

Dalit Literature in India: An Agitation to a Genre

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What is a Dalit literature? It is always very hard to define the exact time and place of its beginning. Dalit word is originated from Sanskrit word 'dalita' which means broken, oppressed, split, untouchable and exploited. Dalits came from poor section of the society that under the caste system of India used to be known as untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedker called them 'broken people' and Mahatma Gandhi gave them a new name 'Harijan'. We only can guess its history from the written source based on "Manusmriti", one of the most religious books of Hindu mythology. Traditional Indian society is divided into four hierarchical caste systems or varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The four varnas or castes are subdivided into many sub castes. Shudras occupy the lowest position in the social order and Dalits are from this section of society. Even we find some streak of Dalits in the Hindu epics in "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata". In Mahabharata we find the episode of Eklavya, whom Guru Drona refused to teach him, because he was from a dalit caste. And we know how he learnt the archery and Drona asked for his right hand's thumb. One another episode is also found in The Mahabharata, the episode of Karana. Karan was born in a royal family but his unmarried mother Kunti gave him up. He was brought up by a Dalit family of charioteer. Even he had become a king of Ange, but in the society did not give him due regard. Even in self chosen marriage ceremony, Dropati refused him to take part in the event. His own brother Pandavas insults him on many occasions. They made fun of him, being a dalit man. In Ramayana we also found an episode of caste discrimination when Laxman refused to eat the plum given by an old dalit lady. So Dalits never desired for Ramarajya because their position was not good at that time. Then why they worship lord Rama.

There is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowest of all, so impure and despicable that they stood outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether. This final stratum is known as 'Dalits' in modern linguistic terminology. Dalits we are called by different names in different parts of India, such names include words like asura, avarna, dasa, dasya, raksasa, nisoda, panchama, chandala and so on. After independence a new term denote the entire Dalit communities that is "Scheduled Caste". It is very sad to say that untouchability is prevalent even in modern Indian society

There are many theories about the origin of Dalit literature. Mahatma Phule and Dr.B.R. Ambedker are considered the creators of Dalit literature. These great men were deeply concerned about the plight of the dalits and caste system of Hindu society and fought against all unjust divisions of society. This unjust is clearly shown in the poem 'The City', written by Daya Pawar.

'One day someone dug up a twentieth century city

And ends on this observation.

Here's an interesting inscription:

'This water tap is open to all castes and religions'.

What could it have meant:

That this society was divided?

That some were high while others were low?

Well, all right, then this city deserved burying--

Why did they call it the machine age?

Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century'

The lower castes suffered untold oppression and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes. So Dalit literature is a great struggle against anti-caste movement to build a modern democratic and secular Indian identity. It portrays the life and struggles of the lower strata, the lower caste. Lalmingthani observes, "We can see from reading Dalit literature that spends several decades, that the suffering of the untouchables is a never ending chain (Lalmingthani 11).

Dalit literature comes against the physical reaction to the violence against untouchables and inhuman behaviour of the caste ridden Indian society. Dalits are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually banned from upper class localities. The term, Dalit literature first time coin and used by Jyotiba Phule, and later popularized by the Dalit leader Dr. BR Ambedkar to reflect the situation of Dalits in 1958 in the state of Maharashtra,

the home state of Dr. Ambedkar. Bharat Ratan Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, was a great visionary leader and the Chief architect of the Indian Constitution and an ardent critic of the caste system, which toppled the myth of the divine origin of the caste hierarchy in Hindu society. Dalits are still subjected to extreme forms of social and economic exclusion and discrimination, physical and mental torture. They are systematically and institutionally deprived of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in all aspects of life. Most famous Buddhist poet is Namdeo Dhasal presents a true picture of dalits in India.

A beam of dalit literature can be seen in the works of non-dalit writers Raja Rao, Munshi Prem Chand and R.K. Narayan and Noble laureate Rabindernath Tagor. In Raja Rao's classical work Kanthapura we find a strong indictment of dalit situation in India. Munshi Prem Chand also deals with such type of discrimination in society. But none of them experience them personally. Dalits haven't been portrayed truthfully right from the beginning, though when we peep in the history of Indian English literature, we find a memorable character of 'Bhaka' a sweeper and lower castes Hindu in Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable'. Anand describes the pitiable situation of dalits who lived outside of the village.

"The absence of drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made the quarter a marsh which gave the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in" (Untouchable)

It seems the novel is drawing a frustrating image for the lowest caste Hindu. Pandit Kalinath attempts to molest Sohimi in the temple yard. Oddly, the priest shouts he's defiled by Sohimi's touch so that he could escape the allegation of molesting the girl. This is a seer example of hypocrisy of the upper classes. The higher castes view them as 'polluted' and make them do all the filthy and impure labour. This situation is very aptly described by a famous dalit writer, Sharan Kumar Limbale:

'The church bell rang
Every one entered in
The ajan heard from mosque
Everyone entered in
The bell of temple rang
Some entered in
And some stood out'

From last few decades “Dalit Literature, a new genre has sprouted with a new critical and creative vigor. Poetry, music, dance, drama, painting and sculpture reveal the aesthetic richness of the Dalit tradition. Great dalit poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arun Kamble, Saran Kumar Limbale, Arun Dangle, Baburao Bagual, Bama and many other poets wrote poetry Indian incredibly new in the sixties and seventies. No doubt on surface at surface level, Dalit Literature is termed as protest literature of caste system, but it also shows the cultural values of Dalits. It talks about the art forms and their oppression also, thereby it helps the reader to understand the Dalits’ way of life. Dalit literature is based on experience. Most of writers wrote their own experience of life and that is why we find a streak of autobiographical note in their works.

In modern literature we find prominent writers like Arvind Adiga and Arundhti Rao. Arvind Adiga very cunningly presents a brutal view of class struggle in India in his famous work ‘White Tiger’. This novel describes the life of a dalit man from north India. Arundhti Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’ is witnessed vast political and social changes after independence. Arundhti Roy directed not only the love between a Syrian Catholic and an untouchable, but also the evil in the Indian society. India has witnessed many violent crimes motivated by hatred and caste, even though the country's legislation does not allow it. Roy wanted the reader to become convinced of the need for racial change in the society.

Through the dalit literature Indian dalits are trying to find their own identity within the very structure of a society that has consciously eliminated the possibility of having one of them.

No doubt there are stories that deal with genuine problems of modern life. But they are not the issues which interest dalit writers. Dalit literature is not a simply literature, it is associate with a movement to bring a change in society. It is a new outlook which is intended to give a new society. It is a new literature with fresh concern. Through dalit literature dalits are determined to narrate their agony, pain, resistance, strength and path of liberation from age long sufferings. Thus it can be said if the fourth world emerge in the world map then its literature would be dalit literature.

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