

Marginalisation, Human Rights and Literature: Exploring Three Marathi Dalit Stories

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The category “Harijan”, and later “Dalit,” have been terms of much critical contestation since the middle of the twentieth century in India, especially since the Dalit Panther Movement in the 1970s. Dalit is the name given to those who come within the caste-ridden system of Indian society and who are placed in the lowest rank in the hierarchy of caste. Religious scriptures such as *Manusmriti* (*The Laws of Manu*) developed the idea of the social hierarchy according to which society is divided into four castes—the Brahmins who are associated with religious rituals and education, the Kshatriyas whose noble duties are warfare and maintenance of state policies, the Vaishyas who are associated with business and the Shudras whose sole duty is to serve the other three classes. The Shudras, according to *Manusmriti*, were born of the intimacy between some fallen women and outcastes, and hence, they are untouchables. It is deemed that the Shudras are impure and they must be avoided. The untouchability which qualifies the Shudras is an attempt to exploit them and exclude them from the facilities of societal-political-economic rights. The Shudras were forbidden the teachings of the *Vedas*; let alone the scriptures they were even denied basic human rights, like decent food and proper dresses.

The inhumanity of the caste system has been a strong mechanism under which the Shudras suffered since ancient times. It was only in the later part of the nineteenth century that a surge of protest gathered within the Shudra community with the able leadership of people like Mahatma Phule, and thereafter, Dr. B R Ambedkar. It was Ambedkar who was the central figure in the movement against the caste system. In a number of important writings he waged his objections against the oppressive and exploitative mechanisms of the caste system. Ambedkar was not an armchair scholar, but an energetic social activist. He was critical of Mahatma Gandhi's views on caste. Saytanarayana and Tharu sum up the conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi in their introduction to the anthology *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing*:

Gandhi described the varna order as an ideal system of ancient India and wanted it to continue. The only aspect of it that he opposed was untouchability, which he looked at as ‘inhuman’ and ‘a blot’ on Hinduisim, a religion he upheld. Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi and gave a call for the annihilation of caste. For Ambedkar, caste as a system and as a practice is undemocratic. It does not allow for interaction, communication, unity or societal mobility of people. Caste is sanctified by Hinduism. (11)

The term “dalit” was introduced later to include all those who come under the caste system. The dalit movement which received impetus since the Independence is mostly

concerned with the rights of the untouchables. Maharashtra was the place famous for Dalit Panther Movement which was the first considerable organized movement against the oppressive caste system. The famous “Dalit Panthers’ Manifesto” (1973) was an angry and revolutionary call against the loopholes of Indian democracy and party-system. It is a well-known debate in Indian nationalism that the very structure of this nation is based on the legacy of the colonizers. The nationalist power block operates on the exclusion of the lower class, lower caste, tribals and women who are dominated, exploited and repressed. They were pushed to the margins of the Indian nation-state, exploited and suppressed in the new system which Pramod Nayar calls “postcolonial subalternization” (99). Real power of India’s apparent “democracy” does not lie in the hands of the common people, but those of the elite leaders. “Dalit Panthers’ Manifesto” hits hard at the core of the faulty system:

The present Congress rule is essentially a continuation of the old Hindu feudalism, which kept the dalits deprived of power, wealth and status for thousands of years. Therefore, this Congress rule cannot bring about social change. [...] because the entire state machinery is dominated by the feudal interests, the same hands who, for thousand years, under religious sanctions, controlled all the wealth and power, today own most of the agricultural land, industry, economic resources and all other instruments of power, therefore, in spite of independence and the democratic set-ups the problems of the dalit remain unsolved. (56)

It is worth noting in this regard that most of the figures in Dalit Panther Movement were writers. Their writings are quite different from most of canonical Indian literature—characterized by aesthetic flourish, romantic imagination and so on—which is understood broadly as the body of writings produced by upper caste people. Dalit literature, on the other hand, is the literature of the humiliated, oppressed, exploited, repressed section of people. This literature is goal-oriented—its goal being the achievement of the basic human rights. As such, there is little or no scope of exercising imaginative exuberance or expert craftsmanship. Dalit literature is closely connected with the dalit rights movements whose motto is to achieve freedom from the strictures imposed on the grounds of so-called lower caste. B. Krishnappa, an important figure of dalit movement in Karnataka, charts out the characteristics of dalit literature thus:

Dalit literature has a different stand on creativity on literary excellence. It is inappropriate to look for refinement in a movement’s reactionary literature. That kind of art can only be found in a literature written in luxury. Refinement cannot be the mainstay of a literature that has revolution and change as its goal.

[...] As dalit literature is addressed more to labourer, the farm hand toiling in the fields, the unfortunate living in hell, suppressed by the caste system, it has to be unadorned and fresh.

When the purpose is to provoke people against injustice, there is no scope for old aesthetic pleasures or artistic creativity or, indeed, abstruse similes and metaphors. Dalit literature is not the literature of those whose stomachs are full. (109)

In the story “Poisoned Bread”, Bandhumadhav has presented a conflict of attitudes between an oppressive landlord and the grandson of a Mahar old man. The young boy, Mhadeva, who is educated can no longer be pursued with the age-old system of caste which he now realizes as artificially fabricated with the intention to exploit a section of people. Mhadeva asks a series of questions to the landlord, Babu Patil, which the latter is unable to reply to:

“Patil, will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the god? And if religion can’t tolerate our human being treating another simply as a human being, what’s the use of such an inhuman religion? And if our mere touch pollutes the gods, why were the Mahars and Mangs created at all? [...]” (Bandhumadhav 148)

The landlord gets infuriated with such “impertinence” of a Mahar boy who has just learnt to read and write, and questions the age-old customs. He replies caustically, “And mind you, even if a Mahar or Mang gets educated, no one will ever call him a Brahmin. A Mahar is a Mahar even if he passes L.L.B. and becomes a barrister. [...] One should always keep to one’s own position” (148-49). This is the closed-door system of caste—the change of one’s status, even with education and refinement of judgement, cannot change his position in the society. A so-called lower-class man or woman is always denied entry into an “upper-class” domain.

In the story, the old man, Yetalya, begs pardon for his grandson’s audacity a number of times and he is employed for a day’s work in the farm. Completely exhausted, Yetalya goes to a fellow’s home nearby to fetch a tripod. It is a coincidence that Babu Patil comes to supervise their work just at that moment. As he does not find Yetalya, he starts abusing him and his grandson, and even deprives them of their rightful share of corn at the day’s end. Out of utter helplessness the old man begs for the morsels of rotten bread from the cow-shade which were not even devoured by the oxen. The young boy whose mind has started to be illumined with education has developed a sense of self-esteem and he is acerbic of the inherent inferiority of his grandfather: “It’s rightly said that the Chamar has his eye on the *chappal*, so does the Mahar on stale bread” (151). Yetalya, instead of protesting against the heartlessness of the landlord, accuses his grandson for engaging in an argument with the landlord which the old man holds responsible for losing corn or even a small quantity of jowar that day. He collects the rotten pieces of bread which were smeared with dung and urine. The grandson mockingly tells his grandfather: “We’ll gulp down the crumbs you collected. Haven’t we got these rotten pieces as a reward for labouring all day long? A good exchange indeed! Are we any better than cats or dogs? Throw a few crumbs at us and we are happy” (151).

As the horrible incident suggests, the poor Mahar people cannot arrange their daily meals without the mercy of the landlords who control the process of production. This is a kind of bourgeois-proletariat relation, according to the general Marxist view, in which the dalits are the proletariat party who contribute their labour-power to the production, but do not enjoy the fruits of their endeavour. The bourgeois party which invariably ascends to power in a postcolonial nation wipes out the history of the oppressed. In his adaption of Louis Althusser’s theory of the function of the “ideological state apparatuses,” the dalit-scholar T M Yasudasan says that these apparatuses silence the voice of the dalits and exclude the truth of oppression on them. “The task of dalit studies,” according to Yasudasan, “is to release the

counter-hegemonic forces of critique in order to facilitate the eruption of dalit voices and truth, breaking the silence and darkness in the midst of the prevailing politics of knowledge” (150).

The young boyin Bandhumadhav’s story is the voice of revolt who pursues his grandfather to forsake the habit of begging and to live proudly as human beings by claiming their basic rights. His solution is that “we must stop begging under the pretext that we are getting our rightful share of corn. And instead of enslaving ourselves to lifelong labour in exchange for that right, we must free ourselves from the land-bondage and learn to live independently” (152). They are denied a bit of decent meal and they are bound to eat rotten, dung-smearred morsels of bread cooked with *dulli* (large pieces of meat, probably of dead, abandoned animal). The old man is afflicted with violent dysentery and vomiting because of the “poisoned bread” which ultimately kills him. At his death-bed, however, conscience dawns in the old man, probably influenced by his grandson who is the hope of a better future. He utters before breathing his last:

“I can only say: never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man” (153).

Education is the prime means of knowledge which is the greatest weapon to fight oppression and injustice. All the dalit leaders right from Ambedkar insisted on the right to education for the development of the downtrodden community. The Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers announced “All dalits must be given free education, medical facilities, housing and good quality cheap grains” as part of their programme (64).

While dalit men carry on their backs burdens of humiliation, exploitation and repression, for dalit women the burden is twofold because of their gender. In any patriarchal society women are considered inferior to men—women are always the “other” or the “second sex” whose position is next to men. In the case of the dalit women they are victims of both casteism and sexism. Dalit women are often tortured, sexually exploited, raped or even murdered on various false allegations, for example, for being sexually promiscuous or “witch”. As Meena Kandasamy observes:

The helpless ‘witches’ are hounded and punished by being stripped naked, paraded around the villages, their hair is burnt off or their heads tonsured, their faces blackened, their noses cut off, their teeth pulled out (they are supposedly defanged) so that they can no longer curse, they are whipped, they are branded, sometimes, they are forced to eat human faeces and finally, they are put to death. (“Dangerous Dalit Women”)

In Baburao Bagul’s moving story “Mother”, the protagonist, who is referred to throughout the story as “Pandu’s mother”, bears the brunt of ignominy. Pandu as an untouchable is regularly ill-treated by his classmates who suddenly turn to disgracing his mother. They allege his mother is a “whore” who indulges in a “business” of selling her body. It is based on assumption rather than on any empirical proof. The lady is widowed, and earns her livelihood, toiling in construction sites. As a vulnerable and easy target, she becomes victim of the lust of a lewd neighbour called Dagdu.

Pandu's mother was ill-treated by her husband when he was alive. He was a drunkard and an invalid person who was living on the labour of his wife. Even then, he used to torture her and doubted her chastity. Later, the wretched lady is suspected of having secret affairs by her dear son for whom she sacrificed her life. When the neighbours abuse her with coarsest slangs, Pandu too believes that his mother is an unchaste lady living on the treasures of her body. When she gives new cloth to Pandu, he leaves home abusing his mother which only increases her misery:

'Whore! I spit on your clothes,' he shouted and ran out of the house. Her pain knew no bounds. [...] She had spent ten long years as a widow, and had tried so hard to love Pandu, she'd lived only for him, till the overseer came along last year. She had lost her husband, and now her son had turned against her. She started crying helplessly. (Bagul 189)

There are hints that Pandu's mother has developed a sort of attraction for the overseer of the construction site where she works. But is it unnatural for a young widow to seek love and support of a man when she is sunken in poverty and insecurity? She is accused of selling her body because the upper-class people are jealous that she is wearing new clothes. It is most pitiable when a dalit lady is robbed of even the right of choosing how to conduct her personal life.

"The 1930s saw the organisation of independent meetings and conferences by dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement," writes Sharmila Rege, where "dalit women delegates passed resolutions against child marriage, enforced widowhood and dowry, critiquing these practices as brahmanical. [...] Women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement must be read in the context of the fact that in Ambedkar's theory of caste there is also a theory of the origins of sub-ordination of women and that he saw the two issues as intrinsically linked" (41-42). But, according to Rege, the question of oppression on dalit women waned at subsequent movements of dalit rights, including Dalit Panther Movement. As such, the social condition of dalit women is more depressing than that of dalit men.

The condition of dalits in Indian cities is no less abysmal than that of the dalits in villages. Anna Bhau Sathe's "Gold from the Grave" is a nightmarish story in which Bheema, a dalit man, is forced by his misfortune to become a gold-burglar who digs out graves to collect gold ornaments from the corpses. His helpless condition which makes him choose the ghastly job under the veil of night is described in these words:

Bheema was from a village on the banks of the river Warna. His great strength was of no help to him in finding a job in his own village. He has strayed over to Bombay in search of work. He had searched for a job all over the city in vain and finally moved to his suburb on the fringe of the jungle. [...] He hated the city of Bombay which offers you everything except work and shelter. (Sathe 210)

After settling in the suburb, Bheema gets a job as a stone quarry worker but the quarry is soon closed down. He is unnerved with poverty and hunger. Out of his profound concern for his family he starts his nightly adventures in cremation grounds from which he sometimes manages to collect a few golden ornaments. With these little ornaments he manages to run his family.

He is very well-aware of the dangers of his “occupation.” As an outcaste, his company is avoided. He is well aware of the dangers—if the upper-caste, rich people come to know about his hideous activities to disturb the graves he is to face the worst situation as a lower-caste man. But he is driven to this work out of hunger.

This story of Sathe can be metaphorically analysed as a lower-caste man digging the grave of the age-old culture of India for his fundamental human rights. The gold is Bheema’s basic rights as a human being which is buried deep within the socio-cultural landscape of India from which he is excluded. He is not allowed to go to the graveyard because his caste prohibits him from it. He can earn his rights in the form of gold only at the stake of endangering his life. At the end of the story, Bheema is seen going out in an unruly weather to dig out a new grave. There he is attacked and badly bitten by a host of jackals as he tussles with them to reach the corpse. He cannot earn the gold without getting hurt. The upholders of caste-system will not grant him his rights easily. He must bleed in his journey to earn his basic human rights which suggests the sad predicament of a dalit man.

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