

## Dalit Voices: The Nation Through a Different Lens

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To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.

(Gangadhar Pantawane qtd. in Zelliott 268)

India has often been claimed and described as a land of diversity but unfortunately a part of our nation, now recognised as Dalit has been ignored and oppressed since a very long time. Smita Narula in *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables* highlights that "More than one-sixth of India's population, about 160 million people live a precarious existence, shunned by many because of their rank [ . . . ]

at the bottom of India's caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and higher caste group" (Abstract Narula). Sailajananda Saikia in "Caste Base Discrimination in the enjoyment of Fundamental Rights: A Critical Review on the Present Caste Based Status of Dalits in India" substantiated Narula's point with relevant arguments. He highlights that a Dalit marrying someone from an upper caste is still viewed as a crime, and punishments for offenses vary significantly between Dalits and other castes. Even now, Dalits are largely restricted to occupations considered degrading in Indian society. In many regions of the country, upper-caste Hindus still refuse to share their food and tables with Dalits. Those Dalits who progress socially often encounter severe repression from dominant

castes through appalling acts of violence and humiliation. This has been well narrated by a Indian Dalit poet of Western India, Hira Bansode in “Bosom Friend”. Hira Bansode was born in 1939 in the Mahar community of a small village in Pune district. During the time when our country was swiftly moving towards independence, Bansode gave voice to the suppressed realities of pain, unfulfilled hopes, and the dreams of Dalit women.

Hira’s poem begins on a joyous note, her friend from the upper caste has come to her home. The narrator is elated because the friend has broken the cage of the

[. . .] traditions of inequality [. . .] But [. . .]

With a smirk you said Oh My- Do you serve chutny Koshimbir this way? You, still don’t know how to serve food

Truly, you folk will never improve (Bansode 49).

Bansode rips apart the illusion of equality upheld by the modern urban cities, exposing how the caste practices have evolved into an indoctrinated ideology. In this context, Jotirao Phule, a pioneer of Dalit education and one of Western India’s most significant activists and writers, reveals in his best known work *Gulamgiri* (1873) that the caste hierarchy has been craftily constructed and maintained. According to him, the monopoly of a particular upper caste section had also been the prime reason for the oppressive conditions of the Sudras and Atisudras.

‘The institution of Caste, [. . .] has been the main object of their deep cunning [. . .] Sudras and Atisudras were regarded with supreme hate and contempt [. . .] commonest rights of humanity were denied to them’ (Phule 5).

In light of this renowned work, it can be argued that the Varna system serves as a broad framework for the caste system. The Varna system categorizes Indian society into four categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Varna System originated during Rig Vedic Period (1500 - 1000 BCE). This system was based on the concept of karma and the people of multiple occupation were considered to be the part of

one Varna. In contrast, the Caste system became more rigid over time, eventually taking on a hereditary nature. A person's caste status was no longer decided by their work and actions but was completely determined by their birth. Individuals started getting chained by the caste of their parents and the possibilities of any social mobility was denied. This system also included a fifth group known by many names such as Avarna, Harijan, Untouchables, Depressed Classes and then finally the "[. . .] Marathi word Dalit [. . .] was chosen by the group itself and is used proudly [. . .]" (*From Untouchable to Dalit* 267).

Tracing the spread of this caste trap in the Western part of our country, Ishita Banerjee- Dube in a "History of Modern India" charts how the Peshwai stood as the symbol of 'Brahman Raj' and established Brahmanical supremacy over the Maratha lands (17). This divide could not even let India to unify itself against the British colonisation or at least, borrowing the phrase from "Decolonising the Indian Mind" by Namvar Singh, it can be said that there could be no one common solution to decolonise the Indian mind:

If we were to pit an image of our nation against colonialism, whose nation would it be? [. . .] But what then will be the nation of those who are oppressed by the state and wish therefore to change it? How can those identify with this nationalism who are obliged to live at a level not fit for human beings even forty years after Independence? For how long can a Dalit go on sacrificing his identity for the identity of the nation? (Singh 435).

Nevertheless, the fact that British colonisation provided some new opportunities to the Dalits in the Western India cannot be overlooked. Dalits witnessed economic progression and received access to education during the British Rule. Ishita Banerjee Dube in her book talks about various ways through which British rule not only led to the development of 'non-Brahman ideology' but also acted as a catalyst to many Dalit movements. The prime reason was the Christian missionaries looking down upon caste as a monstrous evil - 'an unmitigated evil'. Ironically, the institution of Caste also gave the Christian missionaries a

reason to assert the superiority of their religion over Hinduism. Interestingly, their condemn for the Hindu Caste system stirred many Indians to fight the menace. Therefore, it can be claimed, that colonial intervention and their new education system which gave access to information and knowledge to the lower caste people catalyzed intellectuals of the Western part of India to claim an identity for the Dalits.

Gopal Baba Walangkar was a soldier who was born in Mahar community. He started a newspaper in which he openly criticised and challenged the upper caste inhumanity against the Dalits. Eleanor Zelliott in her essay “‘Introduction’ to Dalit Sahitya” reveals that Walangkar appealed the British Government to have a provision to recruit the Dalits in the Army (Zelliott 85).

Jotirao Phule who belonged to the Malis caste founded the Satyashodhak Samaj to educate the Dalits and made them aware about their social rights. Phule studied in a school run by Scottish missionaries. Ramachandra Guha in his work *Makers of Modern India* discusses that Phule was significantly inspired by a school run for girls by American Missionaries in Maharashtra. His decision to open a school for Dalits was influenced by these interactions. Guha mentions that “[. . .] Phule was convinced that Western education, with its rationalist outlook, could play a key role in the emancipation of the low caste [. . .]” (75-76). Phule was truly a revolutionary who bluntly criticized the caste prejudices. In his work *Gulamgiri*, drawing from researches, Phule claimed that the Brahmans were not the natives of India. He also exposed the shrewd ways in which upper castes claimed their superiority over the ‘Sudras and Atisudras’ since ages. Phule’s work and ideas influenced many Dalit thinkers and activists in Western India.

Dr. Bhimroa Ramji Ambedkar who is known as the father of the Indian Constitution and regarded as the supreme advocate of Dalit progression and individuality was also greatly influenced by Jotirao Phule. He was born in Mahar community, Madhya Pradesh and became the first Indian to receive a Doctorate Degree in Economics from the foreign lands

and “[. . .] probably held more degrees than any Brahman in the Maharashtra area” (Zelliot 86). He wrote extensively about the tortures a Dalit has undergone due to Indian Caste System. In the Preface to “Who Were the Shudras” (1946), Ambedkar equated the religion of Hindus to business and attacked them for using their claimed ‘Sacred Books’ to exploit the Dalits and gain privileges for their own caste(s). He referred the ‘Sacred Books’ to be a constructed reality of Brahmans that is responsible for the social degradation of the country. Without any fear, he vehemently criticized the High Court Hindu judges and even the Hindu Prime Minister to be involved in this repressive act (Ambedkar 54-55).

Ramachandra Guha in his work *Makers of Modern India* reveals that Ambedkar and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi could never bridge their differences. The British Government agreed for a separate electorate for the ‘Untouchables’ in 1932 but Gandhi ji was not happy with the decision and went on a fast to project his disagreement. Consequently, through the Poona Pact the decision for the separate electorate was taken back with a promise of increased number of seats for the ‘Depressed Classes’ (206). Guha in the same work also uses the term ‘rivals’ (207) to describe the relation between Gandhi and Ambedkar. The irony that gets highlighted through it is that two of the greatest revolutionaries and freedom figures of India had different definitions of independence. Their outlook was contrasting as Gandhi saw fragmentation in separate electorate but Ambedkar was highlighting the absence of the Dalits in the concept of unified nationhood.

Ambedkar used English language to talk about the traumatic reality of untouchability faced by the Dalits and “[. . .] focused the world’s attention on their civic, social and political rights and liberties [. . .] and gave it a global publicity” (Dhananjay Keer qtd. in Guha 207). Since then many Dalit writers from the Western part of India have used English, the global language to lay bare their struggles, sufferings, desires, dreams in front of the larger world. Their works, whether written in English or translated into English, express a sense of empowerment through various means.

Eleanor Zelliot in her book *From Untouchable to Dalit* informs that a significant extensive analysis of the Dalit literature produced in English language which encompassed different genres like 'poetry, stories and essays' has been the finest description of Dalit literature. This analysis was published in November 1973 edition of *The Times Weekly Supplement* and is remembered as a "[. . .] mass physical reaction to violence against Untouchables [. . .] (267).

Dalit writers writing in English Literature or their work getting translated in English ensures that the voices against the caste injustices and their struggle to attain an identity in their own country is preserved forever. In fact, it can be said that English language act as common ground where the different regional dalit voices unite. The same struggle for identity, spirit for freedom and a socio-political consciousness gets reflected in the works of varied Dalit writers yet the differences of language, style, tone, personal tribulations and dreams of hope cannot be ignored in works of varied Dalit writers.

Let us now study some more Indian Dalit Literature written either originally in English or translated in English language.

Jayant Parmar was born in 1954, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. In one of his most famous poems, "The Last Will of a Dalit Poet", Parmar explicitly rejects the appreciated linguistic devices and uses day-to-day raw images to bring his sufferings and loss of identity being born a dalit in the Indian society:

He (a dalit poet) never assaults you with

Symbols,

Metaphors

Or personalities. (15)

He not only rejects the use of figurative devices but also breaks away from the conventional grammatical structure through the capitalization of common nouns in a sentence. Capitalization of the words like symbols and metaphors further helps him to highlight the difference between the ornamental lavish lives and the harsh struggles of a dalit life.

Images like ‘cow-dung’, ‘broken cup’, ‘lantern of his ancestors’ not only convey a sense of poverty but at the same time there is a proud acceptance of this reality. He bravely accepts his legacy: “A paper dripping with wet blood, A black sun” (15) and promises to establish himself, his identity. He ends the poem with a resounding strike by denying to plead for assimilation in the upper-caste culture and publicly declaring himself to be a ‘dalit poet’. In doing so, he asserts a strong distinctiveness from the privileged caste.

In the same spirit, Hira Bansode fiercely punctures the inflated sense of self of her upper-caste friend: “Are you going to tell me what mistakes I made?/Are you going to tell me my mistakes?” (“Bosom Friend”, 50). In the poem “Bosom Friend”, Bansode narrates the oppressive conditions in which a dalit survives. Her outrageous tone in her poem “Lost Sun” reflects her exasperation against the Caste System. She is adamant to throw away the discriminatory practices: “The fight is inevitable [. . .] Rebellion shakes in every vein/ How can war not proceed [. . .]?” (287).

In “Bosom Friends”, she recollects how her mother used to cook on the sawdust which used to fill her eyes with smoke. They never tasted ‘Shrikhand’ in their life rather the only delicacy that they enjoyed was ‘garlic chutney’ sometimes served with ‘coarse bread’. The poet is no more ashamed to share the reality of people surviving on the margins. She undercuts the myth of progressive and glamoured Western Indian urban spaces and gives a powerful peep into the urban poverty of a dalit life.

Jayant Parmar in his other poem “I am a Man Like You” also draws attention to the dalit state of poverty. He uses simple emotional language to highlight the abuse and torture of a dalit, yet his choice of words are evocative:

Can't really be called a man.  
 Yet I am a man just like you.  
 You have sheltered me in this hut  
 Made up of rags and bamboo walls

Decorated with hunger, poverty and illness. (16)

Sharan Kumar Limbale was born in 1956 in Maharashtra. In his poem the “White Paper” he aggressively deconstructs the use of the white paper. A white paper is used for documentation of laws, rights, notices, transactions, deals and decisions both in the government offices and public sector. Limbale artfully uses this white paper to keep his demands. He starts by demanding: “My right as a man” (Electronic Source). The demand though seems to be a simple basic plea of a dalit but in the process of keeping this requirement, Limbale ruthlessly overthrows the upper-caste constructions that have subdued a dalit since centuries. He crushes upper-caste traditions, hurls their inheritance of ‘lands and mansions’, unseats their ‘gods and rituals’ and finally wields power by refusing to be a part of their ‘castes or sects’. While highlighting the exploitation and humiliation inflicted by the upper caste, Limbale also disrupts the neat outlines sketched by the upper-caste with unabashed chaos. He blurs the boundaries between cities, villages and men and shatters the illusion of embracing ideologies of the urban upper-caste:

You’ll beat me, break me,

Loot and burn my habitation

[. . .]

My rights: contagious caste riots

Festering city by city, village by village,

Man by man

For that’s what my rights are

Sealed off, outcast, road-blocked, exiled. (Electronic Source)

The poem ends with an aggressive assertion of his rights and individuality: “I want my rights [. . .] My rights are rising like the sun” (Electronic Source).

Namdeo Dhasal, the founder of Dalit Panther (1972) was a Marathi

poet. Dhasal, in his poem “Man, You Should Explode”, like Limbale, unearths the falsehood of civilized urban society by disrupting the sense of harmony and startling the reader through the violence of murders, killings and rapes. Through the picture of a disintegrating society he muddles up the upper-caste demarcations that help them retain their superiority over the dalits:

Let all this grow into a tumor to fill the universe, balloon up  
 And burst at a nameless time to shrink  
 After this all those who survive [. . .]  
 [. . .] should stop calling one another names white or black,  
 brahamin, kshatriya, vaishya, or shudra; [. . .] (11)

Notably, the planned explosion will create a world where only humanity will reside and men will “bask in mutual love” (11). Nonetheless, what is heart-wrenching is that despite his counter-hegemonic strategies, many of his poem are filled with demeaning and humiliating everyday experiences of the Dalits residing in the supposedly liberating and progressive urban spaces.

Intriguingly, Neerav Patel born in 1950, Gujarat also uses a sharp tone and disturbing yet dramatic vocabulary to reveal the degrading reality of a dalit life. He starts his poem “Exiled Flowers” with a complicated riddle that has to be solved:

If that’s the order we bow our heads.  
 We will call flowers by any other name,  
 Will the fragrance die?  
 And if we call them flowers,  
 Will the stench go?

He associates both fragrance and stench with flowers. The flowers symbolize Dalit community. The straightforward word ‘order’ reminds us of the caste hierarchy and therefore, it can be easily understood that the first time when Dalits have been depicted through flowers, Patel

dismisses the disgrace associated with a dalit. Nonetheless, through the next rhetoric he skillfully overthrows the system of caste hierarchy itself by aligning ‘fragrance’ and ‘stench’. He uses the most befitting juxtaposition when with a brazen courage, he highlights the hypocrite codependency between the two castes: “The may enjoy loitering in the Moghul garden [. . .] But no, they cannot be in Nathdwara.” While describing this dreadful reality through the most common things, the sudden encounter with the repulsive image: “Joyous are our lives like ‘latrines’” makes every semblance of upper-caste humanity reek.

Pravin Gadhvi (1950-) is a retired IAS officer of the Gujarat Government. He confronts the issue of the age old caste prejudices through the use of direct and sharp language that suits the contemporary world in his poem “Farewell to Arms”:

Will you tolerate if your Draupadi selects our son Galiya as her husband?  
And will your Arjun accept our daughter Raili if she comes as new  
Chitrangada?

[. . .]

Our Magan and Chhagan will compete on open merit basis,

But will you give admission to them in you convent schools? (Electronic Source)

Gadhvi’s simple but curt question projects a dalit’s deep disenchantment with the biased codes and principals on which even the modern-day Indian society has been built.

Hence, to conclude, we can say that what we see in this article is a poignant truth emerging from the discussed writings. The above Dalit narrations from the Western part of India echo that the periodic declarations of our nation’s advancement and progress have always been fraught with injustices and unfulfilled assurance of equality and dignity. The struggle of the Dalit writers for freedom and respectable existence challenges the grand narratives of independence, expansion and advancement.

Suraj Miling Yengde in *Caste Matters* rightly says: “Caste will matter until it is done away with” (37).

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