

Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration

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Abstract- Dalit literature wants to make a casteless and classless society. This literature raises its voice against discrimination, tyranny, oppression, humiliation and social injustice in the name of caste, class, culture and religion. Dalit literature urges for freedom from slavery, changes in the social system, appeal for equality, quest for identity of dalits and a critical of conventions torturing them in the name of caste, tradition, culture and religion. The caste system of Indian Hindu society has been a great obstacle in the path of the dalits. Dalits are economically moneyless and landless, socially in the lowest stratum of the society and politically powerless. Dalits are now aware of their situation and rights to live with self-respect and dignity.

Dalit literature is a literature of protest against discrimination, oppression, tyranny and social injustice in the name of caste, culture and religion. This literature calls for freedom from slavery, change in the social system, appeal for equality, quest for identity of Dalits and a critical of conventions torturing them in the name of caste, tradition, culture and religion. It is also called writings of marginalized people. The works of Dalit literature deal with pain and suffering which the Dalits have experienced throughout their lives. Dalits want to come in the mainstream of society. They urge for an equalitarian society where there is no differences in the name of caste. Dalits want to make their own identity beyond the caste identity in the upper caste dominated society. Dalits have been puppets in the hands of the upper caste Hindus. They have been real victims of the upper caste oriented society.

Dalit is a social word which suggests a new identity of a group of people who were earlier known as untouchables. Though untouchability abolished legally with the effect of Indian constitution in 1950, it is practised in various forms and degrees in almost all states of India even today. Thus, the word 'Dalit' clearly shows that caste as a social system is still practised in India. Dalits are struggling hard to get their identity, equality, self respect and dignity in Indian society. At present, the social word 'Dalit' has been changed into a political word. Dalits remained uneducated and poor through most of Indian history. They were considered as the lowest human beings and were treated worse than animals and other religious communities of India. They were denied rights and liberty under the caste rules. They were able to get education, rights and liberty only after independence. They started demanding their rights and freedom. The word 'Dalit' has a close connection with the nature and character of Indian caste society. To understand Dalits, it is necessary to study the caste system in the society that has evolved over the centuries in India.

The caste system has a great importance in Indian Hindu society. As a social system, the entire Hindu population is divided into two categories: upper caste and lower caste. A number of religious scriptures support this social division. These religious scriptures are known as the Dharma shastras. These Dharma shastras are generally law and rule books written by brahmins to enforce the caste rules among Dalits and women. The caste divisions are based on two sociological words: 'Purity' and 'pollution'. The religious books help the caste system to renew its legitimacy even after it was abolished with the effect of Indian constitution. As a result, the caste system is still prevalent in all states of India with different variation and complexities.

Dalit population in India is about seventeen percent. They are scattered in all parts of the country. They have been given different names as the scheduled castes, harijans, ati-shudras, antyajias, panchamas, chandals, achhuts and Depressed class in different periods in Indian history. Though the caste discrimination has been declared an offence under article 17 of our Indian constitution, Dalits still face the stigma of untouchability.

They are economically moneyless and landless, socially in the lowest stratum of the society and politically powerless. With the help of reservation in education, employment and politics, some of the Dalits have got power and position, but socially they are still untouchables and unaccepted. Whenever Dalits try to rise up the social scale, they are often tortured and oppressed by the upper castes and the state machinery.

Dalits are now aware of their situations and rights to live with self-respect and dignity. They are now able to interrogate and challenge the hegemony of upper castes and classes. It can be seen in the recent emergence of the Dalit literature. Dalit literature is a part of the Dalit liberation movements. Dalit movements and literature provide a platform for Dalits to raise their voices against the caste discrimination.

The word 'Dalit' has been derived from the root word 'dal' in Sanskrit, which means to crack, split, be broken, destroyed, crushed, trodden down, scattered, and is known in all the Indian languages that have their origin in Sanskrit. As a noun and adjective, Dalit is used for all genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. Marathi was the first Indian language to use the word 'Dalit' in the public sphere beginning from the early part of the nineteenth century. The reference of 'Dalit' was first recorded in Molesworth's Marathi-

English dictionary's 1831 edition, which was later reprinted in 1975. The meaning of the word 'Dalit' in the dictionary is as broken, ground and reduced to pieces. The word suggests all types of disabilities-be it social, cultural, political or economic. Thus the different meanings of 'Dalit' clearly shows all the features or characteristics of the caste system which forces Dalits to live in miserable conditions.

It is said that the word 'Dalit' came in use in public communication in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is supposed that it was Jotibarao Phule who first used the word 'Dalit' to describe pitiable conditions of the untouchables and the outcastes as exploited and oppressed people who were maltreated by the upper castes. He demanded for unity among Dalits to fight against what he termed as 'caste slavery'. Phule initiated a public discourse against the exploitation and oppression of the Dalits.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, so called Messiha of Dalits, was the greatest leader of the Dalit movements. He used the word 'Dalit' in his Marathi speeches and writings. He used some other words also for Dalits such as 'bahishkrut' and 'asprishya'. It was Dr. Ambedkar who made the caste fight a national issue and dedicated his whole life to fight against it. He deeply studied Hindu religious scriptures and rejected that the caste system was sanctified by the gods. Instead, he gave new meanings of these Hindu books on historical basis. He claims that the untouchables were once kshatriya. The untouchables were looked down upon by the brahmins because they were engaged in menial and manual work. Thus they were relegated to the margins and became the untouchables. They were forced to live miserable and humiliating lives under the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to make an egalitarian Indian society

by fighting against the caste system. The annihilation of caste has remained only a distant dream for Dalits. Caste discrimination is still perpetual against them, and the upper castes are still unable to tolerate Dalit subjectivity.

With the emergence of Dalit literature and with the beginning of the Dalit movements, Dalit started to be speaking subjects. They started demanding their rightful place and position in Indian society by uniting themselves. The early examples of their unity was seen in Maharashtra when Dalit writers and activists united in 1972 to launch a united movement known as the Dalit Panther Movement. The founder members of the Dalit Panthers were NamdeoDhasal, J.V. Pawar and Raja Dhale. With the formation of the Dalit Panthers, the word Dalit became famous in public all over India.

The members of the Dalit panthers defined the word 'Dalit' in a particular manner. They say that Dalits are those who are people of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, neo-Buddhists, poor farmers, the landless, the working people, women and all those who work hard and are being exploited in the society. This exploitation may be both political and economic and also in the name of religion. The definition of 'Dalits' given by the members of Dalit Pnathers includes ethnicity, gender, class, caste and minority groups across religions. Dalits are those who are exploited and oppressed by the upper caste people. The writers of the Dalit Panthers justify the use of the word 'Dalit' in such a historical context:

The Hindu feudal rule can be a hundred times more ruthless today oppressing the Dalits than it was in the Muslim period or the British period. Because the Hindu feudal rule has in its hand all the arteries of production, bureaucracy, judiciary, army and police

forces, in the shape of feudal landlords, capitalists and religious leaders who stand behind and enable these instruments to strive. Hence, the problems of untouchability of the Dalits is no more of mere mental slavery. Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the face of earth, which survives the ever changing forms of the power structure. Today, it is necessary to seek its soil, its root causes. If we understand them, we can definitely strike at the heart of its exploitation Truly speaking the problem of the Dalits or Scheduled Castes and Tribes have become a broad problem, the Dalit is no longer merely an untouchable outside the village walls and the scripture. He is untouchable and he is Dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian. (Joshi 141-42)

According to the Dalit Panthers, Indian society is based on caste, whereby caste and power go together. In India, work is distributed on the basis of caste. No physical work is assigned to the people of the upper castes. The upper caste men think it their privilege not to do any physical work because they belong to 'high' castes. On the other hand, Dalits have been given all types of physical jobs because they are considered to be 'low' castes in the Indian caste system. In spite of working hard, Dalits are not acceptable in Indian caste society. Dalits have been placed at the lowest stratum of the caste hierarchy and branded as 'Untouchables'. This is the reason that Dalits are not acceptable in the society. They are forced to do all kinds of menial and manual works which demand physical energy and perservance. It can be said that Dalits in the Indian caste society are landless laboures poor workers and the proletariat.

Indian caste society described the people of untouchable communities, such as scheduled castes and Tribes, harijans outcastes, ati-shudras, exterior castes, Depressed classes, ex-untouchables and so an. Dalits felt that these terms were abusive in nature because they were coined by the upper caste Hindus, social reformers and officials. They felt these words to be derogatory and symbol of the domination of the upper castes. This is the reason that the people of this category preferred to call themselves as Dalits which includes all forms of exploitation and oppression, be it caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion or language. Eleanor Zelliot, an American scholar and researcher of Ambedkar's movement in India, writes:

In the early 1970s two Maharashtrian movement achieved enough prominence to be noticed by the English language press, the Dalit Panthers and Dalit literature. By substituting the word "Black" for "Dalit", the reader can immediately understand that a phenomenon comparable to the American Black Panthers and Black literature has surfaced among the lower caste in social and literary affairs in western Indian. Like the American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit school of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity. The Marathi word 'Dalit' like the word 'Black' was chosen by the group itself... Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma, and justified caste hierarchy. (Zelliot 267)

Dalits rejected their caste positions to get a new kind of identity which would give them equality, dignity and self-pride. The word 'Dalit' has become a symbol of identity, change and revolution. Dalits reject such a God and religious books that teach discrimination and exploitation, fate and heaven because they have turned them into slave. Dalit writers have expanded the meaning of the word Dalit across borders and boundaries to assimilate all exploited people who are fighting for their identity, social justice, equality and freedom from slavery. The term 'Dalit' in connection to class, encompasses tribals, women, poor workers in agriculture and industries, along with the untouchable communities.

The term 'Dalit' in terms of religion, we can hear the terms like 'Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Christians and Dalit Buddhists. It shows that the people of the lower castes have changed their religions from Hinduism to Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity. Kanchallaiah, a great Dalit writer and thinker, has coined a new term 'Dalitbahujan' to bring about a collective consciousness among Dalits across religions. This term 'Dalitbahujan' includes various oppressed and exploited communities such as the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, other Backward classes and religious minorities to fight against caste hierarchy prevalent in religious institutions in India. According to Ilaiah, this unity among oppressed class people will create a social revolution which will make a new social identity and order. Dalitbahujan majority will be able to get power and position which has been denied to them by the Hindu upper-caste minority over centuries. Ilaiah in his famous book *Why I am not a Hindu* emphasises the liberation of masses in India:

The future is of Dalitbahujans in India. In order to dalitize society, the Dalitbahujan leadership must know its strengths and weaknesses. The Dalitbahujans of India have suffered all through history. Modern Democratic socialist revolutions have now given them some scope to liberate themselves. It is only through their liberation that the rest of the society, namely the "upper" castes, can be liberated. But this process can be very painful and tortuous.

(Ilaiah127)

Ilaiah is of the view that there should be the transfer of power and position from the upper caste hands to the Dalitbahujans. When Dalits try to get due rights and status in the society, the upper castes enforce violent methods (rape, arson, murder) in order to silence the demands of Dalits. These methods of silencing Dalits are not new. In Indian history, all kinds of methods of exploitation have been used by the upper castes in order to prevent Dalits from getting due rights and socioeconomic positions. The most prevalent method was to declare the Dalit body polluted or unclean. Gopal Guru, a social activists, reveals how the Dalit body becomes a victim of caste-based humiliation and exploitation. He observes:

The top of the twice born have created in Dalits a social leper or walking carrion which is sociologically dangerous and hence needs to be physically quarantined. The ideology of purity-pollution helped the top of the twice born to transmute the human body as an aesthetic idea into a "filthy reality." Untouchables are forced to eat human excreta. This atrocious act seeks to reduce the Dalits to the level of dogs, pigs and cows that are considered wretched as

these animals (not the pampered pets) also eat human excreta. The body of the Dalits is treated as if it is trapped into a septic tank even if it is a vibrant think tank. This is obnoxiously special to the Indian form of reduction. (Guru 213).

Gopal Guru raises his voice for the total rejection of caste which he gives a new term '*rejection of rejection*'. If Dalits start articulating themselves and assert the Dalit subject, they can attain the rejection of caste. The rise of Dalit literature rejects many caste stigmas connected to Dalit communities.

SharankumarLimbale, an eminent Dalit writer and activists, in his famous book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit literature: Histories, Controversies and Considerations* favours the rejection of the inhuman caste system by revolting against it. The Dalit communities demand for justice, identity, equality, liberty and fraternity by rejecting an unequal caste system. Dalit consciousness is necessary for this revolt against the caste system. This Dalit consciousness is the result of centuries of Dalit anguish. Dalit consciousness begets Dalit creativity. Dalit Creativity is an urge for freedom of Dalits who were earlier denied the right to raise their voices. It can be said that Dalit literature is a literature of self-respect and dignity.

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