

Dalit Identity and Culture: Ambedkar's Views in Dalit Literature

Dr Archana¹

Associate Professor, Department of English, Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005

Ms. Puja Majhi²

Research Scholar, Department of English, Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Banaras Hindu University

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Abstract:

The dalit identity is a complex and multi-faceted one. It is difficult to narrow it down to any one single identity. In spite of having such identity there was lack of writing about Dalits. Dalits were erased from the history, literature and also public life. They were forced to be invisible and doing all the dirty work and most labour-intensive work of the society. There were punished even for using the public roads and they could never dream about education. B.R. Ambedkar, the most prominent icon of Dalit movement was not allowed to study Sanskrit. He was not allowed to study the 'sacred' language in the Elphinstone High School in Mumbai because of his 'dalit' identity. My paper will explore the origins of the term "dalit" and the concept of "dalit identity." Additionally, I will examine how Ambedkar aims to raise awareness about the extensive inequalities present in society and highlight the power dynamics that seek to maintain the existing social order. I am also investigating B.R. Ambedkar's significance within the framework of Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit, Identity, Culture, Ambedkar, Struggle, Freedom.

Introduction:

The origin of the word 'Dalit' is from Sanskrit, which means 'suppressed' or 'crushed'. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word "Dalit," was used in the 1930s 'in Marathi translations of "depressed classes," a government term for untouchable castes.' M.K. Gandhi refers to the untouchables as 'harijans' or 'the children of God'.

One needs to understand how the caste system emerged in order to understand the position of dalits in the society. According to Rigveda, the caste system was created based

on Brahma's divine manifestation. In Hindu mythology, the creator of the universe is Brahma. Brahmins originated from the head, Kshatriyas originated from the arms, Vaishyas originated from the legs and Shudras originated from the feet of Brahma.

Society was divided into these four varnas or 'chatur varna', based on Brahmanical ideology which was created to maintain their position on the top of the social hierarchy. 'Chatur varna' had Brahmins at the top, then Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras at the bottom. There was also an invisible varna which were not part of the varna system, they were the 'untouchables' or 'dalits'.

Brahmins were associated with priestly and scholarly works. Kshatriyas dealt with warriorship and protecting the other varna. Vaishyas looked over trade and commerce and last Shudras were meant for the service of the upper three castes. The caste divisions were purely based on the divisions of labour. But the rigidity of the caste system meant one cannot go beyond the limits of one's caste. If one dared to, harsh punishments were levied upon them.

Sometimes the term 'Shudras' and 'dalits' are referred to interchangeably. As 'Shudras' were treated the worst in the varna system. But the 'dalits' or 'untouchables' were treated even worse than that. They had the lowest, dirtiest, most hazardous job in the society. They are primarily associated with leather works, butchering, cremation and cleaning the public toilets or drains etc.

I will explore the concept of "dalit identity." Additionally, I will examine how Ambedkar aims to raise awareness about the extensive inequalities present in society and highlight the power dynamics that seek to maintain the existing social order. I am also investigating B.R. Ambedkar's significance within the framework of Dalit literature.

In 1972, a new literary movement known as Dalit Sahitya (literature of the oppressed) emerged in the Marathi language, alongside a militant group called the Dalit Panthers. Now three decades old and still thriving creatively, the Dalit Sahitya movement has expanded to cover half of India's states. The poets and writers involved in this movement popularized the term "Dalit," which is now commonly found in various publications across the country. Dalit is a self-selected term originating from the Sanskrit and Marathi words that mean ground down or broken, signifying oppression. However, the term highlights that untouchability is externally imposed rather than stemming from any inherent impurity. Additionally, it serves to encompass all those who are marginalized and oppressed in India.

Although the term Dalit holds significance for numerous writers, certain well-educated Marathi speakers have dismissed it as derogatory to their autonomous and self-assured identity.

J. V. Pawar expresses this in an English collection of his poems, arguing that "Phule-Ambedkarite literature" would be a better name since

“We [in Maharashtra] are no more Dalits.”

The author is, however, in agreement with Gangadhar Pantawane, who says:

“What is Dalit? To me, Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism ... He represents the exploited men in his country ...

Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on “to be Dalit” has now disappeared” (Pantawane 1986: 79).

The phrase “Phule-Ambedkar literature” has a restricted application and cannot adequately describe the significant field of Dalit Christian theology, literature, and art. On the other hand, “Dalit” unites individuals who continue to face severe oppression with those who serve as educated advocates for a fairer society.

Punalekar highlights the significance of caste identity among different groups of Dalit writers, emphasizing their Bahujan or majority identity and a complete rejection of pity from the upper castes. Another key aspect of Dalit identity involves solidarity with other marginalized communities, particularly with Black individuals in America and Africans in South Africa. Renowned works like Ralph Ellison's “Invisible Man”, as well as selections from Langston Hughes' poetry and Amiri Baraka's plays, are widely recognized. The connection between contemporary Dalit artistry in poetry, music, storytelling, and theater remains largely underexplored. Interestingly, one Untouchable caste is named “Pariah,” which refers to drums. For many, though not all, Dalits, their historical creativity as Untouchables is an essential part of their identity. There are indications that modern Dalit identity is intertwined with that of their distant ancestors. Notably, pioneering writer Shankarrao Kharat, who passed away in April 2001, prepared a manuscript for publication by Sugawa Press in Pune on the fourteenth-century saint-poet Cokhamela.

K.R. Meera's 2017 book 'Hangwoman' deals with the Mullick family whose job was to execute people. The judge passed the execution order and they had to physically hang people. It deals with how the job of an executioner has changed with time. But the bad reputation associated with the job remained and they remain unable to change their jobs. As no one wanted to appoint or to be associated with them. Dalits suffered the same fate. No one wanted to be associated with them. Their job titles like ‘chamar’ itself are associated with insults. One can imagine how the people associated with the job would be treated.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar was a force to be reckoned with in eradicating exploitation based on caste and wanted equal societal status for all dalits:

“In Dalit literature, a Dalit expresses his anger and resentment of Dalits against social inequality.” (M.K. Shamsudeen)

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a celebrated Dalit literary critic and writer, observes that:

“To start with, there will have to be a definite explanation of the word ‘Dalit’ in

Dalit Literature. Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the

village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm labourers, workers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included” (30)

In modern Kannada, there exists a noticeable tension—or perhaps a simultaneous development—between two potentially opposing trends. One trend emphasizes a writing style that resonates with spoken language, as evident in the works of P. Lankesh, the articles featured in the highly popular tabloid Lankesh Patrike, and the writings of Dalit authors like Devanuru Mahadeva.

This approach steers clear of inflated Sanskrit terms and complex ideas, when possible, instead opting for lively, conversational, idiomatic, and frequently rural phrases.

While this bold and egalitarian approach is not typical among many Kannada writers, it has nonetheless confronted the conventional standards of Standard Kannada, which is predominantly middle-class and Brahminical. This challenge could potentially lead to a greater accessibility and transformation of the dalit language, which can be described as the "empowerment" of everyday language.

The field of autobiography is continually growing, featuring two works by minimally educated Marathi-speaking Buddhist women, one by a tribal woman, and several more in the pipeline, including a piece by the renowned short story writer Urmilla Pawar. The anthology "Poisoned Bread" presents excerpts from the autobiographies of two Buddhist women, Shantabai Kamble and Kumud Pawade—one of whom is semi-literate and the other highly educated—as well as contributions from the late Shankarrao Kharat.

Gujarati poet Mangal Rathod has crafted a concluding poem that serves as a representative piece.

“O, Babasaheb!

The first sip of water you drank

Quenched our thirst of ages.

We learned the taste of life!

We can never forget you

for your memory lingers

in each step we ascend.”

(Indian Literature 159, 1994: 24)

The poem refers to the most notable incident in dalit history, the 1927 satyagraha for water, at the Chawdar tank in Mahad, Maharashtra. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar led the Untouchables or dalits to drink water from a public tank. It was a landmark movement as dalits were barred from even touching the water. Ambedkar returned to Mahad and burned the classical Brahmanical law book,

‘Manu smriti’ which espoused extreme punishment for shudras or lower caste people.

According to Manu, melted hot lead should be poured into the ears of shudras who dared to hear the verses of the ‘sacred’ Vedas.

“The importance of Ambedkar in this Dalit movement can hardly be exaggerated” (Zelliot 1992).

All Dalit writers, regardless of the difference of their mother tongue and caste pay tribute to the memory of Dr B. R. Babasaheb Ambedkar. While writing about Telugu literature G. Lakshmi writes -“Ambedkarism is the philosophic soul of Dalit literature,” (G. Lakshmi Narasaiah, 1999)

Ambedkar and his Writings

In a letter dated December 12, 1935, the secretary of the 'Jat-Pat Todak Mandal'—translated as the Society for the Abolition of the Caste System, an anti-caste Hindu reform organization located in Lahore—extended an invitation to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to speak about the caste system in India at their annual conference in 1936.

Ambedkar composed his speech as an essay titled "Annihilation of Caste" and forwarded it to the organizers in Lahore for printing and dissemination. However, the organizers deemed certain parts objectionable because they contested Hindu orthodoxy, labelling them as 'intolerable.' They requested Ambedkar to omit those sections. In reply, Ambedkar asserted that he "would not change a comma" of his work. Consequently, the organizers decided to cancel the event entirely due to concerns about potential violence from orthodox Hindus.

Ambedkar later printed 1,500 copies of his speech in book form on May 15, 1936, at his own cost because the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal did not honour their promise. In this essay, Ambedkar condemned the Hindu religion, highlighting its caste system and male-dominated religious texts that promote hatred and the oppression of women's rights. He contended that inter-caste dining and marriage alone cannot eliminate the caste system, asserting that "the real method of breaking up the Caste System was... to destroy the religious notions upon which caste is founded"

Ambedkar gives an example of the oppression faced by the Balais, an untouchable group in Central India. A report published in the Times of India on January 4, 1928, details this situation. According to the correspondent, high-caste Hindus—including Kalotas, Rajputs, and Brahmins, as well as the Patels and Patwaris from the villages of Kanaria,

Bicholi-Hafsi, Bicholi-Mardana, and around 15 other villages in the Indore district—informed the Balais that, to coexist with them, they must adhere to certain rules:

“1) Balais must not wear gold-lace-bordered pugrees.

2) They must not wear dhotis with coloured or fancy borders.

3) They must convey intimation [=information] of the death of any Hindu to relatives of the deceased—no matter how far away these relatives may be living.

4) In all Hindu marriages, Balais must play music before the processions and during the marriage.

5) Balai women must not wear gold or silver ornaments; they must not wear fancy gowns or jackets.

6) Balai women must attend all cases of confinement [= childbirth] of Hindu women.

7) Balais must render services without demanding remuneration, and must accept whatever a Hindu is pleased to give.

8) If the Balais do not agree to abide by these terms, they must clear out of the villages.”

The Balais refused to bow to pressure from the Hindu community, which then took action against them. They were denied access to village wells for water, could not let their cattle graze freely, and were prohibited from crossing land owned by Hindus. This meant that if a Balai's field was surrounded by Hindu-owned land, they could not reach their own field. Furthermore, Hindus allowed their cattle to graze in Balai fields. In response to this oppression, the Balais submitted petitions to the Darbar (the Court of Indore) but received no timely assistance. As the injustices persisted, hundreds of Balais, along with their families, were forced to leave their ancestral homes and migrate to nearby states, including villages in Dhar, Dewas, Bagli, Bhopal, Gwalior, and others.

Ambedkar comes to the conclusion that caste system has rotten the Hindu society to its core. The Chatur-varna system has restricted the knowledge production and knowledge dissemination to one caste and deprived the other castes from gaining knowledge, which is the main basis of social upliftment. It has levied harsh punishments to whoever dared to transgress the system.

According to him, “That Hindu Society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” to achieve its full potential. In order to do so one needs to destroy the caste system and varna system.

Ambedkar doesn't call for the denunciation of all the shastras. In-fact he supports the shastra which ‘govern moral conduct’.

A.K. Ramanujan in his essay “Is there an Indian way of thinking?” discovers that a trait which is can be found in Indian way of thinking is inconsistency and lack of universality. It

becomes very apparent when one reads Manu after reading Kant. There is an inability to distinguish self and non-self. He quotes Manu

Manu VIII. 267(quoted by Muller 1883) has the following:

“A Kshatriya, having defamed a Brahmana, shall be fined one hundred (panas) ; a Vaisya one hundred and fifty or two hundred: a Sudra shall suffer corporal punishment.”

According to Manu, even morality depends on the caste or jati of a perpetrator and the victim. It is in contrast with Kant’s well know formulation of imperative: ‘Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through its will a Universal Law of Nature’ (Copleston 1946: 116)

According to Ambedkar, social reform is essential for political change. Caste hinders Hindus from creating a genuine society or nation. Caste obstructs the advancement and inclusion of indigenous tribes. The Hindus have not only failed to contribute to the humanitarian effort of civilizing those considered "savages," but higher-caste Hindus have intentionally hindered lower castes within Hindu society from advancing to the cultural status of the higher castes. The impact of caste on Hindu ethics is truly lamentable. Caste has undermined community spirit and eroded the concept of public generosity. It has rendered the idea of public opinion unfeasible. For a Hindu, the community is defined by caste; their obligations and loyalties are confined to their caste group. Virtue is constrained by caste, and morality is dictated by it. There is a lack of empathy for those in need, little recognition for the deserving, and insufficient assistance for the vulnerable. While there is some charity, it is limited to within one's own caste. Sympathy exists, but it does not extend to individuals from different castes.

According to Ambedkar, an ideal society should be dynamic, with numerous avenues for sharing changes occurring in one area with others. It should have a variety of interests that are consciously communicated and embraced. There must be diverse and open connections with different forms of association. In essence, this means there should be social exchange. Fraternity is simply another term for democracy. Democracy is not just a type of governance; it is fundamentally a way of living together and sharing experiences. At its core, it embodies an attitude of respect and honour toward our fellow human beings.

Conclusion

The identity of a Dalit writer encompasses several elements. It includes the urgency to express personal experiences, frequently using the language and context of their community. Dalit identity also embodies a connection to a broader network of Dalit authors across India and other marginalized groups globally, viewing their literary work as a form of social activism. Their writing often addresses societal issues, particularly the violence and injustices faced in rural areas. Additionally, Dalit literature serves as a counterculture to Brahmanical traditions, focusing on marginalized characters found in epics and religious

texts. Ultimately, Dalit writers create a bridge to the creative expressions of past Untouchables, including influences from Buddhism and particularly the ideas and life of Ambedkar. The writing of Ambedkar sheds gives a very broad picture how the dalits were treated in the society. He tries to look into the root causes of the caste discrimination. He espouses for equal and just society for all, though his writings.

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