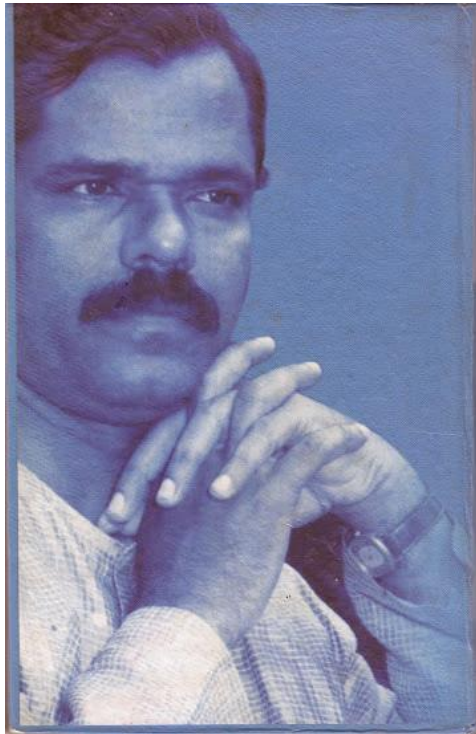


**Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*:  
A Discourse on Suppression and Survival**

**S. Johny, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar**



**Aravind Malagatti**

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**Abstract**

Autobiography is a literary genre that enables a writer to pour out his/her woes and personal thought without any stylistic constraints. The narration makes the prose readable even to a lay man. Due to this reason, many social reformers and political activist around the world have effectively made use of this genre. Many prominent writers such as Maya Angelo have made use of autobiography to expose the racial exploitation experienced by them. In India, Dalit

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writers chose this genre to express their anguish over the unequal, cruel treatment met by them. This article focuses on the autobiographical writing of a leading Dalit creative writer from Karnataka, Aravind Malagatti: *Government Brahmana*. Physical and mental sufferings as well as humiliation faced by Dalit individuals, both children and adults, from both genders, are depicted in *Government Brahmana*. Powerful narrative with simple but elegant language use makes the book a great work of art.

**Key words:** autobiographical creative writing, Dalit literature, Aravind Malagatti, *Government Brahmana*.

### **Autobiography and Dalit Writing**

Autobiography is a literary genre that enables a writer to pour out his/her woes and personal thought without any stylistic constraints. The narration makes the prose readable even to a lay man. Due to this reason, many social reformers and political activist around the world have effectively made use of this genre. Many prominent writers such as Maya Angelo have made use of autobiography to expose the racial exploitation experienced by them. In India, Dalit writers chose this genre to express their anguish over the unequal, cruel treatment met by them.

### **Aravind Malagatti**

Aravind Malagatti is a vibrant literary personality in Kannada Literature, who wielded literature as a powerful weapon against the forces of oppression. He also has redoubtable scholarship in folklore. Further, as an activist he played a cardinal role in establishing several Dalit organisations and rejuvenating Dalit movement in Karnataka. Malagatti now serves as a Professor of Kannada in Kuvempu Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore.

### **Elements of Dalit Literature**

Dalit Literature has a number of elements that are similar to African-American Literature. In both the streams, oppression and emancipation are the leading themes. African-American literary studies have become a well-defined discipline. Dalit literary study is yet to attain this

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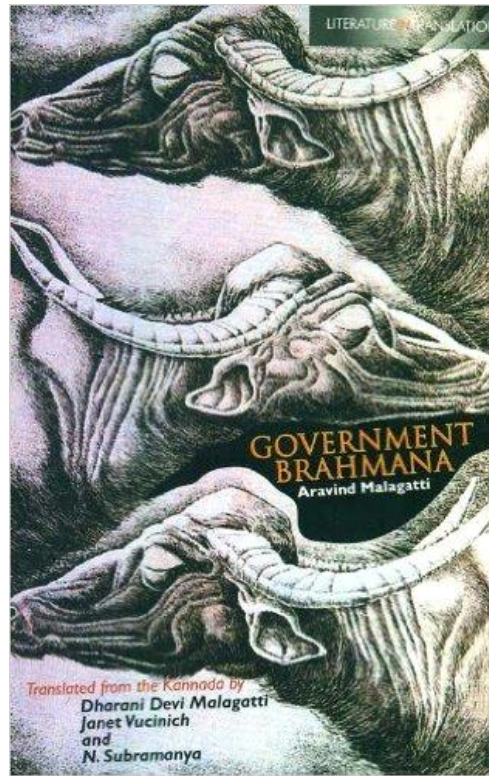
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recognition. Azhagarasan in his 'Bama in Context' observes that not just Dalits, even Dalit Literary Studies is discriminated. He says:

In the academic sphere, while the European and American universities accommodate Dalit Studies as part of the expansion of Cultural Studies, Indian Universities have included it as part of fulfilling the University Grants Commission's demand to accommodate Human Rights in the curriculum, Dalit Studies, however, remains a marginal study as it remains outside the mainstream curriculum, and is offered only as an elective or optional course. Even in those universities where Dalit History was included as part of the mainstream curriculum, it remains merely as a component and does not affect the dominant (Hindu) perspective on literature and culture. (xviii)

### *Government Brahmana*



The title *Government Brahmana* might be intriguing to those who are familiar with Indian caste system outwardly. It might look like an irony. In ancient texts of Sanatana Dharma, 'Brahmins' are entitled to occupy the top rung in caste based hierarchy. The autobiography of a

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Dalit activist, entitled *Government Brahmana* seems strange as Dalits were branded as untouchables by the same set of texts that celebrate Brahminhood. Thus, the very title of the work provides the reader with a curious connotation.

Malagatti explains that Dalits of Karnataka were contemptuously called government brahmanas. This is due to the reason that the government provides a number of scholarships, welfare programmes and reservations for the betterment of Dalits. The rationale of these critics is that during the days of Kings, Brahmins were given preferential treatment. On the reverse now, the elected government attributes preferential treatment to Dalits. Hence people who harbour reservations against Dalits make use of the term ‘government brahmana’ to denote and humiliate the Dalits.

### **Experiments with Truth – Confession versus Documentation**

Malagatti opens his autobiography with the following words, “First let me make it very clear, I do not have any illusions of becoming a mahatma by presenting these few pages of my life story” (1)

The usage of the word Mahatma in the first sentence reminds us of Mahatma Gandhi and his *My Experiments With Truth*. The readers should understand that the aim of Malagatti in writing an autobiography is different from that of Gandhi. Gandhi’s work is confessional whereas Malagatti’s work is documental. Malagatti records his sufferings and trials in his work. His personal history becomes the history of Dalits in Karnataka. He revisits the past to take the readers on a tour to witness the atrocities against him. Malagatti’s says:

You may have seen Aravind Malagatti as a white-clad, thorough-bred gentleman. To those of you who have seen him or would like to see him so, these words may come as surprise. Some of you may raise eye brows; while some others may smirk some may even view the words with suspicion. I am certain that the cause for these reactions is the Aravind Malgatti who stands in front of you as you read. But you have not seen this Maali (the nickname my family and neighbours

employ to tease me) as a child. In fact, a few friends who studied with Maali now maintain a distance and address him as 'ri'. No matter how much he attempts to get close, they shy away from him. They no longer talk to Maali or tease him like before. Instead, they move farther and farther away. Reason: they are under the illusion he is a 'big man' now. (1)

### **Marginalized Living**

Malagatti narrates how he and his family lived in the margins of the village society. Economically and socially, they were only a bit higher than the people who beg for their living. The dominant castes of the village needed them for certain rituals. For example, when the corpse of a caste Hindu was taken to graveyard, it was a practise that handful of coins should be thrown all the way. No one other than the marginalized would touch these coins. Malagatti asks: "If there were no dalits what worth would their coins have?" (1). In order to stroke their castewise superiority, the caste Hindus needed Dalits.

### **At School**

Usually reminiscences of Malagatti's early days in school evoke fond memory among people. Those days would have been of fun, play and joy. It is just the opposite in the case of Malagatti. His school life was an interminable wave of harassments. Segregation started right from the primary school itself. Malagatti and his street-mates were not allowed to sit on the desk. They were forced to sit on the floor. As Malagatti could not tolerate this, he refused to go to school. His grandmother calmed him down by providing him with a new jute sack to sit in the school. Malagatti was ridiculed for this also.

A variety of punishments were imposed on Malagatti. These punishments remind one of the torture camps of Nazi dictators. He was often forced to hang on walls holding the nails. This itself is a torture. Added to this was the canning of the teacher. One cannot even imagine the suffering of Malagatti. A five year old boy was punished worse than a cold blooded terrorist. What hurt Malagatti more was not the beating but the words of his teacher that accompanied the beating. His teacher used to shout: "Look at the buttocks of this bastard, bulging like drums after

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gobbling the school uppit” (12). The abusive and hurting language of the teacher, especially the use of the word ‘bastard’ might shock a reader. Such things were just minor matters of atrocity against Dalits, during those days. Further, the teacher vengefully refers to ‘school uppit’. It is a practice of the government to provide free meals to economically down trodden students, so that they will not discontinue their studies due to hunger. This noble practice is slammed by the teacher. May be, the teacher was venting his anger against the government policy on young Malagatti. This incident is just an example of how most of the people look at certain proactive inclusive measures taken by the government.

### **Reasons for Punishment at School**

What shocks the reader more is the reason for punishment. Malagatti says:

Do you know what the offences were that deserved such severe punishments? Not that we did not do our homework; nor were we untidy. The reason was that we skipped sweeping the class room sometimes before the morning prayers at school. It was mandatory that we, friends from the lane, should come early to the school and sweep it fully! (14)

To compound the miseries, the name of the student who was supposed to sweep the floor next day would also be written on the board. Dalit students were thus twice publicly humiliated. What was the reason for choosing Dalit students to sweep the class room? It was not that the students should learn to do household chores. If that was the reason, a roster consisting of the names of all the students would have been prepared. Instead Dalit students alone were targeted for this job. One cannot miss the irony here. Parents send their children to school with the hope that the education would liberate their children from the cruel clutches of demeaning hereditary jobs imposed on them by the society. But the school, which is supposed to be the beacon of hope, reinforces the traditional jobs. The teacher wanted to thrust the stereotypical Dalit identity on Malagatti. On the other hand, Malagatti's classmates were being given hands on course on mistreating and abusing Dalits. The young minds would fix their attitude on Dalits by witnessing their treatments.

## **Mocking at Personal Names**

Malagatti narrates another incident that shows how the caste Hindus belittled Malagatti. The name Aravind Malagatti had caste Hindu sound. 'Aravind' is the Sanskrit word for lotus and 'Malagatti' is the name of a pilgrimage centre. They were unable to tolerate such names being given to Dalit boys. Hence, first the teacher and then the students began to purposefully misspell his name as Mala Katti. The Kannada word Katti means donkey or ass (15). Malagatti silently put up with this abuse for months together. One day he decided to correct the misspelt name in the board. So he approached the black board after the school hours. Malagatti says:

I do not know where our great teacher was hiding till then. He entered the classroom and pulled out the cane, which was kept on a wooden peg on the wall. I started shivering at the very sight of it. I felt as if all my strength was leaving me. Before I could get down and justify my act, saying, 'They have written "katti". ..', he started beating me.(16)

The teacher was not satisfied with the excuse. He venomously said, "So what if it is written "Katti" were you trying to make it gatti"? The bastard has just learnt to write and he already wants to correct what is written. A Katti is a Katti any way"(16).

Here one has to notice two things: To begin with the teacher is irritated by the fact that Malagatti wanted to correct the misspelt name. He fumes ". . . he already wants to correct what is written" (16) Was the teacher anxious about the fate of the time old traditions that provided him with a license to abuse Dalits? His contention, "A Katti is a Katti any way" (16) shows his deep rooted belief in caste by birth.

## **Did Education Change Their Attitude?**

As years went by, Malagatti successfully completed his higher education. He obtained a doctoral degree. In spite of the passage of time, the mentality of the people did not change. They could not physically assault him anymore. So they turned to back hitting and sarcasm. When Malagatti was openly exhibiting his leftist leanings, people remarked "What else is there?

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Whatever is the facility given to people below the belt, they won't change" (4). Thus all his actions were traced back to his caste.

Even the way he dressed irritated them. Malagatti used to dress well. But people wanted him to carry a Dalit look. They suggested this to him. Malagatti replied:

'You could be like them too, why aren't you? Today you ask me this. Tomorrow you may as well ask, "Why don't you wear a langta like Gandhiji?" I don't aspire to wear a langta and be called a mahatma. I am an ordinary person. Do understand that I have all the qualities that a normal person ought to have. Please don't preach.'(5)

The society continuously tries to put Malagatti in *his* place by reminding him of his Dalit background. During his childhood, he was physically assaulted. In his later days, he was intellectually assaulted. The ruses employed by the people change; but the people themselves do not change.

There is a possibility of analysing *Government Brahmana* from the point of view of New. M.A.R. Habib says: "It (New Historicism) saw the literary text not as somehow unique but as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses – religious, political, economic, aesthetic – which shaped and, in their turn, were shaped by it" (761). The text in hand can be also considered as a cultural discourse; it is a documentation of condemnable, abominable casteism of the society.

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