

Dalit poetry: The voice of the downtrodden

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Regarding the terms 'Marginality' and 'Social Exclusion', it can be said that they are found in many spheres and in various forms in the world's societies. It seems important to me to examine these concepts in the context of India. Let's hope that our research will then lead us to the question of how these people have raised their voices against these disparities through social movements in general and literary movements in particular.

Dalits challenge the existing system through their writing and express their commitment to creating a more equitable society. Central to this pursuit are the intense emotions of anger and sadness, both of which serve as the driving force behind revolutionary Dalit literature. This literary movement has even produced many innovative Hindi poets, such as Malkhan Singh, Jai Prakash Kardam, Kanwal Bharati, Om Prakash Valmiki, Nirma-la Putul, Anita Bharati, Sushila Takbhaure, etc... who are raising their voices of protest in their literature. Even Dalit poetry is defined by these feelings, rooted in everyday experiences and devoid of any flowery language or aestheticism.

The term marginality was used for the first time by the American urban sociologist Robert Park, in his article "Human Migration and the Marginal Man", published in 1928, where he examined and scrutinized the role of migration in social change. Later, Latin American sociologists, in their attempts to study social reality, developed a new concept: marginality. It was Aníbal Quijano who further elaborated the theory of marginalization and marginality and at the same time paid much attention to the political and cultural consequences of this process. Peter Leonard defines marginality as being outside the mainstream of productive and reproductive social activities.

However, the caste system in India has dominated the discourse on these terms. This system is one of the causes of the emergence of these terms in the respective societies. According to the economist González Casanova, known for his literary contribution, the term "Marginality" means: 'Marginalism, or the way of being outside the country's development, not participating in economic, social and cultural development, belonging to the sector of the dispossessed, is particularly characteristic of underdeveloped societies (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1507).

The authors of the Center for the Economic and Social Development of Latin America, DESAL, (an organization that supported the policies of the Christian Democrats in Chile, among others, with media from the Catholic Church) define "marginality" in a very similar way:

the term designates social groups that, despite being members of a country's society, do not manage to penetrate the intimacy of its structures. Peasants and indigenous people... have been left out of the modernization process, the process is messy, however, it is also effective in the Latin American world. (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1507).

However, Indian society is underdeveloped. Dalits in India are a marginalized group in their respective societies. The Dalits suffer from castist discrimination and have to live in a separate neighbourhood outside the village and remain outside the caste system as they belong to the lowest caste, they do not even fall within the categories of the caste system. The people of this group are untouchable from the rest of the castes and, with the passage of time, have been called Dalits.

People who experience marginalization are likely to have tenuous participation in the national economy. The sources of your income may vary. For Aníbal Quijano: "'marginality' originates from changes in the structure of the relations between capital and labor and, in the first place, between capital and salaried labor" (Quijano 1).

In the Indian context, farmers, laborers, women, and adivasis (from the tribes) do not have as much property as higher caste people like Zamindars (landlords), and live in miserable condition, it is the poor who work in fields. Even Hindu scriptures like *Manusmriti* prohibit them from owning property or working independently and instead instructs them to serve Brahmins. As Dalits belong to the low caste it is believed that their duty is to serve and submit to those of high castes; that is why they are offered jobs as sweepers, cleaning the drains, that is, menial jobs that no one else wants to do, jobs related to cleaning the waste of the other castes. Their problems and miseries are many. They are employed as day laborers and marginal workers. They are paid a very low salary for their work.

However, it's evident that Dalits are victims of economic marginalization as well as social exclusion at the same time.

The concept of "social exclusion" has played a prominent role in sociological discussions and debates, and its origins trace back to the social policies of France in the late 1980s. It was first coined by Rene Lenoir, who served as the secretary of state for social integration in the Chirac government. His book, *Les Exclús: Un Français sur dix*, published in 1974, highlighted the plight of the marginalized and excluded members of society, including not only the poor but also those deemed social outcasts. Over the years, the definition of social exclusion has evolved to encompass anyone or any group that faces obstacles in their participation in society and cultural and community life, be it partial or complete.

In the Indian context, Sukhdeo Thorat, a prominent Dalit activist, in an article says:

The misery of Dalits is linked to caste-based exclusion processes and discrimination. Social exclusion is the denial of equal opportunities imposed by certain groups in society on others and which in turn leads to the inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social function of society. (Thorat 4121).

In Indian society, exclusion depends on the relations of one community with another and is the institutions that exclude, discriminate, isolate, and deprive certain groups based on their identities such as caste.

However, Dalits are raising their voices through their literature in general and poetry in particular throughout the country. Dalit poets have created their own unique aesthetics, often in direct defiance of traditional poetics. They have embraced expressions that had previously been dismissed as too crude, culturally inappropriate, or indecent. These poets have infused their work with a wealth of community dialects, slang, street language, and rare expressions, forming an entirely new vocabulary in Indian literature. Moreover, the Dalit poets have shed light on previously unexplored areas of human experience, thus reshaping Indian literature in a meaningful way.

Diverse Dimensions of Dalit Poetry

The realm of Dalit poetry has been amplified by contemporary poets who delve into the pressing issues defining this era. Through their artistry, they expose the struggles faced by the Dalit community and endeavour to surpass caste barriers in order to bring about social progress. As of late, a new wave of Dalit writers has emerged, determined to set down a historical record of the collective pain and experiences of their community. Their works resound with the visceral agony of a shared past, regardless of linguistic differences. Dr. Ambedkar, a beacon of hope and change, serves as an unwavering inspiration to all who traverse this genre. Dalit poetry stands rooted in the past, present, and environment of the community, underscoring its crucial pertinence to the movement.

In Hindi, the tradition is particularly well-developed, reflecting a consciousness that has been shaped by centuries of oppression and exploitation. A well-known dalit poet of Hindi Om Prakash Valmiki writes:

*If you are pushed
out of the village.
You are scolded and not allowed
to take water from the well.
You were asked to break stones in the scorching afternoon
Leftover is given in food for doing a genuine work
what would you do then?
If you are asked to drag a dead animal
and, obliged to carry filth of the whole family
and asked to wear used torn clothes
what would you do then? (Bharti 60-61)*

Thus, this denunciatory voice of Dalit poet comes out as protest against their age-old oppression by the upper caste people in India.

However, poetry like this represents a potent tool for resistance against social, cultural, and political domination in the caste system. The poetry emerging from the Dalit community reflects centuries of accumulated pain and represents a necessary rebellion against the oppressors for a life with dignity.

These people have depicted discrimination by describing their experiences of untouchability, poverty, exclusion, marginality, and resistance in their poetry. A poem by Hindi Dalit poet Jai Prakash Kardam depicts the social discrimination of Dalits as follows:

*He can't get out
in new clothes in many towns
he suffers from hunger, though he works day and night,
sometimes he is forced to spend the nights without eating
he can't sit on the chair in front of higher-caste people
nor can he talk to them*

*their entries are prohibited
in all public places
this independence is not fair to him. (Kardam 2006: 27)*

Dalit poetry is a potent tool that can threaten those who uphold the caste system and seek to maintain their supremacy. By giving voice to the pain and suffering of the Dalit community, it challenges dominant narratives and exposes the hypocrisy of those who espouse the superiority of one group over another. Kanwal Bharti, a Dalit poet, is unafraid to call out this hypocrisy and directly challenges those who would seek to silence him. His words are a powerful testament to the transformative potential of Dalit poetry and its ability to ignite social change. When the pain experienced for centuries becomes a word, it is very dangerous for the oppressors. Kanwal Bharti has a direct question for such people:

*If this legislation were to come into force that
your life has no value
anyone can kill you
and can rape your wife, sister, and daughter
can burn your house
What would be your allegiance then? (Bharti 215)*

Another important Dalit poet of Hindi Jai Prakash Kardam depicts the marginal socio-economic condition of Dalits in Indian society and challenges the oppressor by asking questions that the life experience of Dalits is different from the upper caste people because they are made to do detestable jobs.

*Do you know how it feels to eat,
The meat of an animal dead long ago,
Can you tell me the smell that comes
when you skin a dead animal,*

*can you tell me how the skin
of an animal is coloured and tanned?
Shoes become sandals and slippers,
Then how can you say
That our sensibility is the same? (Kardam 2004: 25)*

The poet affirms that oppressors would have come to know the pain of a Dalit only when they had to listen to insulting words, do all the detestable works like cleaning latrine etc.

On the basis of varna system, the first was given the right of knowledge, the second the right of profession, the third the right of security and the fourth the right of service religion above himself and strict restrictions were also imposed for it. In this context, this poem of Omprakash Valmiki is relevant that

*cut down the forest
dig mountains
still hungry,
did not sow thorns, only extend
the omen of love
Still remain untouchable! (Valmiki 54)*

Society is a community of human beings, without humans, a society cannot even be imagined. It is believed that the caste structure was created for the cooperation of human beings, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. But this proved fatal for the fourth class because they were encouraged to do work, but they were neither advised to accumulate wealth nor keep any kind of property. Malkhan Singh says in one of his poem:

*I am not a man
I am an animal*

*bipedal animal
whom
sons of upper-caste abuse
saying a bastard community.
whole day
we plow like an ox
and get a handful of gram flour
in wages. (Singh 70)*

However, it is evident that Dalits are victim of socio-economic marginalization and social exclusion.

Furthermore, the Manusmriti, a religious text commonly referred to as Manu's Law Book, which originated between 200 BC and 200 AD, serves to institutionalize the suppression of Dalit women based on their caste, class, and gender in Indian society. According to this text, women are obliged to submit to their fathers in childhood, their husbands in adulthood, and their sons in old age. Moreover, the Manusmriti also affirms that women have no independent identity or significance beyond fulfilling these subservient roles vis-à-vis men.

However, be it men or women, Dalits have always been considered unworthy, even less 'human' than those belonging to the lowest caste of the system.

Dalit women, too are coming out and challenging the stereotypes they are subjected to through their writings. In the poem, “we Dalits” (Hum dalit) Sushila Takbhaure asks questions about their miserable situation till now:

*we Dalits
in the form of a human being
want to ask in a civilized language.
What is the history of human civilization and culture?*

What is the basis of Indian culture?

Why are they torturing us until now? (Takbhaure 2013:87)

However, it indicates that today's Dalit woman is not going to stay silent after seeing or suffering injustice, rather she has learned to give an appropriate response to injustice.

Sushila Takbhaure notes in her poem:

The use and abuse

Of my body

I can't take it anymore

I have been the victim

But not anymore. (Takbhaure 1993:68)

Furthermore, a well-known woman Dalit poet Nirmala Putul claims:

Just think

if you were in my place

and I in yours

how would you feel?

.....

Forced to see faces

of your children who whine from hunger

how would you feel? (Putul 1)

Overall, these poems give a direction to the Dalit movement and make us feel the storm that will arise in the future. These poems are synonymous with the deep life experiences and broad outlook of Dalits. Dalit poets, on the one hand, give the message of

being your own light for your liberation, and call for struggle for bringing about change in the society.

So, to conclude, it can be seen how Dalit men and women have been or continue to be victims. Now the voices of the downtrodden, through the literary movements of Dalit literature in general and poetry in particular, affirm their existence and their human rights in the respective regions. As a result, in many languages, Dalit literature has come to the level of mainstream literature, and it has become part of the academic curricula. However, their literature still seeks the readership from the members of the superior castes.

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