

Untouchability, Liberation and Human Values: Issues at Stake

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This paper analyses how the stigma of untouchability suffered by Dalits has been declared an offence against Law. The caste system is one of the greatest separating forces that divide human beings into higher castes and lower castes. This division is backed by certain religious sanctions, based on the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution'. Regarded as the most marginalized of the castes in society, they were and are still considered polluted and assigned the occupation deemed too defiling for other castes to do, such as manual scavenging, sweeping, disposing of corpses, skinning and tanning of animal hides for leather making and sandal making, digging graves, etc In its widest sense untouchability could be used to characterize any interaction which brings one in association with a potential source of defilement. Initially, under the four-*varnas* of the Hindu order, the lower castes, the non-*dwija* castes were described as *shudras*. Shudras were supposed to perform mundane and menial jobs; they were denied access to learning and fine arts. This paper takes literature to be a representation of the collective consciousness of the sufferings of untouchables that they are subject of disabilities in every walk of life. They do not touch the shadow of higher castes and are not allowed to use village wells, ponds, public hospitals, roads and so on. The paper would discuss how the practice of untouchability is more serious, cruel and dehumanizing than the practice of black slavery by giving examples from untouchable's life narratives. The Hindus always consider them to be the carriers of pollution and hence their freedom is censored with the help of the Hindu Scriptures. The discussion which has woven through selected narratives of writers would indicated that untouchables have started raising their voices against the Hindu religion based on holy books and the prophets, utterances and advocated an ethic-based monotheistic religion.

Paper

The Caste system survived for centuries because the religious leaders transmitted the Hindu Scriptures to the common people and attributed the caste system to divine ordinance. Any breaking of this system, individually or collectively, was tantamount to breaking the divine law.

In its widest sense untouchability could be used to characterize any interaction which brings one in association with a potential source of defilement. It is due to the irrepressible caste system that the untouchables of India, numbering more than 220 million, known today as Dalits. They are known as *ati-shudras*, *chandalas*, *panchamas*, *antyajas*, *depressed classes*, *harijans* and *scheduled castes* in different periods in Indian history. They still suffer the stigma of untouchability, even after caste discrimination has been declared an offense under the law. India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy. A person is considered a member of the caste into which he or she is born and remains within the caste until death, although the particular ranking of that caste may vary among religion and over time. Debi writes:

It was only in 1917 that the congress for the first time expressed its concern over the issue of untouchability. It urged the people to understand the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the depressed classes. Beyond this, however, little else was done by the party. (chatterji, 8)

Despite the fact that untouchability was abolished under India's constitution in 1950, the practice of untouchability –the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes-remain very much a part of rural India. Untouchables may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally their children are frequently made to sit in the aback of classrooms, and community as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste. Before discussing the various facets of untouchability, however it is necessary to review the different aspects of the Indian caste system. The very use of the word 'class' as synonym of 'caste' does reveal the influence of Marx on Ambedkar, but more importantly it points towards the crisis of inadequate 'native' vocabulary/frame for the caste. Gandhi invoked an intensely Brahmanical term 'Harijan' for the untouchable. If Ambedkar relied on a patently Western category called 'class'; Gandhi lapsed into religious past to coin a condescending term 'Harijan'. This term invited lot of backlash. Ambedkar criticized the use of this term for not only was it overtly Sanskrit in character but it was also a term of co-

option. Moreover such type of “philanthropic naming by the non-dalit leaders”, as Gopal Guru puts it, lacked “discursive capacity” (Guru 261).

Etymologically, Dalit comes from the root “dala” meaning “of the soil or the earth”. Another meaning is “that which is rooted in the soil. (Bama V).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many prominent writers sporadically took up the cause of untouchables. Rabindernath Tagore in his essay on nationalism condemns the unjust social order of Indian society and seeks justice for the lower castes. He observes that it is a narrow mentality to deny certain people their social rights. As long as the Indian society remained unjust, there could be no justice in politics, he has warned the society. In rural India the untouchables are still struggling to assert their degraded status in the orthodox rural caste structure. To quote Debjni Ganguly: In short Tagore saw the domain of the political as inherently insensitive to question of human emancipation. (Ganguly 64). Since the late 1960s and 70s, an increasing number of poets and writers of the Dalit communities in various Indian states have been producing literary works, such as poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies representing the themes of caste oppression, untouchability, poverty and revolution. Reading of dalit literature I specifically focus on this paper those poems, short stories and life stories that tell us more about the ways in which the people of India live with caste and the complex ways in which they negotiate with its oppressive facets.

I substantiate my argument by first analyzing poems that depict the betrayal of high Hindu concepts by the facts of India’s social reality. Narayan Surve, a orphan from the streets of Bombay writes in his poem “For I am Brahma”, expresses the betrayal of high Hindu concepts by the facts of India’s social reality:

I will protect all that belongs to Brahma,
all that is Brahma.
I’ll undo the knot of time.
I’ll bring the world to my door,
Where it will frolic like a child.
I’ll play lagori with the sun...
For I am Brahma, I hold the world together
I, the helpless one,

Without even a room to call my own. (Qtd in Zelliott 297-298).

Another well-known *bhakti* poet Kabir is famous for his iconoclastic outpours. He questions the concept of purity so-obsessively peddled by the twice-born brahmins. He asks:

Tell me, O pandit,
What place is pure –
Where I can sit
and eat my meal?
(Trans., Dharwadkar 124).

Kabir is the best-known voice for equality of castes and religions, condemning caste and religious divisions in poetic, picturesque, fiercely strong terms. The process of poetry arising out of the cry can be felt in most Dalit poems, because in these utterances protest seems to come from the insulted and the injured who have laboured for generation for the supers, their hands with dirty work. It is inevitable that early Dalit poets have given expression to the torments of an oppressed people and their continued protest and indignation should give a new direction to the dalit literary movement. Shah writes in this regard: Historical events and characters which are the victims of caste hatred and subordination are specially singled out in Dalit Literature. (Shah 219). The dalit short stories like, 'The poisoned Bread', 'The cull', 'Explosion' and 'The Storeyed House' demonstrate the position of the Dalits in rural society, and their fight for existence. 'The Storeyed House' gives a glimpse of how Dalits wishing to live honourably and with respect, on terms of equality, are persecuted by higher castes. 'The poisoned Bread' gives a glimpse of how Dalits wishing to live honourably and with respect on terms of equality are persecuted by higher castes. In this story narrator explained how Grandpa begged Bapu Patil for crumbs which his oxen seemed to refused to eat as they were smeared with dung and urine. He exclaimed to the narrator about this injustice in an assertive way: "What a humiliating life we live! Do you think I feel happy about being oppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have a good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling upon us. But I am helpless! I see no ending to this suffering". (Dangle 151).

On the other hand Dalits used the autobiographical mode as a sense of assertion of their neglected selves. They perceive their 'self', and celebrate their self like the upper caste men and women in their writings. Vasant Moon's *Vasti: Growing up Untouchable in India* clearly describes a struggle of a poor dalit boy to being a civil servant. As a follower of Ambedkar's philosophy he has been organizing dalits to demand their rights and prepare them to participate in a civil society. His story is about a neighborhood, a community of people who are Mahars or untouchables but he describes a change when the community feeling was stronger than any sense of inferiority in his life Moon acknowledges his gratefulness towards his community which has given him everything Moon writes: 'The community gave me food

and gave me the store of experience with which I have made my life's journey". (Moon 175). Caste conflicts always disturbed him throughout his life. As a follower of Ambedkar's philosophy he has been organizing Dalits to demand their rights and prepare them to participate in civil society. His active involvement in various Dalit organizations including his organizational work to review Buddhism has brought him a sense of self-satisfaction. Moon in his autobiography narrates the discrimination perpetuated by the upper caste officials. He remembers how humiliating situations were deliberately created in order to harass him. At the end of his autobiography Moon realizes that lack of unity among dalits is a threat to the dalit movement. So he falls back upon the community to strengthen its bond so as to unite Dalits to fight against the caste oppression. Thus it is the education that could have helped Moon to bring about some change in his family, his community and society at large. In the final story with which I end my contemplation of the multiple ways of dalit worlding in Post-Ambedkarite writings. Only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies. In keeping with the general argument about the abstracting, nihilistic dimension of social scientific writing, a dimension that the category of the aesthetic is seen to counter, I read Bama's Karukku narrative both as an indictment of the atrocities perpetrated on the hapless population of untouchables in India and as an immense attempt to bring to the fore, even to celebrate in some sense, the dense, full bloomed phenomenology of the untouchable life-world. Bama remembers how they carried water to the teacher's house and watered the plants but when other children (from upper castes) committed mistake the blame fell on Harijan children as Bama recollects: the headmaster called out me " you have shown us your true nature as a paraya"... we cannot allow you inside the school.(16). Bama never expects that in the church- run schools and college's caste discrimination would exist because the church preached equality for all. Despite the humiliation and insult, Bama tried to stick to her job with a determination to do something for the poor children. she was there for seven years, but when she could not bear the caste discrimination any longer, she resigned and came back to her village with full of questions in her mind: Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honor and self- respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (24). what we find in reading Bama's narrative is that Dalit women have made a significant contribution for the survival and sustenance of their communities. Women's work both in the domestic sphere and outside and has helped society move ahead. Hence they need to be empowered both in their personal lives and as a member of society.

This shows how the radical elements becomes active in her thoughts and shows Dalit women is empowered in the coming few years. So untouchability in the 1990s and beyond still operates within the binary frame of upper verses lower castes. To quote Akshaya Kumar: in terms of its aesthetics, from autobiographical experience and expression, dalit poetry of 1990s moves towards a polemical politicization of its tone and tenor as the poets speak on behalf of the community. (Kumar 304).

Not only in Marathi Dalit writings but in Tamil too Dalit writers have made a significant impact on mainstream literature. This could be found in the stories of Sudhakar Khathak, J.B. Sanakya and Ravikumar. These writers have maintained a difference from the Dalit writings of other parts of India. As it distanced itself from the trend of producing autobiographies, it simultaneously moved in the direction of creative literature. Ravikumar Writes: Such a body of literature, while identifying itself within Dalit Literature by their use of images and vocabulary, goes beyond the discourse of victimization. (Ravikumar XXXII). The above writings are one facet o the revolutionary project of Dalit Literature. This asserts the Dalits selfhood, history and agency. Alok Mukherjee writes: Dalits are no lomger a people without history, much less the subalterns of society's history, its demonized Ravana or violated Angulimala, Eklavya or Shurpananka... from this history they derive the confidence and the right to assert their humanity. (Basu, 181).\ For thousands of years, dalits have been kept deprived of power, property and position and have continued to endure injustice. The anguish of Dalit Literature is not that of an individual but of the entire society. The introduction of dalit testimonies as historical narratives of experience is a way of introducing the counter views on caste system. These narratives speak across all borders and personal boundaries to ask for greater human awareness and sensitivity, to ask for social change. To quote Gopal Guru: These writings perform a double function; they inflict an inferiority complex in the minds of adversaries by resurrecting dalit triumphalism and bring out guilt in the minds of 'upper castes' by recording social wrongs done by ancestors. (qtd in Rege15).

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