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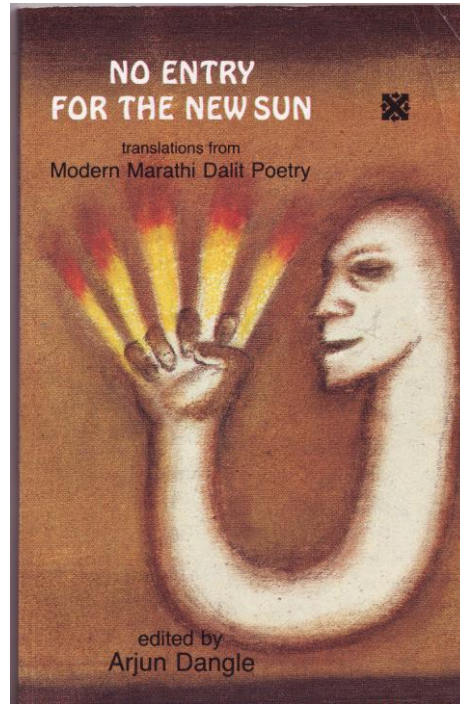
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Dalits and Indian Literature

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.



Traditional Caste Hierarchy and Atrocities Committed Against the Dalits

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Dalits and Indian Literature

Besides the four main castes, there is a fifth group - the Dalits treated as the untouchables in the society. Oppressed, downtrodden and exploited, the Dalits are hardly considered to be part of the human society even some time ago. When the Constitution of India assures everybody equal rights and opportunities, many among the Dalit community are yet to receive and exercise such natural rights. The Dalits were seen as polluting the society and were generally banned and segregated physically from participating in Hindu social life. While some change has taken place, the lot of the majority of this section of Indian society continues to be woeful, to say the least.

The Dalit Movements

Against these atrocities, the subalterns, especially the Dalits, initiated several movements in Indian history. Today, a majority of these discriminated subaltern communities identify themselves as Dalits, thereby acquiring a new identity by coming together with the perspective that "Dalit is dignified".

The Dalit movements, aimed at the liberation of Dalit folk from the oppressive structures in Indian society, are directly connected to subaltern movements. They reject the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order. Sathianathan Clark remarks that "the subordination and subjection that marks the life of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity. (*Dalits and Christianity*, p.6)

Oliver Mendelshon and Marika Vieziany express similar opinion, 'Untouchables (Dalits) have retained their identity as a subordinated people within Indian society, and by this we mean to identify a condition that is far more severe than merely being bottom of an inevitable hierarchy.' (*The Rights of Subordinated People*, p.115)

Explaining the term 'subaltern' Homi Bhabha, a key postcolonial scholar, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of 'subaltern' groups as "oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who have hegemonic power. (*The Post-Colonial Question*, p.210)

Questions Focused in This Article

Given these circumstances, a question may be naturally raised: How are the Dalits introduced and portrayed in Hindu upper caste dominated Indian literature? How do the Dalit litterateurs look at themselves in the post-independent India? How are Dalits observed by the non-Dalit Hindu, Muslim and Christian writers as well as by the Dalits themselves?

The Dalit issue has an added new dimension as well, in its close proximity to issues concerning the feminist literature, within Indian literature.

A Picture from the Writings of Premchand

Arun P. Mukherjee has made a distinction between 'a voice for' and 'a voice of' (The Exclusion, p.36) the dalit taking into account all the texts on dalit issue. Conforming to this feature, in the first section of this article, a collage of Dalit-life from the writings of some representative upper caste Indian *littérateurs* is presented to evaluate their observation on this sensitive issue in a given socio-economic and cultural situation. The second section is a collage of pictures from the Dalit authors as they consider and evaluate themselves in order to make a comparative assessment of how both these two - upper caste and the Dalit *littérateurs* - present the Dalit issue in their creative writings.

A pioneer among the upper-caste Hindu writers is **Munshi Premchand** who identifies untouchability as one of the worst evils of the exiting Indian society dominated by the Hindus. In his very first short story, he expresses his strong condemnation against the insensitivity and heartlessness of the upper caste educated people against the Dalits.

The story 'The Lone Voice' (Sirf Ek Aawaz) shows a syanasi makes a fervent appeal to the audience to love those subjugated people who are in their present state of affairs because of their exploitation by the upper caste people. At the end of his lecture, he asks ". . . Are we really so cruel? I know I can depend on you. You are our brave young men. Stand up on your seats all of you who promise me today that you will be tolerant and kind to the outcastes." (*Selected Short Stories* p.78) Only one man, Thakur Darshan Singh, a conservative old man, rises up when he finds nobody standing up and accepts the challenge.

What Premchand wanted to convey was that the very eyes that turn bloody, shot with passionate patriotism, remained silent on the question of tolerance towards the Dalits as their brothers and to lend a hand to them to have the benefits of their human rights.

The predicament of the Dalits and the extent of violation of their human rights by the upper caste people form the theme of many short stories of Premchand during the 1920s especially after the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement when nationalist movement was at its low ebb.

Thus, "Shudra" is a tale of an untouchable woman who is transported as a part of a racket involving trafficking in women. These poor underdogs of the society often become easy prey to the cunning traffickers. "Mandir" is a pathetic tale of a wretched Dalit mother who is desperate to take her sick child to the temple to pray for his recovery. But the priest will, by no means, allow her to enter the temple and defile it. "Salvation" gives a picture of inhuman torture by a Brahmin on a poor illiterate *chamar* who is innocent enough to honour the Brahmins as the representatives of God on earth even after their ruthless inhuman torture on the poor Dalits.

Dukhi, the *chamar*, died out of starvation and exhaustion while trying to cut a log of wood for the *thakur*. A contrastive picture of the leisurely life led by the *thakur* intensifies the inhumanness of the upper caste people. The account becomes all the more gruesome when the *thakur* is found

dragging the body of Dukhi outside the village into the field for the jackals and vultures to feed on, showing no sign of repentance for his callous action. The Dalits deserve hardly any sympathetic behaviour even after their death.

Raja Rao's Insight

In *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao, 1938), Moorthy, the envoy of M. K. Gandhi in his village, dithers for a while to drink a glass of milk from a pariah woman in her house. This picture reveals that the tradition of distancing oneself from the untouchables, at least initially, persists on as a legacy among the upper caste – sensitive or callous, whatever s/he may be.

Premchand wanted to draw the attention of the upper caste Indians to this insensitive behaviour relating to the Dalits so that the Dalits might be treated at least as human beings. The underlying message conveyed by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* is that traditional caste structure and values have a stronghold over even those who come out to help the Dalits. Such a hesitation and thinking over the immediate encounter with a Dalit may be explained also by the assumed lack of cleanliness or the unhygienic surroundings assumed to be closely associated with the Dalit colonies.

This is an age-old reservation and assumption. This also is a clever ploy to wash away the sense of guilt for failure to participate fully in the interactions with the Dalits. So, a devoted Moorthy could not do away with, initially for a short while, with the socio- cultural tradition of untouchability, when the pariah woman offered him a glass of milk in her house.

Mulk Raj Anand and Dalit Suffering and Shame

Speaking about the real test of the novelist, the other upper-caste sympathizer, Mulk Raj Anand contemplates that a writer should be the fiery voice of the people, and be able to give a new vision of life realizing the pains, frustrations and aspirations of others, and by cultivating his incipient powers of expression, transmutes in art all feelings, thoughts and experiences.

But in his novel, the problem of the untouchable seems to have not been properly addressed. Undoubtedly, in *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand has enunciated the maltreatment of an exploited class with concern. No doubt, he is, indeed, the "fiery voice" of the untouchable caste. Yet if the goal of the writer, as Anand himself states, is to transform words into prophecy, then the reader seems to miss this.

Anand has sought to address a specific question in *Untouchable* through the dramatization of Bahka. For Bahka, the satisfaction is that a new machine will relieve them of their dirty work. But can this be an answer to the age-long social problem?

Moreover, the three "prophecies" or answers stated by the novel -- the rhetoric of the Christian Missionary, Mahatma Gandhi, and the poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar - fail to provide an adequate

prescription for freedom of the untouchable community. The reader doubts the viability of Bakha as the most appropriate figure to challenge the abuses of untouchability.

For the readers, subaltern characters in Premchand or Anand may, at the most, attract sympathy like Lamb's chimney sweepers or Dickens's orphans, whose lives and work have been permanently devalued, misappropriated and made into stagnant categories by repressive traditions of history.

Mahasweta Devi

In the post-independent period, the Dalits found no respite from the inhuman behaviour of the upper caste people. The novels of Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and Rohinton Mistry deal with the problem in a different manner than their predecessors.

The novella, *Doulati*, by Mahasweta gives a gruesome picture of the exploitation of a Dalit girl by the upper caste Brahmins. While the upper caste people are fully aware of the significance of 1947 and 15th August, the concept of a nation and fruits of independence are enjoyed only by the upper castes, while the lower castes Dalits and others are quite ignorant of these concepts. *Doulati* was born in 1947 and died coughing out blood on the night prior to 15th August when she was twenty-seven years. She fell down dead on a map of India drawn by the school teacher for the following day programme. Her body had been mercilessly but systematically exploited by the upper caste persons for nearly fourteen years. The message of the picture substantiates the fact further that there is no end to slavery especially for the Dalits even in independent India. Mahasweta conveys the message that the same strategy is seen at work with regard to the male bandhuas.

True, Mahasweta does not expect revolution to begin among the doulatis in the brothels. Her male characters too are fatalists and take it as God's law and never think of changing their condition. But the message she wants to convey is that for any resistance to be successful, the initiative has to come from within the oppressed section. Interestingly, Mahasweta has introduced the characters of some researchers, satirically though, who go to these places not to solve the problem of these hapless people but to justify their hypothesis. The bandhuas - Prasad Mahato and Bono - comprise another type that is rebellious against the existing system.

Prasad Mahato feels the peaceful demonstrations and knocking the doors of the government departments requesting help are futile activities. His encounter with *Doulati* and other bandhuas-prostitutes changes him. Realising their unbearable sufferings, he goes underground and with the active support from the Naxalites in 1971 forms Palamu Bonded Labour Liberation Front. He wants to fight for just law for better livelihood.

The other character, Bono, involved himself in the murder of a thug, manages to escape punishment, becomes a convert and joins the church as an assistant of a Father. He keeps on learning and as he learns he changes himself and goes on informing and educating the members of his caste about his knowledge. Thus he stands for daring acts as well as for freedom.

The novella can be read as a plea for the nation to be defined by the Dalits, rather than by the ruling, parasitic groups. It is also a plea for a radical change at the structural level to fashion out an alternative vision of a more decent and less unbalanced India. Interestingly, there is an indirect reference to Gandhi but, as it appears, she mocks at the philosophy of non-violence.

Rohinton Mistry

The picture of brutality on the Dalits seems to be multiplied in Rohinton Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance*. He narrates how the upper-caste ruling class mocks at the democratic rights to be enjoyed by the Dalits and other down-trodden class in India. An impression of this reality is being conveyed almost photographically here in the novel through a pitiable tale of Om and his grandson Prakash, the two born in a Dalit family in a small village of India and brought up as "untouchables". After Independence, the caste distinctions were abolished officially but the respite from humiliation was hardly ensured. The landlords in the village exerted inhuman torture to subdue the Dalits.

The desperateness shown by Prakash's father to ask for his own election ballot, instead of just giving his fingerprint and not allowing the landlord to vote for him is an act of defiance; hence, a threat for the authoritarian landlord in the village. So, the incensed landlord sends his goons to torture the Dalit family unto death.

Om flees to a nearby city and gets shelter in the house of a Muslim friend from the village. He finds more similarities with the Muslims than with the people of his own religion. But soon there is a Hindus-Muslim riot. Mistry points out that a slumlord, also a liquor-baron called Thorkay decides who gets burned and who survives during the riots. (*Fine Balance* p.163) And there is his agent, Nawaz. It is through him, the baron extracts money from the poor slum dwellers. Nawaz explains how the extracted money is distributed among the corrupt government officials:

. . . These fellows bribe the municipality, police, water inspector, electricity officer. And they rent to people like you. (*Fine Balance* p.163)

At the same time, Nawaz is a hypocrite too, and innocent people like Om and Ishvar are his victims.

On this last night, Nawaz's relief spurred him to greater generosity... If you prefer, you can sleep indoors. The thing is, that's where I was going to put you anyway, when you first arrived. But I thought to myself, the house is so cramped and crowded, better outside in the fresh air.

. . . Miriam brought the food to the table and left. Even obscured by the burkha, Ishvar and Omprakash had been able to see her eyes cloud with embarrassment at her husband's hypocrisy. (*Fine Balance* p.163)

Function of the Caste System as Viewed by Mahasweta and Rohinton

The unique feature of the Indian caste system is that there is no chance for any upward movement for a low caste person. If there is any attempt by the lower caste people to challenge this idea by moving up, they are to face dire consequences which Mistry vividly portrays in his novel *A Fine Balance*. Om and Ishvar break the unwritten rule by breaking out of their caste. These baseborn leather workers become tailors with the help of a Muslim friend who has apprenticed them in his tailoring business. As tailors they are employable and have opportunities. They have a means to re-shape their destinies, but a series of tragedies awaits them.

With Om and Ishvar, the reader discovers that cruelty has no bounds. Shockingly though, this brutality has been legitimized by the governmental systems. In the mid-1970s, during Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule, she subjugates the nation into submissive "programmes" and "plans" in the name of reformation. These programmes sound great but are extremely inhuman by nature. In the same manner, beautification programmes are meant to clear slums and make thousands homeless. All these programmes take their toll on Om and Ishvar's lives. However, they get friends in Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah, who are kind to them. Dina Dalal has a struggled life throughout. Her struggle begins when she loses her father, a doctor who volunteers for a hazardous job, falls sick and dies. Dina is forced to leave school at age fourteen, denied a university education that would have been her right, and as an adult, is harassed by her older brother to marry rich but unappealing suitors. In order to get rid of her elder brother, she strives hard to manage some sources of earnings of her own. Her experiences teach that suffering people do not have any caste barrier, no man- woman division. So, she is happy to provide shelter to Ishvar and Om, the two tailors, to start a garment manufacturing business in her flat and she takes in a student boarder, Maneck. They come to feel like a family there when circumstances throw them all together after Ishvar and Om are kicked out of their slum. As all the four people of divergent caste and culture integrate in Dina's small apartment, we feel how a little sympathy and friendship can beget immense result for the have-nots.

Mistry ruthlessly criticises the existing social pattern in India - an India that claims to have attained new heights. He feels that the nation needs to uproot its caste system to achieve real progress for the citizens.

There is a similar picture of coercion and torture in Mahasweta Devi's *Daulati*. Both Mahasweta and Mistry fervently attempt to expose the misfortunes, discrimination, oppression and the endless suffering of the Dalits in India even after independence. Moreover, both the novelists demonstrate that political power - be it at the village or at the national level - seek to enjoy and succeed in continuing authoritarian forms of governance under the guise of democracy. With the proclamation of Emergency, even this pretension of democracy is shrugged off to expose the authoritarianism at the heart of Indian politics.

In his novel, Mistry prefers the name "Dukhi," for one of his characters, may be, to create a literary lineage to portray untouchability, where the defeat is pre-determined for his Dalit

characters. In Premchand's short story *Salvation*, Dukhi is an untouchable protagonist who dies of hard work and starvation. In contrast, Mistry's Dukhi survives the poverty of his position and saves his sons from the occupational stigma of being leather workers. But a generation after, all his descendants were brutally killed, except for a son and a grandson, who slide into beggary. Through the possible inter-textual references, Mistry shows that the system of atrocity on the Dalit and the poor has remained unaltered for generations together despite the rhetoric and the occasional examples of upward mobility.

In their novels, both Mahasweta and Rohinton seem to assume that the acute ill-treatment, both subtle and manifest, with justification from tradition and scriptures, by the powerful Hindus enabled conversion by the Dalits to Christianity and Islam, since Christians and Muslims assure them with the required protection from the violence inflicted upon them.

Arundhati Roy

The God of Small Things narrates the same shocking experience of inhuman torture on the Dalits. Both Mahasweta and Arundhati are social activists as well, and have worked among the Dalits, tribes and other exploited classes of the society. They also have first-hand knowledge of their life-struggle, and have participated in and spearheaded many movements against what they consider to be Government's anti-poor and undemocratic stand.

Velutha, the paravan and professionally a skilled carpenter, is introduced as bare bodied - referring himself to be an untouchable and not a middle-class. He is a trade-union activist trying to shed his untouchable stigma wearing a white shirt and mundu. As a boy, he used to go with his father to the Ayemenem's house to deliver coconuts. But he did not have access to anything that the touchables touched. Recollections from Mammachi's childhood demonstrates a gruesome picture of inhuman treatment by the upper-castes on the paravans those days –

“the paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away the footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint.” (*The God of Small Things* Pp.73-74)

To escape the scourge of untouchability, Velutha's grandfather embraces Christianity but finds their problems multiplied. They become casteless and therefore devoid of the benefits guaranteed by the constitution.

Although having a vocation different from other paravans, Velutha cannot escape the humiliation as a paravan. Velutha is rebellious by nature. So, Vellya Paapen, his conservative father, expresses fears when Velutha grows into a young man. Velutha's manner of saying something, his style of walking, his tendency not to pay heed to the suggestions of Vellya, etc. are just audacity for any paravan. Velutha misreads his father's caveat as his grudge against Velutha. The misunderstanding leads him often not to come home and one day he disappears. Coming back home a year after, he finds many appalling incidents have taken place in the mean time. Nevertheless, Mammachi gives him the charge of the general maintenance of the factory which caused some resentment among the other

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higher caste workers. Mammachi appeased them by paying Velutha less.

By this time, Velutha has already grown as a rebel - enough to shake the existing pattern of the society causing his father seriously worried. He sees Velutha and Ammu making love with each other. He reports the matter to Mammachi. Baby Kochamma rushes to the police station to explain that Velutha is suddenly dismissed from his job to contain the scandal. Ammu too goes to the police station to set the record right. The confused and worried police inspector feels that the paravan has not snatched anything from the touchable world; instead he is offered the same. The rebellious Velutha asserts not to be to be kicked out like dogs any longer. The confused inspector ensures support of the local communist leader, K.N.M. Pillai on Velutha-issue. Pillai assures the police that no patronage or protection of the party will be provided to Velutha - all this done by Pillai with an eye to the vote bank.

The death of Sophie Mol helps Pillai much to dissociate him further from Velutha. The police arrests Velutha on false allegation of raping Ammu and kidnapping her two children and their cousin. But, as everybody knows, he has only transgressed the caste-barrier. An insensate torture is on Velutha to his last breath. Velutha's desire to live as a touchable was his only crime. He has the strength to kill at least two of his enemies but he remains all along a Gandhian. He is sincere and skilled tradesman, a loyal party worker, a good friend of Estha and Rahel. In his affairs with Ammu, he is unique too. Arundhati Roy gives him the height of a tragic hero to convince her readers of the unique qualities that a paravan can also attain.

Based on the laws of Manu, history gives the Indian caste system the authority and sacredness. The police and even the Marxist politicians join hands to maintain this historical process thereby becoming the agents of the caste system despite their ostensible affiliations. Roy raises question about the progress of history. In spite of their best attempts, Velutha and Ammu cannot resist the process of history. History wins because it has the power and the weapons to destroy whatever challenges the existing norms. Thus God of Small Things, according to Roy, is also God of Loss. The role of fiction here is significant as it rejects its allegiance to history and joins hands with poetry to give voice to the subtle delicate impulses of passion of the subalterns.

Fiction of Mahasweta Devi, Mistry and Roy

Mahasweta Devi, Mistry and Roy's fictions demonstrate the persistence of oppression that exists unchanged even after the independence in a democratic India notwithstanding the high claims of socio-economic and political reforms. Political and legislative solutions are ineffective, incompetent and futile. So, Mahasweta, Mistry and Roy turn to the small things on the human scale as providing places where the human spirit is tested and where it occasionally triumphs through sheer endurance, where inequalities are born and where they may be extinguished, and where humanity's grand pretensions finally terminate.

Dalit Story as Told by the Dalits

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Writing a literature of their own story, the Dalits, more so the Marathi Dalit writers, have given a new dimension to the understanding of Indian literature. In mid-19th century, Mahatma Phule organised the movement for Dalit and other castes (Shudras and Ati Shudras) occupying the lower rungs of the traditional Hindu society. Perhaps this stage should be considered as the beginning of new Dalit literature and new literary theory for Indian literature.

As an impact of the radical socio- economic changes in the Indian society, a group of Dalit youth emerged as an educated class by the end of the sixties. These youths got either white or blue collar jobs in the towns while their parents still lived their traditional lives of mohars in the villages. An eagerness for upward mobility was found among these youths. That was in 1967, when, in a conference of Maharashtra Boudhha Sahitya Parishad, M.N. Wankhere called for a new literature for the Dalits as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* did not speak for the Dalits - similar to that of the blacks in North America. Nevertheless, the dalits feel their condition is worse than the Blacks in North America for they are to experience an exiled life in their own land. Thereafter, in a *Dewali* edition of the journal *Marathawara*, there were a good number of write-ups on the definition and history of Dalit literature, so much so that the term began to refer to a new type of literature. Afterwards, another journal *Asmitadarsha* became the mouthpiece of the Dalit literature.

Currently, a spirit of protest dominates Dalit writings, largely written by affected people in a caste - oppressed Indian society. They have made a reversal of the order of this universe in their writings.

The short story collection of Baburao Bagul maintains this distinction adding an aesthetic value to the stories. Upper caste people fall from their height and are subjected to the gaze of those who never dared to look at them on any earlier occasion. As a reaction, there was an upheaval both in the political and literary world. The seat of power prickled those enjoying an unchallenging authority so long over the Dalits. In 1990s, the Dalit literary movement spread out its periphery to form Telugu Dalit literary movement.

Radical Political Movement

Creative writing was not all, and so, in 1972, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V Pawar initiated a strong political movement known as **Dalit Panther**. The definition of Dalit literature was further modified to be a literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. A wave of writing began describing experience in provocative language. This might be the first time in India when creative writers were politically active forming an organization. Thus, this literature would be an ambit for them to be distinguished as Dalits.

The Emergence of Dalit Aesthetics

The Dalit litterateurs were busy to formulate what they called Dalit aesthetics. While doing so, they were keener to reject rather than accept the traditional concepts and terminology of the existing upper caste literature. They preferred the structure of poetry by the Black Americans, the words of the prostitutes, of the criminal world, and locutions of the underworld dons (*Dalit* p. 12.) Expressions like 'maggots', 'ravishment', 'gag', 'vomiting fire', 'hole to fuck in', 'cock in your pocket', 'whore',

‘piss in the bastard gutter’ are the preferred expressions in these dalit writings. They rejected the upper class Hindu litterateurs writing on the Dalit life. Not only this, those Dalits who did not protest against the Hindu-subjugation of the Dalits in their writings, were also eliminated from the list of the Dalits.

Thus Chokhamela, a member of the Mahar caste and a saint in Maharashtra in the 14th century, was also rejected by them. His poems were regarded to be a blatant resignation to the Hindu religion and his devotion as a defeat. With such separatist and isolationist strategies in literature, they’ve succeeded in creating a specific genre in Indian literature across Indian languages. However, this sort of pursuit for distinct identity seems to have brought in other consequences such as a feeling of exiled life in their own land. The basic assumption that only a Dalit-creative writing can be part of Dalit literature demands closer scrutiny.

Dalit Poetry

More or less, in a deeply caste-ridden society, Dalit poetry is a quest to verbalise the complexities of finding an identity as a human being. The Dalit poetry takes the lead to be the impassioned voice of the third generation of the Ambedkarite movement. This voice reverberates in almost all the poems of the anthology *No entry for the New Sun*. The poems express pain to be an outcaste in the upper-caste dominated society. Often, a sense of identity crisis too leads to anguish in these poems.

Similarly, these poems also sound militancy. In a poem in the collection "To be or Not to be born", the Dalit poet L.S. Rokade, rejects the meek and submissive manner of the older generation. Here, the character plays upon the word ‘mother’ symbolising both his mother and the motherland. The motherland discriminates against the Dalit son. He is hurt to such an extent that he promises not to be born again. As he goes to collect water, he is humiliated by the upper caste for his Dalit identity, although it is in abundance in his motherland. So, he bewails:

Rivers break their banks
Lakes brim over
And you, one of the human race
Must shed blood
Struggle and strike
for a palmful of water (*Poisoned Bread* p.2)

Intolerable is the injustice meted out and he reacts violently ‘I spit on this great civilisation.’

The continuous exclusion of the Dalits by the upper caste people is the theme of Vilas Rashinkar’s poem ‘No Entry for the New Sun’. He scoffs at the racial policy. The low caste, the poet corroborates, is the new sun and the leader of the new social order. The existing Vedic social order of the high caste is debauched and appears to be ridiculous to the poet.

This is the empire
of ancestor-worship,
of blackened castoffs,
of darkness. (*Poisoned Bread*, p.24)

"That single Arm" by Tryambak Sapkale gives an impressive contrast between the outlook of the older and the younger generation. While the father accepts it to be their lot to be trampled by the rich upper caste, the son, Raja takes a razor blade and 'slices off the attacker's arm from the shoulder.' (p.3) This imagery itself gives an impression of the mindset of the new generation. Added to this is the use of local dialect, concrete and down to earth, which in itself confronts the hegemony of the upper caste. *In Which Language Should I speak?* The poet raises a vital question:

Picking through the Vedas
his top-knot well-oiled with ghee,
my Brahmin teacher tells me,
"you idiot, use the language correctly!"
Now I ask you,
Which language should I speak? (*No Entry*, p.54)

The dalit demands equal opportunity in order to contribute as an equal to the society. Assurance of human rights can elevate any lower caste poor to the level of the higher caste. Education is considered to be one of the means to Dalit empowerment. In 'Send my boy to School' by Waman Kardak, a mother is determined to send her son to school to prepare him withstand the educated high caste.

He'll be a lawyer; nobody's fool Send
my boy to school (*No Entry*, p. 8)

Focusing on Protest

Dalit poetry should be read as a product of a psychological situation. Even in this 21st century in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, etc., Dalits are inhumanly tortured and barbarously burnt to death in front of the police for some trifling reasons. Thus, Dalit writings describe with strong emotions the contours of an unequal society where they never dare to claim their genuine demands for human rights.



Namdeo Dhasal

Namdeo Dhasal, another founder leader of the Dalit Panthers movement, favours protest in poetry choosing the language from the Red Light area and from the underworld of Mumbai but he himself is not a part of this world. He is concerned with the community's submerging into the sea of darkness, of the fear of a community's annihilation which, in turn, may have detrimental effects on the civilization itself. Therefore, with his unique style, Dhasal revolutionises the Marathi literary landscape inspiring a whole movement of Dalit literature in the rest of the Indian languages in order to kindle the light of knowledge among the Dalit. Namdeo observes that Dalit literature is flowing into the 21st Century mixed with blood, sweat and anger, flowering into greatest poetry that this country is producing now. The recent Marathi literature as well as the political movement of the Dalit Panthers demonstrates this trend.

Dhasal's first collection of poems *Golpitha* (1972) took Marathi literary circles by storm challenging the existing rules of traditional Marathi literature. *Golpitha*, named after a red light district of Mumbai city, caused uproar as Dhasal employs vulgar language of the Red Light area.

Let all this grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up
And burst at a nameless time to shrink
After this all those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others
their slaves
After this they should stop calling one another names white or black,
Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra;
Stop creating political parties, stop building property, stop committing
The crime of not recognising one's kin, not recognising one's mother or sister
One should regard the sky as one's grandpa, the earth as one's grandma...

(From *Man, You Should Explode* from *Golpitha*)

One of his poems is on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar:

You are that Sun, our only charioteer,
Who descends into us from a vision of sovereign victory,
And accompanies us in fields, in crowds, in processions, and
in struggles;
And saves us from being exploited.
You are that Sun
You are that one—who belongs to us. (*Ode to Dr. Ambedkar*:
Golpitha)

Dalit Fiction

The 1980s have seen a considerable development of autobiographical works by the Dalit litterateurs is to write autobiographies, where the first stage of the Dalit life ends with his marriage. After his marriage, a new phase opens up - the life of a Dalit citizen. (*Dalit*, p.16) These writings capture the

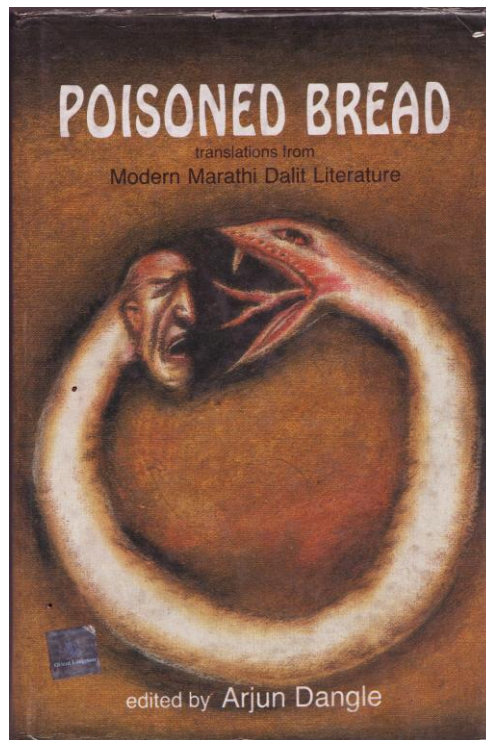
nuances of their struggle through a wide variety of regional , experiential and linguistic means.

There is a distinction between testimony and something of deeper personal and cultural import in these narratives. The narratives are more than an account of or a testimony to achievements in one's individual life. Instead, they help articulate for the writer a social as well as a personal identity.

To that extent, they fashion a self in the articulation as much as they situate this self within a larger social and cultural context. They speak not merely to an individual identity but to a collective identity. The narratives themselves experiment with formal language use in a variety of ways.

Daya Pawar 's *Balut* (1989) is told as a story by Dagdu Pawar to the more literate Daya Pawar – both Daya and Dagdu being the same person in different situation. These writers use particular spoken dialects , connected to the region, locality and caste from which they narrate. (Handbook, p.373) There is another variety which the dalit writers prefer the most besides poems – the short story writing.

The Poisoned Bread presents a collection of short stories and poems wherein the present status of the Marathi Dalit life is vibrantly accessible.



The Poisoned Bread begins with a distasteful comment of Bapu Patil, the upper caste representative when he finds the Dalit, Yetalya in the morning

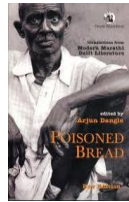
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Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Dalits and Indian Literature

Hey, what brings you here at such an early hour? Hope you haven't come here with your mind set on evil? (*Poisoned Bread* ,p. 147)



Yetalya, the narrator's grandpa, bore this insult meekly as if supposed to be abused always. The claims of the Dalits for equality appear to be intolerable for the upper caste in the village. But Bapu's foul language happens to be excruciating for the narrator, a third generation Dalit spokesperson:

I could take it no more. I felt my cheeks burning. But I quelled my temper and, cutting Bapu Patil short in the middle of his fiery tirade, burst out, Patil, will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the god? And if a religion can't accept one human being treating another simply as a human being, what's the use of such an inhumane religion? (*Poisoned Bread* ,p.148)

But this audacious (?) stance of the narrator cost him very much. Although the grandpa tries to make some rapport, Patil imposes upon them a huge workload as punishment to be completed by the evening to get their dues for their evening meal. But they cannot complete the work in spite of their best efforts. Patil refuses to give them anything - even a few measures of jowar (*Poisoned Bread* ,p.151). At last the grandpa begs Patil for some stale bread smeared with dung and urine. As they are returning home the grandpa opens up his heart to the narrator.

Do you think I feel happy about being oppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have a good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling upon us. But, my boy, I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering (*Poisoned Bread* ,p.151)

The stale bread costs the life of the grandpa but before he dies he advises his grandson

Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man (*Poisoned Bread* ,P.153)

In *The Storeyed House* the punishment is awarded in the form of burning down to ashes a newly built house by one Bayaji, a retired employee who has returned from his workplace to settle down in his own native village. He wants to build a 'storeyed' house with his hard earned pension money to accommodate the members of the family. The local Patil objects to his proposal because it

means a threat to his authority. Out of fear Bayaji has to abandon plans . . . 'but the middle portion is elevated a little and a small first storey fixed up there with a wooden flooring' (*Poisoned Bread* ,p.159). This small deviation costs his life and also the newly built house. 'The govt. officers, quite expectedly the biased ones, records it as an accident due to a 'petromax flare-up.' (*Poisoned Bread* ,p.161) But his sons are desperate enough to start constructing that very day a new house- regular two 'storeyed' building as a symbol of an angry protest.

Another short story by Arjun Dangle *Promotion* gives the picture of the precarious status of a Dalit who gets promotion in his office from his reserved category but the upper caste Godbole will not accept him as officer. A friend of his caste comes to him to say, "Remember no one has obliged you by promoting you in the reserved category Listen it's only now that we are being promoted to the 'Saheb' positions in this 33% category. But remember these other people have enjoyed the privilege of being in the 100% reserved category for centuries". (*Poisoned Bread* , p.169) As an officer, he now wants to dissociate himself from his comrades and relatives. His wife weeps at his changed attitude but he tells her that 'Don't talk too much. Learn to maintain your status. After all, you're an officer's wife' (*Poisoned Bread* ,p. 172). But the moment he comes to know about the bruised knee of his five-year-old son and the cause behind it, 'his newly sprung wings of promotion fall off and a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below'. (*Poisoned Bread* ,P.172)

A Picture of Inhuman Behaviour

The collage of pictures of Dalit-life presented in both the upper-caste and Dalit litterateurs gives an impression of inhuman behaviour by the upper caste on the Dalits. Nobody opposes the view that the Dalits are no better than bonded labourers even in an independent India. There are laws banning untouchability but every Indian knows how far it is effective even in the twenty-first century. The low caste has remained untouchable even to this day in their homeland and this state.

Attempts to move up the hierarchy have tragic consequences for the Dalits. True, many upper-caste writers and philosophers have sympathized with the miseries of the Dalits in their own country but, as Mahasweta has pointed out, that for any resistance to be successful, the initiative has to come from within the oppressed section.

Drawing a miserable picture of the Dalit life deprived both by the goons and by the government officials, Rohinton Mistry wants to affirm that it is impossible to separate casteism from Indian mind. There is an "invisible line of caste" (*Fine Balance*. p.97) which the downtrodden can never cross. The poverty-stricken Dalit women become vulnerable to sexual abuses. Most of the violence against the Dalits , as Mistry has pointed out, comes from landowning caste-Hindus equipped with militias and private armies recruited and trained with government assistance and cooperation, initially to combat Maoist-style uprisings from the Dalits and landless people. Against these atrocities by the upper class and the government, the afflicted Dalit poet fervently desires

While I write this at night

it's three o' clock

Though I want to have a drink

I don't feel like drinking.

Only I want to sleep peacefully¹

And tomorrow morning see no varnas. (From the poem: "Ambedkar: 1980", in **Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi**; translated by Asha Mundlay and Laurie Hovell.)

As mentioned by Ranjit Guha, Indian nationalism for a long time has been dominated by elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism. Setting a new dimension, Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence and poverty of the Dalit.

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