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Casteism as a Panoptic Edifice as Represented in Cho. Dharman's *Koogai* and Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu*

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Dr. Suganthi K

Varnashrama Dharma propounded by Manu forms the basis of caste system in India. The dearth in exercising mobility and communication among the sub-castes of the Dalit community, to bring harmony and have a unified protest and resistance against the caste Hindus, have had always been challenging for the Dalits. Panopticism and the structure of a panopticon comes as a robust tool to penetrate the hierarchical structure of casteism, approbated by the Hindu Religion. This also provides a perspicuous explanation of how and why, casteism ceases the members of the periphery from vertical mobility and communication among its sub-groups/sub-castes and also provide a unison voice of protest. The ideation on power, discipline and surveillance of Foucault in tandem with the normative ideology of Manusmriti, magnifies the strictures imposed on the avarnas (not belonging to the Varna system) by the savarnas (communities which belong to one of the four Varna); maintaining the status quo even after mass movements of protest and awareness in life and literature.

Keywords: Michael Foucault, Panopticism, Casteism, Manusmriti, Cho. Dharman, Sharankumar Limbale

Casteism as a Panoptic Edifice

Dalit course of intervention through literature in understanding the politics behind the operation of caste system and its perpetuating impact in the lives of the Dalits is persuasive. Many scholarly endeavours and keen interests in Dalit studies have opened the sluice gates of epistemological and ontological scrutiny into the socio-economic and political arena of Indian cosmos held up by the religious sanction of caste hierarchy. The growing assertive and affirmative impetus towards validating the Dalit ordeal has transformed the practices in comprehending the social habitus of the sub-continent. This paper intends to etch the idea of a Panopticon in deciphering the foundations of the caste system and engage Panopticism as understood by Michael Foucault, to the implicit power relations in stake with the established social order. It also proposes to centralize the lack of communication between and among the sub-castes of the Dalit community in Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu* and Cho. Dharman's *Koogai* as an impediment in unifying the echo of protest, mobilization and solidarity.

Michael Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), chronicles the development of modern penal system. The chapter titled "Panopticism" delineates a plague-stricken town put up under complete surveillance and control in order to prevent the spread of the infection. He also draws from Jeremy Bentham's architectural structure of Panopticon not only as a physical model but as a social and political edifice that encumbers any mode of contact as ordained by the established norms of power, "cruel and clever cage" (Leroy 143). Though he engages more about discipline and order, one key element of his description positions strict restraints on communication as a measure to ensure dominion of power while enunciating on the control measures ensured to prevent the spread of plague, "without communicating with the suppliers and other residents; meat, fish and herbs will be hoisted up into the houses with pulleys and baskets. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting" (Foucault 195). This stricture on communication is well understood by the structure of the Panopticon, where the

edifice has an axial periphery divided into individual cells, which denies any form of communication between the inmates and is all visible from the central tower (metaphor of power and control). The lighting in the structural space is designed to have visibility over the inmates from the central tower and not vice versa could be entailed.

The metaphor of Panopticon hints at the possibility of discerning the power structures pervading the societal and cultural practices in disrupting the process of association among the members of the Dalit community. Thus, enabling the status quo of domination over the marginalized in spite of growing distress and protest, caste perpetuates the divide among the Dalits and the discourse of power. The prototype of Panopticon throws a new perspective into the socio-cultural set up which provides the resource for preserving the caste-based discrimination and upholding the age-old hegemony. The idea of an egalitarian society comes to a standstill when there is no progress from the margin. This stand-still state of liminality is achieved by the fragmented and fractured proletariat society, where there is a strong sense of division and silence for the sufferings of others.

The caste system of India sustained by religious dogmas, especially the Manusmriti (The moral code of conduct), acts as a part of the metaphorical tower of surveillance which makes sure, that the hierarchy remains stable and operational irrespective of the growing awareness about its presence. This idea of caste division is very much embedded in the neurotic schema of the society and in the minds of the people. In *Caste Matters* (2019), Suraj Yengde sounds polemic in condemning this anatomy:

> Caste as a social construct is a deceptive substance, known for its elemental capacity to digress from its primary motive of existence that governs this oldest system of human oppression, subjugation and degradation. Originated in the Hindu social order, it has infiltrated all faiths on the Indian subcontinent. As old as the order of Indic civilization, the phenomenon of controlling human capacity, creativity and labour has been core to its ideological performance secured by strict legal order. Caste in India is an absolute sanction – of the dominant class over the dominated. (14)

The very notion of Yengde's contention clearly depicts how caste as a construct points at a panopticon in strictly adhering to exercising power and control in the name of ideology governed by the sovereign caste system. And the rubric of the Indian caste society is knit closely by the practices of religious and cultural sanctity.

The exposition on caste also decries the importance of mobility (Mungekar 2017) and has forged the distinction into the aorta of social norms as recounted in:

> In the first place there is no connection between the various castes which form a system. Each caste is separate and distinct. It is independent and sovereign in the disposal of its internal affairs and the enforcement of caste regulations. The castes touch do not interpenetrate. The second feature relates to the order in which one caste stands in relation to the other castes in the system. That order is vertical and not horizontal. (Rodrigues 103)

In the Indian philosophic tradition, it is believed that dharma or righteousness, artha or wealth, kama or enjoyment, and moksa or spiritual freedom are the important purusarthas or human values, firmly rooted in the literature of Kalpa sutras. Of these, the Dharma Sutras assert the codes of law, morals and customs of the society. The code of Manu or the Manu dharma sastra is the most prominent one developed during 200 BCE-200 CE. Manusmriti forms the basis of Varna system which categorizes the four-fold order of the society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas (all these three categories are called as the twice born or dvijas) and Shudras (should serve the above three castes).

A Source Book in Indian Philosophy (1957) edited by Radhakrishnan and Moore, chapter titled "The Laws of Manu" explicates the apodictic confirmation of panoptic symbolism in the law codes of Manu which says that, "(A King) who knows the sacred law, must inquire into the laws of castes, of districts, of guilds, and of families, and (thus) settle the peculiar law of each" (176). Here, one can see that the King under the law codes of Manu is restricted to perform within the limitations of the law and is morally responsible for maintaining the stability of the castes. In another instance, we also perceive that the purity of the castes is sustained by the practice of en-

dogamy, "In all castes those (children) only which are begotten in the direct order on wedded wives, equal (in caste and married as) virgins, are considered as belonging to the same caste (as their fathers)" (176). This demarcation of people into separate entities in caste order also resembles a panoptic edifice of strict confinement and any mobility gets deterred.

Furthermore, the mixing up of the castes are prevented by moral instigation, "for by (adultery) is caused a mixture of the castes among men; thence (follows) sin, which cuts even the roots and causes the destruction of everything" (177). The caste conventions and superintendence over "purity" measures running through every scheme of Manusmriti is very much apparent with the idea of endogamy which also puts a check on mobilization among the castes. There is a moral policing visible in these lines where it says that "It is better (to discharge) one's own (appointed) duty incompletely than to perform completely that of another; for he who lives according to the law of another (caste) is instantly excluded from his own" (184). "He, who seeks to preserve an exalted rank, must constantly form connections with the highest and best families, but avoid the worst and the meanest" (Mungekar 49), a resplendent manoeuvre of making the minions of caste system oblige to the standards of Manu Dharma. Therefore, it is perceptible that the moral code of Manu interlaced into the fabric of Indian society with the weft of religious ideologies are coerced into the caste system.

The oeuvre of Dalit literature had always tried to expose the abominable Caste system prevailing in India. The contemporary practitioners of genre of novels in Dalit literature have expounded the themes of suppression, agony, violence, inequality, double oppression of women and so on. The genre of novels in Dalit literature are of a recent origin and follows realistic portrayal of the society and are also self-reflexive in nature with myriad narrative techniques to defy the traditional dominant modes as proposed by the "so called" upper castes. Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer and Cho. Dharman, a Tamil Dalit writer are conspicuous writers, in the sense, that they do not try to romanticize their characters, instead evoke the substantial lives of the Dalits in its existent form.

Cho. Dharman, an echt Tamil Karisal writer, hails from Urulaikkudi village of Thoothukudi. He is a quintessential writer in realistically portraying the lives of the Dalits and especially the Pallars, the caste to which he belongs to. His novels are fiction-as-fact and blends social realism and magical realism and largely deviates from the traditional narrative pattern and adopts a new narrative structure befitting for voicing out the lived experience of the Dalits living in southern parts of Tamil Nadu. The lives of Pallars form the essence of his stories intertwined with ecological concerns, invisible politics, myths and cultural veracity. His attempts to audaciously super scribe the Dalit inter caste dynamics is commendable and makes it appropriate for the study.

Koogai, first published in Tamil, 2005, and later translated into English in 2015 by Vasantha Surya is a gripping tale about the lives of the Pallars and a steaming narrative of a caste-laden society. Dalit narratives, as it generally is, does not talk about one protagonist and the plot around it, even though we see that "old" Seeni is a pivotal character in the novel. Koogai set in the turn of events mounting around agrarian and industrial revolution, delineates with the still lives of the Dalits, seeking a paradigm shift in their lives stretching towards a real change. It bemoans the customized practice of caste system running through the society, particularly by the backward castes on the lower castes with respect to the state of Tamil Nadu. It recounts the passage of time in the shadows of caste from slavery to drudgery, only to find the dominant castes still holding the power in their hands which is echoed in the concluding passages voiced through Peichi.

Pertaining to the topic of concern the novel pitches some instances which magnifies the idea of absolute control over the lives of Dalits or the lower castes to maintain the caste order in the society. The very beginning of the novel inks the events happening at the point of time when Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan chalk out diligently to feast in a club-shop. They wash their vaittis (a piece of cloth to cover the lower part of the body) as white as it could be and tread to attend a funeral. They plan everything in such a way so as to escape the sight of caste Hindus of their village, having known the consequences of defiance to eat at Nachiyaramma's club-shop. A sense of surveil-

lance always pervades their nerves as evident in the words of "What a wretch I am – might as well be dead, having to sneak around like this just to go and eat at a "club" (6). They gobbled every morsel of rice and trudged back with a heavy pot belly to lay across in the shrine of Koogai-Saami. Suddenly Mookkan felt the shod of Muthaiya Pandian, the village watchman, on his face. Muthaiya was fuming in rage and was not able to tolerate their guts to eat at the club-shop. More than their yearning to eat in the club-shop, it was their gesture of trying to be equal, which infuriated Muthaiya as it is emphasized in his words, twice in the text: "Big lords! Washing your vaittis and shirts all white-and-bright, sitting on a bench just like others and eating "club-food", no?" (11), and "Dirty stinking fellow, it's "club-food" you're needing', le? And on bench you want to sit, eating food in style, on top of it!" (11). Thus, any attempt of mobilization is stopped well immediately which proves it to be a prison-like experience.

Such instances of division and exclusion are found throughout the novel. The caste lines are so visible even with respect to the geographical dwelling. The places of living of the various castes are separate and are referred as, "melakkudi, where the high caste lived…next were the twenty or thirty thatched huts of Pallar-kudi. All by themselves, outside the village and quite apart from it and at some distance from each other were the hovels of the leather workers, and the Paraiyars – the Chakkiliyar-kudi and the Paraiyar-kudi" (19). Kudi means the place of dwelling and it is clear that the geographical limitation is a serious political, social and cultural marker of surveillance and how it represents the individual cells of the Panopticon structure, where any act of mobilization is prevented. In the case of caste, the prevention happens not only from the geographical dissociation but are also found in the obscured minds of the people. The refusal to let the Dalits draw water in the wells, enter the sanctum sanctorum of temples, and to walk bare footed, acts not only as symbols of subjugation but signifies how the upper caste held a dominant hold in influencing the attitudes of the Dalits as a form of enforcing power over them.

Any act of crossing the boundaries drawn by the upper castes on the lower castes are denounced at once and so is within the subcaste groups. Dharman accounts a short episode on the incidents hap-

pening around the death of an upper caste man. It is customary for the lower castes/Dalits to do burial of the upper castes. On one such occasion, a member of the Pallar-kudi, Subramanian is assigned to announce the news of death. As he is fatigued by hunger, he slipped into a hotel, only to have the leftover of an upper caste, as suffused in,

> He finished eating, rose, and held out his soiled leaf to Subramanian. With both hands, Subramanian received that Saliva-laden leaf in terrified awe, as though it were a consecrated offering, and set in front of himself. The gentleman's half-eaten rice and the slimy mess of side-curries mixed into it were all stuck to the leaf. Subramanian knew what would happen if he were to throw it away, or refuse it. (27)

The affliction that Subramanian faces is beyond explanation. The human tolerance is put to test here, but only to fend the caste system and the twinge of it is felt in his conscience which forbids his gut juices and abides by the invisible system.

The audacity of Dharman takes form in his writing where he censures the frame of mind of the Dalits who themselves are prejudiced about the people belonging to the castes much lower than them. An exemplar to this is when, Appusubhan – a Pallar, is sought by the police for having murdered a caste Hindu, Senthura Pandian. Appusubhan being on the lookout by the Police absconds from Chitrampatti and flees to neighbouring village to escape punishment. At one such point in time, Appusubhan gets spotted by a few Pallars, to whom he does not reveal his identity and tells them that he belongs to the Chakkiliyar-Kudi. This kindles the casteist inclination of the those Pallars and they mistreat Appusubhan just in the way an upper caste would treat the lower castes or the Dalits as revealed in,

> Taking him for a lowly leather worker – they had hacked off a bit of palm frond and poured coffee into it, for him to drink from! For him alone!
>
> … He let out a chuckle. This was the way the other castes would have treated him. And here, his fellow Pallars were doing the same thing, thinking he was a caste below them. (153)

Caste convictions are imbued into every unit of the society irrespective of the caste and the very thought being "upper" lets one to think low and look down upon the people in the lower strata.

As already proposed, it should be noted that communication between the Dalit sub-castes does happen hardly and hence, the unification of all Dalits as one voice against the caste system becomes a distant dream. In this respect, Koogai captures the absence of communication between the Pallars and Chakkiliyars. When the Chakkiliyar-kudi is set ablaze, one can find that no one from either the Pallar-kudi or Paraiyans come into their rescue and could find that the Chakkiliyar hamlet is vacated and the entire community migrate to a city, led by Shanmugam. In another event when Nataraja Iyer leaves his land under the supervision of Seeni to the Pallars, Kitnasaamban – Chakkiliyar- treads towards Iyer and asks him, "You could have given a few of us on our street at least little bits of land" (52). A sense of oneness and belonging finds no place among the Dalits and marks this absence as the biggest hindrance in striking at a unity of thought.

Similar illustrations could be found in the novel *Hindu* (2010) by Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer and activist. *Hindu* is an engrossing story of the Mahars (one of the major Dalit communities in Maharashtra to which Dr. Ambedkar also belongs to). The story revolves around the death of Tatya Kamble – an Ambedkarite jalsa (folk theatre) artist who has been portrayed as a typical Dalit revolutionary clinches the hatred of the caste Hindus or the Savarnas for his reproving gesture. Limbale like Dharman also brings out connivances of the Dalit movements and the complicity of the Dalits involved in the movements. The disparaging attitude of the Dalits are attributed to the caste system as such and not as an individual or community turpitude.

The imprisoning caste hierarchy draws invincible lines of division which permeates deep into the operational function of the society affecting mobilization and dialogic discourse of the marginalized. Violence acts as a means to impose discipline and order to mark out the clear lines of discrimination. The nefarious coercion goes to the extent of even killing the Dalits to intimidate any progress of mobiliza-

tion and hence, incarceration strengthens caste distinctions. In the words of Milind Kamble, *Hindu* sensitizes the issue of violence against Dalits as a Repressive State Apparatus (in Althusserian term) to contain their movement:

> These people had killed Tatya Kamble. He was a lion…. The killers had erased the identity of the village as 'Jalsakar Tatya Kamble's village' for ever. This was an attempt to teach a lesson to ordinary Dalits by killing a Dalit who was respected for his talent and a name for himself. It was the disfigured face of social terrorism. Dalits have been murdered for thousands of years. Injustice and atrocities are committed against them daily. (12)

The murder of Tatya Kamble is metaphorical and conveys the death of any attempt of deviation from the prescribed norms applied to the conduct of Dalits. Thus, enforcing the laws of servility upon the avarnas (not belonging to the four castes of Varna).

As in *Koogai, Hindu* also records the geographical segregation of the Dalit bastis (the place of their living away from the village where the caste Hindus live) which pose a major threat to the unification of the sub-castes of the Dalit community and also brings in the caste distinction between the sub-groups. This gets noted by Limbale, "the Maharwada was segregated from the village. Next to the Maharwada was the Mang basti comprising about ten to fifteen huts" (38). Territorialisation of the living area gets absolutely political hiding behind the name of cultural precepts that it never allows them to move beyond and further.

Like the tower of surveillance in the panoptic edifice which has a control over the inmates of the prison and are always conscious of the gaze from the tower, One can find the authority of the perpetual caste surveillance in-built in the conscience of the Dalits who willingly subjugate their lives to it. As in, "We will live the way the village asks us to. We will drag dead animals, eat musaram, the scraps left on your plates, bear with the ordeal of the village spitting on us. We will not complain even if the village perpetrates injustice on us. We have to live in this village" (139). Village refers to the place of the savarnas and anything from the village are rules laid by the caste Hindus in the

name of culture and tradition purported by Hindu religion and the Laws of Manu.

As contented earlier, lack of dialogue between the sub-castes of the Dalit community is a snag in the overall projection of the Dalit issues. *Hindu* reckons the lives of the Mahar Dalit castes in particular but also projects the state of Mangs, a Dalit sub-caste. Due to greater political involvement and exposure, the Mahar community gets the attention of the government and gets access to the wellbeing measures when their basti gets burned down by the villagers to throttle their bust a gut seeking justice for the death of Tatya Kamble. By the efforts of the Dalit activists "new brick homes", "public toilets and public taps were being installed", "a small library and gymnasium were also planned. The electric poles had arrived. The community hall was being refurbished" (32). But the woebegone lives of the Mangs goes unnoticed by the government and also the Dalit activists of the Bhimsakthi (progressive movement of the Mahars) movement. The forlorn state of the Mangs gets a passing reference in the novel which acts as evidence to the proposition of the paper, "the adjoining basti of the Mangs looked wretched with its crumbling huts" (32). It is tangible that the lives of the Mangs are miserable than the Mahars and no attention is given to their needs.

Both the novels accentuate the problem of containment of the Dalits well in the lower rung as a means to curb their mobility and dialogue. The caste Hindus try to efface the avarnas from understanding the polity of the Indian society and keep them up in a position, where the sanctions to fulfil all their needs comes only from them. Dalits are actually quarantined by the concept of "purity and pollution" label as lambasted by Isabel Wilkerson in her book named *Caste: The Lives That Divide Us* (2020):

> Each of us is in a container of some kind. The label signals to the world what is presumed to be inside and what is to be done with it. The label tells you which shelf your container supposedly belongs on. In a caste system, the label is frequently out of sync with the contents, mistakenly put on the wrong shelf and this hurts people and institutions in ways we may not always know. (59)

Correspondingly, the extracts from *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (2002), edited by Rodrigues concords to the notion of lack of communication or dialogue between the castes/sub-castes as an indispensable postulation in interpreting the rigidity of caste conventions: "there is no interconnection between various castes which form a system. Each caste is separate and distinct. It is independent and sovereign in the disposal of its internal affairs and the enforcement of caste regulations" (103). Furthermore, there is also a dissimilitude between the savarnas and avarnas, placing emphasis on the pointedness of the Laws of Manu about Chaturvarna watermark the caste activities, "equally clear distinction between those within the Chaturvarna and those outside the Chaturvarna" (105).

Thus, the continuum of Dalit literature batters the prominence of caste system evolved from the Chaturvarna as a guileful system accommodating transgressions and injustices against the Dalits through surveillance and power. The socio-cultural engagement of caste lines creeping beneath the structure of functionality endangers mobilization and communication. Consequently, rearranging the manipulative system of caste even in the changing times of the age, continuing the rapport of the age-old manifestation in the contemporary times despite the heard voices, protests, laws and movements. The startling effect of such contemplation further problematizes the caste questions and endorses pressing inquiry into its operation and to have a realistic and veridical amelioration of the Dalit lives for a better tomorrow.

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