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Interrogating the ‘Past’: Phule’s *Slavery* and Ilaiah’s *Why I am Not a Hindu*

Abstract

The past has always been a ‘hazy’ ground to tread on and this, among other things, also makes it a place to alter and modify history. Indian social order has been no exception with history and myth playing together to construct some sacrosanct ‘facts’ that created a domain outside the boundaries of questioning and interrogating. This domain comprises the mainstream, in society and literature alike, and projects a way of writing and living that does not offer any space to any ‘digressing’ voices. These ‘digressing’ voices, though, sustained the adversities and created a culture that stood distinct from that of the mainstream. These voices organized themselves in literature too and tried to present their side of the story, “his-
story”. Two such texts are Phule’s *Slavery* and Kancha Ilaiah’s *Why I am Not a Hindu*. The paper strives to assess the interrogation of the past by these two writers in their seminal works. An attempt has been made to look into the way these two works, separated by nearly 90 years, have demystified and humanized the historically divine and the sacred. Finally, the paper aims at foregrounding a social order that shall stand as an alternative to the mainstream and in the process challenge the absoluteness of a past glorified by the mainstream.

The historical and the mythical mingle in strange ways when the past is viewed, and in the process offer principles that govern the values and traditions of the social order. However, the interpretation of the two terms, spatio-temporally, makes the delineation of the conceived principles even more complex. Ideally, history is a factual representation of the past, serving the only purpose of seeking the truth, the events as they happened: “History is not tied to slogans and ideals and reform movements. It is to rid ourselves of notions of doctrines and movements and look at the incidents of the past as they actually happened” (Bhyrappa 97). Mythology, on the other hand, is a conglomeration of stories from the absolute past that define the ‘ideal’ way of life for any community. In the Literary world, myths are manifested through Epics. The “absolute past” being relevant as Bakhtin says, “We speak of the epic as a

genre that has come down to us already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre” (14). This distinction, as explicit as it may be, has not kept the two independent, more so in the present era where vociferous attempts have been made towards “synonymizing” the two or mingling the latter into the former and projecting the ‘hybrid’ as “the” fact. The “Absoluteness” of the Epical genre, carrying the myths of a culture or religion, has been meticulously but clandestinely incorporated into history making it “a twisted version” (Bhyrappa 97) of itself.

Vociferous attempts at dating of the events of *The Mahabharata* and finding geographical evidences for the events in *The Ramayana* indicate that India has been no exception to this practice. Eventually, a Social Order has been ‘idealized’ that prides in Hinduism that, apparently, dates back thousands of years. Consequently, there is an ever-increasing voice for “Hinduization” and “hierarchization” of the inhabitants. The constructed identities, then, are based on corroborating images, concepts and ideas and have validated what has been said and also pave the way for more ‘intrusions’ and ‘manipulations’ to history and myths. Ironically, the tendency has become so ‘standard’ that the mainstream, life and literature, has accepted it, wholly, as the norm and “the right thing to do”. Dr Ambedkar, in “Hindu Social Order” affirms this when he opines that the Hindu Social Order keeps the common man unaware of being wronged through ignorance, poverty, no education and religious sanction. He continues that by doing so, the Order has not only preserved itself but has also earned the reputation of being very humane. Dr Ambedkar also defines this standardization by distinguishing between rules and principles. He opines that rules are subject to change but principles are eternal on which the rules are framed. The mainstream has not only “twisted” history but has also established it as the principal of life and culture, beyond the domain of questioning, on the Indian mainland.

However, dissent, in life and literature, though at the margins, has withstood this spatio-temporal onslaught and voiced concerns over this “twisting, misuse and misrepresentation” of history and myths. This stream has been a consistent and perseverant voice and has presented an *Alternative Voice* (emphasis mine) questioning this mingling, and hence, the “right thing to do”, through a scientific and logical “Striking Back”. It tries to lay threadbare, step by step, the amalgamation of history and myth and in the process constructs an *Alternative Theory* (emphasis mine) to define India and its social order. This alternative theory, finds an expression in Marginal and Dalit Literature and brings to the fore the hitherto unseen aspects of Indian History and myths. What the practitioners of this Alternative Theory assert is that

this “unseen” is not something that was hidden, but a different point-of-view of approaching what has been represented by the mainstream through its own line of sight; and a different perspective of life that was practiced but suppressed by the mainstream for centuries.

Two texts representing this “unseen” are Jotirao Phule’s *Slavery* and Kancha Ilaiah’s *Why I am Not a Hindu*. Published in 1873 and 1966 respectively, the period of almost 90 years between the two speaks volumes, of not only the depth to which this mingling has seeped into the Indian consciousness, but also the awakened consciousness of the margins to question it and construct an alternative to what it represents. The two texts interrogate this “mingling” and unveil what lay unseen underneath the wave of mainstream representation.

Jotirao Phule says in the “Preface” to *Slavery*:

Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmins were not the aborigines of India....the aborigines whom the Aryans subjugated, or displaced, appear to have been a hardy and brave people...Such opprobrious terms, as *Sudra* ‘insignificant’, *mahari* ‘the great foe’, *antyaj*, *chandal*, etc with which they designated them, undoubtedly show that originally they offered the greatest resistance in their power to their establishing themselves in the country, and hence the great aversion and hatred in which they are held (27).

He explicitly elaborates how a concocted “history” was mythicized to create a dichotomy of “good vs bad” and also challenges the *Dev-danav* dichotomy when he says:

From many customs traditionally handed down to us, as well as from the mythological legends contained in the sacred books of the Brahmins, it is evident that there had been a hard struggle for ascendancy between the two races. The wars of Devas and Daityas, or the Rakshashas, about which so many fictions are found scattered over the sacred books of the Brahmins, have certainly a reference to this primeval struggle...The incredible and foolish legends regarding their form and shape are no doubt mere chimeras... (ibid 27-28).

Slavery, thus, expostulates how history and myths have been intermingled in the ‘sacred’ Brahmin scriptures to create an illusion of demons and *devas*. Moreover, it also re-defines what is considered an integral part of our collective consciousness: images of the physical demeanor of the *Devas* as well-dressed, good looking and appealing; while the *danav* as ugly

and loathsome. Phule furthers his argument by providing rational, scientific critiques to the historicized myths of the mainstream.

The Brahmins were created from the mouth of the Brahma. All right. But how is that Manu does not write anything about the original Brahman mother? Which organ of the Brahma was she created from?...is there any written evidence that Brahma's Mouth, which gave birth to the Brahmins, menstruated every month...(ibid 48).

His interrogation bears close resemblance to the challenge posed by Darwin's *Origin of Species* to *The Bible*. His idea of "evolution" against the Biblical faith in "Genesis" was a blow to the very foundation of Christianity that forced the common man to think thus: if the main tenet of *The Bible* is a lie, then how authentic are the other ideas postulated in it?

Phule, identically, poses a challenge to the mainstream's idea of "Historicized myths" by questioning and negating its most foundational tenet. In the process, he creates a space, in the temporal journey of literature, for a perspective that can, potentially, widen the perspective towards the Indian Past. The polyphony of voices that emerges, consequently, makes Indian past open to interpretations and reassessments, in contrast to the monologic truth being propagated by the mainstream.

Phule counters the mainstream mytho-history by re-telling the narratives sacred in the scriptures. His re-rendering of the the Hiranyakashyapu-Nrusimha episode in Hindu scriptures is one such instance. Phule asserts that Nrusimha was the heir to Varaha, a chief of the *dvijas*:

Nrusimha...painted himself as a lion,...fixed some ferocious-looking fangs inside his mouth, arranged a false mane around his face and made himself up as a lion. Then he draped a fine brocaded sari around his body and pulled the pallu of the sari over his head to hide his visage. Then...he furtively entered Hiranyakashyapu's palace...stole into his bed-chamber and hid himself behind one of the many pillars adorning the room. When Hiranyakashyapu returned to his bed-chamber in the evening..., and lay down on his bed to rest, Nrusimha quickly removed the pallu ...jumped on the prostate form of the unsuspecting Hiranyakashyapu and thrusting his tiger claws...into his stomach, tore his body apart (ibid 55)

The rendition highlights turns upside-down the "good-bad" dichotomy, so highly valued in mainstream literature, as deceit and guile are qualities attributed to the hitherto God, and not

the demon. The change in the narration owes to the change in the point-of-view from which the story is told. The “new voice” counters the ‘eternal’ values and principles believed to be universally true and valid. The demystification and humanization of the eternal and the divine by Phule, opens up to evaluation, analysis and critique, what was sacrosanct and unquestionable.

What makes this downgrading more authentic is the technique of the Platonic Dialogue employed by Phule in *Slavery*. Phule places himself and Dhondiba in the text and creates a dialogue in the form of questions and answers. While Dhondiba puts forward his doubts and inhibitions over the theory of Phule, Phule defends his arguments by logical reasoning. The adoption of the style of the father of philosophy and leading figure in literature – Plato, provides intellectual authenticity and credibility to *Slavery*.

Slavery also elucidates how this mingled History and Myth seeped into life and culture of the Indian social order. “The *bhats* were scared that one particular book recommended by the Education Department would expose all the deceitful practices that their ancestors had indulged in; so they held several private meetings with the government...and finally managed to get the book thrown out of the Department of Education” (ibid 89). The kind of established validity that this mingled history has been accorded and the incessant efforts to sustain and further strengthen it are evident, but it carries more significance than the denotative part. It is indicative of a deep-rooted malicious ill of sustaining a social order whose foundation is the “historical myths” that have settled in our collective psyche since a long time.

Made in 1873, the attempt was momentous as the Indian Caste minority was still reeling under the impact of Caste Hinduism. The text is a manifestation of a very conscious attempt by Phule to question mainstream Hinduism by puncturing its foundation. Says Phule:

This treatise has been written with a specific objective in mind. Since hundreds of years, the shudras and the atishudras have suffered innumerable tribulations and lived in wretched conditions under the yoke of the Brahman rule...The sole intention of this treatise is to direct the attention of all these oppressed people towards their own plight and make them consider their situation properly so as to enable them to free themselves from the slavery of the Brahmans, from their oppression and injustice (ibid 36).

Phule’s treatise revolves around “exposing” how history and myths were manipulated and adapted to suit caste Hindus and, in the process, subdue the lower castes. The only reference

apart from this is the reference to the British who emerge, for Phule, as the saviors, but unfortunately duped by the Brahmins.

In the genealogy of Dalit Aesthetics, it lies more at the level of rejecting and abandoning the dominant order rather than highlighting ones' own strengths. He strives to awaken the Dalit consciousness through a deconstruction of the divinity of the traditional and orthodox religious structure of Hinduism by humanizing its most salient aspects, principles and Gods.

Phule's *Slavery* was a text that paved the way for marginal and Dalit writers to voice their side of the story: "his-story"; and pose rational and logical arguments against the 'obvious' and 'the true' of the upper caste Hindus. In line with his revolutionary ideology, Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am Not a Hindu* was published in 1996.

Ilaiah brings to light the origins of the Gods revered in mainstream Hinduism and also the "need for their creation" or "incorporation" into the Hindu fold. His arguments, much like Phule's, demystify the Aryan Gods. He says, "The Head of the brahminical Gods, *Indra*, is known as the *Devatideva*. He is the original Aryan leader, who led the mass extermination of the Indus Valley based Adi-Dravidians, who were also Adi-Dalitbahujans...he established a pastoral Aryan kingdom" (Ilaiah, 73). The challenging of the Aryan Gods by Ilaiah poses a completely distinct picture of Hindu history and myth by "pulling down" the celestial to the human.

His concept of the Hindu Deities bears affiliation to the theory of Phule regarding Brahmins and *Shudratishudras*. Elaborating on Vishnu he elucidates: "Why is Vishnu said to have been a blue-skinned God? The reason is quite obvious: He is the projection of an association between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. ...This godhead might have been created at a time when the Kshatriyas were in revolt against the Brahmins..." (Ilaiah 76). Gods then, opines Ilaiah, are merely constructs to maintain the supremacy of the Brahmins and, apparently, to strike a spiritual compromise with the Kshatriyas.

The argument foregrounds an Alternative Theory of Gods being merely constructs and not divine and virtuous divinities, brought into existence for "preserving and expanding Brahmin Dharma" (ibid 76). His version of Shiva and Parvati as Hindu Gods bears testimony:

What had become problematic and unmanageable, as far as the tribal population was concerned was that slowly but surely they were being pulled into brahminical civil society. However, they did not identify with Brahma and Vishnu, who looked different from them. These Gods were not adequate

for creating a consent base among the tribals. So the Brahmins constructed these two images as God and Goddess who were tribals but had accepted the hegemony of Brahminism in all spheres (ibid 79).

Gods, hence, are merely constructs to spiritually hegemonize powers rebellious to the Brahminical superiority.

Ilaiah opines that Brahmins practiced the theory of “Co-optation” to construct a Pan-Indian image of Hinduism. He asserts that Brahmins clandestinely mingled faith with ‘creativity’, leading to the construction of a myth of Hindu Gods, and then gave historical validity to them through stories of avatars, thereby authenticating, ‘factually’, the mainstream theory of Hinduism. Ilaiah’s alternative approach, however, puts forth a different view, thereby offering space for a polyphony of “fully valid voices”, as Bakhtin calls it, about the Indian Past.

Ilaiah, in his theory, picks up where Phule left when he highlights the values and culture of this “other” in Indian Past. He explicates the distinct living order of a people who, according to mainstream ‘history and myths’ have always been a part of the Hindu order. He defines religious belongingness as: “People belong to a religion only when they know that they are part of the people who worship that God, when they go to those temples and take part in the rituals and festivities of that religion” (ibid 1). He then shatters the ideology of Pan-Indian Hinduism: “What do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras, have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself? I, indeed not only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word ‘Hindu’—not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days” (ibid xi). The rejection of Ilaiah assumes significant weightage in the light of the language he chooses to express his defiance. Hindu, in their living order, ceases to exist, and is nothing, ranging from a “word” to a “religion”.

These are a people living in the under-currents of the dominant social wave; outside “orthodox” faiths that, for them, merely existed as “different” (ibid, xi) and unrelated to them at all levels, “Word...culture...religion...” (ibid xi). But the mainstream has, somehow, claimed them as their own, citing historio-mythical connections. Ilaiah opines, “Suddenly, since about 1990 the word ‘Hindutva’ has begun to echo in our ears,...as if everyone in India who is not a Muslim, a Christian or a Sikh is a Hindu” (ibid x). The bafflement of Ilaiah and the alike is grounded in their ‘ignorance’ to what was central to Hinduism, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Ironical, as it seems, while mainstream is persistently trying to

historicize the myths, here is a people saying, "...the textbooks taught us stories which we had never heard in our families. The stories of Rama and Krishna, poems from the Puranas, the names of the two epics called *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* occurred repeatedly...I distinctly remember how alien all these names appeared to me" (ibid 13).

Ilaiah counters this hypothetical cultural Hindu part of their lives through the "unseen" part lived by the likes of him, for as long as they can remember. He emphasizes, "My parents had only one identity and that was their caste: they were Kurumaas. Their festivals were local, their Gods and Goddesses were local, and sometimes these were even specific to one village. No centralized religious symbols existed for them...My ancestors took to life on the plains about 500 years ago...they (his parents) never paid a religious tax...they never went to a temple..." (ibid 1).

This historical re-visit by Ilaiah is an epiphany as the mainstream's notion of 'unifying' on the basis of historio-mythical foundation is dilapidated comprehensively. Not only is religion abandoned, but also the foundational principles of life rejected for their lack of "utility", as Ilaiah calls the defining principle of Dalit values. Ilaiah says, "As individuals we acquire a consciousness of ourselves, our environment, our production and procreation. This consciousness has nothing to do with organized religion" (ibid, 6). Ilaiah highlights, in contrast to the other-worldly value system of the Hindus, the Production-based value system of the people of his caste. The entire life of the Hindus and the people of his caste is binarized along these two principles: Divinity for Hindus and Productivity for *Kurumaas*. He concludes his argument with the rhetorical question: "Which values...to uphold as right values? The 'upper' caste Hindu unequal and inhuman cultural values or our cultural values?" (ibid 18).

In foregrounding the assault their culture witnessed at the hands of mainstream Hinduism, Ilaiah brings to light an unseen aspect of history and life. He says, "The Brahmin-Baniyas walked over the corpses of our culture" (ibid 19). Such exclamations are a direct testimony to the comprehensive and outright rejection and negation of mainstream history and mythology, mingled as well as pure, of Hinduism. Dalit aesthetics advocates practical application of Dalit Consciousness as the highest form of revolt and Ilaiah's *Why I am Not a Hindu* is a fine specimen of concrete manifestations of Dalit and marginals' rebellion and awakened consciousness. The text is a demonstration of what Limbale asserts Dalit Literature to be, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*: A literary expression of the newly found self-respect depicted through new thought and point of view.

What Ilaiah's and Phule's works do primarily is interrogate the 'standard' history and myths considered sacrosanct to define the Indian and Hindu past. They challenge the undisputed stature of the "seen and evident" by projecting a narrative that not only demystifies Hindu Gods but also offers space to a living system outside Hinduism and other conventional religions of India. Consequently, there emerges an alternative history centering on the warfare between the invaders and the invaded rather than the divine, historicized-myths of *Dev-Danav* wars, deep-seated in Hindu minds and psyche.

Mainstream narratives' credibility as Foundational Narratives to define the Hindu way of life is countered by Phule and Ilaiah. The paradigmatic shift, in the re-visit to history, from the "sacrosanct" to "narrative" symbolizes the changing order of the roots of Hinduism. They espouse an acknowledgement of the possibilities of "voices" and perspectives in defining the "upright way of Hindu Life". Perspectivizing history here does not imply a deviation from truth towards opinions, but acknowledging the "factual" presence of an order that was subdued and negated in the 'unifying' gaze of caste Hinduism. By concretizing history and myths as narratives, Phule and Ilaiah have offered space, literary as well as social, to a social order and living system that had either been manipulated in the mingling of History and myths to suit mainstream Hinduism or negated and denied space as an independent order. What this does is: "...look at the incidents of the past as they actually happened" (Bhyrappa 97).

This alternative order, one based on the basic principle of being productive as humans, is brought to public gaze by the two writers. Phule emphasizes more on the human 'incarnation' of the Hindu Gods, who for him, are mere invading chiefs and kings who used power and guile to vanquish the aboriginals and mingled history and myth to establish themselves as the undisputed and natural inhabitants of the mainland. On the other hand, Ilaiah focuses on being outside the Hindu fold and outlines the basic differences in the culture and values of the Hindus and the caste he belongs to, a lower caste according to the Hindus. He proclaims, with pride, of his culture being based on the idea of living a fulfilling life on this earth rather than preparing in this life for an afterlife. In consonance, the values practiced are those that ensure or enhance productivity, thereby making life easier and comfortable. The manifestations of both the writers may vary, but this distinction is merely superficial, as the underlying principle of both is: "We must begin by creating our history and we must end by changing this very social fabric" (Ilaiah 18).

This alternative consciousness has been surviving at the margins of society and literature but, unlike the Mainstream, has never asserted its perspective as the absolute truth. Dalit Literature and Marginal writings have always prided in being true to Dalit's lives, are essentially a rebellion against what ails the society and aim at establishing the presence of an alternative order of life. Texts like *Slavery* and *Why I am Not a Hindu*, by re-visiting history, serve a dual purpose in this endeavour: first, they project an order that is man-centred. It reminds strongly of the times when the Western World moved from mediaevalism to the modern age: Renaissance. Secondly, by highlighting their own consciousness based on science and logic, along with that of the mainstream, they exhort the readers to re-examine their assessment of the past and the prevailing norms of social life.

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