

DALIT RIGHTS TO DIGNITY AND RECOGNITION: VOICES OF PROTEST IN DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concepts of ‘oppression’ and ‘humiliation’ to highlight the marginalized position of the Dalits in Indian society. The Dalits are the victims of various forms of caste-related discrimination, deprivation and violence. This paper proposes that Dalits must not be deprived of their fundamental rights to dignity and recognition; Dalit writers should carry on writing their autobiographies to voice protests against all forms of oppression and humiliation.

KEYWORDS: *Oppression, Humiliation, Marginalization, Casteism, Autobiography, Recognition*

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Dalit’ is an old Marathi word meaning ‘broken or reduced to pieces generally’. ‘Dalit’ also refers to the ‘untouchable’. The term ‘Dalit’ which means ‘untouchable’ is now also applied to the defenceless and exploited people. The term ‘Dalit’ includes not just the Scheduled Castes but also the economically oppressed classes which also include the Scheduled Tribes, landless labourers, and all those who are economically exploited. The Preamble of the Indian Constitution envisaged a nation where the important values of equality, liberty and fraternity will be supreme. The implementation of the ideals is further elaborated in the section on the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 38) of the Indian Constitution; any form of discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, gender, sex or place of birth has been made punishable by law. Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits any discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, race, sex and place of birth. Article 17 declares the practice of untouchability to be illegal. The Untouchability Offence act was passed in 1955 followed by the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976. In 1989, the Government of India passed the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) to curb violence and crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or Dalits. Apart from being marginal, Dalits have been denied education for quite a long time in Indian caste society. Now, that they are getting educated, some of them have been using writing as a weapon for their social assertion. Thus writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use this genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression.

UNTOUCHABILITY IN INDIA

Though after independence untouchability is legally banned, it is still being practised in various forms. The upper-caste people hold the pillars of power – job, politics, administration, and the lower castes continue to be exploited, humiliated and subordinated. People belonging to lower castes especially the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are being deprived in several ways; they are not being given sufficient opportunity for proper education; they remain illiterate and ignorant. As a result, they do not get better jobs and they are compelled to live in the darkness of ignorance. As these

people cannot make themselves properly educated, they become powerless because education gives power – proper education makes a man self- confident and self-dependent. People belonging to lower castes are being constantly deprived of securing good jobs, the opportunities of earning enough money and living freely with people of higher castes; they even do not find sufficient number of their representatives in the ministry and administration. So it can be stated in a nut-shell that in democratic India, Government measures have been taken to eradicate untouchability and ameliorate the miserable lot of the untouchables but their suffering still persists. In present-day India, caste continues to survive in some form or the other in every corner of India and it shows that the underlying ideological structure of the Hindu mind remains unchanged. India's development, modernization, secularization and democratic governance are not able to change its caste system, inequality, social exclusion and marginalization.

OPPRESSION AND HUMILIATION

Oppression means severe and cruel abuses of groups of people. Oppressed people suffer injustice and disadvantage. Oppression prevents equality, freedom and justice in a society. When and where oppression prevails, man's autonomy and self-actualization is denied. Ann Cudd in her book *Analyzing Oppression* defines oppression as “an institutionally structured, unjust harm perpetrated on groups by other groups through direct and indirect material and psychological forces” (28). Sybol S. C. Anderson in his book *Hegel's Theory of Recognition* gives a definition of oppression: “Oppression is that condition in which, through deliberate or unintentional acts, a system of social and institutional constraints is imposed upon social groups that thwarts their members' resilient autonomy” (34). Humiliation, on the other hand, damages the self-respect of an individual or a group of people. “Humiliation consists of disrespecting and demeaning others, damaging their self-respect, bringing them down in their eyes, and causing them hurt and pain” (Parekh 29). Humiliation belittles an individual in others' eyes also. According to Parekh, a society based on humiliation uses all means to keep the humiliated groups in conditions of poverty, ill health, political isolation, and social marginalization. Humiliation is an assault on human dignity. The Dalits of Indian society experience all forms of oppression and humiliation.

ATROCITIES AGAINST DALITS

With economic development and social change traditional system of caste-based hierarchy and ideological apparatuses supporting casteism should disintegrate. The practice of untouchability should be removed with the process of change in Indian society. But in spite of all such changes and development the inequalities remain intact in our society. Though the older forms of untouchability changed, atrocities on Dalits or ex-untouchables still continue.

In 1991, in Andhra Pradesh, nine Dalits were killed by the local landlords for some trivial reasons. In 2006, in Khairlanji in Maharashtra the entire family of a Dalit farmer was brutally murdered by a group of dominant caste people because the Dalit farmer had complained to the local police against them for harassing and assaulting him. As per a record provided by National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs (as in Eleventh Five Year Plan), the number of crimes against Scheduled Castes in 2001 was 33,501. In fact, the Dalits are experiencing various forms of violence and humiliation – physical beating, murder, rape, harassment and mental torture. These instances show the marginalized position of the Dalits in the larger economic and social structure of Indian society.

Casteism has not been eradicated; we cannot overcome caste-related bindings and restrictions. In India, caste-related violence is occurring in various forms even now. Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international non-governmental

organization which conducts research and advocacy on human rights gives a report that Dalits known as SCs and STs or adivasis continue to face exclusion, discrimination and acts of violence and atrocities. In 2003, the adivasis or tribals who gathered under Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha at Muthanga of Kerala faced 18 rounds of police firing in which five tribals were killed; the tribals gathered in protest to the Government's delay in allotting them land that was officially signed in 2001. In 2006, four members of the Bhotmanga family (belonging to Mahar community) were killed by a mob belonging to the Maratha Kunbi caste in Kherlanji, a small village of Maharashtra. In Rajasthan, during 1999-2002, the average number of crimes against Dalits per year is 5024, with 46 killings and 138 cases of rape. In 2011, Dalits were killed by Jats in Mirchpur village in Haryana; their houses were also burned. In 2015, clashes between Dalits and Jats in Dangawas village of Rajasthan caused four people dead and thirteen injured. The list, however, will continue. In her introduction to B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, Arundhati Roy has mentioned a record of crimes against Dalits:

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every sixteen minutes; every day, more than four Untouchable women are raped by Touchables; every week, thirteen Dalits are murdered and six Dalits are kidnapped. In 2012 alone, the year of the Delhi gang-rape and murder, 1,574 Dalit women were raped (the rule of thumb is that only 10 per cent of rapes or other crimes against Dalits are ever reported), and 651 Dalits were murdered. (21)

India is moving ahead; but the mentality of the Indians remains unchanged. The progress of India and the nation will not be satisfactory with the prevalence of this age-old evil practice. Dalits are also an integral and essential part of Indian society and they should not be kept underprivileged, marginalized and deprived; Dalits must be brought to the mainstream of the society and they should be engaged in the productive and creative fields with due honour and respect. The Dalits should not only depend upon the mercy of the government but they should critically ponder over their own situation and to innovate effective ways to solve their problems. However, the age-old marks of shame should be erased from Indian society. Not the caste- identity of a person, but one's merit and potentiality must be given priority everywhere.

The lower-caste people have been stigmatized as the untouchables so that they can be easily identified and neglected as inferior people. These untouchables have been kept underprivileged, economically backward or poor and powerless for thousands of years. Since they are powerless and backward they are called Dalits; they are the broken or crushed masses of Indian society; they are compelled to live not in the centre but in the margins of society – they are the marginalized people. The centre is reserved for the upper-caste people, for the privileged and the powerful. The Dalits in India have been victims of discrimination and prejudice for long periods of time. This prevented them from acquiring educational and cultural skills necessary for success in contemporary Indian societies.

DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

An autobiography is a personal account of one's own self. What is important in an autobiographical writing is that it is an act of a conscious self which is documented through the active help of memory. A Dalit narrator has recorded a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system. Since Dalits in India live marginalized lives their autobiographies are bound to be different from others. By writing their autobiographies Dalits are mobilizing resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing. Several Dalit writers have raised their voices through their respective personal narratives and these narratives challenge the hegemony of the upper caste and make way for the assertion of the marginal self.

Most of the autobiographical narratives are tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which they experience in a Hindu society. On the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between 'loss of identity' and 'asserting of self'. "Thus the very process of writing autobiography by the Dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression" (Kumar 150). Issues related to poverty, powerlessness, untouchability and several other corrupt social practices have generated a variety of responses among Dalit writers. These responses are basically forms of protest aimed at bringing about social change through a revolution.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is about the history of the entire chamar community – how the people of this community have been treated by the Hindu society worse than street dogs and cats. In this book Valmiki has mentioned how an entire community totally depends on the scrap food of the upper castes in return of their rigorous and humiliating work. The traditional occupation of the chamars was to clean villages, take away dead animals from the upper caste locality. They did not get proper wages. They had to depend on the mercy of the upper castes who exploited them. In this modern democratic India exploitation of the Dalits in different manners and shapes is still going on. In his book Valmiki has not only presented his own painful experiences as a Dalit but has shared the story of the entire Dalit community. Through his book Valmiki has raised the issue of the plight of the Dalits. Om Prakash through his work highlights the importance of literature in providing a platform for disseminating knowledge about Dalit lives and their experiences. 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.

Bama's *Karukku* is considered to be the first Dalit autobiography written in Tamil. This is one among those few Dalit women's autobiographies which has been translated into English. Throughout her narrative Bama condemns all forms of oppression – caste, class, or gender. Coming from a low social position Bama has had to fight hundreds of odd battles daily. Through hard work she completes her college education and becomes a teacher at a convent. She becomes a Catholic nun and serves the poor and the destitute. But when she enters into a religious order she finds that here too, obstacles exist for people from the lower castes. In this narrative, Bama appeals to her fellow-citizens to erase caste, class and religious differences so that even the less privileged people like the Dalits can live with dignity and self-respect. Other remarkable Dalit autobiographies are *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, *The Outcaste* by Shrankumar Limbale and *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma.

The autobiographies written by the Dalits, tribals and other marginalized people bear a confessional characteristic and this confession is made to invoke the bitter experiences the authors have gone through in their lives. In this sense they invoke a personal pain and this same pain is also felt by other members of their community. These narratives interrogate the norms, conventions, attitudes and practices of the society. The aim of writing is to achieve a sense of identity by the members of the oppressed group, and to mobilize resistance against caste and class oppression. But these personal narratives have been systematically neglected. It is because these autobiographies challenge the dominant assumption of a society based on caste, class, ethnicity and other forms of discrimination.

WAYS OF ERADICATING INJUSTICE

Under the oppressive and humiliating forces of the traditional society the untouchables have not been able to raise their protesting voice against the upper castes. As a result, a large number of people of India have always remained backward

not only socially but also culturally and financially. In Indian society, casteism is acting as a machinery or agent of subjugating and subordinating a large section of people; in fact, a large section of people have been dominated and exploited in innumerable ways. It is a fact that those who belong to the lower strata of society contribute a lot to the development and progress of their society and nation. They are closely associated with menial jobs which require tremendous physical power. The untouchables or Dalits are associated with works which require less intellect. Though the marginalized untouchables have done much for the progress of Indian society, their condition has not been ameliorated. As a result, a large section of people of Indian society have been kept undeveloped and backward in every aspect. This is a primary cause of very slow development of India. A country or a nation cannot really progress properly keeping a large section of its population backward and deprived. In Indian society the process of marginalization and subjugation was prevalent in the past; this evil system was practised in Indian society before its independence and even long after its attaining democracy. The evil practice of marginalizing or keeping people deprived still continues in Indian society.

The government, therefore, should take necessary steps for providing the so called untouchables or Dalits with proper education. The Dalits should be brought to the mainstream of the society through education. The Dalits should be given sufficient opportunities for necessary upliftment and development. "Dalits are also an integral and essential part of Indian society and they should not be kept underprivileged, marginalized and deprived; Dalits must be brought to the mainstream of the society and they should be engaged in the productive and creative fields with due honour and respect" (Islam: 79). The ways of educating Dalits should be given preference and priority. The government should always keep in mind the underprivileged and backward social, cultural and political condition of the Dalits.

Sufficient number of representatives from the ex-untouchables or Dalits in political fields is also essential. These Dalit representatives can act as spokesmen of the backward and undeveloped condition of the Dalits or ex-untouchables. Representatives from these backward sections should join parliament and legislative assemblies so that they can express their own marginal condition in society.

The Dalits should think of the paths of their freedom and how equality can be maintained in place of injustice and inhumanity. So Dalit assertion is required; and the "assertion at the grass roots is the most significant form" (Pai 63). The Dalits should open their mouths and make protesting voice against their oppressors for their emancipation and upliftment. Several Dalit autobiographers have already expressed their own personal experiences of caste-based torture and oppression. Many Dalit writers have already begun to use their pen as weapons against dominant and oppressive upper castes of their society, and they have been claiming their equal social status like upper-caste people. These Dalit writes have accepted the fact that casteism is the cause of all oppression and humiliation of the untouchables and lower-caste people; casteism should be uprooted for social progress and for removing inequality among men. It is a fact that where Dalits begin to raise their voice for their due honour and 'recognition', the upper-caste people try to suppress this assertion and cause atrocities against the Dalits. Yet the Dalit voice should not stop; it should be raised in a stronger way. Here unity among the ex-untouchables or Dalits and among the marginalized people is an urgent necessity. The under-privileged and oppressed Dalits should be united and only their unity can frighten the upper-caste people. Hence, only unity and brotherhood among the marginalized people can defeat oppressive and evil systems of a society – united resistance, protest and struggle can uproot any social evil.

CONCLUSIONS

We all should also acknowledge the contribution of the untouchables or Dalits in the progress of Indian nation; the Dalits have done much for the development of Indian society. This type of 'recognition' or acknowledgement is the basic need for resisting casteism and caste-based marginalization of the untouchables or Dalits in Indian society. For maintaining equality, freedom and justice in society, recognitive understanding and mutual recognition among different groups of a society should be nurtured and cultivated. Any form of misrecognition should be removed and abolished. Hence the Dalits should actively participate in every development of our country and nation. Writing can be used by these Dalits as a means of developing mass awareness at national or international levels regarding their deprivation; through writing authentic personal narratives a change in Indian society can be brought about. The Dalits should continue writing their autobiographical narratives to voice their protests against all forms of caste and class exploitation; they should advocate the restoration of their basic human rights of dignity and self-respect.

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