

Quest for A Better Tomorrow: Tracking Dalit Literature from Protest to a Genre

Dr. Swagata Sarkar

Assistant Professor,
 Department of History,
 Kulti College, Kulti,
 Paschim Bardhaman, West Bengal.

Silence that prevails in Indian History and theory about the Dalits has often gone unnoticed in the intellectual sphere. Literature of the Dalits (questionably from the perpetrators of *Dalithood*) from the privileged metropolitan intellectual sphere fail to fill in the gap that exists between those “within the *circle* and those outside it”. It is the personal experiences and their day to day suffering that find expression in their writings and that enrich their literature to produce significant critical contribution to Indian society, history, culture and of course literature.

The marginalized no longer enjoy the sympathy and compassion that is attached to them in the popular writings if ever at all they were given a certain space. Dalits have sought to find their way from bitter memories to better dreams making their pens the weapon in battlefield of literature. Dalit literature is not a simply literature, it is associated with a movement to change the social dictums. It is a new perspective which is intended to give a new society. It is a new literary zeal with fresh concern.

This paper is a humble effort to view Dalit literature, its different genres and its rise, growth and development, leaving behind a positive impact thus laying the path to the ultimate emancipation of the marginalized.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, marginalized, experiences, movement, emancipation, genre.

Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit panther movement, writes: “Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”¹

For ages, we have come to know of the depressed from the privileged. Premchand wrote of Dukhi, Mulk Raj Anand of Bakha, Arundhati Roy of Velutha and Freeman of Muli. But revolutions occur when Dukhi, Bakha, Velutha and Muli decide to relate their own tales. Over the past few decades, a Dalit literary movement has provided invaluable first hand experiences of life and times of this out-cast’ e’ community. In doing so, these writers are also re-scripting the conceptions of Indian society and history while challenging prevailing literary conventions.

The word Dalit is similar to the Marathi word *dalan* i.e. crushed. As A.C.Lai said in his opening address at the Dalit Solidarity Conference, Nagpur: The word Dalit is a beautiful word, because it embraces the sufferings, frustrations, expectations, and groaning of the entire cosmos.² Etymology of the word ‘Dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘Dalita’ and it means ‘broken’. First used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile “Un-

touchable” castes of the twice-born Hindus, later the term came into prominence in 1972. A group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers to express their feelings of kinship and solidarity with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-American rights in the U.S.A. When they took recourse to express their feelings through pen and paper it is only then the world got what is today referred as Dalit literature. It is not merely a literary enterprise it is personal experience of the creators which distinguishes them from the mainstream literature that often take recourse to imagination and myths. Keeping in mind their inadequate representation in the world of letters, Dalits are undoubtedly minority writers. It is their day to day struggle that provide them with intellectual clarity, thinking power and self confidence. When these parameters are fulfilled, they receive the recognition in the mainstream literature, despite their social and economic hurdles which they rightly deserve.

Maharashtra was arguably the birthplace of Dalit literature. The responsibility was arguably first shouldered by Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar. In Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, we have not only a crusader against the caste system, a valiant fighter for the cause of the downtrodden in India but also an elder statesman and national leader whose contribution in the form of the Constitution of India and as a social reformer, activist and of course Dalit writer, will be cherished forever by posterity. He said: “If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.... An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts.”³ He had laid the path and later the revolution soon spread to other parts of India. Credit goes to Professor Gangadhar Pantabane of Aurungabad University to introduce the coinage ‘Dalit Literature’. The literary discourses of the exploited section started by exposing the age old exploitation of the casteist Hindu society. In fact Marathi Dalit writings were mostly found to be autobiographical. Their experiences are heart breaking and shocking that send shivers down ones backbone. Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *akkarmashi*, Outcaste, brings tears to our eyes when we come to know that his mother was raped thrice for a handful of rice. They are untouchables but only to suit the purpose of the dictators. Limbale was a product of such an illegal sexual union and his accounts can never match that of an outsider.⁴ The atrocities against the Dalits hardly come to the forefront. James Freeman’s *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*, does not depict a typical untouchable, but what he shares with others of his caste is a restricted range of options of life styles determined by a common physical, economic, and social environment. His subalternity, determined by his masters, the privileged of the society to which he belongs, yet remains secluded. Here too we find what Limbale had observed-----A Brahman may not eat with a Bauri but he never hesitates to have illicit relations with the Bauri women. Muli’s story reveals how these women fell prey to high caste greed. Even Muli was used by these men to serve their purpose. Muli did not hesitate to play a pimp of a young Bauri prostitute so as to win the friendship of the high caste men but in reality he could not erase his untouchability.⁵ I have referred to this book mainly to establish the insights of the Dalits’ life from an outsider, who after all does not belong to any of the Varnas and thus provides an unprejudiced representation of the reality. In *Poisoned Bread:Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, edited by Arjun Dangle⁶ further create an awareness of Dalit experiences. L.S. Rokade’s poem *To be or Not to be* clearly brings out the dilemma of birth in a Dalit if at all he is given the option to decide his faith. Born amidst abundance he represents the section that struggles in life with empty fists.⁷ Another autobiographical exercise, this time from a women is ‘The Story of My Sanskrit’ by Kumud Pawde⁸ where she was denied a job with her maiden identity. It was only after an intercaste marriage to a higher cast family that she could earn a living as a teacher in a college. Indeed the caste of her maiden status remains deprived. E.M.Foster was right in the preface to the novel, *Untouchable* when he says the untouchables like Bakha, the hero of the novel

is worse off than a slave, latter may change his master and may one day enjoy freedom but for these poor men there is no escape as they continue to live in filth and squalor for generations.⁹ They are indeed outcast'e' whether carrying a Dalit corpse or a Dalit religious procession the boundaries are set and well maintained. So is the case of Dalit literature. They are never amalgamated into the mainstream literary discourses and the stigma of *Dalitism* continues to cast its spectre. It is the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and probably for the Dalits, as others seldom pay their due respect to such scholarship.

The wave of Marathi literature also influenced their Friends in Karnataka. The Bandaya movement was active enough to protest against any physical and social torment. Siddalingaiah, professor in Bangalore University, his poetry gives us an insight into the Dalit social life. He was a founder of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, which launched a powerful Dalit movement in Karnataka in the mid-1970s. He obtained a doctoral degree from Bangalore University for his research on village deities. His publications include *Gramadevathegalu*, a study of village deities in Karnataka, *Ooru-Keri*, an influential autobiography, and collections of poetry, essays and speeches. In *Ooru Keri* he emphasises that education is the basis of human life. Siddalingaiah also expresses his agony when he says: "Some little children beat up their parents when they felt hungry. A boy called Ramu hadn't the least respect for his father.-. When people asked him (Ramu) about his father's health, he would say indifferently, "He isn't dead yet." ¹⁰ It was poverty, hunger ostracism and day to day struggles that rid the Dalits of their dignity and respect even for their parents. The various other literary productions are marked by anguish and protest against the hypocritical attitude of the upper caste society. His poems are dominated by exploitative social hierarchy. Other writers like H. Govindaiya, K. Ramaiya and many others have reflected folk traditions in their poetry. Geeta Devi noted Dalit female writer also had to cross several hurdles to make her point in the literary field.

In Bengal though caste has never featured as in other parts of he country. Bengalis have preferred to hide it under the garb of filth and squalor. Presently the Dalit Sahitya movement has made great strides in Bengal. Such literature which evolves from the hearts of the writers sought to bring a fundamental change in the upper caste psyche. In fact Bengal Dalit Sahitya Sanstha has given an able leadership in the literary crusade in Bengal. Manohar Mouli Biswas emphasises the significance of Ravanisation and Karnaisation of the epics, thus rightly projecting the mental world of the Dalit writers. Works of Mahasweta Devi have become the harbinger of an awakening and a promoter of the freedom of the marginalised to question, rebel and reinterpret the established cannons of authority. Though not a Dalit herself Mahasweta Devi has got under the skin of the readers by asking them to interrogate the cannon as well as the notions of exploitation, victimisation, female sexuality and resistance. So what stays in the reader's mind at the end are the brutally scarred yet supple sensibilities of her creations, the brittleness of their selves and the wretchedness of the response to those situations they find themselves in. To me she may not be categorised as minority writer but her literary zeal definitely contributed to promotion of Dalit literature in Bengal. Like Bengalis, Tamil literature is barely two decades old. Though denied a mere status of a human being, in literature and philosophy their contribution has evoked penetrative thoughts. The Dalit Samaj in Tamil Nadu was effective in publishing pamphlets, little magazines to create social awareness. A large number of Dalit magazines marked a fruitful beginning to this venture. The publishing houses Vilimbu and Vidial greatly helped in the prosperity of Dalit literature. The Hindi belt too is witness to Dalit literary expression. The autobiographical expressions of Dalit writers were infact weapons for Dalit assertion against social ostracism. Historical backdrop to Dalit Sahitya may be traced back to

the times of Kabir and Ruidas. The venture continues, and presently Dalit writers of several provinces have presented their side of the story.

Though Dalit literature has made great strides and has moved ahead from mere expression of protest to a style of its own distinct from conventional western autobiographies, yet one cannot ignore the role of translations from one language to other Indian languages. It is not only India but even the greater world had taste of the literary expertise of the Dalit intelligence, their outlook, and their aesthetics. Most of the English translations revolutionised contemporary approaches to culture. The personal anguish and suffering got sublimated through the creative process and the *Wretched of the Earth* turned out to be *blessed of the Earth*.¹¹ Often such translations have raised the aesthetic value of the writings and allowed it to reach large sections of the populations. However, often the translators have threatened to present a newer version of the literature owing to their different socio political rearing. It is true that earlier protagonists in Dalit literature lived within a closed community and mobility too was difficult, later things changed and with more exposure their outlook altered and texts turned to be more liberated. Phule and later Ambedkar has set the trends and modern Dalit writers like Limbale, Dangle and Biswas has carried the torch ahead. Dalit writers shoulder a responsibility of presenting a better future for the coming generations. As Elie Wiesel referring to the Holocaust had viewed that the past should never become their future.¹² It is often argued that the upper caste has achieved in literature what they could not in real life, a complete silencing of the untouchable, if not its total erasure.¹³ They were denied any space in the intellectual sphere. Even in the literary field they belong to the *pancham varna*, dwelling outside the borders of literary society. Those who were included just could not be ignored. The power and impact of their work ensured them in the literary history. If this may be accepted then the responsibility of the protagonists of the depressed is doubled---- to protest in actuality and seek its redress through literature.

Analysing present literature it may be referred as 'reformist-enlightenment'. The 'stalwarts' of *Brahmanical* literature now sought to entertain them with a spirit of sympathy and compassion. They are misrepresented as objects of pity rather than contributors by their own mastery in the subject. Colonialism, industrialism, emergence of bourgeoisie has ushered in a change in literature. Ideas of rationalism and Enlightenment contributed to the shift of the mindset and instilled in the oppressed the confidence to fight centuries of *confinement*. Earlier writer-activists were inclined on collaboration but present writers have marched ahead to develop the confidence to fight the *objectionable* even though it may come from the dominators. Academics often choose to misunderstand Kancha Ilaiah owing to his explosive writing. In his book *Why I am not a Hindu*, he argues that Hinduism, with its focus on upper caste gods, values, and culture, is a patriarchal and fascist religion.¹⁴ Ilaiah avoids the high moral ground of the typical 'westernised' intellectual. He hits straight at the point and is almost always provocative, going against the current. The fact is that he is too original a thinker to be reduced to a stereotype. A staunch Dalit-Bahujan activist, it is impossible to ignore Kancha Ilaiah and his concept of Buffalo nationalism, even if one hates his guts.¹⁵

Apart from this social perspective, Dalit literature, whose beginning is usually traced in the social ostracism, oppression and injustice, has significantly marked itself away from the mainstream in ways that have come to challenge many aesthetic categories of conventional writing. Far from being plagiaristic, this new literature has developed in response to mainstream challenges on the aesthetic front and also, more importantly, has grown out of its own internal demand for finding formal and generic properties suitable for the depiction of the society at large. They claim their literature to be unique and distinct with an aesthetic genre. It is not imaginative but life affirming and realistic, thus liable for a respectable status. However the critiques have contemplated the social system, while the

literary evaluation goes unattended. Those who have chosen to give them a space, the approach is Humanistic sympathy, which looms large on the literary aesthetics. But such an attitude is not what the Dalits appreciate. Panthers had stood against the Gandhian notion of the harmless and pitiful 'Harijan' victim. The emergence of Dalit writers, critics, lyricists, theatre artists, have chosen to voice the forgotten and forsaken narratives of oppression and resistance, in order to address their discrimination, contributing to a debate in the civil society.

Aravind Malgatti, a noted Kannada literary figure was probably right when he said "Dalit literature has evolved over the years to such levels that it has virtually become the backbone of modern Kannada literature,"¹⁶ He felt that Dalit literature has acted as the sorcerer's stone of Indian writing. Whenever it has come into contact with the main body of literature in any language, it has turned it into gold. If not the backbone, presently it is surely an indelible part of mainstream literature. Its subtlety are so universal in nature that it would hardly be an overstatement to refer it as the soul of modern Indian writing.

The movement has marched ahead and every university in India has Dalit texts on its curriculum. And now, the academic interest has gone global with the texts making their way into universities in the US, the UK, Canada and France. Britain's Nottingham Trent University and Universite Paul-Valery Montpellier, France in June 2014 together started a study that aims to "bring Dalit literature to new audiences".¹⁷ Beyond the borders Dalit studies strive in an important way to offer a corrective to the 'idea of India' as "caste-free".¹⁸

Much is still to be achieved to give ultimate shape to the efforts of the Dalit activists writers. The endeavours have placed this literary genre on the national and international perspective. This article is a humble effort on my part to present a preliminary overview of the efforts of the few among the depressed to voice their cause and narrate their anguish to the world unaware of their servitude, their insult and above all their assertion to the greater world. Indeed though I hardly have any such frustrating experience in life yet while reading about and knowing them personally I would like to end with words of Mahasweta Devi.

'I will have a sense of fulfilment if more and more young writers took to unbeaten tracks. My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness. A curtain that separates the mainstream society from the poor and the deprived.... It is important that we all make an attempt to tear the curtain of darkness, see the reality that lies beyond and see our own true faces in the process.'¹⁹

¹ Dangle Arjun.ed,"Poisoned Bread,Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature." Orient Longman,1992.p265 cited in Omprakash Valmiki, *Jootham,A Dalit's Life*,translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Samya.2003.

²Lai,A.C. Opening Address: Dalit Solidarity Conference in Dalit Solidarity Ed.Bhagwan Das and James Massey, New Delhi: ISPCCK, 1995.p xiii

³ Ambedkar,B.R.. "Annihilation of Caste,the Annotated Critical Edition.",Ed. Navayana,2015

⁴ Limbale Sharan Kumar."The Outcaste.",Translated by Santosh Bhomkar, Oxford University Press. 2008.

⁵.Freeman, James M. "Untouchable , An Indian Life History."Stanford University Press .1979.

⁶ Dangle Arjun.Ed,"Poisoned Bread,Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature." Orient Longman,1992

⁷ Rokade L.S. "To be or not to be born."Translated Shanta Gokhale. *Poisoned Bread*. Ed. Arjun Dangle. Orient Longman, Bombay, 1992. Ind,1994.

⁸ Pawde,Kumud "The Story of My Sanskrit."in K.Satyanarayana,Susie Tharu Ed.*The Exercise of Freedom,an Introduction to Dalit Writing*,Navayana, 2013..p83.

⁹Anand,Mulk Raj. “Untouchable.”Penguin.2001

¹⁰Siddalingaiah. “Ooru Keri.”,Sahitya Academi,2003. p37

¹¹FanonFrantz. “Les Damnes de La Terre.” translated by Constance Farrington, ,Gove Press,1963

¹²Wiesel, Elie . “All Rivers Run to the Sea.” Schoken Books Inc.2006, translated by Marion Wiesel,Hill and Wand,1960.

¹³Limbale, Sharan Kumar. “Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature,History ,Controversies and contributions. translated by Alo Mukherjee,Orient Blackswan.Reprinted 2016.p4

¹⁴Ilaiah, Kancha. “Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy.” Samya.Kolkata.1996

¹⁵Ilaiah, Kancha. “Buffalo Nationalism: A critique of Spiritual Fascism.” Samya,Kolkata,2004

¹⁶The Hindu, March 14, 2011, www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp.../dalit-literature...indian.../article1536026.ece,

¹⁷Times of India,Martand Kaushik ,Apr 5, 2015,timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/.../Dalit-literature-goes-global

¹⁸Times of India,Kaushik Martand ,Apr 5, 2015,timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/.../Dalit-literature-goes-global

¹⁹Mahasweta Devi’s speech while receiving Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997.