

Marginality & Politics of Deprivation: A Study of Syamal Kumar Pramanik's Short Stories

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Introduction

The Wikipedia explains the term '*Dalit*' was first used by the eminent social reformer Jyotirao Phule to refer to the out castes or untouchables. They were a large group of people belonging to the lowest stratum of the caste system. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary the '*Dalit*' is a member of the lowest cast in the Indian caste system and has the least advantages. The Dalit's were denied any social rights. They could not read the scriptures. Education was denied to them. They had to do menial and low works which no body was willing to do. They had to reside away from the residences of the elites. Their mere touch was considered to pollute the individual. In some places they had to carry a broom tied to their waist to clean their footprints. Many such atrocities they had to suffer silently. No mainstream cultural text has a dalit as the main character.

Times have changed. Through the efforts of the great leader Dr B R Ambedkar the Constitution of India has given equal rights to every individual irrespective of their caste, creed, gender or culture. The dalits are now educating themselves. Education has empowered them to break the silence imposed on them by tradition and write out their lives so as to create awareness about the plight they undergone and work to create a society based on equality. The corpus of Dalit Literature has emerged out of this intense suffering of the Dalit individuals. Tapan Basu in his article "*Narratives of Suffering: Dalit Perspectives*" traces the origin of the term '*Dalit Literature*'. It was used by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in its 1958 Conference. The resolution number 5 of the

conference explains it as the literature written by the dalits and that written by others about the dalits in Marathi should be termed as Dalit Literature. Today it is not limited to only Marathi language and marginalized groups from other states and languages in India too have started writing about their experiences as a dalit. This literature is translated in English and available for readers across the country.

Dalit literature has a reformist purpose. It is at the same time a literature of revolt as well as a literature of social change. It revolts against the social and religious dogmas which have chained them for centuries. It endeavours to change the society and make it a place free from untouchability or caste based distinctions. A number of writers like Sharan Kumar Limbale, Namdeo Dhasal, Anna Bhau Sathe, Bama F Soosairaj, Arjun Dangle etc have taken up the cause of the dalit literature. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book “Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations” explains dalit literature as, “Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief” (30).

The genre of short story holds an important place in the corpus of Dalit literature. Short stories based on the life of the dalit characters give glimpses of the problem they are facing and at the same time shed light on the politics of marginalisation that goes on in society. Translation activity has made available the short stories about dalits from different states of the country. It is hence fruitful to understand the issues about the ‘fourth India’ residing in different parts of the country.

The focus of this article is the dalit lives as portrayed in the selected short stories of Bengali writer Shyamal Kumar Parmanik and translated by Sayantan Dasgupta. The analysis explores the methods through which the oppressed classes are subjugated by those in power and authority in the society. It highlights mute acceptance and suffering as the impact of this domination and marginalisation on the dalits. The stories selected for analysis are: *In Dakshin Rai's Land*, *Champaburi or the Story of a Village* and *Untouchable*.

In Dakshin Rai's Land: The story is set in a small village in the Sundarbans. It is one of the largest mangroves in the world and living conditions are quite hard there. A significant number of people living in the areas belong to the lower castes. There are many rivers and dense forests in the area. There is danger from the crocodiles in the rivers and the tigers from the forests. In addition many have lost their lives from bites of the venomous snakes of the Sundarbans. The lower castes have an additional danger of getting entrapped in the designs of the money lenders and landlords who generally belong to the upper castes.

Narhari Ghoshal an upper caste Brahmin is the main character in the story. He has cheated many people in the village and robbed them of their land or money by exploiting them for their lack of knowledge and their lower caste status. He has a son Bholananda. Bholananda was the only son to Ghoshal and was born after a lot of prayers and offerings to various religious places. Ghoshal has sold a mantra to Mona Das for hundred and one rupees. After chanting the mantra three times Mona Das will become invisible to the tigers in the jungle according to Ghoshal. Later in the story Bholananda accompanies his uncle Sachindra for a hunting trip along with Mona Das. Tragically Bholananda is carried away by a tiger leaving Narhari Ghoshal in great agony. He considers it as a punishment for this exploitation of the poor and the family leaves the village the next day.

The story provides a brief glimpse of the attitudes of the upper caste Brahmins like Narhari Ghoshal towards the lower castes. When Pachu Bairagi comes to visit Narhari Ghoshal he considers him inauspicious and a bastard. Another character Haran Sardar had borrowed a sum of Rs 500 from Narhari Ghoshal. Haran could not repay the loan and Narhari Ghoshal takes up two bighas of his land. Narhari Ghoshal is hated by the Dom's, Bagdi's and other caste people as he has become rich by cheating them. Narhari Ghoshal sells a mantra to Mona Das for hundred and one rupees to make him invisible to the forest tiger. He knows he has cheated the man and utters to himself, "*Good, I managed to make a killing today*" (Dasgupta 42).

The hegemonic order of the rural society leaves the poor and low castes utterly defenceless against the exploiters like Narhari Ghoshal. He has taken the land of Nidhi Sardar and Rahim Molla for non repayment of loans. They go to the *panchayat* but get no relief. There is a satiric reference to the evil Narhari in the words of the Jamaibabu, “*You’re doing quite well! In the Sundarbans, the crocodile rules the waters and you lord over the land*” (Dasgupta 43). In this unintentional reply the jamaibabu has referred to the true character of Narhari Ghoshal.

In the last scene there is the foreshadowing of the calamity. Suddenly the weather changes when the hunting party enters the forest. The wind stops, dense dark clouds gather, the forest and the river appear dangerous now. A heavy rain has started. A fearful tiger makes its appearance in front of the party in the rain. Mona Das’s uttering of the mantra turns ineffectual and the tragedy strikes. The story though is of Narhari Ghoshal the other characters belong to the lower castes. Narhari Ghoshal is a representative character and through him the politics of discrimination and deprivation is highlighted.

Champaburi, or the Story of Village- It is the story of an old woman Champa from Sukdupur. The village is located in a very remote setting surrounded by a river and a forest. Mostly people considered low in the caste hierarchy reside here. Extreme poverty, neglect, on account of caste plagues the lives of the residents of this village. Old Champa has to face neglect on account of gender too and is reduced to take the job of a prostitute and then a visionless beggar waiting for her death in the end. The narrator of this story is a resident of the village.

Champa lives in a tattered hut at the outskirts of the village. There are references to the Pods, Bagadis and Bairagis in the village. The upper caste bramhins do not come to perform puja in their temples. Old Champa belonged to the Jola family who were Hindus but later converted to Islam. Since childhood Champa has to suffer tragedies. First her father Fakir Sheikh dies from a snake bite when Champa is very small. Her mother Ameena is left alone with small Champa and no means to survive. She has to beg for survival. One day Ameena too falls ill and

dies leaving Champa alone. Champa has become young. She elopes with Nagen from the Bagdi colony. Tragically Nagen dies in a riot and Champa is again left alone with a son. Back in the village the people have only heard of riot and never experienced it. The Hindus and the Muslims live like people from the same family.

The narrator in one of his comments explains that the educated people call the lower castes as wretched and use them for the purpose of creating riots, to serve their interests. The poor people suffer a lot as they become mere pawns in the power struggle. Champa has no means to earn except begging. There was poverty everywhere in the village and begging was not sufficient to feed her and her son. She goes back to the city and takes the work of a prostitute in a red light area. She is struck by some ailment and again has to resort to begging. Her son is stolen when she is sleeping in a park. She returns to her village a broken individual. She has become old and unable to see. She sits on the village road and begs for alms. The story ends with a pathetic cry by Champaburi, "*Take me now, O Bhagban, O Allah!*" (Dasgupta 51).

Untouchable- This story is a revelation of how an upper caste identity opens avenues like education and job, while being identified as a dalit may cause one to be ostracized. It is about Indranath the narrator's uncle. His father has died when he was small and his mother in absence of any source of income and forced by poverty has to resort to begging. One of her relatives Harihar Middy advises her to go to Benaras and live as a Bramhin. Indranath's mother takes her children and goes to Benaras. In spite of belonging to the lower eschelons of the caste system they impersonate as of bramhin descent. Magically they who were begging in their own village and considered as dalits, are now well respected in Benaras and enjoy all the facilities granted by society to the upper caste people. The children get good education and finally Indranath jethamoshai gets a government job. Thus a bramhinal identity has paved way for their personal growth and development.

Indranath jethamoshai has now two identities. In Benaras he is Indranath Bhattacharya and in the village he is Indranath Mandal. There is one more important character in the story that is reduced to abject silence

due to his dalit identity. It is the character of Munshiram. Munshiram was a dalit and studied in the same class as Indranath jethamoshai in Benaras. He was a brilliant child. He got admitted in the school. He was not allowed to sit with other boys. He had to experience contempt and scorn from fellow students and teachers too. The teachers tried to discourage him from studying by asking questions like, “*Why did you have to enroll in school? You are a cobbler’s son; you should sit on the road and mend shoes instead*—(Dasgupta 62). Munshiram was prohibited from touching the water in the pitcher as it was meant for the upper caste students.

Munshiram completed his Matric but could not get admitted to College. Indranath jethamoshai sympathizes with him. He tries to talk with Munshiram as he knows he too belongs to the lower ladder in the caste system. He empathizes with his pain and feels great agony. In one of his replies to jethamoshai Munshiram replies, “*I also want to go to college. But what can I do? We are very poor. And besides, nobody wants us to get educated?*” (Dasgupta 63). This reply is heart wrenching.

Jethamoshai recruits Munshiram in his office as a clerk. The peons insult him and do not bring him any files. He sets up a school in their bustee for the low caste children. The school is then burnt down in an accident. Munshiram feels it was a deliberate act of some people and not an accident. Munshiram’s son is sick and no doctor from upper caste is willing to treat the child. The child dies. In a year his wife too dies of illness. The impact of experiencing all this pain, suffering, hatred, contempt and marginalization is that he withdraws in a shell. It is the psychological impact of the suffering a dalit individual is subject to. Indranath jethamoshai tells to the narrator that in our India there is a “fourth India”. The marginalized dalits are the inhabitants of this fourth India. They must fight for the liberation of these individuals. It is a touching story of how a bramhminical identity is a pass to progress while a dalit identity leads to targeting by other individuals.

Conclusion

It is evident that the progressive Bengali society is not free from the evils of caste system. The hegemonic clutches of the caste system strangulate the lower caste individuals in to abject silence and mute suffering. They are manipulated and cheated by those in power and authority like Narhari Ghoshal. They lose their land and property falling prey to their schemes. The women from the lower castes are doubly marginalized first on account of being woman and second on account of being a dalit women. Through the case of Champaburi it is evident that they have to resort to begging in order to sustain their lives. The dalit identity is a crippling phenomenon. In contrast an upper caste identity is a ticket to progress and development. The story Untouchable exemplifies this statement. Indranath Jethamoshai impersonating as an upper caste leads a happy existence, but his friend a fellow dalit Munshiram is reduced to abject silence and suffering. The short stories lead to contemplation about the agonies of a large group of people who are subject to suffering and encourage restoring equality in our social set up.

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