

The Marginalized Lives of *Baluta*: An Analysis of Maharashtra's Dalits

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Introduction

Caste has long remained a historically crucial defining factor in India's social hierarchy, perpetuating systemic inequality and exploitation over centuries. The Dalit community, historically referred to as "untouchables," was positioned at the lowest level in this hierarchy. They had constantly been subjected to rife discrimination and social exclusion. Maharashtra, a state with a significant Dalit demographic, has been a crucible for movements aimed at combating caste-based oppression. They were often spearheaded by prominent figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

One of the first Dalit autobiographies to be published, *Baluta* took the readers by storm not only with "its unvarnished depiction of the pervasive cruelty of the caste system" but also "the extraordinary candour with which Pawar wrote about himself, his family and community and Dalit politics of his time" (2). *Baluta* is a "triumph of social commentary, storytelling and self-reflection" (3) as it was set first in the Maharwada, the area earmarked in each village for the Mahars so that they would not pollute the main village and also in the Mumbai of the 1940s and 1950s with its chawls, slums, brothels and gambling dens where the poor and the outcaste found ways to make a life.

Even after forty four years of its publication, it shocks and amazes the readers with its graphic description of how brutally the human spirit can be broken at the same time how valiantly it can fight its way out of the darkest depths of abysmal existence. *Baluta* (2015) deftly articulates the raw realities of Dalit existence. Written in the first person, *Baluta* intertwines personal narratives with political commentary, encapsulating

the systemic oppression that hallmarked the core of the Dalit experience. The title itself, “Baluta,” denotes a feudal practice in rural Maharashtra wherein Dalits rendered labour to the upper castes in exchange for minimal wages or goods, highlighting the inherent exploitation embedded within the caste system.

The narrative examines the pervasive impact of caste system, including internalised oppression as well as institutionalised discrimination that moulds Dalit identity. It exposes us towards a life of “such squalor, deprivation and cruel discrimination” (6). It rudely awakes us to the realities of our pernicious caste system. Mahars skinned dead cattle and ate their flesh. Mahar children were made to sit apart from the upper castes in schools and colleges. Their touch was supposed to pollute water, rendering it undrinkable for the upper castes. More than fifty services were expected of the Mahars without remuneration. But in return they were entitled to Baluta, a share in all the village produce. They were exploited to the core and when they went to collect Baluta, it was with grudge and curses that the villagers gave them what was due.

Historical and Social Context

To grasp the significance of Baluta, it is essential to place it within the historical framework of caste-based discrimination in India. The caste system, deeply rooted in ancient Hindu scriptures, parts the society into rigid hierarchical categories. Dalits, relegated to the lowest rung, were considered “impure” and were systematically excluded from participating in mainstream societal activities. This exclusion and marginalisation was institutionalized through systemic denial of education, land ownership, and access to public resources.

He says that the Manusmriti had a list of names for Shudras. “It requires that our names should reflect society’s contempt for us” (19). While Brahmin names like Vidyadhar signify learnedness, a Kshatriya’s name like Balaram suggest valour, a vaishyas name like Laxmikant suggested great wealth, their names like Shudrak or Mattang suggested their lower caste status. That was the order of things for centuries.

He also describes the place they lived- between Chor Bazar or the thieves market on the one side and kamathipura, the red- light area on the other side. They were too poor to afford to live at a better quarter. The Mahars lived in squalid homes, each the size of a hen house having two or three sub tenants. Wooden boxes acted as partitions. At night, temporary walls would come up, made of rags hanging from ropes. The Mahar men worked as labourers. The women scavenged scraps of paper, rags, broken glass and iron from the streets.

He pictures typical mahad life by presenting his own family. His father worked at the dock in Mumbai. He was a drunkard and womaniser. And his mother scavenged to sustain their lives. Whatever father got he spent on drinking and womanising. Yet, he says that, his mother “did not seem to feel a matchstick worth of revulsion for Dada” (31). Without protest she would pour out what little she had in front of him. His father never saved any money and also stole from the docks but always escaped uncaught. He says that the world he learned about in school seemed fraudulent in comparison to the world he lived in.

Moreover, in Maharashtra, Dalits have historically been assigned demeaning occupations, such as manual scavenging and the disposal of carcasses, which perpetuated and reinforced their marginalization. Despite legislative measures such as the prohibition of untouchability as stipulated in Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the ground realities of discrimination continued to endure.

The Dalit movement in Maharashtra, spearheaded by Ambedkar, aimed to dismantle this oppressive social structure. The emergence of Dalit literature in the mid-20th century created a platform for Dalits to share their scorching narratives. Baluta emerged as a significant voice within this movement, presenting a poignant depiction of caste- based oppression.

Themes of Marginalization in Baluta

Economic Exploitation

A prominent theme in Baluta is the economic exploitation faced by Dalits. Pawar recounts his community’s dependence on the “balutedari”

system, in which they provided labour to the upper castes in exchange for meagre returns. This feudal structure not only sustained perpetuated economic dependency but also denied Dalit's access to land or financial resources.

Pawar says that the Mahar did not see baluta- his share of the produce of the land- as charity. It was his birth right and was only one among the fifty two rights that the mahar had been granted. But there was no timetable for the Mahar's work. "It was slavery, for he was bound to whatever work had to be done for all twenty four hours of the day" (59). They had to take the villager's taxes into town. They were supposed to run in front of any important person who came into the village, tend to their animals, feed and water them and give them medicines.

They had to announce funerals from village to village. They had to drag away the carcasses of dead animals. They chopped the firewood. They played music day and night at festivals and welcomed the new bridegrooms at the village borders on their wedding days. And instead they got a meagre baluta. Each house had their bounded Mahar and they got their portion of grains from there. Pawar says that the farmers grumbled as they handed over the grain; "low- born scum, you do not work. Motherfuckers, always first in line to get your share. Do you think this is your father's grain?" (59)

The book also underscores the meagre educational and employment prospects for Dalits, which further exacerbates their poverty. Pawar recounts his own struggle to escape from this vicious cycle, highlighting the systemic barriers that impede upward mobility and social advancement.

Social Exclusion and Stigma

Social exclusion is the cornerstone of marginalization experienced by Dalits in *Baluta*. Pawar describes the diverse humiliations faced by his community, from being barred from temple entry to facing segregated seating arrangements in schools and other educational institutions. The concept of "pollution" associated with the Dalit identity is illustrated through instances of ostracism and systemic violence.

In public also they were allotted specific places. The villagers sat in groups, according to their castes. The restaurants also had different cups for different castes; “there were Mahar cups and Chambhar cups, Mang cups and so on” (43). They had to rinse them themselves before ordering tea. Their cups were often without handles and ant- infested. They also sat separately- either on the verandah or on a bench behind the restaurant.

In the schools also they were not allowed to sit with the Maratha children from the village. “They faced the teacher and we sat at right angles to them, facing in a different direction” (45). If they were thirsty, there was no water for them at school. They had to go back to Maharwada to drink. Even though the Chambharwada was near, they too would not give the Mahars water.

The internalization of this stigma forms a significant theme of the book. Pawar contemplates the psychological impact of being perpetually reminded of his caste identity, a weight that overshadowed all his interactions with the world.

But he ironically says that once a Mahar converted to Christianity, he could no longer be considered someone who could pollute the village. And if the Christian were an official, the entire village will be at his beck and call.

He also points out that there was discrimination in sports too. However accomplished, Mahar wrestlers were never allowed to challenge the upper castes. So the matches were allowed only within their castes. Seeing this, he lost interest in sports and he withdrew into his shells. He writes; “My sense of self began to seep out of me, as water out of an earthen jug” (70). At school, he was also not allowed to be part of dramas as the teachers discouraged him by saying that they are for the rich alone.

At last he turned to books for solace. He knew now that the only way out of this ignominy was to study, to prove himself better than the sons of the Brahmins and the Baniyas. In the hostel also he was not allowed

to eat along with other upper caste students. But when a rich mahar joined the hostel he did not heed the other boys and dined in the mess hall. So for the first time Pawar understood that not only caste, but also poverty added to the discrimination.

He also remembers that though he was the lead bhajan singer at the hostel, when the Prasad was distributed the thali with its pieces of coconut never reached his hands. He ‘swallowed these insults as one swallow one’s spit’ (95). He adds: “I would feel a scream welling up. But I swallowed that too. I shut my mouth and took the shit” (96).

It was at this time that a social revolution was happening in village after village. Ambedkar asked them to stop stripping carcasses and eating the flesh of the dead animals. They also stopped collecting baluta. A majority went out of villages to escape their castes and also in search of other jobs.

But even after studying and improving himself, in the village he was still treated as Maruti, the Mahar’s son. He writes “my Mahar identity was a leech that would not let go” (84). He was also embarrassed that the local barbers refused to cut their hairs. They were just afraid that if they polluted themselves by touching the untouchables, they will lose their village customers.

Cultural Suppression

The cultural side-lining of Dalits represents another significant theme in Baluta. The enforcement of upper-caste norms and values has systematically undermined Dalit cultural practices and traditions. Pawar expresses sorrow over the loss of indigenous knowledge systems and the exclusion of Dalit perspectives from the dominant mainstream narratives.

Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender

Pawar’s account highlights on the intersectional nature of oppression, specifically the compounded discrimination faced by Dalit women. He illustrates the dual challenges of caste and gender, revealing how Dalit

women are subjected to both caste-based violence and exploitation driven by patriarchal structures.

The Role of Identity in Baluta

Identity plays a pivotal role in *Baluta*, as Pawar grapples with his self-perception within a society that dehumanizes him. The narrative fluctuates between his innate pride in his Dalit heritage and yet the equally deep rooted desire to transcend the stigma associated with it. Pawar's experiences reflect the broader struggle of Dalits in their quest to affirm their identity amidst systemic erasure.

The book further examines how education and urbanization contribute to the shaping Dalit identity. For Pawar, relocating to Mumbai provides a semblance of anonymity and respite from caste-related oppression and discrimination. Nevertheless, he remains keenly aware of the constraints of this escape, as societal prejudices continue to exist even within urban environments.

Literary Significance of Baluta

Baluta represented a significant milestone in Marathi literature, heralding the emergence of Dalit autobiographies. Its unvarnished depiction of caste oppression confronted the sanitized narratives prevalent in mainstream literature, forcing readers to face the uncomfortable realities of Indian caste system.

The influence of the book reaches far beyond its literary value. It acted as a driving force for social and political discourse, motivating later generations of Dalit authors and advocates. Pawar's straightforward writing approach, free from ornate language, highlights the genuineness of his experiences.

Challenges and Criticism

Baluta has received praise for its integrity and bravery; however, it has not been without its detractors. Certain academics assert that Pawar's account is excessively subjective, failing to provide a comprehensive

structural examination of caste dynamics. Additionally, some critics argue that the emphasis on victimhood within the book may inadvertently foster a feeling of powerlessness among Dalits.

Baluta continues to be a crucial work for comprehending the actual experiences of Dalits, notwithstanding the criticisms it has faced. Its merits are found in its capacity to portray the humanity of marginalized individuals and to articulate the perspectives of those who have been muted by prevailing narratives.

Contemporary Relevance

The themes examined in Baluta continue to hold significance in modern India, where caste-based discrimination persists as a critical concern. Events of caste-related violence, exemplified by the Khairlanji massacre, highlight the on-going importance of Pawar's narrative.

Dalit literature has progressed since the publication of Baluta, with authors such as Omprakash Valmiki and Bama delving into similar themes in their writings. Nevertheless, the systemic inequalities emphasized in Pawar's autobiography continue to endure, rendering it a perennial critique of caste-based oppression.

Conclusion

Daya Pawar's Baluta transcends the boundaries of a mere autobiography; it stands as a powerful affirmation of a community's resilience that has faced centuries of oppression. Through the narration of his personal experiences, Pawar illuminates the marginalization of Dalits while simultaneously affirming their humanity and capacity for agency.

The significance of the book in the realm of Dalit literature and its influence on the conversation surrounding caste is immense. Baluta urges readers to face the stark truths of caste-related discrimination and encourages them to imagine a fairer society. Consequently, it serves as a potent instrument for social change.

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