

## Indian Dalit Literature : Peregrination for Identity to Egalitarian Society

<sup>1</sup>Samir Kumar Bhardwaj and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Amit Dhawan

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Dept. of English, SBBS University (Jalandhar)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, SBBS University (Jalandhar)

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### ABSTRACT

The Republic of India is considered one of the emerging superpowers of the world, yet it is fabled for its unyielding cast culture. This paper analyses the narratives of crushing, circumstances of the suppressed and the origin of dalit literature. Scope of Dalit writings and their study of movement are included in it. Ambedkarite beliefs are widely considered to be genesis of all dalit artistic formations. The paper also examines the utter truths of dalits and their exceptional endeavours to upraise socially. This paper exhibits substantial interpretation of social and legislative experiences of dalit community in the cast based society of India. Cultural exclusion, economic deprivation and political exploitation of centuries made them to break out of such kind of age – old prejudices. It includes how marginalized subaltern people struggle for equality and freedom. Because of vigorous dalit motions along with hammering on upper caste society through Dalit literature by writers and thinkers, and also by implementation of welfare schemes by Government, a positive approach toward equality is seen in social life of Dalit community nowadays. Indian Law has prohibited the discrimination on the grounds of cast, creed, religion and gender. This is a expedition of oppressed from peregrination for identity to egalitarian society.

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### 1. Introduction

Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. Dalit literature is the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently it was used in the 1930's as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes' a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. In 1970s the 'Dalit Panthers' revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution. Dalit literature is the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently it was used in the 1930's as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes' a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. In 1970s the 'Dalit Panthers' revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.

The term "Dalit literature" can into use in 1958, when the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society). Dalit literature is an important stream of Indian writing in English and other languages of India. However as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit panthers. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit panther movement, writes: "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a

sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."

### 2. Dalit

The term 'Dalit' has roots in Sanskrit where the root 'dal' means 'to split, crack, open'. ( This Indo-European root appears in German and English in the form of 'dal' or 'tal', meaning 'cut'. In English, 'dale' is a valley, a cut in the ground; in German, 'thal': a tailor is one who cuts; 'to tell a tale' is the same as 'to cut a tally', the cut-marks made by the shepherd on his staff when counting sheep.

'Dalit' has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. By coincidence, there is in Hebrew a root 'dal' meaning low, weak, poor. In the Bible, different forms of this term have been used to describe people who have been reduced to nothingness or helplessness. During the 1970s, the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term 'Dalit' as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed. This term for them is not a mere name or title: for them it has become an expression of hope, the hope of recovering their past self-identity. The term has gained a new connotation with a more positive meaning. It must be remembered that *Dalit does not mean Caste or low-Caste or poor* ; it refers to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people has been reduced by social convention and in which they are now living.

The Dalits are called by different names in different parts of the country. These names were given by the Caste people as expressions of contempt. They include: Dasa, Dasysa, Raksasa, Asura, Avarna, Nisada, Panchama, Chandala,

Harijan, Untouchable. Each of these names has a history and background. Besides these names, there are a number of other titles or names which have been given to them at the level of the regional language. For example, Chura in Punjab (North West India), Bhangi or Lal Beghi in Hindi (North India), Mahar in Marathi (Central India), Mala in Telugu, Paraiya in Tamil and Pulayan in Malayalam (South India). By the British, the Dalits were named 'the Depressed Classes' and 'the Scheduled Castes', in the Scheduled Caste Act of India, 1935. Mahatma Gandhi named them 'Harijans' which means 'children of God' : but this term was not welcomed by the Dalits because it did not adequately describe their condition.

### 3. Indian Dalit Literature : Peregrination for Identity to Egalitarian Society

Dalit literature has its origins in the exploitation of Dalits and symbolises a quest for equality and a rational attitude towards the problems of society. The exploitation and persecution of Dalits was sanctified by irrational religious dogma propagated by the Hindu orthodoxy. Thus, challenging this persecution necessitated taking a rational attitude towards society's problems. In this sense one can say that the teachings of Bhagwan Buddha can be counted among the first pieces of Dalit literature.

Phule and Dr Ambedkar translated their ideology into a political struggle—which should be the ultimate aim of any ideology. The most decisive phase of Dalit literature was symbolised by the work of Dr Ambedkar who adopted Mahatma Phule as his guru (teacher). Dr Ambedkar was a true scholar who researched extensively about the Buddha's teachings and wrote a masterpiece "*The Buddha And His Dhamma*". He laid down in this book a very revolutionary way of life for Dalits—he propagated the equality, liberty, fraternity inherent in the Buddha's teachings. This writing of Dr Ambedkar translated into a socio-cultural revolution for Dalits. His act of embracing Buddhism with more than half a million of his followers was one of the greatest revolutionary phases in India. This event also symbolises a revolutionary act by Dalit to throw away shackles of Hindu tyranny and was the most practical outcome of Dalit literature.

By a particular ethnical group Dalit literature was introduced with the commencement of Dalit Conferences in 60s decade originated in Marathi and spread in many languages all over India. There are many Dalit Marathi writers such as Bandhu Madhav, Annabhau Sathe, Daya Pawar, P.I. Sonkamble, Shantabai Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gayakwad, Hari Narake, Sharankumar Limbale, Arun Kamble, Waman Nibalkar, Bhimsen Detha, Bhanu Panchbhair, Ambadas Shinde, Murlidhar Bansode, Kishor Shantabai Kale who have contributed a lot to Dalit literature..

*Poems, stories, novels, biographies, autobiographies produced by Dalits established a new body of literature in which, for the first time, the downtrodden took centre stage. People who had been denied what humanity considers the 'basics', started to transform the lives of others like them, through the written word.* Baburao Bagul's work, *Dalit Sahityache Krantivigyan* (roughly translates as 'Revolutionary Science of Dalit Literature') was one of the first and brilliant attempts to provide theory to Dalit literature. Being his predecessor in this domain of theory making, Sharankumar Limbale broadened the scope of such attempts. Born in 1956

in Maharashtra, Limbale's life was not easy. If one happens to read his autobiographical book, *Akkarmashi* (meaning 'Outcast') one feels discomforted, and of course, one might even not like it for its stark depiction of Limbale's life. It also separates itself from the experiential perceptive world of readers whose reading tastes were nurtured by the literature of Savarnas. Limbal has written more than 40 books. *Akkarmashi* and *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* provides the context of Dalit literature, taking reference from Black, Marxist and Russian literature and illustrating the trajectories of experiences needed in order for something to be take shape as a piece of art.

The emergence of Dalit autobiography gives a new dimension to the study of autobiography. Dalit writers have been using writing as a weapon for their social assertion. Thus writing an autobiography is a social act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression. Dalit autobiographies are plain, simple tales of the private lives of people belonging to the underclass, without a heavy load of literary attributes. Autobiography thus became a fitting vehicle for this expression. The portrayal of the life of the Dalit individual was representative of the entire community.

Baby Kamble's "The Prisons We Broke" is considered to be the first autobiography written by a dalit woman in Marathi language. It is originally written in Marathi entitled as Jina Amucha. It was serialized in 1982 in a Marathi women's magazine and published as a book in 1986. Autobiography is a conscious act of self-revelation where the uniqueness of the individual is celebrated. But Baby Kamble's autobiography differs from traditional and main stream autobiography. Her autobiography is a collective account of dalit women and their ordinariness. Her autobiography deals with the duality of patriarchal social system and the practice of untouchability. Her autobiography emphasizes on the miserable condition of dalit women who are doubly oppressed. She has portrayed the superstitious beliefs prevailed in her community. It is about the inhuman attitude of men towards women as well as women's cruel intensions towards women. Kamble's autobiography, not only depicts the miserable condition and hapless lives of dalit women but also portrays their firmness and ardor for gaining self as well as communal identity out of patriarchal domination.

Illiteracy among Dalits is common. Even if they try to get education facing all odds, all of them are not successful in their adventures. They cannot write their autobiographies of their own. But they can narrate their life-stories to others who can help to document them. The narrated autobiography of Muli comes under this category. It has been collected in Oriya and then translated into English by James M. Freeman, an American anthropologist with a title, *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*. Muli comes from the very backward state of Orissa where general literacy rate is abysmally low even today. In this case we can well imagine the literacy standard among the Dalits of Orissa.

Laxman Mane's autobiography *Upara*, first published in 1984 in Marathi, Mane's *Upara* gives a detailed account of the writer's struggle in life within the repressive framework of Hindu society. It vividly portrays the process of subjugation of the Kaikadis, a nomadic group whom Mane called *Upara* or the outsider by locally settled upper caste communities. Mane, a Kaikadi himself, narrates how he and his family and his

community were suppressed by both rural and urban people, and at times expelled from their village. It is the gripping story of a man's struggle who yearned for a life of dignity but failed. Mane was the first person from the Kaikadi community to be a graduate. The Kaikadis considered education as an anathema. That's why when Mane was struggling to become educated the community sanctioned social boycott against his family. Later, Mane's dream to settle down in a place after getting a permanent job was never realised. Thus Mane had to confront two adversaries: his own people and the upper caste - both of whom opposed his efforts.

The practice of untouchability was legally abolished in 1950 but not from people's mindsets. Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiographical account *Joothan* highlights that untouchability was practised by the educators, educated – like minded upper caste people, and his relatives belonging to same community. Through *Joothan*, he reveals that the instances of violence caused due to caste system remains etched around throughout one's life. Om Prakash Valmiki provides a chilling account of caste oppression in the newly independent state. His autobiographical account brings into light one of those rare, detailed and lived accounts on Dalit lives. *Joothan* marks as a first Dalit autobiographies in Hindi literature and later translated into English by Arun Prabhakar Mukherjee in 2003. Om Prakash through his work highlights the importance of literature in providing a platform for disseminating knowledge about Dalit lives and their experiences. His work stands out as extraordinary for its sheer realistic detail of caste oppression but still struggles to be included into the mainstream literature in the country. With its non linear style of writing, his work is a collection of memoirs, of detailed accounts of caste violence during his school and adult life.

Like Omprakash Valmiki, Balwant Singh, another Dalit autobiographer happens to come from Uttar Pradesh, North India. Another similarity between Valmiki and Singh is that both are from the Chamar community though they belong to different sub-castes. As the title *An Untouchable in the IAS* indicates, it is the life-history of a Dalit who joined in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in the early seventies of the twentieth century. Within five years of his joining IAS Singh became a Magistrate and impartially delivered justice in many cases. But his job did not go as well as he had expected. Being born to a Dalit community was his disadvantage. Soon Singh found it difficult to work in his capacity as a Magistrate. His colleagues in the office were mostly from the upper castes who started non-cooperating with him. Singh also clearly marked that there was an undercurrent of hostility and jealousy among his upper caste colleagues.

Singh in his autobiography narrates events after events discrimination by the upper caste officials. He remembers how humiliating situations were deliberately created in government offices to make it difficult for lower caste employees to work with self-respect. Even though Dalit employees worked hard with honesty and dedication to their duties Singh knows that they were the first to be fired and last to be hired by the high caste officials.

Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri*: This autobiography is a reminiscent of distorting the hunger and humiliations of Dalits in Karnataka. *Ooru Keri* portrays poverty and anxiety of Dalits in Karnataka state. Siddalingaiah's family belongs to farm laborers and gets low-income, and sometimes nothing. In spite

of his abject poverty, Siddalingaiah attended free night-school. He began to realize self-respect and dignity from his teachers at the school. He reveals the experiences which juxtapose all the struggles like caste discrimination, poverty, and identity.

Bama's *Karukku* explains the experiences she had as moments of oppression that composed her daily lived reality. In the book, one sees Bama's quest to understand and present how her multiple identities as Dalit, Christian and woman have impacted her oppression. *Karukku* is an elegy to the community Bama grew up in. She writes of life there in all its vibrancy and colour, never making it seem like a place defined by a singular caste identity, yet a place that never forgets, and is never allowed to forget its caste identity. She writes simultaneously of humorous incidents she remembers from her childhood, the games she used to play with her friends, good meals with her family and the oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the convent. In this manner, she presents the pervasiveness of caste oppression – how it not only punctuates everyday life, but is an integral part of it, even in the memory of a community.

Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* got published in English in America first in 1951 by the Baennisdale Press and then in 1969 by Praeger publishers. Born to a rural, poor untouchable joint family, Hazari remembers how even a baby of his community suffers from the day it is born. It is no wonder that due to poor economic conditions many children of untouchable families die in infancy. Hazari tells us, as many as eight children of his stepmother died in infancy due to want of proper food and medical care. And those who survive these deaths are lucky enough but they are not children for long because they have to shoulder family responsibility. Children from untouchable families help their parents and relations in several ways and equally share the joys and sorrows with their adults. Hazari describes the burdensome untouchable childhood in a most realistic sense. He sums up, "the child of an untouchable is a father before he is a child."

Another great work "Vasti" by Vasant Moon is an autobiographical narrative of an untouchable boy who grows in a slum amidst poverty to become a self-made person and later a responsible leader of Dalit community in Maharashtra, the homeland of Ambedkar. Being orphan at an early age Moon's struggle to become an educated person must have been an arduous task. Moon's determination to grow in life not only resulted in his having completed a post-graduate degree, he also became a civil servant in the state government of Maharashtra. Securing a government job helped Moon to materialize his aspiration to work among socially disadvantaged groups, particularly Dalits. For his activism and scholarship Moon was given responsibility by the government of Maharashtra to edit B.R. Ambedkar's writings and speeches in English which he conducted quite gracefully. In the meantime Moon has already edited seventeen volumes and few more volumes are under publication.

Dalit caste organizations like "Dalit Panthers of India" in Maharashtra, "Dalit Mahasabha" in Andhra Pradesh, "Dalit Sangharsha Samiti" in Karnataka, and "Arundhatiyan" in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to mainstream atrocities. They demand for equitable shares in opportunities and reservation. Most of the activists are good writers as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

The budding voice of Dalit literature is a protest against social inequality and caste tyranny. Since the 1970s onward the Marathi Dalit literature has been able to occupy a position in the mainstream Marathi literature and from the 1980s onward the Marathi Dalit writings were extensively translated into different regional languages of India. Subsequently, from the 1990s the Dalit writings are being translated into English and different other languages of the world which made Dalit literature a significant part of Indian literature with considerable global attention. Dalit literary representations have challenged the mainstream canonical literature and casteist constructions of Indian identity. It also interrogates the neat binaries of postcolonial literature. As noted by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Dalit subalternity is not located within the dialectics of the 180 colonizer and the colonized, but in a caste based social, economic and cultural structures. Dalit literary

movement is also considered as a movement for self respect. The caste-stigma, in fact, has remained as usual even after legal abolition of untouchability. With the influence of various Western literature, writers, and politicians, these Dalit authors recorded their experienced life stories in order to make awareness among fellow-Dalits. They are triggering opportunities for further research on the Dalit literature for younger generation. The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience. The most significant attribute is that the Dalit literature displays Dalit consciousness. The contributions of Dalit writers have been emerging every day to enrich Dalit literature, as well as Indian literature in recent years. The expedition of Dalits is from penetration for identity to egalitarian society is still going on but positive signs and effects are clearly visible throughout India.

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