

Dalit Literature as a Socio-political Tool

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Every country has its own social distinctiveness which is also its social reality. This reality does not exist on a single plane, but is multi-layered. India is a diverse nation and various cultures simultaneously exist in both their appealing and misshapen forms. However, many cultures also exist in conflict with each other and therefore, a culture of mutual hostility is also visible here. And this reciprocal opposition is based not only on religion, language or region but also exists within the followers of even one religion. In the rest of the world, there are many forms of social reality that are based on class, race and religion but in a large nation like India, which is almost a subcontinent, its social reality rests on caste.

As we know, social and cultural activism in its constructive form can also influence active politics and is in fact, a form of politics itself. They are mutually beneficial. The caste system in India has also influenced active politics right from the beginning. The difference between Dr. Ambedkar and other political leaders and social reformers was clearly visible in pre-independence India and since independence this divide has only grown deeper in both social and political terms. Between the Dalits and non-Dalits, it is caste alone that creates a conflict of interest and especially, the issue of reservations granted as provision in the Constitution, has played a major role in creating this rift.

Government jobs and the policies made for the betterment of the Dalits led to the emergence of an educated group among Dalits that went on to form the middle class within the community. This middle class played an important role in creating an oppositional awareness and the Dalit community also began to organize itself to fight for its rights. Dr. Ambedkar had begun this on a large scale in Maharashtra by his social movements and political activities. After Dr. Ambedkar's *mahaparinirvan*, this struggle slowed down somewhat but soon enough in 1972, the rise of Dalit Panthers gave an important turn to Dalit

politics and movement. In this phase, Dalit writers recorded their suffering and their struggle in the form of autobiographies and also began to fight for their rights.

Raja Dhale, who is a committed Dalit thinker and a Dalit Panther leader, has critically reviewed Premchand's writings and also carried out an in-depth analysis of the social and political conditions of north India. He writes, "At the end of this deliberation, there is one question that comes to my mind. Maharashtra's Dalit literature has crossed over to the neighbouring states of Gujarat and Karnataka and is flourishing there, then why is the domain of Hindi silent?"¹

Raja Dhale had written this piece in 1980, the year of Premchand's centenary and by then in the Hindi sphere, Dalit writing had not made a beginning. It was not as if caste atrocities were not being committed but that they were not finding a place in the domain of literature. Dhale adds, "Has not the time for such a movement come for Hindi? Has the taint of untouchability been wiped off completely from the map of Uttar Pradesh or is no part of Uttar Pradesh on the map of untouchability? Does the fault lie with the Hindi language or with untouchability? Are there no untouchables left in the Hindi belt? Have all their complaints been redressed?"²

The truth is that even at that time, untouchability was rampant in Uttar Pradesh. Several incidents of mass killings and gang rapes on the basis of caste continued to occur. It was not as if there were no protests against these incidents but these were political in nature, they had not taken a literary shape. They had yet to find literary expression. Raja Dhale refers to various incidents of caste violence in places like Beldhi, Agra, Almora, Jagdishpur, Muzzaffarnagar, Parasbigha, Muradabad and Bilaspur.

To his analysis of this situation, Dhale adds further questions, "So where does the fault lie? With life or with literature? Or with both? To reach a rational understanding one has to first learn to distinguish between life and literature. It is possible that sometimes literature may fail to represent or provide an insight into life but that does not mean we lose faith in life. Did Premchand misrepresent the social reality of Uttar Pradesh? Absolutely not! On the contrary, Premchand's literature was born out the social reality of Uttar Pradesh. Then why can the same not give birth to Dalit literature?"³

Raja Dhale cites two reasons for the delayed flowering of Dalit literature in the Hindi belt, he believes, “It is true that life creates literature but that does not mean that literature gives birth to a new way of life.”⁴

The first reason he believes was Dr. Ambedkar’s struggle which made a difference. He writes, “This a real question and the answer to it lies in understanding the differences between Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, especially in the context of the modes of existence of the untouchables. The backdrop against which Dalit literature emerged in Maharashtra was completely absent in Uttar Pradesh. The lone leader of Dalits, Dr. Ambedkar’s lifelong struggle for the freedom of untouchables from the slavery of the savarnas was carried out on the soil of Maharashtra. Even though this battle was fought in one region, its echo resounded all over India and Premchand too was not unaffected by it. Even then it did not find a place in the history of Hindi literature. This struggle that took place in one corner of India was striking at the root cause of untouchability that was being practiced all over India. However, those very parties and organizations that for political reasons embarked upon policies for abolition of untouchability became impediments in its execution and therefore the impact of this movement could reach this region only belatedly. It is for this reason that the lives of untouchables in Uttar Pradesh have not changed at the pace that it did for those in Maharashtra. That also accounts for why no movement like Dalit literature emerged in Uttar Pradesh.”⁵

Raja Dhale considers Buddhist Dhamma, that is, the new cultural movement to be the other reason for the absence of Dalit literature in Uttar Pradesh. He believes that it brought about a huge change in the lives of Dalits in Maharashtra because it led to the beginning of a cultural transformation and provided a cultural alternative to the Dalits. He argues:

Why was it that after 1956 the erstwhile untouchables of Maharashtra turned rebels in every sphere of life and gave birth to a new trend in literature? The answer to this lies in the change that came into their lives and not in literature. When Buddhist beliefs became the basis of their daily lives, it led to a cultural movement, which in turn brought about a social transformation. To understand this social transformation, one needs to understand the grammar of social change.

Social change cannot occur without change in the values of life and all studies in the field of social transformation have established that change always takes place first on the cultural plane, in the sphere of values and belief-systems and only then does it translate into principles of conduct. This runs contrary to the Marxian understanding of change being inspired by special circumstances or as a result of frustration with social conditions. Dr. Ambedkar's life and writings gave a new direction to the lives of Dalits in Maharashtra. On conversion to Buddhism, the lives of Dalits have completely altered and the erstwhile untouchables have adopted a new lifestyle. Today, their values have been radically altered and Dalit literature is part and parcel of that change.”⁶

One cannot disagree with the two conclusions that Raja Dhale reaches. However, in the context of Dalit literature, his first conclusion seems more valid. The second conclusion, that is, on the role of Buddhism, may still be open to question. Therefore Dalit literature can draw its inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's life but one cannot find in it an explication of Buddhist religion. Dr. Ambedkar's slogan-educate, organize and agitate-had a sweeping impact on Dalit communities but the same cannot be said about Buddhism.

In its very basic form, Dalit literature stands for the dignity and self-esteem of Dalits but it does not propagate the teachings of Buddhism. Any literature that preaches and proselytizes about any religion stands the risk of becoming orthodoxical and may even militate against the principles of democracy. It might also insult other religions and their followers. These possibilities may inhere in such a case. Therefore such literature can be called religious literature but it cannot be considered modern literature.

Dalit literature in any form is not religious literature, however, it can definitely be asserted that it gives expression to the movements and activities that go on in life and society. In the first convocation held in 1936, Premchand, as the president of the Progressive Writers Association, had rightly said—“Literature is a criticism of life.”⁷

Dalit literature, too, offers a critique of Indian society and life. It opposes the *varna vyavastha* because this system is anti-human. It not only divides people of a religion from one another but also creates a hierarchy between the ‘low’ and ‘high.’ It impedes the forging

of a national unity and the development of society. It grants privileges to some castes while depriving many other castes of even their fundamental rights.

Premchand considers it the aim of literature to awaken both an aesthetic sense and moral responsibility in human beings and society.

He writes — “In ancient times, religion held the reins of society. Religious teachings were the basis of man’s spiritual and moral development. It used to resort to fear or incentives and matters of sin and virtue were its tools.

Now literature has begun to fulfill this role and its tools are aesthetic pleasure. It tries to provide aesthetic pleasure and there is no human being who has not experienced aesthetic pleasure.”⁸

Therefore I believe that though Dalit literature finds inspiration from Ambedkar’s life-struggles but it does not propagate or preach Buddhism. It gives rise to feelings of anguish and resistance among the people. Dalit literature does not merely transform the lives of Dalits but also attempts to bring about a change in the life and world-view of non-Dalits too. It tries to make them more sensitive towards other communities.

I say this because Dalit literature pays its respects to Jotiba Phule in the same manner as it does to Ambedkar, and Phule never advocated Buddhism. He opposed the caste system and endorsed modern education. He was a staunch critic of the brahminical system. He has fiercely criticized this brahminical system in his book *Ghulamgiri*.

The dedication of his book read as follows — “Dedicated to the good people of the United States.

As a token of Admiration for their sublime, disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of negro-slavery; and with an earnest desire that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra brothers from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom.”⁹

In telling us about his objective in writing *Ghulamgiri*, Phule lays emphasis on education — “My object in writing the present volume is not only to tell my Shudra brethren how they have been duped by the Brahmins, but also to open the eyes of Government to that pernicious system of high class education which has hitherto been so persistently followed and which

statesmen like Sir George Campbell, the present Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, with board and universal sympathies, are finding to be highly mischievous and pernicious to the interest of Government.”¹⁰

Dalit literature, too, stresses the importance of education and the need to struggle for human rights. For the attainment of this goal, it opposes the brahminical system because it fosters casteism. Casteism destroys the unity amongst the citizens of India.

We must understand the caste system of India before analyzing Dalit literature any further.

Ostensibly, there are four *varnas* in India—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras but castes run into thousands in number. The Shudra *varna* has many castes in it and all of these practice untouchability with each other. However, there are some castes, against which all the other castes practice untouchability. Dalit jatis/castes, which are known as Scheduled Castes in constitutional/administrative parlance—they too practice untouchability among themselves and discriminate against each other.

This is to imply that after independence, thanks to the implementation of the Constitution, the Scheduled Castes became a political community but could not become a cultural unit.

By converting to Buddhism on Oct 18, 1956, Ambedkar tried to knit the Dalits into a cultural unit but all the Dalit castes did not accept Buddhism. The Mahars in Maharashtra and the Chamars in Uttar Pradesh converted to Buddhism in large numbers. There are a lot of Dalit castes which do not accept Buddhism and still continue to worship Hindi gods and goddesses.

It is true that they benefit from reservation, get educated and also cooperate with other Dalits in their struggles and oppose the caste system too. However, the contradiction is that they still prefer endogamous marriages. In the cities, they have begun to eat with people of other castes but in the villages, they maintain social relations of commensality with members of their own castes alone.

It is pertinent to point out here that the backward castes are also committing atrocities against the Dalits. These are the same backward castes which were victims of atrocities by “upper” castes till 50 years back. Thus the caste-system has remained indestructible because of this.

Dr. Ambedkar had written about the caste-system using the following comparison: “Hindu society is like a multi-storeyed building, to enter into which there is neither a door nor a staircase. Whoever is born on which ever floor of that building, has to then die on that floor.”

However, it is pertinent to note that this tendency is not evident in a class-based society. There is social mobility in that system and it is flexible, while the caste system is ossified and unchanging.

Therefore, the caste system is still firmly entrenched in Dalit communities. They, too, maintain distance, practice hatred and abjure inter-dining and inter-marriage with other castes.

The main achievement of Dalit literature has been that it has managed to bind these various Dalit castes to a cultural and political identity without taking recourse to religion. Now religion is redundant to this unity.

While Dalit literature gave birth to the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra, North India too witnessed the beginning of several small movements. Recently in Saharanpur, the emergence of a Dalit movement by the name of ‘Bheem Army’ was witnessed. Although this movement had its genesis in Dalits striving for education and self-respect, soon, it began to resort to violence. This was not right. Dr. Ambedkar always carried out all his struggles using non-violent means. There can be no place for violence in a democratic system. Dialogue and the ballot can be only chosen means of change.

Dalit literature made the Dalits recognize that they are divided solely on account of their occupation, otherwise they share one identity. In this struggle for identity, the majority and minority Dalit castes are gradually coming together. This is happening with great speed in Maharashtra but in North India, too, the extensive influence of Dalit literature has now become visible.

Dalit literature has offered different kinds of arguments in favour of reservation. Stories, poems and autobiographies have underlined the economic and psychological changes that have accrued from reservation in Dalit families. As a result of the economic and psychological changes, many changes have become visible at the social and political level too.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiographical narrative *Joothan* and TulsiRam's life narrative *Murdahiya* have garnered a considered response not only by the Dalit community but also by the more sensitive sections of savarna society as well.

We should believe in the fact that social change will occur, not merely because of the awakening of Dalit communities but it is also important for other castes to be sensitive and aware too. Social transformation involves the active participation of all the different sections of society.

Dr Ambedkar writes — “Some of you may say that we need not bother about the cooperation of Brahmins or the lack of it in our struggle. But this perspective is indicative of the fact that such people want to undermine the impact of intellectuals on society. You may not be persuaded by the idea of history being made by great people but you will have to agree that the intelligentsia, in every country, influences society to a great extent, even if it does not control it. It is the intelligentsia which is visionary, and it alone can provide the correct direction and leadership.”¹¹

In conclusion, we may say that Dalit literature has emerged as an important means of social and political transformation. Dalit literature has supplanted the religious and priestly class which earlier carried out the task of consciousness building.

The caste system had played a role in fragmenting the concept of the nation, whereas Dalit literature is now playing a role in strengthening the nation, by empowering and awakening all the sections of society.

The participatory role of Dalits in the various political parties is increasing continuously, which is an indicator of the fact that no caste can remain neglected in democratic India.

¹ *Dalit Sahitya ki Avdhaarna aur Premchand*, ed. Sadanand Shahi, first ed. 2000, Premchand Sahitya Sansthan, Premchand Park, Betiahaata, Gorakhpur, UP 273001. (*Premchand and Dalit Literature*—Raja Dhale, Translator Shanta Singh, pp. 152-3)

² Ibid, p. 153

³ Ibid, pp. 153-4

⁴ Ibid, p. 154

⁵ Ibid, p. 154

⁶ Ibid, pp. 154-55

⁷ “Sahitya ka Uddeshya”—

⁸ Ibid, p. 13

⁹ Ghulamgiri, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, translated by Anil surya, Gautam Book centre, Chandan Sadan, C-263A, Gali no.-9, Hardevpuri, Shahdara, Delhi-110093, 1st edn-2015, Dedication

¹⁰ Ibid, p.23

¹¹ Jati-bheda Ka Uchched- Dr. Ambedkar, translated by-Anil Kumar, Gautam Book Centre, Chandan Sadan, p.68-69.