

Dalit Literature Movement and Dalit Feminism (with special reference to ‘Sangati’)

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Abstract:

India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world; yet it is notorious for its rigid caste system. This paper will throw light on the history of suppression, how the writings to heal up came into being and Dalit Feminism with special reference to Sangati, a Tamil autobiography. Also to study the movement and scope of Dalit Literature, how it is able to deal with the conditions of the suppressed class of our earth. It is widely believed that all Dalit literary creations have its root in the Ambedkarite thoughts. No doubt, as the movement began in Maharashtra, the focus is on Marathi Dalit Literature. The paper also dissects the stark realities of dalit specially dalit women's lives and their commendable attempts to upraise socially.

Keywords:

Dalit, castes, shudra, oppressed, suppressed, feminism, movement

Castes and Classism:

In India people of different castes and classes lived since ancient period. Four classes or Varna Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are there in the cultural history of India. The basic definition and explanation given in Hindu religion is the people engaged in education are Brahmin, fighters on battle field are Kshatriya, businessmen are Vaishya and other low level workers are known as Shudras. This classification was made on the basis of skill and ability of work, resulted in different castes as per occupation. But after thousands of year the reality became tragic with meaning that the class and caste of father should given to their children without examining occupation, skill or ability to do that work.

Dalit:

Since few decades Shudras are known as Dalit. Dalit, a word that refers ‘ground’ collects under its umbrella numerous groups that move at the margins. Etymologically, the word Dalit is derived from Sanskrit word dalita, that means 'oppressed'. In Indian socio-cultural context ‘Shudra’ or 'Dalit' are untouchables due to their low level work and the below the three classes: Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. Mahatma Gandhi has given a name ‘Harijans’ to Shudras, means people of God.

Dalit Literature Movement:

Dalit literature means the writing about dalit community or oppressed. This might be written by dalit or non-dalit. But writing of non-dalit is not accepted as ‘Dalit literature’ by dalit community. It is believed that one of the first Dalit writers in the history was Madara Chenniah, who was a cobbler saint in 11th century. He lived in the reign of Western Chalukya and was regarded by some scholars as the “father of Vachana Poetry”. There is another poet, who was Dalit by birth, Dohara Kakkaiyah but his only six confessional poems are being able to survive. Marathi Saint Chokhamela also explained the condition of oppressed through his poems (Abhanga) in 13th century. Actual Dalit Movement started in the sixty's decade by the motivation of great thinkers Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and earlier by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

not particularly for dalit but for all suppressed communities including poor Indian farmers in British Rule. This movement got the spark from the 'Black Movement' of contemporary America.

Indian Dalit literature began as a concerted movement in the 1960s, though clannish elements were visible as early in the 11th century. It began in Marathi literature and later on infiltrated to Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil literatures. Dalit writers initiated a realistic, experience based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society and in literature. The anger, sorrow and the indomitable will and hope of Dalit protagonists were offered in a tongue which is often denigrated as vulgar. The writers of different states in India share a collective relationship to a common cause, a common identity and a common political stance. Historically Dalit literature goes hand in hand with Dalit liberation movement.

One of the chief aims of Indian government since independence is to raise the living standards of the Dalits. But, in spite of India's modernization agenda dalits have been deprived of their land, their home and their fundamental rights. In many states tribal lands are being taken over by plantations, dams, social forestry and ecotourism.

Dalit caste organizations like 'Dalit Panthers of India' in Maharashtra, 'Dalit Mahasabha' in Andhra Pradesh, 'Dalit Sangharsha Samiti' in Karnataka, and 'Arundhatiyar' in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to mainstream atrocities. They demand for equitable shares in opportunities and reservation. Most of the activists are good writers as well. Dalit issues are recorded in a variety of genres- autobiographies, novels, poetry and essays. Mulik Raj Anand with his *Untouchables* pioneered the movement. Mahaswetha Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Lakshman Gayakwad, Sivakami, Poomani, Om Prakash Valmiki, Marku, Paul Chirakkaroode and Arundhati Roy walked after him. Ka. Ayothi dass Pandithar is the pioneer of the Dalit literature and Philosopher in India as well as south India.

Dalit Literature in Marathi:

Dalit Literature, which is about the oppressed according to the Indian caste system. People, who are called as Dalits in the Indian society have a history of being lived in subjugation under the high-classes of the Indian society. So they have been a marginalized, downtrodden and subaltern group from centuries. But because of the efforts of many social reformers like – Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Mahatma Gandhi, this community has also rise and been progressing day-by-day. Although, the Dalits have rise but still there many problems related to their existence in the present scenario. Dalit literature, a literature by this particular ethnic group, came into use in the 20th century in 1958, with the commencement of Dalit Conferences. The First of this kind was held at Mumbai, known as Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society), a movement driven by thinkers like Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.

There are many writers belonging to this category but the pioneer of Dalit writing in Marathi is Baburao Bagul (1930-2008). He published his first collection of stories, 'Jevha Mi Jat Charoli' (When I had Concealed My Caste) published in 1963. It is a passionate depiction of a crude society and created a stir in Marathi literature. It brought a new momentum to Dalit literature in Marathi. It is highly praised and now today, it is seen by many critics as the epic of the Dalits. It was even later adapted into a film by Marathi actor-director Vinay Apte.

Writer, like Namdeo Dhasal, founded Dalit Panther. There are many other Dalit Marathi writers like Daya Pawar, P.I. Sonkamble, Arun Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal, Annabhau Sathe, Bandhu Madhav, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gayakwad, Hari Narake, Sharankumar Limbale, Waman Nibalkar, Bhimsen Dethe, Bhau Panchbhai, Ambadas Shinde, Murlidhar Bansode, Kishor Shantabai Kale who have contributed a lot to Dalit writings. There are many other writers who have enriched Dalit literature and are still enriching it to a great extent.

Sharankumar Limbale in his one of the seminal essays entitled as 'Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose' suggests certain pivotal traits to discern the form of Dalit Sahitya and has also assayed to explain some of the basic reasons behind this paradigm shift in the literary sphere of Indian literature. Limbale while commenting on the revolutionary factor of the Dalit literature asserts: Rejection and revolt in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. ('Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose', p. 31)

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. ("Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose", p. 32)

He also confesses that because of the form, purpose and role of Dalit literature, many accusations have been made against it. 'Dalit literature has been criticized as being propagandist. It has been alleged that this literature lacks artistic finesse. It has been charged further, that their writing expresses the frenzy of a movement and does not possess neutrality and objectivity.' (p. 34-35)

But today, Dalit Literature includes not only the writings about Indian suppressed people but also other groups throughout the world that are relegated to a secondary position by the privileged classes. Dalit Literature might include writings about the exploitation of nature and environment, the racial discrimination of Afro Americans in America, the women subordination, the rights of homosexuals, the negligence of old age people. The word dalit has a large periphery and it speaks about every type of domination that any group faces. It has the healing power to cure the traumas of the past

Similarity connection of Dalit Literature:

The world literature is a mixture of reality and imagination. The words – pain, sorrow, resistance, protest, oppressed, classism, suppressed, untouchable found in every literature. So, with different names the literature of the oppressed found everywhere. For an example - African-American and Palestinian literature having some similarity with Dalit Literature of India.

African-American literature:

African-American writing or in other word what is called as 'Black writing' is an important part of literature. It is also considered as body of literature written by the writers of African descent in United States. The pioneer of this writing are Phillis Wheatney and Olaudah Equiano, who began their works in late 18th century. It has reached early high points with slave narratives of 19th century. African-American writers are considered as great writers of the world as they have been felicitated by all the best awards of the world including- Noble Prize to Tony Morrison. Walter Mosley, who is an award winning writer, is being ranked among the top writers in the United States.

Palestinian literature:

The term 'resistance' has extensively been drawn in the context of subaltern studies. Etymologically the word owes its genesis to Latin *resistere* meaning 'to take stand'. The term resistance was first applied in relation to literature in Ghassan Kanafani's work on Palestinian literature. This literature define it as a category of creative endeavors which registers strong protest against the oppressors. In this connection it is not perverse to consider dalit literature as one of the recent forms of resistance literature in India. The spurt in dalit literature is to expose issues of exploitation, discrimination, malnutrition and growing death rate of the

underprivileged sections of India: the untouchable minorities, nomadic tribes and other degraded lives. It came as a move away from the symbolic grand narratives and posed a tremendous challenge to the existing literary conventions.

Dalit Feminism

(with special reference to Tamil autobiography ‘Sangati’):

Dalit literature is a literature with its prime focus on the social marginalization of the oppressed communities like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities. Dalit literature and dalit activism became rampant in the twentieth century especially in Maharashtra and Southern India.

Autobiographies or self referential texts have always been powerful instruments for registering the presence of dalits. In Maharashtra, women dalit writers like Shantabai Kamble (Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha), Mukta Sarwagaud (Mitleli Kawada), Baby Kamble (Jina Aamcha), Mallika Amarsheikh (Mala Uddhwatha Vhayachay), Kumud Pawde (Anthasphot) throw a light on dalit feminism through their autobiography. The condition of dalit women is analogous to the situation of black women in America.

In Tamil Nadu writers like Bama, Sivakami and Poomani explored gender discrimination in their works, books and in articles. Their female protagonists are prone to psychological analyses. They are doubly victimised, as dalits and as women. It is in this context, a recent wave of dalit literature emerged as dalit feminism.

Bama is a representative writer of Dalit feminism. A laudable attempt to couple penniyam (feminism) and dalityam (dalit studies) has been recorded by Bama, whose ‘Sangati’ speaks of the hitherto unheard annals of dalit women. Through Sangati, Bama tries to bounce back the bi-fold oppression of dalit women. ‘Sangati’ is more of a celebration of dalit female identity. Bama's women are no longer subjugated; they assert their individuality through education and collective action. Their resistance - both passive and active to oppression makes Sangati a piquant depiction of the Dalit cause.

Bama's ‘Sangati’, published in 1994 in Tamil is a series of local anecdotes strung through a female narrator. Both *Sangati* and her earlier work *Karukku* exploited autobiographical elements to innovate an experimental form of writing fiction. Whereas *Karukku* is the autobiography of an individual, *Sangati* is the autobiography of a community. There are only a few self narratives of dalits in Tamil literature though a spate of autobiographies nourished Marathi literature. *Sangati* like *Karukku* is translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom and is written in a new narrative style and diction. It flouts the traditional concept of a novel. Written in an elliptical structure, it ends where it starts. The word ‘sangati’ can be literally translated into English as events. In Marathi this form is known as ‘Aatmakathan’.

‘Sangati’ is an account of some personal impressions on certain atrocious and blood curdling incidents in a dalit street. Among these incidents there is neither a story nor characterization that is often associated with a novel. The novel owes its popularity to the contributions it made in the field of both dalit literature and feminist literature. It is written in a dalit-feminist perspective. Dalit feminism is a reactionary movement against academic feminism and the universalism of the experiences of dalit male. The writings and manifestoes of different Dalit women's groups underlined the fact that the unmarked feminism of the 1970s had, in fact, been in theory and praxis a kind of Brahmanical feminism. Hailed as the first Dalit woman writer in Tamil and may be India, Bama seeks to establish a collective female identity for dalit women. The protagonist cum narrator of the novel gradually develops the awareness that they are the lowest rung in the hierarchy and that only through education they can rid of their oppressed consciousness.

In *Sangati* Bama reflects on the impoverished and violent world of dalit women. Her female characters suffer from double discrimination; they are oppressed by the so-called high caste people (which equally affects both male and female Dalits) and by Dalit males. They

constitute the majority of labourers, doing hard manual labour and engage in agricultural operations. Women participate in productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less than their male counterparts. This unequal division of labour becomes a major issue in *Sangati*. The Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system whereby dalit men who themselves are marginalized by the upper class land owners, in turn marginalize dalit women. "It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands" (*Sangati* - p 65)

Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. Bama as a young girl understands the crafty nature of gender games they play. Girls are not allowed to play the games of boys. While games like 'kabaddi' and 'marbles' are meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters. Elders consider boys as permanent members in a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children are transient members who are to be transplanted to another family and so have no role to play in their families. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents.

Two of the stories that Bama reminds is that of Mariamma and Thayi whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the dalit predicament. They are ill treated and beaten up daily by their husbands. Mariamma is humiliated by her father, assaulted by the landlord and later tormented by her husband. She is a true representative of the entire community of the submissive dalit women. She never resents her tormentors. She is unjustly accused of being intimate with a village boy and summoned to the village meeting. Even though the whole village knows that she is not guilty, nobody had the courage to defend her. The women are prevented from speaking in village meetings and the men do not possess the courage to stand erect before the upper class and question them.

Bama realizes that women occupy a claustrophobic space in the world and are constantly under menace. They are not safe in their home, agricultural fields, in church and even in public spheres. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassments in the field of work. Family, church and caste-courts are usually male-led. Justice and rules for behavior are different for men and women. While Mariamma pays 200 rupees as fine, Manikkam pays only 100 rupees for an equal offence.

Dalit women resort to variegated tools for survival. While Mariamma accepts what comes to her, Pecchiamma protests by walking on without her husband. Language is one of the effective tools they deploy against their oppressors. The folkloric native language of the dalits itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. To this Bama added a language of human rights articulated by her liberated protagonist. This new language of political resistance also includes a free use of abusive terms. Women give vent to their feelings by calling their neighbours abusive names or shouting the names of their body parts. This, for them, is an effective defence mechanism to maintain their psychological equilibrium.

Bama's chosen village includes Parayars, Pallars, Koravars and Chakkiliyars. Among these only the parayars have been converted into Christianity. This coerced conversion brought nothing but economic deprivation because they had lost their right to reservation. The popular education scheme promised by the Christian priests becomes a poor substitute for economic self sufficiency. The children could not attend the school since they have to assist their parents in work. Within the subdivisions of dalit community there is caste-hierarchy. In matters of marriage and love women are discriminated. Parayar women do not have the right to marry a man from the Pallar, Koravar or Chakkiliyar community. On the other hand men have the right to marry whoever they like.

Bama also draws a comparison between dalit and non dalit women. According to her the dalit situation is better than that of upper class women who have been forced to live in

most vulnerable conditions. Upper class women find no way to express their pent up emotions. Bama feels proud that their women have economic freedom from their men folk; they work hard in the fields and match box factories and rear up their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates a widow from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotions within the four walls of their mansions. Even the male members of the dalit community have their own defence systems. Since they cannot protest against their landlords they show their strengths at home on their wives and children. Women, as a result, suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppression in nights. The narrator's grandmother who is the general commentator of the events in the novel explains their plight: We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel. (Sangati p 6)

Bama identifies instances of early child marriage, poverty, lack of proper health care and sanitation and lack of education as certain barriers impeding women from coming out of their subdued state.

The child narrator in the early chapters grows melancholic and rebellious due to the events happening around her. When she grows into a young woman she stresses on the need for a radical change and calls out for action against the exigencies of her companions. She exhorts them to take pride of their caste and march towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labour, their spirit of protest, their culture's absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator's courageous grandmother who pawned her thali to feed her children, Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about Marriamma who came back to work even after she met with an accident. But they have been silenced in the crucial moments of their lives. Their protests are nipped in the very bud. When Bama's protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, she replies, "From your ancestors' times it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you've learnt a few letters of the alphabet?"

This is the climax of story. There is no change in dalit feminism today. The need is to stand by dalit women themselves against this double discrimination by pen on paper or movement on road.

Conclusion:

The earliest records of Indian civilization are preserved in Aryan or Hindu scriptures. The early Indian society was constructed around Varnasrama Dharma, a labour based division of castes in India that inevitably brought racial prejudices. The Brahmins were the topmost in the pecking order. The Shudras were destined to serve the three upper ladders, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. They remain the 'untouchables' in society. They have been accepted as Scheduled Castes in the Indian constitution after the British use of the phrase. Gandhiji and Ambedkar used two different terms to name them- Harijan and Dalit. Their efforts have brought about an upliftment in their social status. They also encouraged education of the Dalits that ultimately lead to a new writing.

Dalit Movement started in the sixty's decade by the motivation of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. It brought a new momentum to Dalit literature in Marathi. Rejection and revolt in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits pain. African-American and Palestinian literature having some similarity with Dalit Literature of India. Factor of Classism is everywhere in world.

Dalit Feminism is more than in any other community. Dalit women are doubly victimised, as dalits and as women. Bama, first Dalit woman writer in Tamil narrated autobiography of her community in 'Sangati'. The beginning of the novel displays a state of

depression and hopelessness of the dalit women; but the latter part reveals the vigour, courage and the resilience of women even in the midst of all misery. They face the problems by their solidarity. They chatter and laugh to forget their sorrows; they celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator finally becomes free of the clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. But it is striking to note that she had to hide her caste name out of fear of repercussions. Even when there are more educated and self reliant women among the dalits the cult of violence still continues to trouble their lives.

The only solution is that the dalit women has to protest strongly against this double discrimination and to destroy the barriers from coming out of their subdued state in all manner, through pen on paper or a movement on road.

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