

Afflictive, Dissident and Assertive Voices in Indian Dalit Autobiographies: A Study from Socio-economic Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, an unprecedented bulge can be seen in the number of dalit autobiographies, dalit personal narratives and memoirs. Due to revolution in education system and the equal opportunities to all the people belonging to every community, dalit writers have written their personal narratives and shared their personal and private realms of agonies, pain, and oppression with other people after getting influenced by the European models. The spurt in dalit autobiographical narratives in different forms reveals how they were relegated from the core and vital issues of national importance. The trials and tribulations of dalit women, their exploitation, torture and triple marginalization remains the core theme of dalit women's autobiographies. Dalit men's autobiographies are the saga of sufferings, tortures, caste discrimination, hunger, deprivation and ostracization. The present research paper is an attempt to explore the afflictions and age-old sufferings of those people who live at the fringe in the mainstream society. Only selected Dalit men's autobiographies have been taken for analysis in the present research paper.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Autobiographies, Memoirs, Personal Narratives, Exploitation, Maginalization, Discrimination, Hunger, Poverty, Deprivation.

INTRODUCTION

People of various communities, religions, castes and class inhabit on the immense Indian landscape and among them there are some people who have been deprived of their fundamental rights by the upper caste people for their personal benefits. Though dalits are also a part of Hindu religion but it is a strange and shocking state of things that they are not given any space in Hindu religion and their entry in some Hindu temples is still prohibited even after the Indian Constitution has given the equal opportunities. The language of dalit writers is also criticized because they have used the words of the atmosphere in which they live. Their language at places is uncouth and filthy but they have deliberately used it because the decent language cannot express their feelings exactly and it will dissuade them from the real essence of their autobiography. Dr A. P. Pandey writes that, "Dalit Literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view" (Pande 10).

Dalit literature is generally labelled as a protest literature and that's why it tends to bring epoch-making changes in the lives of dalits and it is an important weapon to strengthen various dalit movements and is vital to bring dalit consciousness. Even after Ambedkar, any movements and activities such as Dalit Sahitya Movement, Dalit Panther Movement, the Dalit Rangh Bhoomi, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the All India Backward SC, OBC and Minority Communities Employees Federation also came into existence.

Autobiography is a powerful and influential genre in literature which is a symbol of search for meaning, identity and roots in the mainstream society. It is not about the glimpses of their past life, in fact, it shapes and structures them in such a way that even the readers also sympathize with their pathetic life. These autobiographies transform their painful life into a narrative of resistance. Dalit literature showed an unprecedented growth 1980s onwards and dalit autobiographies are the assertion and struggle for their roots and an effort to enter the main literary sphere to gain stability and equal right in the society. Meenakshi Thapan remarks about Dalit autobiography:

The genre of autobiography seeks to engage with questions of selfhood and identity, of memory and location, of voice and agency, of "truth" and authenticity, and of many other aspects of a self-revelatory method that seeks to conceal, in layered forms, even as it bares itself to the world. Subjectivity in its most intimate form is therefore central to this exploration into uncovering the subaltern's experience of the social world. (Thapan 2)

The first dalit autobiography that comes to the mind is Joothan: A Dalit's Life by Omprakash Valmiki. This autobiography was originally published in 2007 in Hindi and it was translated into English in 2007 by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Valmiki aptly postulates in the "Preface" of this autobiography, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations" (Valmiki vii). In this autobiography, Omprakash writes how the people of his castes were called "Oe Chuhre" or "Abey Chuhre" to make them realize that they belong to a low caste. He writes about it, "If a person were older, then he would be called "Oe Chuhre". If the person were younger, or of the same age, then "Abey Chuhre" was used" (Valmiki 2). Omprakash Valmiki writes how untouchability was one of the major problems of Dalit people. He narrates his experience, "Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human" (Valmiki 2). When Omprakash was sent to his primary school, his school headmaster abused him and forced him to clean the whole school and Omprakash could get rid of this cleansing work after the intervention of his father. He was not allowed to drink water from the water tap in his school, "To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass" (Valmiki 16).

Omprakash belonged to such a poor family that they had to remain hungry also at times and they had to eat left-over food also. He narrates an incident in which his mother was badly humiliated by a Tyagi when she asked some sweets in his daughter's marriage. He points out towards the pattals and tells her to pick them and take these pattals at her home with whatever left-over food was thrown by the people after eating the feast.

The second very important autobiography is Uchalya: The Branded by Laxman Gaikwad. Through this autobiography, Laxman Gaikwad has narrated the life of tribal community through his own eyes. The people of the Uchalya community were involved in criminal activities as the people of this community were not allowed to go outside without giving information to police. The people of this community were forced to live a life of torture. They were branded as criminals and only it was their identity. Nobody was ready to give them work. That's why they would steal goods from the fairs and would pick the pockets. Gaikwad writes about it in the beginning of his autobiography:

No native place. No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born in an Uchalya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur. . . . My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuable and odd things at markets and fairs. Once while drunk he attempted to pick the money tied in the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger's waist. (Gaikwad 1)

Laxman Gaikwad writes about the tortures of the police how the policemen would pick up the domestic goods also from their house. They did not spare even the children and old women of the house and would torture them. The fear and the abuses of the police are clearly seen in this autobiography. The police would misbehave even with women:

'See Saab, see for yourself, there is nothing in the hut.' 'Your whore will know,' cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over... The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon-women, children. They squeezed grandmother's breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods. Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for some months... Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. (Gaikwad 1-2)

The police would give inhuman tortures to boys and it cannot be expected from such people. Laxman's grandmother also narrates how she was badly tortured by the police to extract information regarding theft. She narrates about it:

When the police catch me, they hang me upside down by the legs and lash the soles of my feet with a whip, thrust burning cigarette-butts into my anus. If I don't confess to the theft, they bring shit near my mouth and force me to eat it and keep on beating me. (Gaikwad 8)

When Laxman Gaikwad was sent to school, the people of his community raised voice against it and they would think that the cholera is spreading in the village just because a tribal child is going to school. Archana Parashar and Mukesh Kumar observe:

All the efforts of Dalits for getting an education were strongly and unanimously opposed by the upper castes for social and political reasons. The upper caste was afraid that if the lower caste is allowed to get an education, they will ask for their power share. (267)

Waman Nimbalkar holds the view that a dalit autobiography has a revolutionary vision behind it, “The autobiographies in the Dalit Literature are records of Dalit Cultural Revolution” (Nimbalkar 15). Without work, the people of his community were forced to become a thief. Gaikwad’s autobiography is a moving portrait of Uchalya community.

Why is it that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life? ... Are we proud of this diverse heritage as we age for these conditions Addicted to? (Gaikwad 63)

Sharan Kumar Limbale’s autobiography *The Outcaste* was originally written in Marathi but later it was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar. This autobiography narrates the struggle of a bastard who was born out of an illicit relationship whose upper caste biological father denies to accept this child just because Sharankumar’s mother belonged to an untouchable family. Sharan’s mother was married to Ithal Kamble who worked as a farm worker for Hanumantha Limbale. Their landlord was a Patil, an upper caste. Hanumantha deliberately ruined their married life for his personal benefit and separated them forever. Masami became his keep after her divorce with her husband. Masami was a beautiful woman and Hanumantha Limbale enjoyed her beauty secretly but he kept this relationship secret from others because he knew it well that Masami belonged to an untouchable community. Sharan was the untouchable even among the untouchables just because he was not only a dalit child, he was a bastard also. He writes about it, “My mother is an untouchable while father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in hut, father in a Mansion. Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an Akkarmash (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate” (Limbale ix). His own sister also did not accept him as a brother. He faced problem in his marriage and having a house on rent. Later the same person touched the height of success, published many books and became a Professor and Regional Director of Pune Division in Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nasik. Archana Parashar and Mukesh Kumar write how Dalit literature is an o:

Dalit literature in general and autobiography in particular; insists at length upon the condition and mechanism of oppression of the individuals and their communities, and upon the access to school and education as the essential way towards employment and social mobility in a modern urbanized setting, that is, allowing for an escape from the grip of traditional repressive systems. (268)

Dr Sheoraj Singh Bechain’s autobiography *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* was published in 2009 by Vani Prakashan, New Delhi and later it was published in English in 2018 as *My Childhood on My Shoulders* by Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Sheoraj Singh Bechain’s autobiography is dull of loss of different types. His father died because he was attended by the Ojhas instead of doctors, “Swaying wildly and with strange gesticulations, they swept their arms through the air to plant the soundest of slaps on my father’s cheeks” (Bechain 5). He could not study properly because his step-father did not allow him to burn night oil. He was considered a burden for his step-father. He had to all type of manual labour including shoe-polishing.

Laxman Bapu Mane’s autobiography *Upara: An Outsider* is also about the caste discrimination, untouchability and exploitation. The teacher did not want to admit Laxman in the school because of his low caste. He said, “You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? ... If they study, who will weave our basket? Nothing doing! You want to study, Huh!” (Mane 360).

Kancha Ilaiah has also written in his autobiography *Why I am Not a Hindu* how he was born in a shepherd family and had to struggle a lot to reach the height of ladder. He feels proud to be born as a Dalitbahujan also because he finds so many faults in Hindu religion. In his autobiography, he writes how he was treated differently from the upper caste students in his school. He writes how upper caste children are taught to despise dalit children: Upper’ caste children are taught to live differently from Dalitbahujan children, just as they are taught to despise and dismiss them. Hindu inhumanism becomes part of their early formation; hating others — the Dalibahujans — is a part of their consciousness. (Ilaiah 9)

One more dalit autobiography that is worth mentioning is Balbir Madhopuri’s *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night* that was published in English by Oxford University Press in 2010. In this autobiography, Madhopuri narrates how the Chamars of his village were very poor and they had to carry dead animals. His grandparents would use the fat of dead animals to eat and burn lamps in their home. They had to beg food from others due to poverty.

Dalit children were exploited by all means. The Jats of his village wanted to see dalit children poor and inferior to them. They would beat if any dalit child would wear a new or neat and clean dress. Balbir Madhopuri narrates about it:

If a low-caste boy were to come out in the lanes of the village, all bathed and dressed in new clothes, his hair combed, one or the other of the Jats sitting under the trees would get up and throw mud on him. If he protested, he was sure to be beaten up. If an untouchable appeared in the village dressed in the new clothes, he was certain to be given a beating on the pretext that the low castes were trying to become the equals of the higher castes; no one knew or could predict when such an incident would occur and where. (Madhopuri 2)

Thus, dalit autobiographies can be called the social critiques of the ancient varna system in which Shudras, dalits and untouchables were labelled as inferior. These dalit autobiographies are the silent united forces which vehemently try to uproot the evil of caste discrimination in India by making other people aware about it. Under the aegis of this egalitarian philosophy, all the exploited sections must aim to establish a united force to cross the barriers of superiority-inferiority conflict. Dalit writers have given this message of equality through their autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies are not only the caricatures of the pain; rather they are the harbinger of change for equality and justice. Revathi and M. R. Bindu aptly postulate in this context:

The purpose of recording the ‘micro histories’ of Dalits life not only to correct the old image but brings out together the life of Dalit as a celebration, which finds its way through different local cultures (Revathi and Bindu 2776)

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