

Dalit Writing: A Struggle for Identity

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Dalit consciousness is truly humane consciousness. This consciousness looks at all the past and present exploitation that has occurred in the many realms of Dalit life. When we study Dalit writing we must see how the impact of this Dalit consciousness has shaped their literature. This makes a Dalit person/writer raise his or her voice against the unwritten rules of the dominant society, which denies them the life of a human being like others. Therefore, Dalit consciousness is in a sense the strength of Dalits, which took them towards the dawn of a dignified living.

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The word “Dalit” has been defined by different writers and social thinkers based on their own personalized opinions, yet all these thinkers, including the stalwart leader Dr. Ambedkar, agree that Dalit is someone who has been oppressed and depressed throughout the centuries. The word “Dalit” is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Dala’, which means crushed, split, ground, and so on. Later, the word was applied to that part of the society, which was crushed by, and split from the mainstream society. These people were barred from participating in the social life of the so-called upper castes. Therefore, Dalit is the one who is labelled as untouchable or outcast. He or she does the work that a touchable will not engage in. In Indian society, there has been an oppressive caste system, which divides people as superior and inferior according to their birth. This division is often reinforced by the changing cultural politics in modern times, although

there have been some major interventions and resistances against this hierarchical division.

Thus, there are many different meanings and connotations related to the word Dalit. The historiography of the term “Dalit” must be traced back to the past. Dr. S. M. Micheal, a translator and the Honorary Director of the Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai, describes the term as follows, in his book *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*:

The word ‘Dalit’ as such was first used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writings. Following this, the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the early 1970s, gave currency to the concept and the word ‘Dalit’ highlights the sufferings and struggles of untouchables. Later, they extended their movement to include all oppressed groups, namely SCs, the STs, workers, landless labourers, small farmers and other poor people and also neo-converted Buddhists. However, nowadays, SCs (earlier called Depressed classes under the British and Harijans by Gandhiji) prefer calling themselves ‘Dalit’ or ‘the Oppressed’, while the tribals prefer to call themselves ‘soshits’ or ‘the exploited’. Both the words are evocative of the anguish and frustrated aspirations of these people who have been the victims of social; injustice for several years. (Micheal,108).

It was Mahatma Gandhi, who renamed the untouchables as Harijans- People of God. The terms like ‘Achchuta’-untouchable, have an insulting tone and hence he thought to rename the community. But it addressed only the superficial problem of nomenclature. Their problems were much deeper. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar opposed Gandhi’s views on untouchability which he thought only sympathized with the downtrodden and did not try to uplift them to the level of dignity. Dr. Ambedkar aspired to provide a new identity to them. At this point, he found the term ‘Dalit’ more acceptable. Many Dalit writers also opposed the word Harijana, they tried to retain their original name because it recognizes their consciousness. In addition, this idea has been used as a subject in their literature. The word ‘Dalit’ is now used by the untouchables and others to mark the whole system. Dr.

Ambedkar with his decisive step to embrace Buddhism, straightly rejected the Varna system of Hinduism.

The term Dalit today referred to the range of marginalized classes or communities. Thus, the term has a broader connotation. In contrast to the term Dalit, Harijan is a label that is not only patronizing but also pejorative, in the sense that it basically accepts the Hindu view of the world. Thus the term tries to cover up the past in glorious terms and reinstates the power centre.

Historically, no one can say exactly when the earlier “Varna” system in ancient Indian society where the social stratification of people was based on colour and class, changed into a watertight caste system. The gradation and hierarchy of the caste system probably started when Aryans came to India from central Asia. According to some historians, Aryans were fair in colour and the dark skin colour of the indigenous people was different from theirs. Skin colour also becomes a mark of difference and superiority for this race. After conquering India, they suppressed and subjugated the natives and destroyed the existing system at that time in the Indus Valley civilization and considered and self-proclaimed that they were superior to the black indigenous people, declared and considered themselves on the top of the hierarchy, whereas indigenous people pushed to the last stage of the hierarchy. When they completely settled in India, they arranged themselves in the first three positions of the hierarchy and called themselves ‘Dwijas’, which means twice-born. In the ancient Indian religious concept it was believed that the person was first born physically and spiritually for the second time as a result they are far superior to the ‘ekjas’ means the persons who are born once physically (Manu 71). These self-proclaimed superior Aryans pushed indigenous people to the last stage by categorizing them as ekjas. In addition, these ekjas became literally slaves of the first three castes. Apart from this, they were also kept away from the central areas and started living in the outskirts. Gradually, this type of segregation became normalized in caste society.

The domination of the Brahman class and the watertight caste system is said to have started in the late 2nd century BC during the rule of Pushyamitra Sunga of the Sunga Dynasty. Pushyamitra was a

Brahmin. He was a commander in the reign of the last Maurya King, Bruhadrata, who belonged to the Shudra group. He killed King Bruhadrata and became the King. When he became the king, he tried to suppress the Shudras as he was afraid that they might take revenge on him. He asked a pandit Sumathi Bhargav to write the scriptures that contained inhuman and unethical religious codes and laws against the indigenous people. Accordingly, Sumathi Bhargav edited Manu's codified work. Manu was considered to be the son of the creator Brahma, later this codified work was known as Manusmriti or Manushastra. In this Shastra, we see that Brahmanas are made the most privileged and blessed persons. This work also converted the Varna system into a watertight caste system along with feelings of superiority and inferiority. Ideas of purity and pollution became important. Religious, social, political, and economic segregation and such obligations were made mandatory for the Shudras. From this period onwards Brahmins started claiming the highest status in the society. In addition, this scripture made the role of the King mainly to protect Dharma. In order to maintain the superiority of the upper castes, this codified work was reinterpreted and propagated in society in the name of God and religion.

Manusmriti is seen as the foundational scripture. Many practices of a Brahmin-dominated caste system are based on these Manusmritis. Sir William Jones translated them as *The Code of Laws* in English during British rule. In this scripture, Manu seems to push the untouchables below the pale of the caste system. They are given subhuman status. They are not allowed to dwell in areas where the other upper caste Hindus reside, they are allowed life outside the village with dogs and donkeys as their wealth and forced to use the discarded bowls, in addition, the Manusmriti ordains that the King should not surround himself with these untouchables:

These (castes) should live under mounds, trees, and cremation grounds, in mountains and in groves, recognizable and making a living by their own innate activities. But the dwelling of Fierce Untouchables and dog cookers should be outside the village; they must use the discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys should be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and

their food should be in broken dishes; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly. A man who carries out his duties should not seek contact with them; they should do business with one another and marry those who are like them. Their food dependent upon others, should be given them in a broken dish and they should not walk about in villages and cities at night. They move about by day to do their work, recognizable by distinctive marks in accordance with the king's decrees; they should carry out the corpses of people who have no relatives; this is a fixed rule. By the king's command, they should execute those condemned to death, always in accordance with the teachings, and they should take for themselves the clothing, beds, and ornaments of those condemned to death (242).

Arjun Dangle, one of the Dalit writers, a Dalit activist, and one of the founding members of Maratha Dalit Panthers, in his edited work titled *Poisoned Bread*, it is an anthology of Dalit writings, commented on theories put forth in Rigveda, an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns. This claim that the caste system is not man-made but created by God. The four castes, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras were placed in a hierarchical structure not by man but by the creator. The class system, and later the caste system were given religious sanction in the texts like Vedas and Smritis, which were written by the Brahmins. These religious texts emphasized that the caste system was god made and through these scriptures, the Brahminical caste spread the theory that they were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriya from the shoulders, and the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Hence the Brahmins were the superior, next came Kshatriyas, and so on. According to Dangle:

The Social, political, economic, and religious restrictions laid down by the Brahmins in their texts were implemented by the kings or the Kshatriyas. Thus to follow the duties allotted to a particular caste in the texts became not only a religious obligation but also obedience to royal order. In other words, religion and the State joined hands and bound the lowest class namely Shudras into

mental, cultural, and social slavery and later into untouchability (Dangle 34).

So, Dalits in Indian society have been made voiceless. They are treated as sub-human, or less than human, and denied their fundamental rights to live like others. No doubt, Dalits are the victims of oppression and humiliation from ancient times. In Manusmriti, they are called by various names like panchamas, asprushyas, bahiskruts, chandalas, etc. These Dalits are branded as untouchables and outcasts in the same society, religion, and culture they belong to. Though Dalit is a suppressed man who was crushed by the unwritten laws of society, Dalit has become his identity and has become his consciousness, Dalit consciousness. This Dalit consciousness and their experiences are represented in their writings.

“Consciousness” has been defined in the dictionary as the state of being aware of and responsive to one’s surroundings. Consciousness is nothing but one’s awareness of his or her existence among people. However, Dalit consciousness is not just the awareness of human existence among people; it is the acute awareness of how the Dalits have experienced suppression and many humiliations from the past to the present. Dalit is not just a word; it is a world for these people who have lived through the most harrowing circumstances. For them, the term ‘consciousness’ includes the past, present, and future, and puts them in a series of ecological conditions. This Dalit consciousness has included a range of feelings emotions, and experiences, pain, loss, alienation, being subjected to physical and mental brutality, and economic hardships. It has also meant being shut away from political and social life and being denied fundamental rights. Slowly, it has incorporated the feelings of anger, resistance, and capacity to fight back against the dominant society. The last phase of this development of the Dalit consciousness is the desire for selfhood, to find a different and independent identity of their own without submitting to the definitions and deprivations that the mainstream society has heaped on them.

It is in the sense of this final phase of the Dalit consciousness that we can see how the very consciousness of deprivation has turned

into a strength. The long history of pain and exploitation has made the Dalit people examine their lives from the past. As a result, they have begun to be aware of their position in the caste society. They have realized how they were pushed into a subhuman state. They have started to break the shackles of such restrictions, which were placed upon them by the so-called high-caste society. They challenge the society, which trampled upon and crushed them in the name of caste. They gradually have begun to question this injustice in their activism, agitation, and in their writings,

The noted Kannada writer and Dalit activist, Aravind Malagatti's, work *Dalita Sahitya*, gives a comprehensive idea of this movement. Malagatti defines Dalit consciousness as the truly humane consciousness. It is nothing but an awareness developed to resist all kinds of anti-Dalit activities. This consciousness looks at all the past and present exploitation that has occurred in the many realms of Dalit life. They have been oppressed in the social, economic, political, academic, and cultural areas of life. They have been seen as void of metaphysical and rational human consciousness. Therefore, when the Dalit people resist this injustice, they find a liberating awareness. This awareness impels action-based motivations. This state of being generates new ways of looking at their own lives through the past. It leads to new kinds of discussions about their lives. This experience and awareness of their oppression bring a new dimension to their writing and their artistic expressions. When we study Dalit writing we must see how the impact of this Dalit consciousness has shaped their literature.

The Dalit consciousness makes a Dalit person/writer raise his or her voice against the unwritten rules of the dominant society, which deny them the life of a human being like others. Therefore, Dalit consciousness is in a sense the strength of Dalits, which took them towards the dawn of a dignified living. Dalit consciousness does not make the Dalit ashamed of being a Dalit, but in fact, makes him claim his rights. It makes him conscious of a distinct Dalit identity. This identity is not something the high caste society has dubbed them with. It is the identity they have found and shaped for themselves within intense struggle. No wonder this idea of "Dali-hood" is

predominant in the Dalit Literature that has come out in the recent past. The writer who is conscious of being a Dalit upholds his or her humanity. As a result, this individual sheds feelings of inferiority. This gives the Dalit individual new confidence o proving himself or herself in the fields that his ancestors never stepped in, or perhaps never even thought of like for instance, literature, politics, art, law, and other cultural spheres. Moreover, because of this confidence, this Dalit person starts showing how the unjust society denied him his rights through his writings. The Dalit literature flourished because it emanated from this Dalit Consciousness.

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