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Joothan : A Case Study of dalit Historiography

Abstract

Literature is the mirror of society it purports. From time immemorial it has been used as an instrument for depiction of nation's history. The chapters of Indian history are filled with colonialism .With the ending of this long prevailing colonial supremacy within the Indian domain. Writers began to write about it and such writing from Indian writers writing about the conflict and struggle to gain freedom fall under the umbrella term 'post colonialism' .However it is observed that postcolonialist literature in Indian context is marred by casteism and patriarchy. This paper is an endeavor to discuss postcolonialism by taking it beyond including the history from below that is dalit history, to read it as a part of Indian Historiography.

Key words: Post Colonialism, Dalit, Historiography.

“The past continues to speak to us.”- Stuart Hall

Post Colonialism as a term is much discussed and sorted when it comes to discussing the literature that falls into the category of belonging to the erstwhile colonies of Nations like Great Britain and likes of her. It is indeed a fact acceptable that Post Colonialism in literature became the expression of resistance of the natives not to accept the dominance of the colonizers; there are numerous texts written by various Post Colonial writers through which they have liberated

themselves from the shackles of the unbearable past and at the same time these texts can be studied as the manifestations of historical account of colonial era.

Critiquing Post Colonialism needs an out of box approach to set limit on it or in other words by moving beyond the term itself. Gone are the days when History was considered to be based only on facts and hence different from, and supposedly more reliable than, Literature. History is revisited with a new eye because today historiography is concerned not just about the rise and fall of empires or chronicling the events and episodes involving or rather glorifying, the exploits of the power-that-be, but also exploring the ‘micro-history’¹ charting out the unknown or lesser known terrains of shared experience of a people.

There was a time when the concept of history was teleological. It meant that everything that took place was nothing but the handiwork of the providence. But over the time humanism and the gradual secularization of critical thoughts have informed/ influenced historiography.

Hegel describes historiography as ‘interpretation’ whereas Levi- Strauss states that historical facts are ‘constituted’. Others go to the extent of acknowledging that historical narratives are structured through ‘emplotment.’ Similarly historians like Hayden White too admit the importance of Literature for the construction of history. They argue that history is more successful when it embraces the “narrativity.”

Since ‘narration’ signifies a nation and narrative has traditionally been the main rhetorical device to discover what people think and experience in a particular time, extension of literature

¹ Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis pioneered the genre of historical writing known as “micro-history” which attempted to understand the mentalities and decisions of individuals- mostly peasants –within their limited milieu using contracts, court documents and oral histories.

beyond the boundaries of the traditional format engages it with the question of power, hegemony and justice.

Process of nationalization of history, as a part of nationalist revivals in 19th century, resulted in separation of “one’s own” history from common universal History by a different way of perceiving, understanding and treating the past which constructed history as history of a nation.

Indian history being no exception, riding the wave of nationalism India won the independence in 1947 with expectation galore. Soon the nationalistic fever however gave way to disillusionments in the name of economic, political and social crisis; dividing Indians in the water tight compartments.

In the words of Ranajit Guha:

What is clearly left out of this un-historical [elitist] historiography is the politics of the people. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant group of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and intermediate the strata in town and country- that is, people. This was an autonomous domain, for, it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter².

If historiography involves imagination, interpretation, construction and emplotment then it is but natural that the ideological subject position of the historian plays a vital role in such a pursuit.

² Ranajit Guha, “Introduction” *A Subaltern Studies Reader*. New Delhi :OUP,2003(1997).P.xiv-xv

This also means that change in the ideological position would trigger a corresponding change in the history itself.

By a curious stroke of fate, the harijans/untouchables/dalits of India find themselves with the Hindu community. They belong to Hinduism but Hinduism does not belong to them. Due to Sanskritization most of them might have accepted the 'stories' of Hinduism but Hinduism is far from accepting, least bothered about their 'stories' most of which can be said to be constituting the 'micro –history' missed not only by nationalist, bourgeoisie, elitist but also by colonial historiography of India.

There is a general consensus that the phenomena of caste and untouchability evolved over a period of time, as a result of conflicts over land, resources and cultural practices between a people who called themselves Aryan when they began arriving in India about the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and the various communities of indigenous people that ranged from citizens of highly developed city states to forest dwelling hunters and gatherers.

In time these conflicts produced the *chaturvarna* system of society. Varna literally means colour, and *chaturvarna*, meaning four gradations comprised of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras arranged in a hierarchal order. At the top of this power structure were Brahmins, who were performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts, the *Vedas*, the *Smriti* and the *Puranas*, and Kshatriyas, who, as rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins and commissioned the rituals, including the yagna ritual of animal sacrifices and gifts to Brahmins.

Although constantly feuding between themselves for control of power, these two *varnas* lorded over the Vaishyas, the cultivators and traders, and the Shudras, the servitors and performers of menial tasks. The Shudras were denied the ritual of *upanayana*, the sacred thread

ceremony, which gave the three *varnas* above them the status of *dwija* or twice born. After undergoing this ritual symbolizing a second birth, they could study the Vedas. Not having the right to this ritual, shudras were born only once, from the womb of a woman.

Mukherjee speculates that the Aryans made strategic alliance with the autochthonous groups, and the friendly or powerful among them were incorporated into the varna system at the higher level. The Shudra category, on the other hand, 'in all probability owes its origin to the non-wealthy, conquered and hostile groups' (24).

Mukherjee speculates further that as settled society, based on agriculture and industry, evolved in ancient India, the fourfold varna system was further divided by a jati or caste-based division, caste being a group whose membership came with birth and which maintained its separation by practicing endogamy and commensuality. The caste system, she suggests, allowed for a better knit social organization in which privileged groups could maintain their exclusiveness more stringently than in the four large divisions of the varna system.

Although the doctrine of chaturvarna accounts for the beginning of the process by which the four varnas gradually proliferated into modern day casts. Ambedkar thinks that untouchability was born around A.D.400:

It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between

Buddhism and Brahminism which has so completely

moulded the history of India and the study of which is so woefully neglected by students of Indian history. (Ambedkar 1990:379).

The ideological difference between Dalits and caste Hindus over the Vedas and other sacerdotal texts, chaturvarna and the caste system caused a deep rift between the Dalits and the congress leadership which was dominated by high caste Hindus and derided by Ambedkar as a 'bourgeois-Brahmin' organization. Gandhi, for example, believed that caste system and untouchability were distortions that could be purged from Hinduism, without discarding chaturvarna, which he believed to be a unique gift of India to world civilization. He felt that untouchables must not stop performing their hereditary functions because that is what the varna system enjoins upon every Hindu.

Writing in *Harijan* on 6 March 1937, he said:

What I mean is, one born a scavenger must earn his

Livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes. For a scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your president. That according to me is Hinduism. There is no better Communism on earth. Varnashram Dharma acts even as the law of gravitation.

The law of varna is the antithesis of competition which kills.

Ambedkar differed radically from Gandhi on the question of 'reforming' Hinduism. Whereas Gandhi believed in the removal of untouchability through penance and acts of social service by caste Hindus, as opposed to mandate changes in the law, Ambedkar used the language of rights and legislated remedies. Similarly, while Gandhi and the other Congress leaders thought in terms of temple entry and inter-dinning, Ambedkar linked untouchability to the economic destitution of the untouchables, constantly reiterating how they were denied access to education, ownership of land and jobs above the level of scavenging, sanitary and other menial occupations and were also

forced to provide their labor against their will and without any control over their wages. In the words of Gail Omvedt,

The point is that Gandhi, who feared a 'political division
...in the villages ignored the division that already existed

In his warning against the spread of violence, he ignored
the violence already existing in the lives of the Dalits

(Omvedt 1994:172)

Dalits constitute about 16 percent of India's population. For centuries they have been at the bottom of India's population .For centuries, they have been at the bottom of India's social pyramid and denied even the most basic human rights such as access to drinking water from public lakes and wells, freedom to walk on public roads, and freedom to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these erstwhile untouchables to a self –chosen identity as Dalit, is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries.

The term 'Dalit' was first appropriated by the two towering figures, Jotirao phule and B.R. Ambedkar in the pantheon of Dalit history. The term 'Dalit literature' was first used in 1958 at the first ever Dalit literature conference held in Bombay. Every literature is born out of certain identity and every identity tells a history. Whether recognized or no, written or oral, mainstream or marginal every history has a protagonist.

The protagonist of Dalit Literature and Dalit History is a person who has undergone the trauma of being called Dasa, Dasyu, Asura, Rakshas, Chandal, Harijan, Scheduled Caste and Dalit in various narratives.

Each Age in the history of India viewed, characterized and treated him with contempt and he was at the receiving end of all kinds of inhuman treatment. Although none of the identities were to his liking the protagonist has always made the best of them and survived the atrocities perpetrated on him.

The term 'Dalit' forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth, and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils its metaphoric usage, still as a verb, can be seen in descriptions of warfare and vanquishing of enemies .

However as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers activist founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The name expressed their feelings of solidarity and kinship with black panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-American rights in the United States of America.

Dalit writers and leaders are influenced by Ambedkar's attitude and actions vis a vis Indian ancient texts based on vedic principles. In a famous but undelivered speech, later printed as *Annihilation of Caste* , he had proclaimed: 'you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras which deny any part to reason (Ambedkar 1979:75). And on 25 December 1927, while leading the famous agitation to gain Dalits the right to draw water from the Chavdar lake at Mahad, Maharashtra, Ambedkar had, in a powerfully symbolic act, burnt the Manusmriti in a

bonfire. He chose this text for burning because its author Manu is the ancient sage credited with codifying the brahminic laws of untouchability and pollution.

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But now, it seems time has come for the protagonist to turn the table and assert himself as a Dalit because he has now realized that whatever precarious conditions he find himself in is the handiwork of hegemonic system. He cannot allow the system to crush him forever. It is from this realization, there comes a consciousness, a movement, which gets reflected in literature and pens down different narrative for the Dalit.

Depending on different situations this narrative takes different forms which vary from anger, anguish, satire, subversion to reconstruction of the past through myth making. The new narrative revisits the site of earlier narratives and creates a new historiography.

To quote Arun Prabha Mukherjee

Valmiki through his *Joothan* (1997) has portrayed a slice of life that had seldom been recorded in Indian literature until the advent of Dalit literature in Marathi in the fifties and its subsequent spread to many other languages notably Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English. Until then, literature had been the domain of high castes, untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviours, as object without voice and agency.

Joothan A Dalit Literary Text

Quoting Arun prabha Mukherjee again, “In his preface to *Joothan* Valmiki has presented those experiences that did not find a place in literary representations. Experiences like Valmiki’s birth and growing up in the untouchables caste of chuhra, the heroic struggle he waged to survive this preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution, and his transformation into a speaking subject and recorder of the oppression and exploitation he endured, not only as an individual but also as a member of a stigmatized and oppressed community.”

Joothan as a narrative is full of writers traumatic experiences inflicted upon him and his community by the high caste oppressors.

For instance humiliation of his mother by Sukhdev singh Tyagi and her overturning of the basket full of *Joothan*(left over food) .Another experience of his life that needs a mention is Valmiki’s

and his Dalit friends encounters with upper caste teachers in the context of the Brahmin teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple Eklavya into cutting his thumb and presenting it to him as a part of his gurudakshina or teacher's tribute. This is a famous incident in the Mahabharata. By doing this, Dhronacharya ensured that Eklavya the better student of sarchyery could never compete against Arjun, the Kshatriya disciple. Indeed having lost his thumb. Eklavya could no longer perform archery. In high caste telling, the popular story presents a casteless Eklavya as the exemplar of an obedient disciple rather than the Brahmin Dronacharya as a perfidious and biased teacher.

These are just one or two of his personal experiences that he encountered as a the one belonging to Dalit community and the *Joothan* as a text is constructed in the form of wave upon wave of memories that erupted in Valmiki's mind when triggered through stimulus in the present. Many Dalit texts share this strategy of staging encounters between the Dalit narrator and persons of upper castes.

Conclusion: *Joothan* as a Dalit text claims the status of truth, of testimony .Naming people and places by their real names is one of the strategies through which the valmiki establishes the status of joothan as testimony and it gives joothan the status of documented Dalit history. While the indictment of an unjust social system and its benefactors is one thrust of the text, its other important preoccupation is to examine Dalit lives substantiatively.

Joothan combines representation of struggles with the external enemy with the enemy within: the internalization by Dalit people of upper caste brahminic values, the superstitions of Dalit villagers, the patriarchial oppression of Dalit women by their men, the attempts by Dalits who have attained a middle class economic status to 'pass' as high castes and the attendant denial of

their roots, the inferiority complex which makes them criticize the practice of rearing pigs by rural Dalits, all these aspects of Dalit struggle are an equal aspect of *Joothan* .

It is a multivalent, polyvocal text, healing the fractured self through narrating, contributing to the archive of Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors and providing solace as well as frank criticism to his own people . Its overall effect is truly paradoxical. For the fact that Valmiki has become a speaking subject indicates that Indian democracy has opened some escape hatches through which a critical mass of articulate, educated Dalits has emerged.

On the other hand, the harsh realities that he portrays so powerfully underscores the fact that the promises made in the constitution of Independent India have not yet been fully met, *Joothan* stridently asks for the promissory note, joining a chorus of Dalit voices that are demanding their rightful place under the sun. A manifesto for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness, *Joothan* confronts its readers with difficult questions about their own humanity, and invites them to join the universal project of human liberation.

Looking at the present scenario it is the need of the hour going to the length of saying inevitability as the current literary trend itself demands inclusive approach. Neglecting literature from margins and not making any effort for streamlining it with the mainstream literature will be like picturing half the moon keeping in oblivion the other half.

References

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