dalits were writing novels decades before Independence, with Jala Rangaswami publishing *Dunnevaniki Bhoomi* and Raitupilla in the 1920s. Vemala Yellaiah's *Kakka* and G.Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantham* (Untouchable Spring) both published in 2000 radicalized the representation and style. They dealt with the humiliation and oppression faced by Dalits and their socio-cultural life.

Challenging Nehruvian Socialism, revivalist Hinduism, the Left, and other disguised anti-Dalit policies in the post-independence period, the new Dalit intelligentsia has been in the vanguard in resisting subtle forms of sociocultural subordination. They wanted to challenge mainstream intellectual protagonists and the range of themes literary, cultural, mythical, historical, pedagogic and ideological – point to the sharpness of debate and the wide array of talent amongst Dalit writers. Dalit essays have been successful in generating academicization, debates, and globalization of the Dalit praxis.

We view 'Dalit literature' as having originated in Marathi in the 1970s. But there is an active century-old distinct Dalit history and culture in Tamil Nadu. Unlike non-Brahmin literature, right from the beginning, Dalit literature was able to address the differences in terms of gender as seen in the novels of Sivakami and Imayam. Inspired by the activities of the Dalit social movements, Dalit Tamil poetry has moved rapidly towards subverting, even dismantling, and the literary experiments that had been the hallmark of mainstream magazines.

The corpus of Dalit Tamil poetry with all its diversity opens up a space for continuous transformation and self-discovery. It defies canonization, categorization, and theorization, and blurs the boundaries between perceived 'Dalit experience' and the human condition. In 1960, with the rise of little magazines like *Deepam*, *Gnanaratham*, *Kanaiyazhi*, *Nadai*, and *Ka Sa Da Tha Pa Ra*, the short story received significant attention in Tamil literary history.

As short story provided the freedom to experiment and the flexibility to accommodate a whole spectrum of themes and styles, it became a preferred form of literary expression. Using literature deliberately as a tool for social activism, Dalit writers embrace the short story as a semi-fictionalized record of events and recollections that amplify the resonance of caste and highlight the responses of Dalits. Writers like Ravikumar (Unmai Arithal, 'On Knowing the Truth') are overt and insist a self-critical position, questioning the role of activism, but others such as Bama (Ivan, 'This Man') highlight the 'we-versus-they' mindset. The impact of Dalit cultural festivals and Dalit theatre can be seen in the theatre activities in Tamil Nadu commencing from the 1990s. The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit writing read along with the developments recorded by Epigraphy and Archaeology opens up possibilities of tracing alternative histories of regions, cultures, and languages. Establishing itself initially as

literature of protest, with time Tamil Dalit writing went far beyond resistance and it records how Tamil Dalit writers have challenged stereotypes.

The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit writing in English translation has remained unrepresented in the canonical tradition of Malayalam literary discourse. In central and South Kerala, Dalits have had their own oral traditions with immense historiographical potential. Idandan Paattukal, Chengannuradi, Krishigeetha, and other folk-songs are instances. From the 1990s onwards the Malayalam literary scenario has seen celebrations of the differing and plural voices of the historically oppressed, marginalized and unrepresented. This not only includes the Dalit discourse but other silenced groups- environmentalists, feminists, and religious and sexual minorities.

Dalit literature in Kerala has fast-forwarded to the third phase and is beginning to provide the colour and power that only people who live close to the earth can express. There are elements of theatre in almost all the Dalit ritual performances of Kerala like Thira, Theyyam, Chimmannakkali etc and they mark Dalit community life, reflecting their resistance, protest, and life consciousness. Dalit auto-biographics referred to as narratives of pain do not harp on victimhood, but use writing as a tool against the inhuman social order.

If history cannot capture life, it means that it's not like that has to change but it is the course of history. These sketches of different lives reconstruct history and document the socio-cultural specifications of the Malayali Dalit's world. Dalit epistemology also marks a break from brahminical representations in the critical interventions of Kerala. Dalit literature it's due, Dalit is only a term for designating the untouchable and it has a history that they refuse to acknowledge. It became part of the social-political discourse of the turbulent 1960s, as an epitome of India's dreams of liberation. It carries the weight not only of strife but also of centuries-long philosophical inquiry. Therefore, giving primacy to the Dalit discourse and struggle for existence, Dalit identity has to be reconstructed. One needs to examine the caste questions raised by literary histories. Moreover, when it is a 'lower' caste author, literary histories become contradictory, often discourteous, if not offensive. The problem before literary history writing is the social right of every community and every individual for self-determination. Hence, those who are not in history, have to interpret it anew.

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