

Dalit Struggle and Subjugation Through The Centuries

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Abstract

Our society is marked by its hypocrisy. On the one hand, our constitution guarantees equal rights to all its citizens yet the reality is just the contrary. Hierarchy continues to exist at every stratum in the society. Instead of bridging the gap in the society, this further feeds inequality on the basis of caste, class, gender, and what not. India has been portrayed as a land with unique and yet striking differences, the Indian national identity has been evolving over the past century.

Keywords: Dalit literature, dalit struggle and subjugation, centuries old society, backward society, Indian society

Introduction

Indian culture is complex yet diverse. It is a potpourri resultant from influences across time and varied races. It is a huge overlay and crossover of ideas. Indian culture is a comprehensive idea of a pluralistic society, it has its wide display of languages, communities, caste, tribe and religion. Therefore India can be called a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi lingual society with its wide array of religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism and also twenty two major languages have been recognised by the Indian constitution apart from which there are many other languages. ¹Yet poverty, gender discrimination, caste discrimination, communalism, hierarchy are the off shoots that are both unique and stark realities of the Indian culture. The constitution of this country drafted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is a formidable body of scholarship, it guarantees equal rights to all its citizens. Caste is an important aspect of the Indian culture. Every caste has its own rituals, customs, and deities. As Professor Ghurye points out that caste was considered as central to organized form of division of labour in the Aryan society.

Ghurye explains caste in India on the basis of six distinctive characteristics:

1. Segmental division of society;
2. Hierarchy;

¹Hasan, Zoya. , India-European Union Round Table. *Diversity and Democracy in India*. 4 May 2016.

3. Civil and religious disabilities and privileges;
4. Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation;
5. Restriction on food, drinks and social intercourse;
6. Endogamy.²

In India, hierarchy has always existed within the family, caste, and class structure. People would and are still divided into hierarchies. In the present context as well, social class system seems to be an influencing factor. Firstly, let's look at the origin of the term "Caste", the term is derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' meaning race or breed³. Caste structure is not based on power but rather on purity and pollution. Caste determines a person's occupation. The caste system has shaped the Indian society. A person from a higher caste would not be allowed to socialize or mingle with a person from the lower caste. The lower caste people were and are constantly humiliated and kept away from the public activity. Hinduism is based on *varnas*. Varna, a Sanskrit word, is derived from the root *vr*, meaning to envelop, classify, consider.⁴ Varna literally means division of society namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya, Shudra.

Brahmins (priestly class)

Kshatriyas (warrior class)

Vaishyas (trading class)

Shudras (labour class)

Outside of the varna system is the fifth caste or Avarna and hence the Dalits and untouchables fall under the category of Avarna.

Indian culture is though claimed to be diverse, yet it fails to accommodate voices of all? This is where the hypocrisy lies, Women, Dalits, Adivasis, and the minorities are still not part of the inclusive India. It doesn't adequately represent the reality of these issues. The issues cannot be ignored, since major groups are not represented. There has always been an opposing relationship between modernity and culture. On one hand, women are made to feel that they are part of the Indian culture yet on the other hand she is part of the age old form of repression and suppression. Most often women are not allowed to participate in decision making. Gender and caste are still one of the major barriers of the world's biggest democracy. Many writers have tried to bring out the voices of the evils prevalent in the society. The Dalit writers have been among prominent voices of all. These writers were part of the very suffering community.

It was in the 1920s, however, that the Dalits began to organize strongly and independently across India. The most important of the early Dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab, organized in 1926; the movement under Dr Ambedkar in

²Ghurye: G.S. Journey of IAS. *Indology*. 15 August 2014. 25 April 2016 <<http://journeyofias2013.blogspot.in/2014/08/indology-g-s-ghurye.html>>

³Caste. *Wikipedia*. web29 April, 2016. 5 May 2016. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_India>

⁴Varna Hinduism. *Wikipedia*. *Etymology and Origins of Varna*. *Wikipedia*. Web1 May 2016. 5 May 2016. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varna_\(Hinduism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varna_(Hinduism))>

Maharashtra, mainly based among Mahars which had its organizational beginnings in 1924; the Namashudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in U.P; and the organizing of the pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala⁵

Hierarchy in the caste system creates inequality. After gaining independence, from the British rule, India adopted a democratic form of rule which grants freedom of speech, equal rights; and to ascertain justice, secularism and liberty to all its citizens. Yet discrimination continues in every sphere of our society. There is a contradiction that exists between the modernity that we strive to be and backwardness that continues to prevail in most pockets of our society.

Debates circling around caste system have existed in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. Caste is a complex institution which continues to haunt our society. One would often see arguments revolving around the caste system in a news channel room when a person from a lower caste is killed. There would be sympathies and strong revolt, yet the gruesome violence continues. The Indian constitution had been adopted in the year 1950 which guarantees equal rights and opportunities to the scheduled castes and tribes and also the disadvantaged groups of the society. However, the merits of the lower castes have often been humiliated and remain unrecognised. Significant observations have brought back debates circling around caste to the tables of parliamentarians and policy makers, yet one ceases to find a solution. For a person to compete with the rest, one needs access and resources to access quality education, yet the conditions in the government schools, universities or work place do not provide them any relief. One would want to believe that education would help them in their upliftment yet their voices remain suppressed. Even today discrimination continues in educational institutions. The constitution is available in its written form, but how much of it is followed?

However, the differences based on caste system plague other religions also and hence caste-based discrimination is a reality in other religions in India. , For example, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar writes in *Waiting for Visa*, that once during the month of Ramzan he along with his co-workers was visiting Verul. On their way to Verul, they would have to stop at Aurangabad, they decided to wash their face in a nearby tank, suddenly a Muslim man came running "The Dheds (untouchables) have polluted the tank". Soon others started shouting at them.⁶

This shows that caste discrimination has been in practise at large in the society and by the people of all faiths. .

As Arundhati Roy writes in her essay *The Doctor and the Saint*, introductory chapter of *Annihilation of caste*,

“Outside of these varnas are the avarna caste, the AtiShudra, subhumans , arranged in hierarchies of their own- the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the

⁵Patankar, Bharat and Omvedt, Gail. *The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period*, New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2007

⁶ Ambedkar, B.R. Dr. *Waiting for a Visa. Polluting the Water in the Fort of Daulatabad.*
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambekar_waiting.html

Unapproachables, whose presence, whose touch whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged caste Hindus”⁷

Caste is deeply embedded in our society; it is still practised at school, work and marriage. In the Indian society practice of untouchability has always been a cruel and inhumane truth. The untouchables were forced to live in the exterior part of the village, they would not be allowed inside the temple, they were made to do scavenging work, they would have to beg for the leftover food from the upper caste and were forced to carry excreta.

Origin of the word

The word Dalit has been derived from Sanskrit word 'dal' meaning crushed or fallen.⁸ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar initiated the Dalit movement to represent the depressed class. After the 1960's the word 'untouchable' came in use. Various terms have been used to refer to the Dalits, such as Mahar, Bhangi, Chura, Panchama, Avarna, Harijan, Chandala and Raksasa. The names carry within them the two- term contrast of "we the pure" and "you the impure"⁹

Portrayal of Caste in Indian Literature:

Caste hierarchy has been prevalent in India since the ancient times. Bhakti Movement a foremost religious movement was a way to convey that all human beings are equal in front of God. An important feature was that these poets sought salvation but did not protest against discrimination and social injustices. Poets like Tukaram (a tanner), Kabir (a weaver), Eknath and Chokhamela were some of the earliest Bhakti poets and reformers to preach against the practice of untouchability. Chokhamela was one of the earliest Dalit voices to discuss about the caste structure. He belonged to Mahar caste and wrote during the fourteenth century.

“He seems to accept his outward ugliness thus conceding in the process a sense of superiority to the aesthetics of the upper-order: Cane is crooked, but its juice isn't crooked Why be fooled by outward appearance? The bow is crooked, but the arrow isn't crooked, Why be fooled by outward appearance? The river is twisting, but the water isn't crooked. Why be fooled by outward appearance? Chokha is ugly, but his feelings aren't ugly. Why be fooled by outward appearance? (Abhanga 52)¹⁰

The Dalit literature was a response to the humiliation and oppression that had been forced upon the lower castes by the upper castes. The Brahmin hegemony for centuries had

⁷. Roy, Arundhati. 2014 : "The Doctor and the Saint." In Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar edited and annotated by S. Anan. New Delhi: Navayana

⁸Origin of the Word "Dalit" History. 10 October

2015<http://www.dalitchristians.com/html/dalitmeaning.htm>

⁹Origin of the Word "Dalit" History. 10 October

2015<http://www.dalitchristians.com/html/dalitmeaning.htm>

¹⁰Amandeep. Dalit Aesthetics: A Study of Bhakti Period Vol.-II 4 July-Dec. (Winter)

2010<http://www.inflibnet.ac.in/ojs/index.php/JLCMS/article/viewFile/367/343>

excluded them from their writings. It had become important for the Dalit community to express the subjugation, atrocities that they had faced for centuries.

Indian writings do not primarily represent the Dalit reality. Most of works have ignored the issue of untouchable as a non-existent issue. The main aim of the Dalit writers however had been to liberate themselves from the caste based politics. Ambedkar and Phule's writings had become a powerful medium which helped other writers.

As the political movement began in Maharashtra and across India, the Dalit movement became a political identity for the untouchables.

“Arjun Dangle an important Dalit writer and member of the Dalit Panther's organization has asserted that Dalit literature is not simply literature. Although, today most Dalit writers have forgotten its origins, Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change. “Dalit presently are able to show not only the hostile circumstances in which Dalits live, but also their struggle from emancipation from caste”¹¹

Marathi writers and intellectuals had contributed significantly in Dalit Literature. Namdeo Dhasal founded the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970's. Marathi Dalit writers such as Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Baburao Bagul, were all members of the movement. Dalit movement gained momentum in Maharashtra with the contributions of Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar. The writers rebelled against the Hegemonic Brahmin class. The Dalits had been pushed into poverty by the upper castes. Namdeo Dhasal, the founder of Dalit Panthers movement came from an impoverished family. His father was a butcher and bought home a meagre income. The sought of humiliation was expressed by the writers who started rebelling against the caste prejudices of the upper caste.

India has been portrayed as a land with unique but striking differences. The issue of caste and gender discrimination continues to plague our society even after India gained its independence almost seven decades ago. We are far from calling ourselves a free country that gives equal freedom and rights to all. Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, Women and children still occupy the most vulnerable positions. Dalits continue to live in ghettos in the rural parts of India; they are still economically deprived and culturally marginalized. The voices are often suppressed, their pain and anger remains unheard.

Literature acts as a weapon for most writers to express their anguish and disgust. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, UR Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, Unnava Lakshminaryan's *Malapalli* or the more contemporary *God of Small Things* written by Arundhati Roy have focused on the caste system. *Malapalli* is a strong revolt against the injustices that were meted out upon the Dalit community. Women are even today subjugated to multiple exploitations and discrimination. Women from the lower caste suffer double discrimination, both caste and gender. The main aim of the Dalit writers had been to liberate themselves from the caste based politics. Ambedkar and Phule's writings had become a powerful medium which helped the writers. It had become important to represent their part of their story which had never been expressed by the upper caste. For a very long time the upper caste writers represented sweepers, rag pickers and toilet cleaners as representatives of the Dalit

11Azhar Samina, Mohindra Vinita. Muse India. Marathi Dalit Literature.
<http://museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=40&id=2976>

community. In Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*, the protagonist Bakha makes his living as a sweeper and toilet cleaner. The Dalits have never been represented as someone from a prosperous background.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* written during pre-independence India focused on the sweepers of Chandrapur, and the protagonist of the novel Bakha, an untouchable was a sweeper by caste. The story is a creation of a one day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper and toilet cleaner. As E. M. Forster points out in the preface of the novel,

Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic could have created the character of Bakha, because he could not have known enough about his troubles. Mr. Anand stands in an ideal position. By caste he is a Kshatriya and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution-complex." (Mulk Raj Anand: *Untouchable*)¹²

It is important to understand as a critical outsider that Anand did not have an insight on the community. He tried to understand the tragedy of Bakha and his community but did not share their problems. He was detached from them because he himself belonged to an upper caste. He observed their lives as an outsider and wrote about it. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* explores the lives of who are untouchables in a rural part of Kerala. Therefore as critical outsiders, they observe the tragedy faced by the Dalit community but at the same time they are detached from them. They romanticise their problems instead of finding a solution to their problems.

Bama, an important Dalit writer focuses on the atrocities and oppressions faced by the Dalit community. She discusses in her work the exploitation that she and the women of her community faces. Women are not paid equal wages and many times women have to run their entire family on their own without depending on their menfolk. The women are often subjected to sexual harassment at the hands of the upper caste men and at homes they are often treated violently by their husband and father. As an insider of the community, her language is both raw and crude, she uses Tamil dialect in a more consistent manner. The language used by her is the lingua franca of the real women of her community. The story has been written in many voices of women addressing to one another. Whereas Roy and Anand's language is more colloquial and refined. It captures the educated western audience who are interested to learn about Indian society and the issue of caste. Whereas the critical insider of the community would often express the anguish and anger.

Reason

Dalit writers felt that there was a need to produce their own writings. It had become important for them to express their sufferings and anguish which had never been addressed in the earlier writings produced by the upper castes. The main aim was to see it as a new dimension and have their own identity. It was also important to analyse the social conditions of the Dalits.

As Bama discusses in her novel,

¹²Anand Mulk Raj, E.M. Forster 'Preface to *Untouchable*'. *Untouchable*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2001.

*Sangati is in the voices of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the incidents of their daily lives. These voices, sometimes raised in anger or in pain as they lash out at each other, or against their oppressors, is reported exactly. Such a language is full of expletives, quite often with explicit sexual references.*¹³

Analysis

The major evil that has infested the Indian society has been its hierarchical structure whether it is religious or the social hierarchy. All the exploitation and conflict is based or is due to the hierarchical system. It is always the upper caste who have looked down upon the lower caste and were not allow to coexist with the other castes as equals. A woman is still not allowed to marry a person of her choice or go out to work. Many times, it is observed that social views, perceptions or do's and don'ts are above the law in the society. In fact the fate of an individual or a community is still decided according to these existing social norms which even revolutionary writers have failed to minimise or do away with.

Conclusion

Poet Meena Kandasamy writes,

Aggression

Ours is a silence
that waits. Endlessly waits.

And then, unable to bear it
any further, it breaks into wails.

But not all suppressed reactions
end in our bemoaning the tragedy.

Sometimes,
the outward signals
of inward struggles takes colossal forms
And the revolution happens because our dreams explode.

Most of the time:
Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.¹⁴

¹³Sangati: Bama Page xix-xx.

¹⁴Kandasamy, Meena. Poemhunter. Aggression. Web 20 June 2012. 5 May 2016 <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/aggression-3/>>

As Meena Kandasamy writes 'ours is a silence endlessly waits' but now the silence needs to speak up. There is a current revolt that people in this country are experiencing that leads people question the law and governance and challenging age old norms.

While this is a positive movement that has risen. However to turn the movement into realities the agitation must continue until everyone has an equal right . People have been silent for centuries which only resulted in further suppression. Patriarchy shackled voices has created a hierarchy. This hierarchy needs to be broken.

There are many contradictions and conflict that exist in our society in the name of religion, caste and gender inequality. We have to revolt against this hierarchical structure and we must continue this struggle.

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