

## Dalit Literature: An Overview

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### Abstract

History testifies the presence of cleavages in every society, characterized by atrocities, discrimination, exploitation and subordination that raised peoples demand for justice and equality. It is this idea of equality that forced people to protest in the form of movements. The Dalit Movement also began as a protest movement in India. The Dalits, also called as Atisudra, Panchama or Outcasts, at present constitute one of the most depressed and marginalized sections of Indian society. Socio-cultural exclusion, economic deprivation and political exploitation of centuries made them to break out of such kinds of age-old prejudices. Hence, they began to protest with the help of literatures, or forming organization like the Dalit Panthers, which came to be recognized as the Dalit Movement. This paper is an attempt to bring forth the various aspects of Dalit's lives that led to the movement, in the radiance of four Dalit literatures.

**Keywords:** Cleavages, Dalits, Depressed, Equality, Exploitation, Protest, Marginalization, Movement.

### Introduction

History testifies the presence of social cleavages in Indian society, in terms of caste, class, gender and the like. Such cleavages have changed the entire social fabric of Indian society, whereby the exploited section, be it the Dalits, adivasis or women, have been systematically pushed to the periphery by the traditional Brahmanical structure of oppression. Dalits are the people who are economically, socially, politically exploited from centuries. Unable to live in the society of human beings, they have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation and lived as untouchable. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by

age old caste hierarchical tradition in the Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of Dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected them to a life of poverty and humiliation. The Dalits (ex-untouchables), who have been brutally exploited by the so-called upper castes, lag outside the Varnasrama theory and were referred to as outcasts in pre-independent India. India attained independence, but the Dalits were not allowed to live a life with dignity and equality. It is this idea of equality, which sparked the beginning of the Dalit Movement in India, as a protest to the age-old atrocities committed against them. Dalit movement is a struggle that tries to counter attack the socio – cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is a movement of the masses that craves for justice through the speeches, literary works, dramas, songs, cultural organisations and all the other possible measures. So, it can be called as a movement which has been led by Dalits to seek equality with all other castes of the Hindu society. The main objective of the Dalit Movement was to establish a society in India based on social equality. The constitutional identity, however, fails to capture the true picture. The real picture is something different which will be reflected in this paper, in the light of the four books including *Debrahmanising History*, *Poisoned Bread*, *The Prisons We Broke* and *Dalit Visions*.

### **Different Connotations of the Word ‘Dalit’**

Dalits, the group of people who constitute the last category of castes in the Varnasrama Theory. This is the traditional definition of the term Dalit as is given by different scholars. According to the Indian Constitution the Dalits are the people coming under the category Scheduled castes. With slight changes, however, the term Dalit ‘would mean not only one category of caste, it means the human who is exploited economically, socially, politically and from all the spheres of life, by the traditions of the country. By tradition would mean the Brahmanical Indian tradition prevailing in the country for centuries. A Dalit does not believe in God, religion as propagated by the Hindu scriptures and religious texts , as because it is these tradition only that have made them slaves. A Dalit is the person who has the realization of the sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society. The Dalits, called by different names like Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, are actually the Depressed Classes of Indian society. Dalit is one who believes in equality, who practices equality and who combats inequality. A Dalit is the believer of Humanism—the ultimate ideology of human beings.

The real symbol of present Dalit is Change and Revolution. Therefore, any individual from any caste category (including the Brahmin), will be considered a Dalit given the fact that the person is depressed and exploited, aspire to attain equality through change and revolution, being the firm believer of the ideology of Humanism.

### **Brahmanism as the Root Cause of Dalit Movement: A Historical Critique**

The Dalits and women in India are, at present, categorized under the marginalized sections of the society. All these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis and so on) share a common condition of exploitation and oppression by the so called upper castes of the Indian society .If we trace back to the historical periods, it will be found that the root cause is the formation of the Caste System which actually led to the oppression of the other categories of oppressed classes of India– the women. It was with the Aryans who entered the country from Middle East and settled in the fertile land of the Ganges after a fight with the indigenous people of the civilization. The people, well versed in the techniques as shown in historical aspects, were defeated by the Aryans. The Minority Aryans defeated the majority Dalits by the use of their tactics of Divide and Rule, as assumed by Braj Ranjan Mani because without doing so they won't be able to defeat the majority. The Brahmins had retained this tactic even today. Later in the Vedic period, the formation of the Rig Veda laid the foundation of the oppression of the people in their own land, with the Purushashukta in its tenth book. It was later in the 5th century that people of Shudra Varna were transformed to untouchable. And this led to beginning of the Brahmin domination accompanied by Dalit exploitation. A Brahman is a great God, whether he is learned or imbecile, and the Brahmins should be respected in any way, even if they indulge in a crime<sup>1</sup>. These are the Religious texts of the Hindus, which strives for an unequal society, a society where a certain group of people are given the status of God, in total contrast with the other group who are considered even worse than animals. God who is considered as the Almighty do not exist but is considered as the Supreme power. Is it that the Arya-Brahmins, devised the institution of Varna and thereby caste, in order that they consider themselves as the Supreme. By putting themselves in the supreme position, they actually wanted to attain superior status, a life of dignity, and aspired to be obeyed by everyone in the Indian society. Caste, the very creation of man and not God, is now rooted firmly in the Indian society, through the religion of majority Hinduism. Gail Omvedt in her book *Dalit Visions*, equated

Hinduism with Brahmanism. Hinduism is constructed in order to hide the discriminatory laws of Brahmanism under a religion to be considered as the religion of the country, and thereby obeyed without any question. The caste ideology is founded in the twin religious doctrines of Karma and Dharma. And that it was the basic duty of every individual to maintain Dharma which was to retain the social structure based on the Varnasrama Theory. Not only Manu, Kautilya, another Brahmin, also emphasized on retaining the Caste structure as the basic structure of Indian society that cannot and should not be changed. The same was asserted by Gandhi, the Father of the Nation ,to change is to create disorder<sup>2</sup>. This means that the Brahmins should stay at the top of the pyramid and the Dalits at the bottom. Even if the Dalits die under the situation, they should not be uplifted. This is Brahmanism –believer of inequality, the roots of which lie in the ancient Vedas. Formulated 3500 thousand years back, the Vedas are ruling Indian society even now, through its instrument – Hinduism. It is controlling the minds of the people, which made the minority groups –the Brahmins to be the policy makers of the country. And in order to retain their position they have devised myths. For instance, they devised the myth of Punarjanma which explains the phenomena of re-birth. It explains that the activities of our past janma are responsible for our present status, and the activities of present will decide our life after re-birth. This myth has two connotations-

Firstly, the Dalits should accept the exploitation done against them as the result of their own deeds of past birth. They should consider that they committed some bad deeds due to which they are facing such kind of oppression.

Secondly, even if they are exploited in this birth, they should not protest, which will provide them a good life in the next birth after re-birth. That is, with the desire to get happiness in the next birth, they should cry. Because it is believed that, God will help them to come out of distress, and that the Brahmins being Gods are the only solution for their distress. If these texts are observed closely in sociohistorical perspective, the aim to write these texts becomes clear, which is to establish and maintain Brahmanical hegemony, and exploit the non-Brahmins, basically the Dalits.

## **The Dalit Movement**

The Dalit Movement is the result of the constant hatred being generated from centuries in their heart from the barbaric activities of the upper castes of India. Since Dalits were assigned the duties of serving the other three Varnas, that is all the non– Dalit, they were deprived of higher training of mind and were denied social-economic and political status. The division of labour led to the division of the labourers, based on inequality and exploitation. The caste system degenerated Dalit lives into pathogenic condition where occupations changed into castes. The higher castes of the society looked down upon the Shudras. It was a general belief that the Dalits are part of the lowest of low Varnas. Thus, for centuries Dalits have been positioned at the bottom of the rigid Indian caste society. People from other castes, who considered themselves to be higher, believe that Dalits are impure by birth and that their touch or sheer presence could be polluting. Hence, they are assumed to be untouchable. For centuries, Dalits were excluded from the mainstream society and were only allowed to pursue menial occupations like cleaning dry latrines, sweeping, tanning or working as landless labour for meager daily wages. They were the people who cultivated the land and worked as bonded labour, did the work of scavenging and did all types of manual works. The most inhuman practice is that of untouchability, which made the Dalits to live in extreme inhuman situations. In other words, they lived a barbaric life. Starving for food in their own land where they themselves are the owner of the land, enraged the Dalits. This has made the Dalits to rise and protest, against the inhuman practices of Brahmanism. Dalits were discriminated in every sense. They lived in the Hindu villages hence did not have advantage of geographical isolation like tribes. They were pushed to the jungles whereas; the mainland was occupied by the Brahmins. They were to serve all classes of people around and had to do all the dirty jobs. They were barred from entering into those mainland areas in every sense, they were prohibited to wear decent dress and ornaments besides being untouchable. Many of the atrocities were committed in the name of religion. Besides, the system of Devadasi they poured molten lead into the ears of a Dalit, who happened to listen to some mantra. To retain the stronghold on people, education was monopolized.

From the Vedic age, the Dalits began struggle against oppression and exploitation. The most striking aspect of Manus formulations is in the sphere of punishment for breaking law where the quantum of punishment for the offender increases as one goes down the caste hierarchy

(Chakraborty .11). From the classic instances of Shambuk who was killed for acquiring spiritual knowledge and Eklavya who was forced to cut off his thumb for his prowess to archery, the Dalits were always punished. Their only fault was that they are Dalits, and that they did not have any right to attain knowledge. Dronacharya could not take off the art of archery from Eklavya finally punished him by taking away his finger. The Dalits were always punished for the deeds that they didn't commit, just because it was coming in the way to the Brahmins. Whenever they constitute a threat to the Brahmanic hegemony, the Brahmins would not leave a chance to punish them. The Dalits were never placed in their rightful position, which they deserve. Today, they constitute the marginalized section of society .The reason behind this is that they were denied access to resources –material or intellectual as well as were exploited .It was thus the Dalits decided to stop the following of such unequal practices in society where one group benefits stealing from the other and began their movement due to the fact that they were denied equal status.

### **Dalit Literary Movement**

At a time, when there was no means of communication to support the Dalits, pen was the only solution. The media, newspapers were all under the control of the powerful class –the Brahmins. Given that the Brahmins would never allow the Dalits voice to be expressed, as it would be a threat for their own survival, the Dalits began their own magazine and began to express their own experiences. Their pen wrote not with ink, but with blood, of their own cuts –the cuts being basically mental, with instincts of physical in them. Dalit literature, the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness, emerged initially during the Mukti movement. Later, with the formation of the Dalit Panthers, there began to flourish a series of Dalit poetry and stories depicting the miseries of the Dalits the roots of which lies in the rules and laws of Vedas and Smritis. All these literatures argued that Dalit Movement fights not only against the Brahmins but all those people whoever practices exploitation, and those can be the Brahmins or even the Dalits themselves. New revolutionary songs, poems, stories, autobiographies were written by Dalit writers. All their feelings were bursting out in the form of writings. Writing is not simply writing, it is an act that reflect ones continuous fight against evil. It seemed as if the entire Dalit community found the space to break out their silence of thousand years. Such effective were the writings that each of its word had the capability to draw blood. The songs were sung in every village, poem and other

writings were read by the entire community. Educated Dalit and intellectuals begin to talk about the problems of poor and about exploitation and humiliations from the upper castes without any hesitation educated Dalits tried to explain to the other illiterate brothers about the required change in the society. Dalit literature, try to compare the past situation of Dalits to the present and future generation not to create hatred, but to make them aware of their pitiable condition. It is not caste literature but is associated with Dalit movement to bring about socioeconomic change, through a democratic social movement.

## **Conclusion**

Dalit Movement, a social revolution aimed for social change, replacing the age old hierarchical Indian society, based on the democratic ideals of liberty, equality and social justice, has begun much earlier, became intense in the 1970s and began to deem at present. One reason behind this, as pointed out by Uma Chakraborty, is that the academicians are not paying much attention. Books on Dalit Movement are written but these books do not reflect the actual things and are written keeping in view the Brahmin elites. No one wants to confront with those who have power. Besides this, the minds of the people are brahmanised through hegemony. Yet another vital issue is that the movement lack people from all the communities of Dalits. For instance, in Maharashtra, the Mahars dominated the movement. The other Dalit communities like the Mangs, Chamars were not actively involved in the Movement. As Kamble pointed out that the Mangs and Chamars had their traditional duties, whereby they could somehow manage their food. But the Mahars did not have any traditional duty which made them to protest. At present there came up many new issues. The Dalits who got power became the dolls in the hands of the Brahmins. Many of them tend to imitate the Brahmins changing their surnames and thus identity. They are ashamed of being called Dalits which make them to discriminate against their own kith and kin. It should be noted that Dalit Movement is against Brahmanism and not Brahmins. The Brahmanism is a mental state which accepts superiority of one man over another man. It gives more respect and profit for the caste which is up in the ladder of caste system, and as it goes down the ladder, resources and respect also decreases. Its contribution for the Dalits which is lowest of all the castes is nothing but exploitation, jeering and slavery. This mental state of Brahmanism not only exists in Brahmins but also in Shudras, who simply shape the ideas of Brahmanical practices without

testing them with scientific temperament and reasoning. India got independence, but the Dalits are humiliated even now. Untouchability is abolished but injustice practices are not. Today to wear good clothes is not forbidden, but to get good job is. In the name of reforms and social uplift, today's political and social systems are pitting one group against the other, sowing hatred and perpetuating a sense of rejection from the past. Education is the only remedy for such discrimination. Thus, the Movement for social change will succeed only when all the Dalits unite together to fight for equality. However, they should accept that caste that is deeply rooted in people's mind cannot be erased. So here social change would mean to get rid of discriminatory practices and get rights, necessary for the upliftment of the backward section of society-the Dalits.

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