

Dalit Consciousness in Society and Literature: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on the Dalit consciousness in India after independence. The status of Dalit people in India and the struggles they overcome to make themselves equal to other communities were pointed out. Denial of basic rights and the steps taken by Indian government to provide the Dalits equal rights were the main areas discussed in this paper. This paper also deals with the Dalit consciousness in Indian literature and concludes with a strong belief that someday this society would be a casteless society. This paper also proposes to eradicate untouchability from the minds of people and in the society so that all will be equal in the society.

Keywords: Dalit Consciousness, Society and Literature untouchability, struggles, challenges, law, literature, Dalitism

Literature generally reflects the life on earth. Some critics would refer to it as the mirror of human life. Literature brings out the real face of the society through a book. There are many different world literatures that reflect the everyday plights of the human race. The detailed portrayal of human sorrows and sufferings could be seen in Subaltern or Marginalized literatures. The literature of the African-Americans, feminist literature all over the world, and Dalit literatures in India could be quoted as the best examples of marginalized literatures. The African-Americans faced so many serious problems due to racial and colour discrimination in America. Harlem Renaissance during 1920s to 1930s paved for them a way to bring out their sufferings through writings. *The Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature* says that,

“... the first two centuries of the African diaspora’s sojourn in the U.S. were marked by the dominance of the slave narrative and African American folklore, both of which continued to flourish and influence African American literature and politics long after the end of slavery. This does not mean, however, that these two creative forms represented the totality of African American literature” (Serafin: 2003).

The Dalit consciousness in Literature grew rapidly only after the independence. This is because everyone, irrespective of caste and religion, was encouraged to seek education only after the independence. So, this paved way for the people to think of their condition in

the society. And then they started making notes about their condition and written about these in their works. This latter paved way for a new genre of literature called the Dalit literature.

The word 'Dalit' is of a Sanskrit origin and it means 'Crushed' or 'broken to pieces'. The word 'Dalit' was first used by a nineteenth century writer Jyotirao Phule when he wrote about the story of 'Untouchables' in his work. There were numerous Dalit movements in India that work for the betterment and welfare of Dalit people in India. The Dalit movements were mainly organized as the response against the dominating upper castes especially Brahmins in Indian society. The socio-economic differences between the upper caste people and the lower caste people created an unhealthy society. The denial of basic rights to a particular group of people induced them to fight for their rights. For a long time, Dalits were not allowed to do all types works, but some works were assigned to them. They were even denied wearing proper dresses and eat good foods.

They lived in villages or in secluded areas that were given to them by the so-called upper caste people. So, they were not allowed to go anywhere away from those villages. The predetermined hierarchy in Indian society made these people a kind of slaves as they could not even shift to other places and were forced to live in the places given to them. They were actually called as the 'untouchables' by the upper caste people. Later, after independence they themselves re-revised their own name and called themselves as 'Dalits'. The founder-editor of Asmitadarsh, a chief organization of Dalit literature, Professor Gangadhar Pantawane, defines the word 'Dalit' in Eleanor Zelliot's compilation as,

“To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, and holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.” (P 268)

Dr. Ambedkar initiated an organization in 1942 in Nagpur by the name *All India Scheduled Caste Federation*. This federation ensures legislative, executive and public services to all the people belonging to Dalit group. Providing all the duties equally to all the community people would eradicate the system of untouchability in future. The efforts made by Dr. Ambedkar in his mission of eradicating untouchability were immeasurable. This could be better understood with the lines of C. B. Raja. He states thus,

“The use of political means to change the condition and status of the scheduled caste was first made by Ambedkar. Through his writings and speeches, he emphasises the fact that political power was the key to all progress and that the scheduled caste could achieve salvation, if they captured power by organizing the schedules with a separate party. He believed that ... the social and economic conditions of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes improved through political action. He wanted to force the hands of the

caste Hindus to ameliorate the conditions in which the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were living.” (P: 133)

There are numerous laws and acts that are made to protect the Dalit people in India. There are various acts that propose equality to all the people in India. Education, jobs, dressing, food and habitat have become common to every people in India excluding some rural areas in India. There are still some practices in some rural areas that threaten the peace of Dalit people. There are reservation quotas for Dalit peoples in all the aspects like education and job opportunities. This is to elevate the standards of Dalit people and bring them equal to other caste people in livelihood and social status. There are many commissions and organizations working hard to achieve this goal. Indian Constitution is designed in a way to create a casteless society. It proposes fundamental rights and duties to every citizen of India irrespective of caste and religion. India is a secular country with numerous religions and castes in it. The unity among every group is achieved by following the nation’s constitution in a proper way. Article 46 of Indian Constitution proposes,

“The state shall promote with special care of the educational and economical interest of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.” (Article 46)

There are many undefined laws that are with the name of Manu’s Laws, which still kill the rights of lower caste people. These laws are actually the serious offences made by its followers. For instance, the Manu’s Law denied education to people of all castes in India; it was totally against the inter-caste marriages. This even denied the lower caste people to sit equally with upper caste people and have food. These caste-based discriminations of the Manu’s Law are highly criticised. The Indian Constitution proposes a law as a response to these injustice laws. Article 17 of the constitution says that,

“Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.” (Article 17)

There are numerous articles that are made to protect equality among Indians. The articles that protect the lower caste people in the society are Article 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 25, 29, 38, 46, 164, 330, 335, 338, 341 and 366. The parliament of India also passed an act called Untouchability Offence Act (UOA) to announce untouchability practice as an offensive practice. Government has taken many steps to eradicate the untouchability practice in India. Its efforts start from the textbooks of little children, saying, Untouchability is a sin, crime, and inhuman. The UOA act came into operation in December 1956 and the same act was amended in September 1976 as the ‘Protection of Civil Rights’ (PCR) act. PCR act was like a

guard to each and every people belonging to Dalit community. This act protects them in a way that the untouchability was almost brought into control by this act.

There are numerous literary works in English that are written with Dalit consciousness. Some of them are *Shadow from Ladakh (1988)* by Bhabani Bhattacharaya, *Children of God (1976)* by Shanta Rameshwar Rao, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Baba's Tribe (1989)* by Suresh Chandra and *A Black Paddy* by Rangin Banerji, etc. are best examples of Dalit writings in literature of India. All these stories deal with the sufferings and plights of lower caste people through some characters in the stories. Even in the two great epics of Indian literature there are some characters who stand as the best examples of untouchability due to caste. Out of the two, *Mahabharata* is taken for instance. The characters Ekalavya and Karna are considered the most talented characters who unfortunately belong to lower castes. The sufferings and pains they faced due to their caste could be well understood by the readers. Discrimination in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata's Ekalavya's* condition were noted by Bir Singh Yadav thus,

“In the Ramayana, Shambuka, a sudra who was doing penance, and was dealt with death penalty by Lord Rama on the advice of his political council comprising the learned scholars and his rishis like Vishwamitra and Vashista. In Mahabharata, even a great rishi Uttanga emitted bad smell of untouchability when he refused to drink water from the Nishad - the disguised Indra, saying that he would prefer to die than accept water from an untouchable. Ekalavya was debarred from the archery by the great guru Drona and he had to pay a heavy price for being an untouchable.” (P 71)

Thus, there are lots of literary works that expose the sufferings of Dalit people. The efforts that they have taken to overcome their social condition were well written in the works of Dalit writers.

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