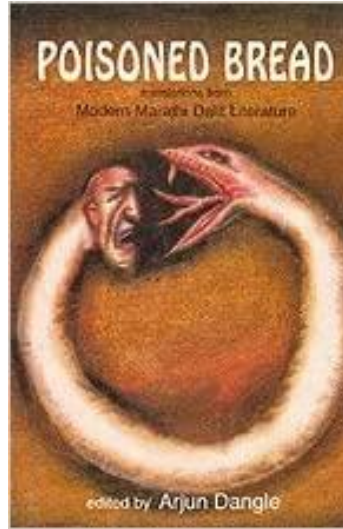


“The Untouchables” in Bandhu Madhav’s “The Poisoned Bread”: A Postcolonial Reading

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Poisoned-Bread-Translations-Marathi-Literature/dp/B002A9V1U2/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Poisoned+Bread&qid=1632431741&s=books&sr=1-1

Abstract

India is a land of many religions, castes, and social divisions. This is a country that envisions the value of unity beyond caste and religion. The education system in our country has enabled us to develop a more efficient attitude. Our society must be free from discriminatory attitudes. But have we improved in our behaviours? Do we treat all Indians in the same way? Do our religions and castes determine our thoughts and actions? There will be many answers to these questions. Untouchability is a social danger that exists in India in the twenty-first century as well. Dalits in our country are victims of prejudices and abuses by the upper castes. Internationalization has really expanded our borders. But it has not changed our views on the social hierarchy. The present study addresses the problem of untouchability depicted in Bandhu Madhav’s short story (included in the book *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle with the title *The Poisoned Bread - Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* 1994, Orient Longman) in the post-modern context.

Keywords: *The Poisoned Bread*, Bandhu Madhav, Dalit literature, Dalit consciousness, untouchability, Mahar community, psychological wounds, education, Postcolonial.

Introduction

Post-colonial Indo-Anglian literature covers everything related to our society, social classes, tradition, and culture. It tells us about the lives of ordinary people, their lifestyles and customs. The twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of many short story writers. However, Dalit literature originated in the mid-20th century:

The term ‘Dalit’ — meaning ‘oppressed’, ‘broken’, ‘crushed’ and ‘downtrodden’ in meaning — was first used by Phule and was reactivated after India’s independence. The first mention of ‘Dalit literature’ was made at the first Dalit Literature Conference held in Bombay in 1958. It gathered momentum in the 1970s, particularly after a group of young Marathi writers and activists launched an organization called the ‘Dalit Panthers’ in reference to the Black Panthers. It certainly was a significant moment in the history of Dalit literature, since it was followed by various political and literary movements across India. (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 8)

Dalit literature depicts the trauma and psychological pain suffered by the Dalits or the Scheduled Castes in India. They are also called Harijan. Gandhi was the first to use the term “Harijan”, the children of God. Their aspirations were at the mercy of the upper castes who determined the rhythm of the lives of these oppressed people. To survive, they were destined to work in the fields of their landlords. They had to face the atrocities of the caste system in their own country. The concept of untouchability must be completely uprooted. “Untouchability is a distinct Indian social institution that legitimizes and enforces practices of discrimination against people born into particular castes, and legitimizes practices that are humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative” (Shah et al. 19). By the middle of the twentieth century, Dalit writers began to depict the lives of their own community and created brave characters. Dalit consciousness reached its heights in the twentieth century:

Dalit Literature is at once the expression of a “Dalit consciousness” about identity (both individual and communal), human rights and human dignity, and the community, as well as the discursive supplement to a ground-level socio-political movement that seeks redress for historically persistent oppression and social justice in the present. (Nayar *Dalit Literature*)

Under Ambedkar’s leadership, Dalit communities in India stood against the exploitation of the upper caste. Several protests were held across India that accelerated Dalit consciousness. They strongly opposed the atrocities:

Ghurye in ‘Caste and Race in India’ makes an exhaustive list of discriminations associated with untouchables in traditional Indian society which includes banning of

women of untouchable caste from covering the upper part of their body, wearing gold ornaments having sexual proximity beyond the caste and the men from wearing dhoti below their knees using public facilities and going for occupations beyond their caste prescriptions. Untouchables at large were supposed to carry a thorny branch of the tree to remove their footsteps from the road, they were supposed to hang an earthen pot into their neck to spit which may otherwise fall on the ground making higher castes impure. The list of discriminations associated with untouchables is exhaustive which ends with the note that untouchables were supposed to start their day drinking the water into which the Brahmins dip their toes. (*Dalit Consciousness*)

Landowners or zamindars in the northern parts of India enjoyed special privileges during the colonial period. British officials pleased them to create a peaceful existence in the subcontinent. So, they gave acres of land to these upper castes. But the Dalits did not have better facilities. They were not properly paid for their hard work. They were poor because of the lack of food. They did not own the status of human beings. The upper castes treated them like animals or inanimate objects. “After Independence there has been a growing awareness of and concern for the degraded socio-economic condition of the Dalits . . .” (Paswan 11).

Bandhu Madhav, a twentieth-century prolific Mahar Dalit writer, wrote mainly in Marathi. As a writer, he tried to create awareness among the Dalits in Maharashtra. His stories and novels are the products of his consciousness as a Dalit. He was also the driving force behind the Dalit literary movement. “[He] writes movingly about his experiences and sufferings during his childhood spent with his parents, grandparents, and uncles. He terms his stories as being inherited tales” (Mane). With the publication of this work, these writers expressed the socio-economic and mental conditions of Dalits in India. In the late 20th century, a new era of Dalit consciousness emerged among communities:

For the first time, Dalit authors mustered the courage to listen to their inner voice and pen down their experiences using words and imagery not known to the literate world. The unexpected language and imagery of the outpourings in the poems, short stories, essays and songs by the Dalit youth in Maharashtra rattled readers. This literature of protest motivated a large number of Dalit young men and women, who wanted to change the system. (Joshi)

Published in 1992 as part of a collection of Dalit literature, “The Poisoned Bread” speaks about the suffering and hunger of the Mahar community, “caste-cluster, or group of many endogamous castes” in Maharashtra (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). It is the story of a Dalit who does not have better living conditions. The narrator in this story is a twelve-year-old boy. He arrives to live with his grandfather Yetalya Aja. The boy goes with his grandfather, who is looking for a job at Babu Patil’s farm. The narrator satirises the supremacy of the upper castes. Babu Patil, an upper caste landowner, addresses his grandfather and him like his slaves: “Hey, what brings you here at such an early hour? Hope you haven’t come here

with your mind set on evil. For don't they say, an encounter with a Mahar in the morning, and you're doomed for good" (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 1). The landlord's prejudice is clearly depicted in these lines. Yetalia and his community understood their conditions and adapted to the negative attitude of upper caste landowners like Babu Patil. None of them had the courage to speak out against those zamindars. They are labelled as slaves with utmost dedication. A slave in Yetalya realizes his duty and says, ". . . I am your slave. I have come to you on purpose on hearing of the operations at your threshing floor. My lord is our bread-giver, and we find it a privilege to beg for our share of com, muter. I am your begging Mahar and fed proud be so" (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 1). He tolerated and accepted all beliefs related to the Mahar community. The upper castes had instilled in them the thought of slavery and obedience. So, people belonging to the lower community blindly followed Babu Patil's words and toiled day and night to earn Jowar. They believed that they had no right to demand more wages and equality and had no right to tolerate injustice and violence. Patil abuses Yetalya and her grandson Mhadeva. He criticises the entire Mahar community for tarnishing the sanctity of their religion. He says, "Come on, don't you know that the rain-god got enraged because you - the Mahar and Mangs - have profaned religion, and abandoning caste, have defiled Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur. How else can you account for the drying up of the Chandrabhaga river?" (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 2). However, his grandson was brave enough to question the supremacy of Babu Patil and his community. He questions the hierarchy practised by landlords. The twelve-year-old boy acts as a renaissance leader of the entire Dalit community and says, ". . . And if our mere touch pollutes the gods, why were the Mahars and Mangs created at all? And who, may I know, who indeed, created them? And would you please tell me the name of the god whom the Mahars and Mangs can claim as their own?" (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 2).

Babu Patil insults the child when he speaks against him and uses obscene language to talk about the secondary status of the Mahar community. Patil boasts of his socio-economic status, and his arrogance is evident in these words. He says, "Look at that snot-nosed brat! He can't even keep his nose clean and yet has the audacity to talk back to me! Yetalya, whose good-for-nothing whelp have you brought with you?" (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 2). They both worked all day, but Patil paid them no wages. Yetalya could only assure his grandson that this was their fate.

On his way back, grandpa collects old food scraps lying next to the cowshed. The narrator talks about the exploitation and suffering faced by Dalits. They are destined to live as mere objects among the upper castes. Patil, a conservative landowner, emphasises the greatness of the upper caste. These 'untouchables' work in the fields and fill the landlords' granaries with grains. We can see how Mhadeva tells his grandfather to ignore the exploitation they have endured over the years. His grandfather also learns the truth and throws the collected pieces of bread to the dogs. But there is nothing at home for dinner, so the wife takes pieces of bread and makes dinner. After eating, grandpa falls ill due to food poisoning. The doctor could not save the old man either. In search of food for his entire family, the old man dies after eating a dish

his wife made with stale bread. Hunger and poverty are part of their lives. “The characteristic descriptions of the unique items in Dalit food habits which are also at times representative of their poverty are a striking feature in their identity construction” (Mambrol). Grandfather knew they were a group of people who did not own a penny. They are ‘untouchables’ in front of the upper castes. He feels that no one can stop discrimination against his own community. They struggle to earn their daily wages in the twenty-first century. Yetalya’s words clearly demonstrate the anguish they are experiencing:

Mhadeva, will the Mahars and Mangs never be happy? What a humiliating life we live! 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. But why should it go on? Even a lion locked in a cage all his life forgets how to hunt. This hereditary land-right has trapped us Mahars for good. How can we dream of doing business independently since we've been fed all our lives on the charity of others? What achievement can we ever boast of? All that comes from begging is more begging. (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 5)

Yetalya Aja urges her grandson to teach a lesson to the upper castes. The sting of conscience haunts Mhadeva for another twelve years. It was his dying grandfather’s last words that made him strong enough to respond to violence against Dalits by getting proper education. “They inflamed [him] with a sense of fury and disgust, prompting [him] to retaliate” (Bandhumadhav, *The Poisoned Bread* 8).

Conclusion

The Dalit community in India suffers from the same problems in the twenty-first century. Yetalya Aja is one of the affected people from the Dalit community. In Maharashtra and other parts of the Indian subcontinent, there are people who still endure their plight and live at the mercy of high social and religious classes. They should enjoy adequate food, equal status, education, and all human rights like other people in our country. We need to think of these Dalit people who have all the rights to live like the upper castes of this country. The status of the Mahar community in Maharashtra is unchanged in the current century. Education, land reforms and other grants offered them many things. India’s postcolonial land reforms have not saved them. They are still fighting for a piece of land and better education. In this age of globalisation, we need to change the traditional and prejudiced views of the upper classes to ensure peace and harmony among diverse societies.

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