

Dalits and Dalit Writings:

An Overview

***Niharika A. Singh**

Rivers break their banks
Lakes brim over
And you, one of the human race
Must shed blood
Struggle and strike
For a palmful of water

(Poisoned Bread)

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' and means held 'under check', 'suppressed', or 'crushed' or in a loser sense 'oppressed'. This word was first used by Jyotiba Phule in the nineteenth century in order to identify to the oppression this class of people met. Dalits are communities of the people deprived of all that are needed to lead a normal and dignified life as human beings. This is what the dalits ask for, a respectful life, which is denied to them since ages. This class was purposely excluded from the main stream of the Indian society for various reasons. They are deprived of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in every aspect of life. Dalits occupy 16.2% of total population of India and India constitutes largest number of dalits in south Asia. Statistics show, the population of dalits in India alone is the half and equal to the population of United States. But the conditions highly differ of the people in both the countries.

The major reason for the suffering of the Dalits is due to the Indian caste system that classifies them as untouchables. The very nature of the word is so derogatory that one can imagine the conditions of them. To be born a Hindu in India is to automatically, enter into the

***St. Aloysius College, Jabalpur (M.P)**

caste system, one of world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. There are four basic castes- brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras. The Brahmins is the priestly class that came from the head of God. They are responsible for learning and teaching and perform various 'pujas' and scarifies. No one else is considered eligible to teach and perform scarifies. The kshatriyas, ranks second to the brahmins in caste order. They are the warrior class that came from the shoulder of God. They could avail the facility of learning. Their work was to protect people by waging wars against the enemies.

The third caste in order is Vaishyas. This is mainly a trading class that came from the thigh of God. Their job was to trade and in turn feed the upper two classes. The last class that ranks fourth in class is of shudras. They came from the feet of god and their job was to do all the menial works to the above three classes. They could not learn anything.

The fifth class of Panama does not find any rank in the rigid caste system. It is the class of untouchables, kept outside the caste system and considered slaves of the above mentioned castes. This sought of caste construction was suitable for the society ages back however, it was constituted to provide a stable system and self-dependent unit. People belonging to various castes could contribute something and be a part of the system. But the tragedy is, even after independence this system is still practiced, though the Law on abolition of untouchability was implemented in 1950. Dalit experiences the agony of untouchability very deeply in all walks of life, whether social, political, or economical. They occupy large section of population, make use of very little resources, lives in severe poverty, and are illiterate resulting in their appalling social conditions. The striking reality is that they are victims of the worst crimes and atrocities far outnumbering other sections of society.

Their conditions, crimes, and protests have been the major attraction of the intelligentsia of our country. Atrocities carried over them have long been the theme of the works of writers. They document dalit culture, life, wars, and protests in their work. Earlier, people had very little knowledge about the class of untouchables; credit goes to these dalit writers, who chiefly dedicated their works to them. These works in turn proved to be the literature about dalits. The works on dalits - the untouchables gave the common educated man the

knowledge about the real situations they face.

However, these dalits are interpreted variously by different writers. The Primary objective of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. The main motive of the presentation of dalit in vulnerable, deplorable and devastating condition is to create awareness among those who are unaware about their real situation. They are portrait weak, feeble, oppressed, suppressed in most of the writings. They are looked down upon by the higher class since they are largely related to degraded jobs of cleaning toilets, streets scavenging etc. As a result, they are not allowed to mix up freely with the other castes. Since they are weak all the other upper classes suppresses them. The books on dalits are full of such horrifying pictures of dalits who are accustomed to torture, humiliation, physical and sexual assault, publically beaten, stripped naked, women raped, children brutally murdered and so on and so forth.

If one goes in the history of dalits one can trace their age long struggle. Mention must be made of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a social activist of the nineteenth century, who along with Lord Benedict abolished the Sati System. He being socially active did a lot for the lower section of the society. He became their voice and spread news about them everywhere. Voiceless, defenseless and the marginalized class found a voice in him.

In the middle of nineteenth century, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) spread awareness about dalits by writing about them repeatedly in his works. He began the Satya Shodhak (truth-seeking) movement in an attempt to reduce Brahmin influence on the lower castes. His book on Gulangiri is a milestone in dalit writing for its potent views on alcoholism, widow remarriage, women's education and initiatives towards loosening the shackles of societal bondages.

With the beginning of freedom struggle, unity among citizens of the country was urgently required and Mahatma Gandhi deserves the credit of getting both the high and low together at same platform. Freedom from foreign rule was the war cry. However, one must, acknowledge that this was successful only to some extent. Mahatma Gandhi, when saw this isolated group was greatly moved. The untouchables as they were termed was a derogatory term, so he coined a new word 'Harijans' meaning people near to god, it was then onwards, untouchables were termed as harijans. This brought some relief in the

camp of dalits but still they faced discrimination.

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, popularly known as Baba Rao Ambedkar was a famous dalit leader, writer and a politician. He is unarguably the pioneer of modern constructive rethinking on issues of social upliftment and to him can be attributed the resurgence and firm establishment of Dalit Literature on the Indian literary scene. He was the chairman of the constituent committee that formulated the longest and most descriptive constitution of our country. He gave a new thought to the dalits of India. His ideas about freedom, equality were very clear and brought a new life in dalits. His notable literary contributions include *Thoughts on Pakistan*, *Who Were the Shudras* and *The Buddha and His Dhamma* inspiring millions today. He started the newspaper '*Moonayak*' (Leader of the Dumb) in 1920, a fortnightly journal '*Bahishkrit Bharat*' in 1927 and '*Janata*' and '*Samata*' to give a voice to the dalits.

Mention must be made of Shri Valmiki, who is considered one of the foremost dalit scholars and who composed the epic poem *Ramayan*. He is even referred as *Maha Kavi* or *Adi Kavi* in Sanskrit for composing the holy text of Hindus. However, he cannot be considered first dalit writer but *Madara Chennaiah*, cobbler-saint of the eleventh century who lived in the Western Chalukyas, is technically the first dalit writer. The next in line to Chennaiah was *Dohara Kakkaiah*, who was dalit by birth and today only six confessional poems survive of him. Some known dalit writers are B. R. Ambedkar, Baburao Bagul, Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Gaddar, Arun Krushnaji Kamble, Kaviyoor, Murali Dagdu, Maruti Pawar, Chandra Bhan, Prasad Annabhau Sathe, Daniel Selvaraj, Surrender Valasai and Om Prasad Valmiki.

Baburao Dhasal, another dalit writer of early twentieth century greatly inspired young dalits. "*Jeva Mi Jaat Chorli*", "*Maran Swasta Hot Ahe*", "*Dalit Sahitya Ajache Kanti Vigyan*", "*Sud*" and "*Ambedkar Bharat*" are some of his famous short stories. They all portray dalits, their life and struggle. Arun Krushnaji Kamble or popularly known as Professor Arun Kamble, is a writer as well as an agitator for the rights of dalits. He was very actively engaged with famous politician of our country and brought dalit issues at the national front. He is remembered chiefly for establishing *Dalit Panther* along with Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale. It was an organization that was founded in 1972 and

worked for the betterment of the dalit youths.

The contemporary dalits writers also deserve mention. There are writers who vividly present dalit lifestyle and patterns in their writings. They employ dalits in their writings. One such writer is Arundhati Roy, the first Indian to win the most prestigious Booker Prize for her only novel *The God of Small Things*. Though, the novel is not entirely based on dalits but it does touch certain aspects of dalits. It talks about the crimes and tortures caused by the higher class on lower strata of society. The blunt truth discussed in the novel brought attention of many. The unique feature of the Indian caste system is that there is no chance for any upward movement for a low caste person. If there is any attempt by the lower caste people to challenge this idea by moving up, they face dire consequences which Rohinton Mistry vividly portrays in his novel *A Fine Balance*. He narrates how the upper-caste ruling class mocks at the democratic rights to be enjoyed by the Dalits and other down-trodden class in India. An impression of this reality is being conveyed almost photographically here in the novel through a pitiable tale of Om and his grandson Prakash, the two born in a Dalit family in a small village of India and brought up as "untouchables". After Independence, the caste distinctions were abolished officially but the respite from humiliation was hardly ensured. The landlords in the village exerted inhuman torture to subdue the Dalits.

Aravind Adiga, another young Indian and a recipient of Booker Prize for *The White Tiger* in 2008, expresses through the 'white tiger' a division between the white and the dark. 'White Tiger' symbolizes the higher class who govern the dark or lower section of society. The most sought them of writers but in a very effective way.

Another writer is Mahasweta Devi of similar stance contributing largely for the upliftment of dalits. Her novella *Doulati* and short-story *Rudali* gives a gruesome picture of dalit women being exploited in an independent India. *Doulati* was born in 1947 and died coughing out blood on the night prior to 15th August when she was twenty-seven years. Her body had been mercilessly but systematically exploited by the upper caste persons for nearly fourteen years. The message of the picture substantiates the fact further that there is no end to slavery especially for the Dalits even in independent India. *Rudali* is another short story by Mahasweta Devi on the exploitation,

struggle and survival of woman. The theme of survival is so effective and impressive that it makes its readers and audience think over it many a times. Rudali is a tale of Sanichari, hired as rudali by the upper class for mourning of their dear ones. Unlikely of her name, tears have dried up speaking another tale about dalits who are subjected to severe atrocious behavior. She has written a number of talking tales about the atrocious behavior met by poor dalits. Her periodical Bortika provides a platform to the tribals, downtrodden and dalits to express their experiences through the pen.

The basic purpose of dalit writers is to bring to light the harsh realities and facts about them, to create awareness, and bring in transparency in justice at social, economical and political fronts. The basic things of life are denied to them, they are man-handled, humiliated and sexually harassed. Why? This is the persistent question raised in every single work by dalit and non-dalit writers. The focus is to create an opinion for this marginalized class and bring them to a respectful level of living. To empower the dalits about where to work hard and mould themselves to strong individuals. This is achieved to some extent but much awaits to be conquered. The best result of dalit writings is that readership has increased and improved. People want to know more about them. It's a challenge for the writers too, to create an authentic proof. These writings in turn become ready documents about the history of dalits. A specific dalit literature is thus developing side by side for the present and future generations.

As a result, dalits have found a voice of their own. Earlier they resolved to movements and protests but today readership has drastically improved. The word dalit is no more a taboo for them and in fact the meaning of dalits has itself changed. Now, a dalit can be any-body who has limited resources. The old belief of terming anybody who was a scheduled tribe, caste or other backward class is buried deep. These remain only in documents of government. Anybody who is unprivileged can be termed a dalit. These writings have become a forum expression of the angst- resistance of hitherto suffered marginalized. There are many magazines, journals and articles written exclusively on and about dalits. Interestingly in most of them many dalits also contribute. Thus, the marginalized, unprivileged class has found a platform for expression of their heart. The long suffering finally finds a vent to combat all kinds of sufferings. I must quote Arjun

Daugal who says:

Silenced by centuries, the Dalit writer today ask,
But how long can this bird
Remain in this dungeon,
Whose very walls tremble
With his very exhalation? (203)

The works by dalit and non-dalit writers endorses the very spirit of dalits sufferings that has found space to move out freely.

Works Cited

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