

Annihilating the wall of Dalit seclusion: A cognitive study, aided by the Vedantic Discourse

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Abstract :

The post-globalisation scenario well analyses the portrayal of the secluded Dalits' socio-economic-political exploitations, a national issue since 1947. Baburao Bagul and Meena Kandasami are names that have emerged as veritable vanguard of the various iterations of Dalit discourse. The paper shall be an attempt to critically examine the location of the Dalit consciousness within the subtext of Baburao Bagul's poem '*Before The Vedas*' and Meena Kandasami's '*Advaita : The Ultimate Question*' which posits an unfettered non-hierarchical plentitude of creation. Throughout the ages Indian classical scriptures have often been dissected with casteist dictums but Baburao and Kandasami present subversive visions of boundless creation that strictly defy and moreover question the prevelant social hierarchy. The paper aims to trace the poets' postulation of an epistemic alterity in the face of normatively received theological ambits of power, echoing the line from **The Upanishad** :

II Sarvani bhutani antyeiba abhuut II

(The one Eternal patulous soul manifests itself in all forms of life.)

The poem looks back to the state of Universal celebration of human agency irrespective of class distinctions. Supporting Aravind Malagatti's words, "Dalit is a way of thinking" my paper shall deal with this particular poem along with references to the works of other active members of the Dalit-Panther group-Namdeo Dhassal and Arun Kamble, simultaneously drawing from *The Upanishad*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu : A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* and also Alok Mukherjee's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, Controversies and Considerations*.

Key words: Dalit literature, Self-identity, *Upanishad* , *Manusmriti*, B.R.Ambedkar, social structure.

Introduction :

Our understanding of 'Personhood' is relative to the frameworks of understanding of the Self that vary from cultures to circumstances. In the Vedic tradition the Self is taken as a potent prevailing and distinguished identity, that is free from all the bondages, caste, creed, race and gender. It is unaffected by any natural and physical obstacle, it is immortal, and the mover of the object called body. If it comes out from the gross body, all five elements which constitute the body, amalgamate it in nature and the soul acquires a new garb. To quote from the Bhagvad Gita:

II Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya navani grihnati naro parani Tatha sarirani vihaya jiranny anyani samayati navani dehi II

(Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul casting off worn-out bodies and taking on others that are new.)

But contrary to this, the group or rather the section called Dalits, since ages has been forcefully deprived of the 'Self'. Religion was alien for them and so were its benediction. They were haunted by fear of pollution and abomination. The Bhagawadgeeta too articulates the importance of "karma" in determining one's caste which was never envisaged as determined by birth, but determined by one's propensity and inclinations towards the kind of work one wants to learn and perform. To quote Lord Krishna :

II Chaaturvarnam mayaasrishtam gunakarma vibhagasa II

Dronacharya was a Brahmin by birth but chose to be a Kshatriya though unfortunately discriminating against both Eklavya as well as Karna . When one peeps in the pre-Ambedkarian India, the condition of Dalits was miserable. The Manuvadi philosophy of culture and society didn't allow them to stand on the platform of human beings. Divested of humanity and thereby Self (I, MY, ME, WE, OUR, US) Dalits, galvanised by Ambedkar's ideology and bolstered by self-confidence, tried to make their presence felt in all quarters of life. In this way they not only subverted their chattel like status but also established their presence with dignity. The word "Dalit" literally means "oppressed". Etymologically speaking, the word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit word Dalit which means "down trodden", "Suppressed", "crushed", or "broken to pieces". It was first used by Jyothi Rao Phule, the champion of backward classes and other oppressed classes of Maharashtra in the 19th century. In the context of the oppression faced by the untouchable caste of the twice born Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi employed the word "Harijans", which means the children of Hari or Vishnu to identify them as children of God. The Hindu scripture "Manusmriti" describes the varna or the caste system of the Indian society based on the occupation. According to the ancient scriptures it is comprised of five kinds of people of the society born out of the body of Lord Vishnu. This mythological interpretation says that the Brahmin was born out of the head, Kshatriya was born out of the arms, Vysya was born out of the waist and finally the Sudra was born out of the feet. There is another section called Panchamas or the avarnas to which the fifth section of society, Dalits, has become a part of Varna Dharma. Despite of this notion as suggested in the Manusmriti, surprisingly though The Upanishad harbours some variant views or conceptions. Among the several divisions The IshaUpanishad says :

II Bayurjyatheika bhubhang prabista rupng rupng pratirupa babhub Ekastatha sarbabhutanataratma rupng rupng pratirupa bahishya II

(Just like the wind that takes different forms, one protean soul gets manifested in various forms.)

The KathUpanishad too reveberates a similar sloka that says :

**II Suryo jyatha sarbalokasya chakshurna liphte chakshusheibarhyadoshei
Ekastatha sarvbhutantaratma nh liphte lokduhkhen bahya II**

(Like the one eternal Sun being refelcted in the plurality of eyes of different souls remain chaste and reposeful ; the One Perpetual Infintine Soul too is omnipresent and inpeccable.)

In the conclusion of his speech at Mahad *satyagraha* (25th December 1927)
Dr.B.R.Ambedkar had said :

“We must uproot the four-caste system and untouchability, and set the society on the foundation of the two principles of one caste only and of equality....Our work has been begun to bring about a real social revolutionNo one can now arrest it. I pray to God that the social revolution which begins here today may fulfil itself by peaceful means”

Dalit phases - Aiming to outdo the despotism :

It had been the day, remembered in the history of India as the *manavmukti din* symbolized by the burning of the *Manusmriti* . Ambedkar himself had called the Mahad *satyagraha* the beginning of the ‘untouchable liberation movement’. He was indisputably acknowledged as the ‘Maha Manav’, ‘Messiah’ or the ‘Modernist’, bringing about a renaissance in the thought of modern generation in general and of dalits in particular. It was Ambedkar’s spirit of revolt, his modernism and his rationalism which provided the philosophical context of the new Marathi Dalit Literature. There were of course predecessors to what emerged as Dalit literature in the 1970s.The movements for liberation at that time had climaxed with one brilliant writer who had united both the left and Dalit revolts: Baburao Bagul, a mahar and a member of the Communist Party. Two collections of Bagul’s short stories aroused a storm in Marathi literature in the late 1960s and it was Bagul who provided the inspiration and leadership for the first gatherings of the young writers, Namdeo Dhasal and several others who spearheaded both the Dalit Panthers and the poetry that erupted during the period 1972-1978. It was on the background of these streams of literary expressions that the major voices of anger and revolt by the new generation of Dalits came.

Literature thereafter became one of the major weapons to fight against all the atrocities inflicted by those upper castes, as observed in a saying in the Gujarati Dalit dialect : “*hathe chadhyun te hathiyar.*” Whatever is handy is the weapon –a handful of dust, a pebble, a blade

of grass, a twig of a tree, a finger or a fist to counter the attack. Literature was the same to the Dalits. The Dalit writers took literature as Omprakash Valmiki defined it:

“Literature is that discourse which stands on the side human being who is oppressed, who is in great peril, who wants to live. Literature should infuse him with the urge to live. Literature should shake him up, teach him to do battle, not weaken him, not make him submit to hegemony, not enslave him. We need to free ourselves from the social order surrounding us. For me, good literature that which wakens us towards that freedom.”

Literature did for Dalits, what it did for Indian freedom struggle. Their struggle is to get the answers for surging questions in their heart and mind. Their effort is to get selfidentification on the human platform. They too, want to take fresh air in the azure sky where there is no smell of discrimination, marginalization and exploitation. It is noteworthy to mention here how in the context of Dalit poetry Mulk Raj Anand states, “The process of poetry arising out of the cry can be felt in most dalit poems, because in these utterances protest seems to come from the insulted and the injured, who have laboured for generation for supers, their hands with dirty work”. Their sufferings and pains are fore-grounded in the tropes, similes and metaphors used in the poems.

Dalit literature is a new literary norm with an evident disregard for form, content and style, and a vibrant expression of the newly awakened sensibilities which distinguishes it from the mainstream literary traditions. Other main features are as follows:

- It is a literature of protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. It primarily focuses on fundamental human rights and human values.
- The Dalit literature imbibes “Dalit Consciousness”, a consciousness of their own slavery, an understanding of their experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression down the ages.
- The Dalit writers reflect the anguish of a community, and demand the shaping of a just and realistic future for the underprivileged and the outcast in society.
- It rejects both the Western and Eastern theoretical conceptions like Freud’s Psychoanalysis, Barthe’s Structuralism and Derrida’s Deconstruction together with the Indian theories of Rasa and Dhvani. It attempts to develop Dalit aesthetics.
- It questions and de-constructs the very foundations of Indian Mythology. In their search for alternatives, rediscovering the low caste poets of the Bhakti movement.
- The Dalit writers consider the legendary figure Ekalavya as their forefather.
- Shambooka- another Dalit in Ramayana who was killed by Rama at the behest of Vasishta, is worshipped by them.
- The Dalit writers express their experiences in stark realistic manner by using their native speech.
- Their language as well as images comes from their experiences instead of their observation of life and hence genuine descriptions are provided in stark realistic manner.

Many feel that the term ‘Dalit Literature’ came to be used after a stormy discussion organised by the periodical *Marathwada* in its Diwali issue of 1969. It cannot be debated that use of this term during the discussion added to the respectability of the term. But in fact, the 1958 conference discussed Dalit literature in detail and passed

the following resolution : “Resolution No.5 –that the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as “Dalit Literature” and realising its cultural importance, the universities and literary organisations should give it its proper place (*Prabuddha Bharat*). The rich and vibrant Dalit literature includes varied forms such as poetry, lyrics, stories, dramas, literary essays, etc. The Dalit literature wishes to change the world by bringing the humanity to the forefront and indeed has brought about few sturdy changes altogether such as the following :

- It effectively threatened the Brahmanic supremacy from literature as well as from society itself.
- Stimulation of the Dalit masses for assertion, protest and mobilization.
- It stirred up thinking in Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed creation of intellectuality among the Dalits.
- It highlighted the atrocities on the Dalits through different forms and thenceforth enlivened the issue making the sufferers meet the justice.
- It brought in a new set of Dalit aesthetics, in opposition to the age old, traditional poetics.
- Last but not the least, it, to a great extent motivated the long secluded Dalits opt for education and dignified careers.

The sixties were an important decade for Marathi Literature. A number of new streams appeared during this period. Narayan Surve’s poetry which portrayed the problems of the workers came into being during this period. This period is also characterised by the Little Magazine movement and the emergence of the Angry Young Man in Marathi literature. These were by Baburao Bagul. His stories rebelled against the social system and gave it a jolt. His collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) took the entire Marathi literary world by storm. It was hailed by Marathi periodicals and reviewers. Some thought it resembled the jazz music of the Blacks, for some others it was the epic of the Dalits. Some regarded the ten stories in the collection as ten electric shocks. The collection of stories had not only the power to disturb but also raised several new questions in Marathi literature. Before this, many had felt that their experiences, their life, their revolutionary views should be put into words and that these could be subjects of poetry or prose. But they are also confused by the question of how this should be done. The collection of short stories by Bagul helped to give them strength ‘to bear their scorching experiences and shape these experiences creatively. In this way Baburao helped to shape Dalit literature and by showing how to combine creativity with thought he inspired many writers to render more effective the feelings of suffering expressed by Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat.

The post-globalization scenario however well analyses the portrayal of the secluded Dalits’ socio-economic-political exploitations that has been a national issue since the 1947. And moreover Dalit literature too has acquired an exclusive and distinctive niche of its own as observed by the words of Aravind Malagatti :

“Dalit ideology can be a part of any literary work. Dalits should not be portrayed as a group of castes or an abandoned community. Dalit is a way of thinking”

In this particular poem 'Before the Vedas' Baburao Bagul is of the opinion that the vision of the boundless creation is always at odds with the socially formulated hierarchical teleological stratification. India the land of the *Sanatan Dharma* has for long suffered from casteist dictums, where scriptures often consciously issued ultimatum to haul a certain race to the mere periphery, though of course to serve some selfish interests of another social section that actively became frightfully superior. With this poem Bagul posits an unfettered nonhierarchical plentitude of creation, that is evident in the very first few lines of the poem where an epistemic alterity is observed in the face of normatively received theological ambits of power:

*"You lived before the birth of the Vedas
Even before the birth of the Almighty
Looking at the frightening material world
Pained and anxious....."*

It is crucial to note here what the poet means by the term 'You', that according to him has been the constant guiding force behind the robust creation of not only this planet itself but the Universe in its entirety. In an attempt to know this 'You', I would like to digress a bit and fall upon an Eastern Philosophical text of the ancient Vedic Field, *Drig Drshya Viveka* that deals with the notion of the 'Self' and its consciousness regarding the seer and the seen. One of its slokas echoes the view :

II Rupam Drishyam Lochanam Drk Taddrishyam Drg Tu Manasam Drishyaadhibrittaya Sakshi Drigeva Natudrishyate II

The entire verse operates on one principle – the difference between the Seer and the Seen wherein comes the perception of the SAKSHI, the witness, the knower of the mind, the perpetual and omnipotent existence. It is this Sakshi that remains the principle driving force behind all creation, while itself being diametrically indifferent in the process, and thenceforth comes in the duality between the Seer and the Seen.

Yajnyavalkya, one of the great Indian thinkers of Upanishadic times gave logical arguments to catch on to the fact that it is duality or the *Dvaita* which is the idiom of life that dogs our life and hems in our powers. But however this duality is in terms of the *Sakshi* that is made to understood ,

II Yat dvaitam iva bhavati, tat iterah iteram pashyati II

(When there is seeming duality, then only one sees another.)

The Upanishad calls the Reality by the name of *Brahman*. This *Brahman* is described by adjectives such as 'Ekam' (one or unitary), 'Advityam' (alone or without a second), 'Sat' (existent), 'Anaadi' (without beginning), 'Anant' (Infinite), 'Nirguna' (Without any quality or attributes such as good or bad, kind or unkind), 'Chit' (made of energy or consciousness). In short *Brahman* looks like a 'Big ball of energy' or the consciousness which is the abiding or permanent Reality behind the Universe. The Upanishads refer to the Ultimate Reality not as He or She but as 'It' implying it is some force or principle (as in *tat*

tvam asi) and not some God in human form. In Vedantic philosophy, 'Brahman', the absolute has three attributes : being (sat) , consciousness (chit) and bliss (ananda). The Advaita Vedanta emphasizes that "The consciousness is one omnipotent and omnipresent"

II Sarvani bhutani antyeiba abhuut II

The moot question that has haunted man since he came into existence, is eternally one and the same; "whence have all this sprung forth, whence this manifold creation?" (*kuta ajata kuta iyam visrstih*). And the Indian reply has always been : "He this has entered here" (*sa esa iha prvistah*). Indian wisdom thus enjoins : "know that one alone, give up all other talk" (*tam evaikam janatha anya vaco vimuncatha, amrtasyaisa setu*).

Similar reflections are observed in the lines framed by Bagul which say:

"..Only you gave a name to this world

.....

Oh the creative, the genius humans

You are the cause

Because of you so beautiful, so lively is the world."

It is however a matter of great anguish that India, despite of her lofty thoughts on personal identity, concept of consciousness, notions of self and the prevailing unity among all, suffered the plights of 'untouchability' , 'inequality' , 'casteism' ever since the later Vedic age. The Dalits are just one level of manifestation of the straits. The themes of Dalit poetry mirror the harsh realities of their existence of the Dalits as untouchables or the outcaste. Through Dalit poetry, the poets have used the power of language to express the agony of being oppressed under the caste system. I would here like to mention few of other Dalit poets whose heart breaking experiences of being marginalized are reflected in their poems. The famous Gujarati poet Dalpat Chauhan vividly expresses the grief of being an outcaste in his poem 'Untouchable' where the poet expresses the agony of the entire community through a boy who enters the school for first time.

"The first day in school,

The doom's day

With trembling hand I did not write

One, two, three...

I wrote

On the fire land of burning desert

, My Chest,

My caste

Since then

I am untouchable, untouchable, you cannot touch me.”

Similar observations are evident in the work of Meena Kandasamy when she draws in the reproachful incident of the Dalit Prince from The Mahabharat – Eklavya.

“This notes comes as a conclusion :

You can do a lot of things

With your left hand

Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrent

Left –handed treatment.

Also,

You don't need your right thumb,

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.”

Vedanta uses the term ‘consciousness’ in a technical manner quite different from our ordinary conventional usage. The terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘awareness’ are ordinarily tend to be used synonymously, but the Sanskrit equivalents signal a clear and profound differentiation. Consciousness or the ‘Chaitanya’ is what is always present, whereas ‘awareness’ or the ‘Antahkarana-vritti’ involves the transactions of intellect, ego, mind and the various sense capacities in our ordinary experiences of waking and dreaming. Awareness is always intentional or the so-called ‘intentionality of consciousness’ from an Indic philosophical perspective is best expressed simply as the ‘intentionality of awareness’. Consciousness on the other hand, may, of course, be intentional, but in its fundamental nature it is understood to be non-intentional, a bare, countless presence without an object. Vedanta thus suggests that moksha or spiritual liberation is the realization of such a contentless pure consciousness, the consciousness of Sakshi in Advaita Vedanta. Baburao’s lines remind us of a similar notion of the Sakshi when he says :

“You raised your hands and prayed

Those prayers went to make the Vedic verse.

It is you who celebrated the birth of all Gods and named the happily”

The Mundakya Upanishad utters the line :

II Swa jo hw be tat paramng Brahman ved brahmeba bhabati II

(Anyone who gets to know the real identity of the Brahman, himself is ascended to the echelon of the Brahman itself.)

And it is here that the words II Sarvani bhutani antyeiba abhuut II fall crucial again that states that the Brahman atman exists among all, irrespective of caste, class, creed. But unfortunately such elevated thoughts too failed to put an end to the plights of the “Ashparshya” – the untouchables, and Meena Kandasamy comes up with the ultimate question securing her arguments tight the Advaitabad with special noteworthy typologicality in her ‘*Advaita :The Ultimate Question*’ :

<i>Non</i>	<i>Dualism</i>
<i>Atman</i>	<i>Self</i>
<i>Brahman</i>	<i>God</i>
<i>Are</i>	<i>Equal</i>
<i>And</i>	<i>Same.</i>
<i>So</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>Untouchable</i>	<i>Outcast</i>
<i>Am</i>	<i>God.</i>
<i>Will</i>	<i>You</i>
<i>Ever</i>	<i>Agree?</i>
<i>No</i>	<i>Matter</i>
<i>What</i>	<i>You</i>
<i>Preach</i>	<i>Answer</i>
<i>Me.</i>	<i>Through</i>
<i>Your</i>	<i>Saints.</i>
<i>One</i>	<i>More</i>
<i>Final</i>	<i>Question</i>
<i>Can</i>	<i>My</i>
<i>Untouchable</i>	<i>Atman</i>
<i>And</i>	<i>Your</i>
<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>Atman</i>
<i>Ever</i>	<i>Be</i>

One ?

And the answer is yet to be found.

Throughout the tumultuous ages India has tried hard to maintain the living words that have been issued from the illuminated consciousness of her great sons –

II Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahma

Santam Sivam Advaitam II

(Brahma is Truth, Brahma is Wisdom, Brahma is Infinite.... Peace is in Brahma, goodness is in Brahma, and the unity of all beings.)

Quoting Tagore from The Spirit Of India : It is known that what India truly seeks is not a peace which is in negation, or in some mechanical adjustment, but that which is in Sivam, in goodness; which is in Advaitam, in the truth of perfect union; that India does not enjoin her children to cease from Karma, but to perform their karma in the presense of the Eternal, with the pure knowledge of the spiritual meaning of existence..”

Conclusion :

We can only spread the awareness, the heights of consciousness attained by the Vedic and Upanishad seers. The search here in India has always been about the essence, the supremely hidden principle lying behind this evolution of life, mind and consciousness, which are all actually higher and higher manifestations of the same one thing or the Supreme Reality, which is termed as Atman or the Self, that never gets tainted in caste or class and thus strongly defies the very concept. I would thus like to conclude with another sloka that says :

II Hiranmayena papren satyaswapihitwan mukhyam

Tat twam pushyanapbrinu satyadharmaya dristaye II

(The face of Truth is covered with a brilliant golden lid; that dost Thou remove, O fosterer of Light, for the law of the Truth, for sight).

We can thenceforth only hope for such light to illuminate the path, fiercely defy all inequalities, outbrave all indecorous dictums that have failed to give the due honour to human beings itself and the time is ripe enough to change. For over the centuries the enigmatic words of India have long echoed with ultimate certitude :

II Esa atma samaha plusina samo masakena samo nagena sama ebhis tribhir lokaih.....samo nena sarvena II

(This Atman is the same in the ant, the same in the gnat, the same in the elephant, the same in these three worlds....the same in the whole Universe.)

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