

Politics of Hegemony: A Study of Lakshman Gaekwad's *UCALYA*

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Abstract

Dalit literature, as the name suggests, is the writings that are about Dalits. It is that literature that artistically depicts the sorrow, ridicule, degradation, tribulations and poverty endured by the Dalit community. The word 'Dalit' is not a new one. Its origin can be traced back to the 1930s when it was used as a Hindi and Marathi translation of "Depressed Classes", a term the British used for what we now call the Scheduled Castes. The word Dalit encompasses all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, the Adivasis, landless farm labourers and tenants, workers, the marginalized communities and nomadic and criminal tribes.

Every human being has the right to liberty, honour, security and freedom from persecution and intimidation by the powerful elements of the social setup. These values are now being expressed in a particular genre of literature called Dalit literature. The underlying motive of dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. It regards the human beings as supreme and as such this literature is full of humanity's joys and sorrows. It leads them towards total revolution.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Depressed classes, Untouchable, Criminal tribes

Theorising Hegemony

The Hindu religious scripts are full of commands that denigrate the dignity and self esteem of the dalits. For instance, right from ancient times, the dalit's shadow, touch and speech have been considered impure. They are tagged as untouchables and guilty from birth. Dalits were not permitted to accumulate property or wear gold ornaments, they had to live outside the boundary of the village and use only shrouds for clothing. Furthermore, they were supposed to take food only in clay utensils and take inauspicious, crude and unrefined names. In short,

the Hindu religious order relegated them to the status of mere slaves without an identity of their own.

For thousands of years, dalits have been kept away from power, property and position. They were made to believe that 'God created this hierarchy' so that they may not rebel against this social order. Generations of dalits have continued to suffer this injustice.

The dalits came to understand their pathetic existence following the stands taken by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. In a short span of time, Ambedkar became their hero and the anguish of entire outcaste society voiced through him. This anguish and frustration became the seed for dalit literature. It is not the suffering of any one person, neither is it of just one or two days; instead it is the anguish of thousands of people experienced over thousands of years. As such, it is expressed collectively. It has assumed a social character, owing to the fact that this anguish and frustration is not that of an individual but that of the entire depressed classes.

The primary aim of dalit literature is the emancipation, empowerment and the liberation of dalits. The dalit struggle against the evil tradition of casteism has a long history. For instance, in Kannada, it begins with the first Vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the Cobbler. The 12th century dalit saint Kalavve fought the upper caste through his poetry in the following words :

Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish

Such, they call caste people

Those who eat the sacred cow

That showers frothing milk for Shiva:

Such, they call outcastes

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar, Dalit literature prospered in Maharashtra but before the name came into being in the 1960s, writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, and Shankarrao Kharat were already creating Dalit literature. In its early form, it developed out of a progressive movement called Little Magazine which was pioneered by some rebellious, educated youth against the establishment.

These dalit youths drew inspiration from the black literature in the distant land of North America. This rebellion and protest was first expressed in a new literature called Dalit literature. The dalit writers resorted to a plethora of genres like poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies to provide useful insights on the question of Dalit identity.

The outcaste communities got a fresh lease of life by coming up with the perspective ‘Dalit is dignified’ thereby quashing the subhuman status imposed on them by the Hindu religious order.

It is worthwhile to say that Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literature theories which were full of upper caste ideologies and shed light on the neglected aspects of life. It is experience based and not speculation based. Thus for Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as propounded by the Hindu metaphysical theory. That is why authenticity has become the characteristic of Dalit literature. The Dalit writers employ the language of the marginalised and downtrodden in the Indian society. As a result of the anger and outcry against the continuous, age old exploitation by the upper caste, the literary expression of the Dalit writers can be seen as very sharp and incisive.

The experiences articulated in dalit literature are unique to itself; in other words they have not been expressed in any other kind of literature. They are the experiences of one single community; they constitute a rebellion against the religious diktats and tradition as well as hypocrisy disguising under names such as freedom or democracy. They express the agony of the human beings who are reduced to a slave-like existence. They exhort respect for the Buddhist value of treating human as human.

Hegemony is the political, economic or military subjugation of one community by another. In ancient Greece, hegemony denoted the political and military dominance of a city state over other city states. In 19th century, the word meant the “social or cultural domination by one group within a society”. Later it came to mean “a regime that exerts arbitrary influence within a society”. The Marxist notion of cultural hegemony, pioneered by Antonio Gramsci, is the idea that the ruling disposition can control the value system and beliefs of a society, so that their view becomes the world view. Gramsci uses the word hegemony to mean “the ways in

which the ruling dispensation acquires the consent of the people whom it subjugates to its rule”.

Narrativising Hegemony

“The Branded”, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1988 is a translation of Laxman Gaekwad’s Marathi novel *Ucalya*. The novel has been translated into English by P.A. Kolharkar. Himself belonging to the Ucalya community, Gaekwad narrates the predicaments and sorrows of his community. He resists the oppressive structures that brand the Ucalyas as born criminals. They are deprived of any respectable means of livelihood and survive by thieving, looting and pick pocketing.

Lakshman Gaekwad introduces his subhuman existence to the readers of the very beginning of the novel *Ucalya*- “No native place, No birth date, no house or farm, No caste either. That is how I was born. In an Ucalya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur”(4). Belonging to a genre of literature known as resistance literature, *Ucalya* sheds light on the gross injustices and atrocities faced by the Ucalya community. The novel portrays a world where one has to survive merely on water continuously for days. People often consume cats, rats, roots and leaves as food. Life in Ucalya community is not worthy of living. Laxman’s personal struggle represents the plight of the entire Ucalya community. Just like all other writings, the novel is full of Dalit consciousness.

The novel traces the plight of Ucalya community branded as “criminal tribes” in the All India Criminal tribes Act of 1871. This nomadic “denotified tribe” is made to undergo all kinds of brutal treatment by the ruling disposition. The Ucalya have been relegated to the dark world of ignorance, poverty, crudity and prejudice. Thus the Ucalya are reduced to the status of outcastes. The stigma of criminal tribe remains with them as inborn identity. The Ucalyas make a living by resorting to thieving, pilfering and pick pocketing. Laxman Gaekwad narrates the story of his childhood afflicted by poverty, illiteracy and the contempt shown by the society towards his community. He gives a comprehensive picture of their pathetic existence:

“On getting up in the morning we never washed the coverlet but spread it on the roof to dry. The piss smell filled out nostrils with a strong odour, yet we used the same sodden coverlet.

Our senses were dead and we were beyond tellings. The coverlet teemed with lice. When we killed them, Harchanda and I kept the count mostly up to hundred or two hundred and then gave up..... I did not take a bath for months, nobody from the household ever told me to take a bath. Washing clothes was not even thought of (The Branded 11 – 12)”.

Gaekwad recalls the nomadic life of his childhood when he and his family wandered from place to place while fighting poverty, starvation and exploitation. When the law forbids the Ucalyas all other vocations, the parents beat their children to teach them thieving techniques. Parents train their children not only for pilferage but also for beatings by the police. If they were caught by the police, the money demanded for bail often forced the family members to borrow from money lenders. And as they borrow money at very high rates of interest, they again turn to stealing to pay off their debts.

Being denied of basic rights on account of their lowly birth the Ucalyas are coerced into a hellish existence. The only option to guard themselves against starvation was to pursue their age – old profession. They give training of thieving profession. The training of young boys and girls would begin with their beating. They were made to undergo physical tortures so that they may not reveal others names. One would be allowed to start the job only after proper training. If anyone failed after the training period, there was severe punishment far that person. Laxman recalls how one day Manikdada was arrested by police, tortured and forced to disclose all the names. His community people abused him: “you bastard, F**k your mother, you cower in fear like vanes (Merchants) and bammans (Brahmins). When caught red – handed, you disclosed the name of the entire gang. You have brought shame upon us and tarnished the names of the tribe of thieves” (6). They beat him sixes and sevens. Then Santaram threw him on the burning sand. Further, Santaram turned him on his stomach and started kicking him mercilessly. “Dada screamed and yelled like an animal being put to death. The mid – day sun had baked the sand hot with its intense heat. On such burning sand they had thrown Manikdada naked, and were kicking him viciously with their boots. Dada’s front and back had turned blood – red (Gaekwad 7)

Gaekwad recollects an incident involving his grandfather, who was a well respected thief in their tribe: “one day while picking the money with a blade, he mistakenly gave a deep cut in the stranger’s body from buttocks to the waist. The man groaned in pain as the blood gushed

from wound” (Gaekwad 1). The police arrested him and inquired: “ Tell us where you’ve hidden the stolen money and gold, show or we’ll smash your bones” (2). Grandfather wailed piteously: “See saab, see for yourself, there is nothing in the hut”. The police replied: “Your whore will know”. They grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over (Gaekwad 2). The police beat whomsoever they saw including women and children.

But Gaekwad shows the courage to resist these oppressive forces – the unjust laws, police and money lenders to provide dignity and self esteem to him and his community. Even though his grandparents and brother relied on pilferage, his parents earn by respectable means (Branded 1 – 4).

In fact his father Martand, gives Laxman a slate and pencil instead of a Bharat blade; in doing so he challenges the hierarchies of caste / class and knowledge. Martand realises that in order to earn a living, a child must learn to read and write.

Even though Martand faces the opposition of the higher castes and of his own community, still he sends Laxman to school. He does not allow his son to go for thieving trips with his maternal grandfather Sayabu Tata due to the old man’s dirty eating habits (9). Whenever someone in the family eats a cat, mouse or fish, Martand punishes him / her. Martand proves to be a person who preserves the values of truth, honesty and hard work. He strongly opposes the belief of the community that education is futile for an Ucalya. When he is met with threats of ostracism from his own tribe, he seeks the intervention of the Panchayath and Kulkarni Guruji.

Gaekwad lived in a thatched hut with his parents, four brothers and two sisters. Since the family did not have sufficient source of income, sometimes they did not even get one square meal a day. Gaekwad, the youngest member of the family was entrusted the responsibility to take care of his immediate elder brother Harchanda, who was mentally ill. He criticises the so called egalitarian set up of the country which speaks about equality, fraternity and liberty among all its citizens but in practice it holds a very discriminatory, biased and oppressive attitude towards the people of his community even today. Gaekwad further writes:

When I used to open the textbook for Marathi on the first page, I used to see: “India is my country; all Indians are my brothers and sisters. I am proud of its rich and varied heritage”. I

used to wonder why if all this were true, we were beaten with false allegations of theft, when in fact we had committed no theft; why they beat my mother, pulled at her sari and asked her to hand it over alleging it to be stolen property. Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thief's community (Branded 7).

Gaekwad regrets about being born into the Ucalya community which were branded as "Criminal tribes" and also recognised as untouchable all over the country and Maharashtra in particular. The upper caste people never mingle with them and treat them with the feeling of hatred and contempt. The mere touch of Ucalyas are considered as impure by the higher caste people. Gaekwad further criticises the tie – up between the upper caste people and the police which inflicts unending misery upon the Ucalyas. He says it is this alliance that in a way forces them to go for thieving trips. He further goes on to narrate the economic exploitation of the Ucalyas by the local money lenders in the Latur district of Maharashtra.

As a person who has seen from close quarters the oppressions, exploitations and atrocities inflicted upon his community, Gaekwad takes a serious concern for the welfare of his community. Wherever any sort of atrocity or injustice happens to his community, he immediately reaches there, sympathises with the victims and does everything for the swift delivery of justice. He writes:

But i feel sad to see that people from the Nomadic and denotified tribes are still looked upon as thieves by the police and society. Their houses are regularly searched, even their broken and hole ridden utensils are confiscated. Not even a simple enquiry is held in respect of officers who amass enormous wealth ad properties well beyond their legitimate means and income. This is my experience from very close quarters (Branded 10).

The novel is an attempt to expose all the prejudices against the Ucalya community and make the readers know that they too are entitled to all the rights to join the social mainstream. The tone of the novel is frank, candid and militant. He does not adhere to the rules that are to be followed while writing a novel; he simply tries to dispel the misconceptions and prejudice about the Ucalyas. Since there is no systematic historical and sociological study available on

these tribes, he presents his autobiography in such a way that the readers get a comprehensive picture about the Ucalyas.

Laxman exposes the hegemonic strategies that are employed against the Ucalyas to subjugate them. He tells how right from school, the language, mode of expression and role models all are provided by the hegemonic circle of Brahmins; there is not an iota of their original language, culture and traditions in that. The following lines shed light on the embarrassment he faces in his school. He does not complain to the teachers as they make him feel worse:

“When I went to school, the boys in my class sniggered at me. They mocked decisively: Lakshya, Patharut boy, has come to school! I used to sit in a corner meekly as if I had been forcibly dragged there.... some of the boys in the school used to call me Lachhmantata, Crabcurry Khataa (34)

In short, in Ucalya Lakshman regrets about the past and present suffering of his community who continue to live in the same condition. He critiques the entire social, economic, political and religious environment of the country, which in spite of promising all kinds of justice against the oppression and exploitation for the dalit community, have always discriminated and sidelined them. Today, Gaekwad is committed to his long – cherished dream of creating a space where there is equality, liberty and social justice for dalits and other downtrodden sections of the society. He ends his autobiographical narrative with a demand for abolishment of all social and legal restrictions, social justice, rights and transformation of Ucalya community as a whole in the existing social milieu of the country.

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