

# Asian Resonance

## Writing for Liberation: Dalit Literature as a Weapon against Oppression

### Abstract

Caste system is one of the most successful systems that has ever been devised by human beings to oppress and exploit other human beings. The origin of this system is still a matter of research where the researchers are still adumbrating about the beginnings of such a system. The system is barbaric and diabolic that segregates human beings and thrust inferiority complex on them. Untouchability is the worst form of caste system. Though many movement emerged with in the country to annihilate caste; all of them failed. In the recent time Dalits have started writing literature. Dalit literature is being published in almost every language of India. Translation of these texts into English have allowed a Dalit movement to emerge in literature. This paper is a study of different issues related to Dalit literature.

**Keywords:** Caste, Oppression, Diabolic, Backward, Dalit.

### Introduction

Caste system is "probably the most discussed and most studied institution of India" (Pal Text and Context 179). Though caste is omnipresent in the Indian society; it wakes up like a sleeping giant during the elections. The selection of the candidates from the Lok Sabha level to the grass root level is done on the basis of caste equations. In other words the Indian democracy is governed by the dynamics of caste. Porter sums up the influence of caste in the following words:

Caste represents the most memorable, comprehensive and successful attempt ever made by an order to oppress humanity in its own interest. Its enactments break up the race into many fragments never to be reunited, separating Aryans from other peoples by impossible barriers, permanently fixing their occupations, interests associations and aspirations. As men were born so they must remain. Their course of life was prescribed, their places after death determined. (Porter 25)

The most diabolic form of caste system was manifested in untouchability. Originally the Hindu society was divided into four Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar there was a fifth class of people who were kept outside the system of caste. These people were called Varna Bahyas or the untouchables. There was a restriction of inter-dining, inter-marriage with them. It was believed that a person who will touch them or will be touched by them will get polluted. This system degraded the both the oppressed as well as the oppressor. The oppressed because he cultivated an inferiority complex and the oppressor because he dehumanized himself by practicing segregation and becoming diabolic in the process. However there were many efforts to end this untouchability. The efforts to end these diabolic practices go back to times of Buddha. In the modern times a resolution was adopted in:

This conference resolves henceforth, amongst Hindus no-one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth, and that those who have been regarded hitherto will have the same right as other. Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, public schools, public roads and all other institutions. This right shall have statutory recognition .... It shall be duty of all Hindu leaders to secure by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so-called untouchable class, including the bar on right of admission temples. (Cited in Rajagopalachari's)



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It is pertinent to mention that untouchability has diluted to a great extent because of the modern life style. Now people have to travel in public transport where they do not know who is sitting next to them. In the restaurant they dine and do not have any idea about the caste of the cook and the persons who are serving them. Modern lifestyle has diluted untouchability, but caste biases in another forms still persist in society. The people still do not want to marry in what they think of as, low caste; some social taboos still remain. In other words; untouchability has diluted; but the stereotype associated with the castes still remain in the society.

#### Review of Literature

Dalit literature is still an evolving field where new books are being published and translated almost everyday. The Researcher has come across many books on Dalit literature. The important books on Dalit literature include Dalit literature by Dr. T. Devaisgamani published in 2016, critical essays on Dalit literature by D. Murali Manohar published in 2013, and Interrogating the canon: Literature and Pedagogy of Dalits by K. Purushottam published in 2015. Many new anthologies of Dalit short stories have appeared in recent times. These include listen to the Flames edited by Tapan Basu et al published in 2016. The researcher has not come across any other latest book.

#### Aim of the Study

The paper aims at studying how Dalit literature is articulating the experiences which are so central to Dalits. Dalit literature not only aims at telling about their experiences; but also at transforming the common people. The paper also aims at revealing the different strategies adopted by the writers in articulating their experiences.

According to A.S. Ghurya the restriction due to caste system include:

1. Segmental division of society.
2. Hierarchy of groups.
3. Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse.
4. Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections.
5. Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation.
6. Restrictions on marriage (Cited in Singh 60)

These are the traditional restriction that remain in the societies; but even graver are the stereotypes that have been associated with the castes. In their research on caste stereotypes Gopal Sinha and Ramesh Chandra Sinha discovered that the lower caste people were stereotyped as backward and drunkards:

Our subject had assigned only one desirable trait: Industrious. Similarly Prasad's student subjects in describing the Chamar used such derogatory traits as Backward, Dirty, Poor, Illiterate, Untouchables, Drunkards, unintelligent (15).

In their study they made three generalizations:

1. Student's samples generally have negative stereotypes of both Chamar and Dom.

# Asian Resonance

2. The Stereotypes of Chamar and Dom, even 15 years after the adoption of the Indian constitution which guarantees certain fundamental rights do all the citizens, have not changed to extent.
3. The stereotypes of Chamar are not similar to those of the Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput and Kayasthal (forward caste); are partly similar to those of the Ahir, Kurmi and Kahar (backward caste), and very similar to the Dom Scheduled castes. (15).

These stereotypes are challenged by the Dalit writers in their writings. Over the years the stereotypes have been etched on to the psyche of the people; but Dalit literature opens a window of understanding. It tells the truth about their condition consider the following poem "I am a Man Like You" by Jayant Parmar:

I, a lonely man,  
Roam these alleys with filth and waste  
While walking the dusk depends on  
me.

The night feels terrible.

This Kuldi is my other face.

And this broom my third leg. (16)

In the above line word 'Kuldi' refers to an earthen pot that the Dalits were forced to wear around their neck to spit in. The upper caste forced them to do so because their spit could pollute the earth. The barbarism of caste has been exposed by the writers. Basu brings out many other such practices:

Sometimes "untouchables" had to ring a bell to announce their "polluting" arrival and to wear spittoons around their necks in the case, for example of AndeKoragas of Madras so as to catch any polluting spittle that might drop from their lips. There was even a caste of "unseeable" (the PuradeVannans of Tinnevely district) who washed the clothes of other "untouchables" selves by day. "Pollution" norms such as these were prevailing well into the eve of Indian Independence. (Basu XIX).

All these barbaric practices were not known to the common people, if at all they were known them the common people did not know about the impact these practices had on these people. The treatment that was meted to them was even worse than that to the animals. The people who were born in such families were dehumanized throughout their lives they lived in the iron chains, the choice of occupations remained limited and poverty and backwardness became their fate. The students in the research conducted by Gopal Chandra Sinha associated people of lower castes with backwardness, Dalit literature tells them that the backwardness of these people is due to obstacles laid in their way by the society. The options of employment professions was restricted to only few. The second part of Jayant Parmar's poem concentrates on society induced poverty and backwardness:

You have sheltered me in this hut  
Made of rags and bamboo walls

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Decorated with hunger, poverty  
illness Made holes for insects and  
worms, Who enters this hut except  
me? When the dusk descends.  
I collapse into my broken (at 16).

These lines of Jayant Parmar are addressed to the society. He minces no word in telling the society that it has restricted the growth of these people. These people have been incarcerated by the society in their respective spaces and profession. This incarceration has occurred due to no fault of theirs. Their caste has been decided by the birth and they had no choice in choosing the family they were born in. Dr. Ambedkar asserts the same thing:

Modern science has shown that the lumping together of individuals into a few sharply marked off classes is a superficial view of man, not worthy of serious consideration. Consequently, the utilization of the qualities of individuals is incompatible with their stratification by classes, since the qualities of individuals are so variable. Chaturvarnya must fail for the very reason for which Platos republic must fail namely that it is not possible to pigeon men into holes according to class. (Annihilation of caste 267).

Ambedkar in the above quotation makes clear that dividing men into groups according to their caste acquired during the birth is a system that is flawed. In the course of time it has developed into dehumanizing diabolic system.

It is indeed disturbing to read Dalit literature because during the process of reading Dalit literature a person gets naked in front of himself. He realizes that he is also a part of this exploiting, oppressive infrastructure of the society. After reading this literature he cannot enjoy sound sleep. This literature seeps to transforms the consciousness of its readers and make them better persons. The appeal in Mahesh Deka's poem "The Sweeper" is clear:

The sweepers and cleanness are not out castes. They are also children of the same god. Defying the names of the narrow minded society Bapu Mahatma honoured them by doing away with divisions between the touchable-untouchable.

And notions of purity- pollution  
He allowed them into the temple  
sacred with firm judgment granted  
their due privilege.

All Dalits are your siblings. (23)

The message is loud and clear. The appeal is to the conscience of the readers. The people who read this literature surely start their journey on the path of self-realization in making the world a better place.

In the recent times a debate has been started about who can write about the Dalits. It has been asserted that Dalit literature is a specific literature that is written to articulate the specific experiences that are central to Dalit existence. Most

# Asian Resonance

of the Dalit writers believe that only Dalits can write Dalit literature:

The militant, activist position is that only a Dalit can adequately articulate the unique kind of experience of suffering and humiliation that any Dalit undergoes under hegemonic caste hierarchy. (Singha XXVI)

One prominent writer who has written about Dalits is Munshi Premchand. His short stories like "Kafan" have been accepted in Dalit canon. Another important writer to write on Dalit issues is U.R. Ananthamurthy. His writings concentrate on the effect of caste system on Brahmins. He shows how caste system affects the Brahmins: "The Brahmins refuse to become part of modern professions so they remain impoverished and this has a dehumanizing impact on the people" (Pal, Challenging 14750). Though he also advocates the annihilation of the caste system, his focus is on his own community, the Brahmins. His writings show how orthodoxy in ritual leads to backwardness. For him more orthodox is the person, poorer he is. His writings show that the orthodoxy in rituals does not allow a person to develop. In his story he writes about Venkata, a poor Brahmin:

I began to feel that, without  
destroying the likes of this Venkata,  
there would be no progress no  
electricity, no river dams, no  
penicillin no pride, no honour, no joy  
of sex, no winning a woman, no  
climax, no flying, no joy of life, no  
memory, no ecstasy, no bliss (146)

The writings of U.R. Ananthamurthy do show the plight of Dalits, but their focus is somewhere else. Many other writers have also written about exploitation and marginalization of Dalits, but they are handicapped while describing the experiences of the Dalits. The Dalits think it must not be included in ambit of Dalit literature:

These representations do not show Dalit as they are, but as helpless and child like people who cannot make their own decisions or take action. In Anand's novel, *Untouchable* for example, the protagonist, Bakha, instead of opting for radical action submits to Gandhi's pacifism, and is thus contained. (Limbale 8)

Dalits have tried to convert to other faiths to escape the tyranny of caste; but caste followed them into their new faiths. Going by their experiences it seems that conversion lost its meaning. In the recent times literature written by Dalit Christian writers like Bama have been published. The futility of conversion is the subject of Bama's book *Karukku*. Bama's book *Karukku* exposes casteism practiced in the church. Bama quotes the officials of the church to show how caste system is deep rooted:

How can we allow these people to come into our house? In any case, even if we were to allow them they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place. There is nothing we can do for

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these creatures. And we should do anything for them. Because to do so would be to help cobras.

Even if we were to do something for them, they will never make progress. Their natures are like that. These days these people go about reasonably dressed. So you can't even make out who they are, sometimes. The government goes and gives these people all sort of privileges. Why do illiterate people need all these things? (Karukku 100)

Even the same thing came in the Bishop's conference Archbishop George, Zur Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India observed in the catholic Bishops conference of India:

Though Catholics of lower castes and tribes form 60 per cent of Church membership they have no place in decision-making. Scheduled caste converts are treated as low caste not only by high caste Hindus but high caste Christians too. In rural areas they cannot own or rent houses, however well placed they may be. Separate places are marked out for them in the Parish church and burial grounds. Inter-caste marriages are frowned upon and caste tags are still appended to the Christian names of high caste people. Casteism is rampant among the clergy and the religious. Though Dalit Christians make 65 per cent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 per cent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests. There are no Dalits among 13 Catholic bishops of Tamilnadu among the Vicars-general and rectors of seminaries and directors of social assistance centres. (qtd. in Masih 82)

Nirad C. Chaudhri, the well known author also made the same point:

All the Christian groups of India retain the mark of caste system. They continue their caste status and pride of caste even in the generation born to Christianity. (310)

All these things remain hidden to the common people of the society. Moreover, the society in reality remains immune to the feelings of the sufferers because the feelings are never articulated. They remain hidden under the piles of bad memories, but literature brings them out in the open and starts of a process of redemption. This redemption works in both ways. On the one hand it liberates the oppressed who writes to achieve a cathartic effect. The effect is multiple, the pent of feelings of the oppressed are released and at the same time the readers realize the

# Asian Resonance

mistakes of the society. Once a reader comes across the feelings of the oppressed s/he becomes a better human being as s/he could empathize the situation of the oppressed. Thus Dalit literature is an important attempt in making the society a better place to live. There have been so many movements in the past that tried to establish egalitarian societies. But they failed to penetrate the caste of Casteism. However, Dalit literature is penetrating deep in the society and changing the psyche of the people

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