



Research Paper - English

# Authenticity of Dalit Experience and Literary Expression

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The human history has been a vibrant record of an incessant struggle as well as dialectic between the two opposing forces; between the exploiters and the exploited, the rulers and the ruled, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed and between the colonizers and the colonized.

Exploitation or oppression of the weaker by the stronger is as old as mankind itself. It is an inevitable component of the power dynamics functioning in any human situation. Exploitation or oppression is a process by which a powerful group attempts to control and exploit the less powerful group by using its all resources in order to further and safeguard its own interests. In this power dynamics, it uses its power and means for domination, exploitation and humiliation. According to Frantz Fanon, the class of oppressors is invariably inimical to the autonomy of the oppressed and their culture. Therefore, it constantly attempts to inculcate a sense of inferiority complex or inferiority of their indigenous culture by obliterating their cultural past. This resulting sense of inferiority is internalized in their collective memory and their instinctive behavioural responses.

It is due to a number of socio- cultural and socio- political forces that the contemporary human society is faced with a dilemma of a fluid identity.

Interestingly enough, the contemporary consciousness celebrates both fluidity and anarchy.

As a result of it, there have been attempts to subject the prevalent cultural and social paradigms to a religious critique to decolonize the mind or change the mind-set because a large section of humanity suffers marginalization, discrimination, exploitation and deprivation at the hands of the powerful class in the contemporary world. The constant conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the Black and the White and between the low caste Dalit and the high caste Savarna Hindus is the distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary world.

Since the birth of the Hindu varna or the caste system, Dalits have been segregated from the rest of the community through the inhuman and arbitrary practice of untouchability. Dalits have also been addressed as shudras in common parlance. They have always been at the lowest rung of the Indian social ladder, as they are the most unfortunate members of the human community in India. A close study of their past reveals that the hegemonic and political aspirations of the higher caste sought their marginalization, humiliation and isolation from the mainstream of life. They were pushed beyond the margins of social, cultural, political and economic spheres of life of the community in general. The tragic sense of misery, suffering and the consequent sense of alienation have their genesis in primordial instincts in the powerful to dominate and crush the weak and establish their hegemony of all kinds. Therefore,

the caste system and the cultural productions such as religion, philosophy, literature and fine arts were fully exploited for perpetuation of an extremely inhuman and unnatural way of life to heap injustice upon Dalits and label them as ugly, subhuman, inferior and sinful.

It is pertinent to explore the reasons and the rationale that were used to justify the practice and prevalence of untouchability in the ancient Hindu social system that was responsible for the ageless and endless pain and sufferings of Dalits. The four varnas based on various occupations were at the centre of the Hindu social structure. The Hindu scriptures prescribe specific occupation for each caste. Accordingly, the class Brahmins (priests) was assigned the vocation of performing religious activities. The class of Kshatrias (warriors) was entrusted with the job of protecting the society from the forces of invasion or aggression. The class of Vaishyas (traders) was supposed to undertake economic activities. The class of Shudras (labourers) was required to do the menial kind of work. In that rigid and orthodox social structures the Shudras were deliberately and permanently pushed to the margins by the higher castes and deprived them of any slightest possibility of upward mobility. Thus, the classic Brahminical world view excluded the Shudras from the scheme of things and formulated, theorized and justified their assumptions of an invariant social order that had a divine sanction of the omnipresent God, Lord Brahma.

The classification and positions of these four varnas were strictly in accordance with their birth, utility and excellence in their religious sacrificial function. It was claimed that in the hierarchical position of birth, the Brahmins were the first to be born. They were prioritized over the

rest due to their excellence at performing rites and rituals at the time of sacrificial ceremony. The rigid social structure did not allow the members to swap their duties and functions. The strict adherence to the duties of one's class was considered good. The Shudras were prohibited from performing the functions of the higher castes. They were commanded to perform ugly and menial kind of job of scavenging and tanning. They were not allowed to imitate and undertake respectable duties of the caste of Brahmins. The theological interpretation of the ancient Hindu world view justified the desirability and utility of this kind of social structure as it sought legitimacy from the religion and its ancient scriptures. All those scriptures and their interpreters recommended absolute faith in them and in the interpretation that the Varna or the caste system was willed by God or it was one of divine creation. Therefore, a strict conformity to the prescribed way of life was emphasized and ensured by the class or caste of priests. It is due to this discriminatory and biased social hierarchy, the ruling class and the class of priests worked hand-in-hand and subjected all the Shudras to an inferior social status.

The state power and the organized religion imposed on them social, cultural and mental restrictions through superstitions, myths and corporal punishments. Because of the inferior, ugly and unhealthy nature of their work, their physical contact was strictly avoided. Even their shadow was considered as an evil and polluting force by the higher castes.

The ancient text of *Manu Smriti* was often used for the justification of the exploitation of lower caste people in India. It recommends an extremely rigid and prohibitory code of conduct for the untouchables often called as chandalas. This

brought about stagnation in social, political and economic spheres of life. In the tenth chapter of the *Manu Smruti* Manu writes that the chandalas or untouchables must not be allowed within the limits of the village. They should be forced to live outside the precincts of the village. They should not possess valuable assets but only broken pots. They should possess donkeys and dogs as their only wealth. They should wear the garments of the dead people. They should use broken mud pots and other utensils and eat their food from the broken dishes. Their ornaments should be made of black iron and they must wander from place to place.

This expulsion of the untouchables from the centre of the social life of the village to its periphery deprived them of their dignity and self respect. Their peripheral and 'Othered' existence was surrounded by helplessness, ugliness, squalor, ignorance and poverty. The high castes assigned unpleasant menial and unrewarding tasks such as scavenging carrying and disposing of the dead bodies. They were also required to act as hangmen. Any deviation from these prescribed duties entailed terrible physical punishments for them. In return for their services the untouchables were favoured with the stale food and the leftovers. The most disgusting inhuman and cruel example of social injustice was the practice of forcing them to tie an earthen pot around their neck and a broom at the back in order to save the village roads from getting defiled and polluted through their infectitious sputum and foot-prints. To cap it all, even the potable water was not easily accessible to them as they had to depend upon the mercy of the higher castes to favour them with the drinking water.

The years of misery, poverty, ignorance, slavish mind-set and economic dependence

gradually eliminated a desire for any kind of freedom from the collective consciousness of untouchables. It was due to the repressive socio-cultural state apparatus, their self respect or identity was replaced by self hatred. Their consciousness was colonized by the socio-political and socio-cultural discourse which conditioned their minds as passive receivers and slaves of the system. As a result of this conditioning they began to look at themselves as the high caste people would do, and in the course of time they lost sense of their "Self" and will to fight. It would be pertinent here to refer to the 19<sup>th</sup> century European view of the Indian caste system as recorded by a French missionary known as Abbey DuBois. In his book entitled, "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies," DuBois presents an account of life in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century society in India. He has attempted to show the contrasting life styles of the pariahs (the untouchables in Tamil) and that of the high caste Hindus.

The historiographers find it difficult to locate genesis of the concept of caste and untouchability in temporal and spatial terms in the historical antiquity of India's past as there is not much factual and archival record of socio-cultural correspondences lost during various invasions and incursions into India around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The archeological and sociological sources are hardly adequate to address the problem.

Though political and economic clout was responsible for a prestigious social and religious standing of a community member, yet the system had an inherent lacunae that did not allow a well-to-do untouchable to aspire for a high ritual position and nor could a poor Brahmin be forced to occupy a lower ritual position in the hierarchy. In the Indian

socio- cultural structure castes are invariant and timeless categories in the sense that castes are determinants of one's position in the hierarchy. Even today, a person's birth into a particular caste-fold prevents him from marrying over to the caste of his choice or from marrying a spouse from another caste. These caste stereotypes were accorded religious sanction through Hinduism. The Hinduism emphasizes that one's actions in the present life determine his or her status and happiness in the next life. This kind of postulation strengthened the existing stereotypes and spared little scope for polarization. As a result of this, Hinduism tended to become a monolithic ideology of life. Its belief in the rebirth and next life made it abstract and other worldly. This provided higher castes with an excuse to perpetuate social discrimination to further their own interests at the cost of the untouchables.

According to scholars and historiographers the Varna or caste system with its invariant hierarchical caste categories had its genesis around 300 B.C. It is believed that during this period the scriptures or religious texts like *Upnishadas*, *Puranas* and *Pursh Sukta* were written. These books contained a powerful religio-philosophical discourse that had a considerable impact on the contemporary civilization. During the age of Manu and the priest Yadnyawalkya these scriptures exercised great influence as an authentic rendering of socio- cultural and religious philosophy of life.

A number of theoretical assumptions and explanations have been offered by the historians, researchers and scholars about the origin and development of the concept of untouchability. However, Dr. Ambedkar's hypothesis appears quite convincing, plausible and pertinent. He himself was an untouchable. His objective

interpretation and scholarly insights on this subject are found in his seminal book *The Untouchable* which offers his theory about the tribesmen and the broken men from the alien tribes.

The Middle Age witnessed emergence of an array of religious cults propagating their respective principles aimed at reformation in the Hindu social set-up. Those religious sects attempted to propose a simplistic form of Hindu religious beliefs and practices. During the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries there emerged the cults such as Mahanubhav and Warkari. These two cults had a considerable influence and following in the contemporary society. Around this time there was the emergence of the Nath cult. It was very popular and had many followers. The Mahanubhav cult attempted to offer an alternative set of beliefs and reduce the stranglehold of an orthodox belief system that had dominated that life since ancient times. The Mahanubhavis revolted against the practice of untouchability, caste and gender discrimination.

The pan-Indian Bhakti movement produced humanitarian religious discourse and its practitioner saints like Ramanuj Guru Nanak, Kabir, Basaveshwar and Mirabai and a few others in different regions of India. They denounced the inhuman practice of untouchability and appealed to the masses to do away with it. The orthodox Brahminical priestly class isolated the common humanity from God through misleading interpretation of religion but the Warkari cult brought a new ray of hope for them. It rejected the orthodox rituals and recommended simple prayers to God to attain salvation in this life. It tried to liberate God from the clutches of the Brahminical priests. The Warkari cult convinced the masses that irrespective of one's caste and gender, god was

accessible to any devout person or bhakt. It never bothered itself with a devotee's social, political and economic rank or status in society. Therefore, the slave women like Janabai and the prostitutes like Kanhopatra were welcomed to its fold. Sant Eknath's (from the Marathwada region) humanitarian act of lifting an untouchable child from the scorching heat of the desert is an important instance of philanthropic effect of the Warkari cult in the direction of the eradication of untouchability. Chokha Mela, the saint poet and the follower of the Warkari cult belonged to the untouchable community. He tried to raise the consciousness of people about the dark side of untouchability through his Abhangas or devotional poetry addressed to God. He is often regarded as the precursor of Dalit poetry. While exposing hypocrisy of the society he asks people not to be taken in by the outward appearance of a person.

It is interesting to note here that all these saints never had a rational attitude towards the organized religion. They never challenged its highly unrealistic and orthodox assumptions such as the ancient Varna system and the inhuman practice of social discriminations sanctioned by it in spite of its humanitarian appeal and altruism, the Bhakti movement and its practice. They could not challenge the validity of the obnoxious practice of untouchability and other abstractions. They could not promote and popularize the notion of social equality, justice and other egalitarian ideas. Though religious and devotional literature produced by them attempted to strengthen the accepted stereotypes through their belief in fatalism and the theories of Karma (action) and Dharma (duty), it, challenged the discriminatory religious rhetoric of the priestly classes. The saint literature provided much needed affirmation to the

unnatural, brute and unjustifiable social practice of the upper classes.

The western colonialism with its forces of enlightenment brought a new wave of ideas to the Indian subcontinent. With the establishment of a British colony in 1818, the process of change and awakening was accelerated. It brought in its trail many social, political and economic ideas to India. The encounter with Christianity created many more possibilities of changes. The spread of Christianity through missionaries acquainted the Indians with the Christian theological thought. The British colonists introduced new knowledge, technology and effective methods of production that facilitated industrial progress.

After the establishment of the British colonial rule, the penal code was introduced in 1851. It exposed the discrepancy and primitive nature of the Varna system. As a result of this the supremacy and authority of Brahmins was challenged. The new British rule encouraged the rural artisans, the untouchables and the poor provincial people to migrate to the urban commercial towns and cities and start professions of their choice in place of their traditional and caste-based occupations. With the inception of universities at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in 1857, there was gradual growth in the number of educated men and women in India. It was due to print journalism there were a number of periodicals to cater to the needs of an ever growing reading public in India. The western liberal, secular, democratic thought influenced the Indian thinkers and social reformers. They realized that the orthodox and outdated religious, social ideas coupled with the lack of proper education were hampering the growth of the Indian society. They realized that the inhuman and unnatural social

conventions such as untouchability, the practice of sati and numerous superstitions were responsible for the stagnation of their society. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy began their fight against such cruel social conventions. They demanded their absolute elimination from the social sphere of life. The new rational ideas influenced reformers like Balshastri Jambhekar, Lokhitwadi, Justice Ranade and Mahatma Phule who started their struggle against orthodoxy and ignorance. In 1832 the first Marathi periodical 'Darpan' was started by Jambhekar in Mumbai. He began to propagate progressive ideas through this periodical. Gopal Hari Deshmukh alias Lokhitwadi tried to convince the Indians about the exploitative nature of the British imperial rule and promoted nativism. He asked people to boycott the British products and use the products produced by the native Indians.

Under the influence of liberal, progressive and secular ideas, the social reformers were inspired to establish a number of sabhas and societies such as Dnyan Prasarak Sabha, Royal Asiatic society, Paramhans Mandali, Bramho Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj etc. Justice M. G. Ranade was also a great thinker who inspired the middle class people to strive for social and economic progress. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the men like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Lokmanya Tilak struggled for social and political progress of people.

However, the contribution of Mahatma Phule to the social reforms was unprecedented and substantial. Mahatma Phule was a great visionary thinker and social reformer. He struggled hard for the upliftment of the Dalits, the underprivileged and women. His rational arguments created a new hope and awareness in the minds of the lower class

people. He expounded his common sense approach to the social ills in his epoch-making books such as *Sarvjanik Satyadharma* (Public Religion and Truth), *Brahmanache Kasab* (Bramhin Skill), *Gulamgiri* (slavery) and *Shetkaryacha Asud* (the Farmer's Whip). These books are Phule's critique of Hindu religion and a scathing criticism of Brahminism. He established the Satya Shodhak Samaj (The Truth Seeking Society) in 1873 with a view to brining in a new social order based on the principle of justice, equality and reason.

Phule struggled hard to subvert the Brahminical discourse for perpetuation of a hierarchical social order. He criticized the British imperial and colonial rulers for their indifference to the welfare of the poverty stricken underprivileged masses and their anti- poor policies. As a part of his conscious strategy about untouchability, he established a school for women in 1851 and the first school for untouchables in 1852. He was the first philanthropic social reformer who made available the water tank from his house to the untouchables.

Phule played a crucial role in raising the consciousness of the downtrodden people and the untouchables. There were several factors that contributed to this process. Because of the British policies education was made available and accessible to all, including the untouchables. The Christian missionaries helped the downtrodden people by their acts of charity such as free health services and equality with others. The well intentioned persons from the class of untouchables took initiative in starting the movement for defining their self identity. Gopalbaba Walangkar founded the Amarya Dosh Parihar Samaj in 1889 and wrote a book entitled *Vital Vidhvansan*. In 1818 Kisan Fagoo Bansode founded the Nirasrit Samaj.

In 1903 Shivram Kamble organized a conference of untouchables.

It was through the great and ceaseless efforts of Phule and others in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a very powerful movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The far-sighted thinker, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar founded the People's Education society as he believed that education opens out new avenues and that the untouchables should have an access to them. It is significant that the Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle started by Dr. Ambedkar for a change in the social, cultural, literary and economic hegemony of the caste Hindus.

The basic impulse behind literature is an awareness of the social injustice and rebellion against it. Though, till nineteenth century, the untouchables were traditionally singers, jesters and drummers of the folk drama, 'Tamasha' happens to be the only recorded voice of the Dalit consciousness. Before that the Dalit consciousness, though subdued, was reflected in Saint Chokamela. Although, many of his poetic creations sing of Lord Vitthal, some do interrogate against the practice of untouchability.

The dominant figure in this period was Gopalbaba Walangkar who started a monthly *Vital Vidhwansan* in 1894. Shivram Kambale also started a monthly *Somvanshiya Mitra* through which the untouchable sensibilities were expressed. Waman Kardak, Pandit Kondiram, Kerubva Gaikwad and Kisan Fago Bansode contributed significantly with their poems and songs by deriding at the cruel practices of Hinduism, prescribed in *Manusmriti*.

It was Anna Bhau Sathe, who gave the first fully uninhabited expression to the Dalit

consciousness in his writings. Prominently known as a Marxist writer he could not establish himself as the Dalit writer, may be because he joined Ambedkarite movement much later. His penchant for minute observation, deep compassion and understanding of the life of the downtrodden and his irresistible gift for creativity made his novels like *Fakira* and *Warnecha Wagh*, remarkable creations in Marathi literature. Shankarrao Kharat, another Marathi writer acquired eminence through the works, *Manuskichi Haak* and *Balutedar*. His autobiography *Taral Antaral* portrayed guileless and helpless condition of the Dalits in their novels and gave the Dalit a heroic position in literature for the first time.

However, Dalit life was also viably portrayed by some Savarna, (non Dalit) writers like V.S. Khandekar in *Don Mane*. S.M.Mate in *Upekshitanche Antarang*, G.T. Madkholkar in *Chandanwadi* and the poet Keshavsoot in his poem *Antyajachya Mulacha Prashna*. These works depict the sufferings and suppression of the Dalits. The upper-caste progressive critics and reviewers like M.B. Chitnis, S.B. Karhade, P.S. Nerurkar, W.L. Kulkarni, R.G. Jadhav, D.K. Bedekar and Sharadchandra Muktibodh upheld Dalit literature as a strong off-shoot enriching the mainstream Marathi literature. Dr. M. N. Wankhede, who was a Mahar from Amravati, encouraged most of the Dalit writers to verbalize their feelings candidly.

The poems by leading Dalits poets like Baburao Bagul, Keshav Meshram and Narayan Surve were published in different Magazines. The eminent writer Raja Dhale led the movement for a few years. The movement flourished in the sixties and came to an end by the year 1970. The publication of Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories, *Jevha Mi Jaat chorli Hoti* (when I had

concealed my caste) gave a momentum to the Dalit movement because of the rebellious stance taken by the protagonists of the stories. Though not an avowed Dalit writer, Narayan Surve, who was influenced by Marxism gave a new dimension to the Dalit movement with two collections of poetry, *Aisa Ga Mi Brahma* (For I am Brahma) and *Majhe Vidyapeeth* (My University). Baburao Bagul's second volume of short stories, *Maran Svasta Hot Aahe* (Death is becoming cheaper) gave a jolt to mainstream Marathi Literature as it presents the heart rending experience of the author. In addition to the above mentioned writers, the following writers too contributed significantly to the Dalit Literature. They are Keshav Meshram, Avinash Dolas, Arjun Dangale, Bhimrao Shirwale, Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare and others. The complex, obliterated, curvilinear relationship between a Dalit individual and the society constitutes the theme of Dalit short stories.

Dalit novel could not enjoy outright growth compared to the Dalit poetry and short story. From the new generation, Madhav Kondvilkar (*Ajum Ujadayacha Aahe*), Bhimsen Dethle (Iskot) Ashok Whatkar (*Melela Pani*), B. Rangrao (*Soma*) and few others are conspicuous Dalit novelists. The period between 1972 to 1978 saw the proliferation of the Dalit literature through its poems, short stories, novels, periodicals etc. the period between 1978 to 1986 bestowed an accomplished dimension to the Dalit literature that of the autobiographies.

A host of Dalit writers resorted to writing autobiographies. Among them *Baluta* (Village Servicemen) by Daya Pawar, *Upara* (The Alienated) by Laxman Mane, *Athavaninche Pakshi* (Birds of Reminisces) by P.E. Sonkamble

and *Mukkampost Davache Gothane* (At Post Devache Gothane) have emerged as the landmarks in Marathi literature.

There were different experiments of the performance ranging from street- plays to the well equipped theatricals. *Manuskiche Band* (Revolt of Humanity) by Gangadhar Pantavane, *Mrutyupatra* (The will) by Suresh Vanjari, *Pinjaryatil Popat* (A Parrot in the cage) by Datta Bhagat, *Narbali* (Human sacrifice) by Kamalakar Datar, *Nata* (Relation) by Baburao Gaikwad are some of the notable plays.

Thus Dalit literary movement is the unique example in India. It has proved an important platform to the lower classes to express their sense of identity and solidarity.

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