

Dalit Consciousness in *Poisoned Bread*

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to take a close look at the oppressive socio-cultural framework that has rooted the Indian society. In the Indian context, the word “subaltern” hasn’t merely denoted the coloniser-colonised dichotomy but an indigenous phenomenon of oppression that was faced by a section of Indian populace formally classified as the ‘Dalits’ at the hands of the so-called upper caste Indians. In this paper, the concept of ‘dalit’ will be explored by analysing the anthology *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle which is a repository of the ‘Marathi Dalit experience’. Dalits were meted out with inhuman treatment in the form social-exclusion, oppression, humiliation, and deprivation. Dalit literature first appeared on the literary scene of India in the Marathi language and then found its way in other languages. Hence, considering it as the expression of first-hand experience of a ‘Dalit’ life, this paper has chosen an anthology that compiles works by Marathi writers originally written in Marathi and translated into English for its study.

The anthology *Poisoned Bread* is divided into four parts: Poetry, Autobiographical Extracts, Short Stories and Essays and Speeches. The paper will focus on the non-fictional content of the anthology i.e. particularly the autobiographical extracts and then proceed to explore the themes as evident in the poetry and one short story. Autobiographical extracts in the anthology have a touch of authenticity to them because they are the lived realities penned down by the authors. However, it would be difficult to say that the translation really does justice to what was originally written in their mother tongue i.e. Marathi. The expressions that were potent with the note of dissent wouldn't find exact equivalents in the translated versions. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be a futile exercise to understand the essence and tone of the writings that says a lot about the Dalit experience.

Dalit Literature is, in fact, the writings that are about dalits. 'Dalit' (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of depressed classes a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. In 1970s the "Dalit Panthers revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, woman and all these being exploited politically, economically and in the name of the religious. So, here, we should notice that Dalit is not a caste. But it is "a symbol of change and revolution."

As mentioned earlier, the meaning of 'Dalit' in Hindi and Marathi is "ground down depressed" and is now used by politicized untouchables in reference to any other designation. Dalits are called untouchables and have been oppressed by others; but there is nothing inherently wrong with them. Dalits are untouchables recognized by the society because their traditional work was to serve the village as watchmen, removers of dead cattles, messengers etc. that is, all purposed servants. They also were traditionally the singers, dancers, comedians and drummers of the folk drama. The treatment given by the society to them is that-- the well of drinking water and temple were closed to them, and their living quarters were removed from the village proper.

The primary motive of Dalit Literature is the liberation of dalits. Dalit struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. But in modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Jyothibrao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalit Literature got impetus in Maharashtra and all over the India. But before the name came into being in the 1960s as 'Dalit Literature', people like Baburao Bagul, Shankarrao Kharat in Maharashtra were already writing such type of literature. For example, Bagul's 'Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti'(When I Had Concealed My Caste) , 'Veda Aadhi Tu Hotas' (You Were Existed Before the Vedas) and 'Taral-Antaral' by Kharat .

Actually, Dalit Movement got inspiration in the movement of blacks in the distant land of North America. Their Black Literature and the Black Panther became the role models of sorts for them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit Literature.

While dealing with the trends of Dalit Literature, readers can notice that the writer makes a humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context also it can be said that Dalit Literature questioned the mainstream literature about the theories of upper caste ideologies which has been exploiting the neglected aspects of dalit life and their experiences. This ‘anubhava’ (experience) takes precedence over ‘anumana’ (speculation). Therefore, authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit Literature. There is specificity of language in Dalit Literature. These writers make use of the language of the outcastes and under privileged in Indian society. In that sense, it is different from mainstream literature; but based on reality, their actual language and experiences as it is. Anger, sorrow, injustice and indomitable hope are some of the main themes of Dalit Literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers has become sharp and real. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul change of society. Revolution, transformation and Liberation are the aims of these writers. Dalit Literature is neither a pleasure-giving literature of fine sentiments and refined gestures, nor a narcissistic wallowing in self-pity. It focuses on their identity. Dalit writers like Sharankumar Limbale mentions that Dalit Literature is writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. There is much debate that which literature is called as Dalit Literature. However, the form of Dalit Literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pains and suffering by upper caste Hindus. This anthology follows this view clearly. All these things can be clearly observed in the anthology of Dalit Writing named *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle.

The process of poetry, arising out of the cry can be felt in most Dalit poems, because in these utterances protest seems to come from the insulted and the injured who have labored for generations for the bread with their hands with dirty works. One can take almost any Dalit poem and feel it by own. This anthology seems to derive its powers from labor protest and their oppression and injustice. The attitude of these poets or poetry is revolutionary. The outcastes are crying against deaf gods questioning God Brahma Himself. They have the force and vivacity of deep agonies against the rejection of themselves and a hundred million untouchables, in their pulsing hands. Therefore, present anthology focuses on their cry and their identity, that is, for their own liberation.

This anthology mainly focuses on Dalit issues like poverty oppression, suppression, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities. There are various forms used by Dalit writers to express themselves. But the most predominant forms are poetry, autobiographies and short stories. Therefore, this anthology is a good source to see Dalit expressions. Dalit classes has suppressed and oppressed by society, especially by upper classes for many generations. They had not their own voice since they were uneducated and known as inferior than others. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial critic and translator wrote in one of the titles of her essays as ‘Can subaltern speak?’ It throws light on the condition of oppressed classes. Because of the oppression they lost their voice to speak. So, they are recognized as inferior than others. However, in the beginning, these people (Dalits) started to express their agony in the form of literature. Literature is the expression of their identity. In this anthology writers like Kardak, Lanjewar, Pawar and Dhasal expressed their state of slavery. In some of the poems it is evident from even the titles itself, for example, ‘Birds in Prison’ by J. V. Pawar, ‘Slave’ by Hira Bansode, and ‘Empty Advice’ by Pralhad Chendwankar etc. They depicted their sorrowful life in literature, for example, in the poem ‘Tathagatha’, Bhagwan Sawai mentioned -

“... there was nothing but darkness
and rocky muteness...”

Any reader can see that their minds became harsh by the oppression of the society. Their life became full of sorrow, despair, pains and agony. In the same poem ‘Tatahagatha’, poet Bhagwan Sawai says –

“I will lay a stone on my chest
and carve on it
images of my sorrow
songs of pain.”

Dalit writers don’t believe in God. Their literature is experience based. They deny and even curse to Hindu God and Goddesses. It shows their anger and hatred towards Hindu culture which has bias on the issue of caste. It is evident in this anthology also, for example, a poem entitled by the poet Keshav Meshram is “One Day I Cursed That Mother Fucker God.” The very title of the poem evokes that Dalit Literature do not accept Hindu caste order, God- Goddesses and Vedas.

Because of grief, sorrow, oppression and agony, their language, expressed in literature is not common; but very harsh. Their emotions, desires and expressions reflect their sorrowful life and injustice through language of their poetry. In a poem Ambdedakr- 79 , the poet Namdeo Dhasal uses the shocking words and expressions

like—‘mother- fucking’, ‘they fuck their sisters’, ‘impotent Arjunas’, ‘parliament’s brothel’ etc. Generally, these type of words and expressions are not used in literature; but Dalit Literature experimented this thing. In that sense, Dalit literature is different from main stream literature and especially it is ‘revolutionary’. Their language suggests their grief, pain, agony and revolution for the society. It is evident from this anthology that one of the poems is entitled as ‘Revolution’ by Arjun Dangle.

At the beginning, Dalit Literature expressed their emotions and desires; but later, they got their voice and they started to revolt against the issues of mainstream literature especially of upper classes.

This anthology focuses light on the marginalization and otherness of Dalit classes. In the poem, “Bosom Friend” by Hira Bansode expresses the approach of upper classes towards Dalit class. The friend of the poet says to her –

“You still don’t know how to serve food.
Truly you folk will never improve.”

In the same poem there is reflection of poverty which is the major issue of Dalit Literature. The poet says by her personal experience—

“...my nose had never smelled the fragrance of ghee...”

They are economically poor; but unfortunately recognized as socially ‘inferior’ by the established society. There is no logic behind it; but treatment of the established society is not well to them. So, their reactions are minutely expressed in the form of anger, revolution and negativism in literature.

Illiteracy and ignorance are the major problems of Dalits. Most of the dalits did not take any education due to poor economic condition. So, they do not come to main flow of the society of development. Now, many people are aware of their rights. Old people of this generation hope that their children should learn since they had to bear oppression because of the lack of education. Their lack of education is reflected and ignorance is revealed in this anthology, for instance, in one of the poems of the Waman Kardak, the speaker of the poem says that—

“Send My Boy to School”.

It is evident that Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. This evokes various aspects of serious thoughts in Dalit Literature. This anthology makes an impression among the readers that this literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of a people. On the basis of caste, they are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. It can be observed in this anthology that Dalit Literature is characterized by the feeling of rebellion against the

establishment of negativism. So, this literature must be assessed by realizing their life and their social status. These things can be noticed from the present anthology remarkably.

Finally, it could be said that this anthology of Dalit writing is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented. The creation of such literature is unavoidable and inevitable until the nature of this harsh social reality changes.

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