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Dalit Literature

Dalit literature has been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted and underestimated for a variety of reasons, aesthetic, cultural and political. The Dalits have also unwillingly contributed to this predicament. They did not strive to create an art of their own. Their struggle for survival took a long time before they could fit themselves into the mainstream of the society. They are yet to develop a theory of their own, a Dalit Consciousness and a Dalit Aesthetics.

The history of Dalit literature is invariably connected with the history of Dalit oppression in India. The Hindu scriptures were misinterpreted to exclude a considerable proportion of the society from the benefits of education and culture. The Dalits have been called outcastes. Their village is used to be called the outcaste hamlet. It was considered sacriligious for the outcastes to study. As knowledge is power, it has been a deliberate attempt to exclude the Dalits from the power structure of society. Being illiterate, the Dalits have only an oral tradition in literature. They have hardly attempted to express their sentiments in creative art.

Dalit women became the objects of the upper caste lords. Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of Dalits have been frequent. Chastity was a mystique created by the upper castes to preserve the purity of their women. But the same chastity was denied to Dalit women. This made the Dalits to literally ex-

press the inhuman treatment they suffered at the hands of the upper castes. Art and literature came to be used by the Dalits as an instrument of social protest. The Dalits struggle of existence, as expressed in creative art, is rather a necessity than an art. In the context of this reality, Dalit literature can be rightly called the literature of necessity.

It was B.R. Ambedkar who encouraged the education of the Dalits. He exhorted the educated Dalits to record their sentiments. Dalits with conventional beliefs accepted their inferiority as a destiny. But the realistic dalits attacked their predicament and the caste system responsible for it. Initially, Dalit literature was more a protest than an art. It began as a literature of suffering. The intensity of expression was proportionate to the magnitude of the suffering of the protagonists. The Dalits considered the early forms of Dalit literature specimens of Dalit power. The early Dalits were concerned about the content rather than the form of expression. The upper castes could see only the revolutionary fervour in Dalit literature. They ignored its artistic dimension. The Dalits wanted to convey their feeling and never demanded to accept their literature as aesthetic expressions of the protests of their souls. This was due to the Dalit's unenviable position vis-a-vis history.

The classification of Dalit literature is a meticulous process. Dalit literature consists of the following

1. Any form of literature of a person of Dalit ancestry whether the literature is designated as Dalit or not. The love poems written by Dalit writers are examples of this kind of writings.
2. Literature, structurally, formally and thematically Dalit irrespective of authorship. Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* and Kumaran Asan's *Duravastha* and *Chandalabhikshuki* are examples of Dalit works by non-Dalit writers.
3. Literature by any person of Dalit ancestry which is identifiably Dalit in terms of structure, theme, form or sentiments. Narayan's *Kocharathi* is an example.
4. Literature by any Dalit person who can be classed as a

writer.
5. Literature by any identifiably Dalit person whose ideological stance with respect to the history, culture, progress and aspirations of his people is adjudged by them to be correct. Pandit Karuppan belongs to this class.

The early forms of Dalit Literature were *Pattu*. They were a kind of folk songs sung by Dalit farm workers planting, weeding or harvesting. These highly melodious songs were drawn from Indian folk tradition. In symphonic structures they are identical with *ballads* of English poetry or *Blues* of Afro-American poetry. The songs have beautiful touches of allegory, alliteration and appeal. The composers of the songs are anonymous. The songs had a composite composer like a community. These songs are beautiful narratives of freedom, hard times and alienation. They at once expressed hopeful vigour and hopeless melancholy.

The Dalit *pattu* formed testament of Dalit resiliency which was an experienced reality. The Dalits were never confident of making an art of their articulated misery. Many early Dalits displayed courage to sing against the odds of racial prejudice, poverty and ill-health. The *pattu* may be called "dialect poems" as they were written in the Dalit dialect forms of the vernacular language. The verbal creativity of Dalits was best reflected in the workers of the plantations, coolies and porters. In the absence of any upper caste surveillance the Dalit consciousness was uninhibitedly assimilated into the Folk literature of the Dalits.

The Dalits expressed their dissatisfaction and helplessness in their writings. They lived out their roles as stereotypes of upper caste imagination. The Dalits were tired of being victims and types. The early Dalit writings express the hurt feelings of the Dalits in a tone of regret. The writings that followed are qualitatively different. They contain the Dalit power. The Dalit power is a call to the Dalits to unite, to recognise their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for the Dalits to define their own goals, to lead their own organisations and

to support those organisations. It is a call to reject the castiest institutions and castiest values of the society.

Dalits found it difficult to achieve recognition as writers. It was difficult to overcome the lack of education and conditions of subordination. Dalit music was suppressed as a form of castiest expression. After independence it was patronised as an entertainment.

Two parallel streams of literature existed in Dalit literature. One stream imitated the general Indian forms and literature. The other competed with these forms and focussed on protests and revolts of the Dalits. The development of Dalit literature was hamstrung by the organised discrimination of the upper caste critics, theatre and publishers. The Dalit writings began to get encouragement with the establishment of the Akademies. Their service helped a great deal in the recognition of Dalit literature as a separate category of writing.

For the Dalits literature became a probe into the innermost recess of their outcaste psyche. They prepared themselves for awakening. But the upper castes considered the awakening a revolution. The Dalits were considered a part of natural resources to build an elite civilization. But the Dalits got support from various political and social groups all over India. Sree Narayana Guru and SNDP fought against castiesm in Kerala. The Dalits also joined the movement under the leadership of Ayyankali. Pandit Karuppan was an early Dalit writer of Malayalam. In Tamil Nadu, E. V. Ramaswamy Naiker led the movement. It was rather a Dravidian uprising against the agelong Aryan domination. Mahatma Gandhi also encouraged the Dalits though he always remained within the structure of Hindu society and family. He stood for the upliftment of the Dalits within the Hindu society. That was why he called them *Harijans* - the people dear to *Hari*, ie, *Vishnu*. This is because he believed in the infallibility of the Gita. He seemed to have accepted Krishna's statement of the caste system (*Chaturvarnyam mama srishtam.....*). But Ambedkar differed with Mahatma Gandhi on the Dalit question and established the Republican Party of

India. The party continues to have a massive Dalit base. Recent political out-fits like the Maoist Movement in Bihar and the People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh are built on solid Dalit support. Some key figures of these movements are widely read Dalit writers.

There are two kinds of Dalit writers. The first group have an accommodative attitude to the social parameters. They are ready to compromise with the hierarchical structure of Hindu society they live in. They believe that conversion is not an abiding solution to their state of subordination. For conversion never alters or improves their social status. The other group is rather militant. They gather together political and alternative religious supports for the solution of the social miseries they encounter. They express vitality, ironic humour, commonality and protest in their literature. But the literature of the former group lacks vigour and protest. Their works have a subdued tone. The Dalit writers were forced to seek a form that would express their racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from outside. The mutilated language they use is symbolic of their mutilated psyche. Dalit writers should transmute their folk culture to liberate their race from the octopus-like hold of the upper caste. The stress on folk music in Dalit literature is an implicit call for the reduction of the Dalit artist. This resulted in a cultural revolution leading to the evolution of a Dalit Aesthetics.

There was a quantitative change in Dalit literature after the second Five Year Plan. With the establishment of industries in the cities the Dalits also migrated to cities. This opened up new vistas in their lives and broadened the scope of their experience. The crowded cities provided a basis for vigorous group life. A rise in standard of living and better educational opportunities fostered new altitudes of self-respect and independence in the Dalits. The urban environment lifted the migrant Dalits to a new plane of consciousness. This profound transformation in the lives of the Dalits had its reverberations in their literature. The new group experience called for a new literary movement

to express it. Dalit Nationalism is a dominant feature of their literature of this period.

There are two dominant trends in Dalit literature. One group of writers copied the literary models of the early twentieth Century writers. This is an alternative trend which became a tradition later. Their writings are exclusively full of middle class characters and they appeal for social justice in their writings. Another group of writers derived their models from Dalit folk culture and Dalit masses. This trend is later called Folk tradition Dalit Literature. Their writings are peopled with working class characters, mostly rebels. They break away from the literary stereotypes of the past.

Dalit literature has been increasingly influenced by Marxist ideology since late 1960's. In the Marxist perspective subordination and castism are economical issues and not moral ones. In this respect the Marxists differ with Mahatma Gandhi who considered castism a moral issue. The communists view the racial oppression of the Dalits as an expression of economic bondage and oppression; each oppression intensifies the other and complicates the problem, but does not alter its fundamental character. The folk tradition gradually gave way to socialist realism in Dalit literature. At the social level this change was matched by mass demonstrations, sit down strikes and industrial trade unionism. Dalit primitivism lost its relevance in the context of social and economic reality. Any myth must represent historical reality. So, shallow myths of primitivism cannot survive in any community. The Dalit writers find it necessary to construct a framework for their art based on the community's actual experience. This makes them assimilate some proletarian traits into their writings. They begin to set down the forms, themes and models for Dalit literature. Literature becomes an expression of Dalit's struggle towards a formula, a strategy, a methodology and an art of its own kind.

The Marxists seem to have an ambivalent attitude to castism. Their attitude changes from state to state depending on the configuration of vote banks of the state. Caste is syn-

onymous with class in India as is evident from economic statistics. This is at least true in the case of Dalit and Backward communities. The latest instance of this Marxist ambivalence is their attitude to the Mandal Commission Report. So the Dalits often felt being betrayed and let down by the Marxist at critical points of their struggle for a life of constitutional equality. So the Dalit writers also cultivated an ambivalent attitude to Marxist ideology. Their initial attraction for it subsequently ended up in desperate rejection. They come under the Marxist spell on account of their affiliation of the oppressed communities. Their ideological perspective makes them acutely aware of the lot of their community bearing the burden of exploitation. They become more conscious of their unequal status. The same caste concerns combined with their sense of independence as artists keen on projecting the Dalit reality based on their own experience makes them apathetic to Marxism. This ambivalence creates a kind of consistency that persists throughout the work of Dalit writers. This consistency can be described in terms of the values cherished by their protagonists.

But, some Marxist critics express the view that the Dalit's apathy to Marxism is due to the influence of the elite aesthetics. The Dalit writers never denounce politics. They think that literature and politics are two equally indispensable tools in the service of humanity. The Dalit writers have a prophetic vision of Dalit power. They portray Dalit life as a healthy contrast to the upper caste corruption. They always coalesce intellect and instincts in their works. They believe that the mechanism of the elite world manipulates the Dalit world. In a spirit of embryonic nationalism they picture a slice of Dalit life. They try to stress on the paradox of castes. The Dalit writers find that castism cuts across the questions of economic status, political philosophies, religion and national survival. They venture into the religious and philosophical dimensions of the experience of life. Their quest for ideological freedom inspires them to create a personal aesthetics. Ultimately, literature becomes a symbol of change qualified by an existential commitment.

The Dalit writers have been averse to socialist realism. They reject the utilitarian nature of literature. Socialist realism falls to show the Dalit a way out for his social bondage. It reveals the vices of society, but hesitates to reflect the fact of social creativity. In socialist realism the writer is bound to create class consciousness in the readers. Literature, in this context, becomes future-oriented. Socialist realism sees reality through the monocle of political ideology. Its stress is not on the present state of society, but on its future. Instead of socialist realism the Dalit writers take to urban realism. They suggest a complex, ironic laughter as the Dalit's saving response to caste oppression. In an attempt to recreate a world close to reality, they turn away from naturalism and follow the philosophy of determinism. Literature, for them, is a weapon in the quest for the equality and self-reliance of the Dalits. The writer assumes the role of the interpreter of the Dalit way of life. They dream of a body of literature that accurately portrays the hopes and fears of the Dalits and their unique experiences. No wonder Marxist acrobatics alienate them recently.

Any literature meaningfully begins with early instances of lasting achievements. The monumental works skilfully imitate or characterise the dominant trends of the period. Dalit literature is no more a literature of anguish. It reflects the Dalit consciousness, the Dalit power and Dalit aesthetics. It is a literature of protest against the social and economical maladjustments of the Dalits. The Dalit protagonists are always conscious of their caste which, they think, is mainly responsible for their inferior status in society. The favourite Dalit themes of poverty and ambition are entwined in the images of social change in Dalit literature. The Dalit writer always stands by the community and never stands aloof as an individual.

Dalit literature reflects the collective experiences and sentiments of the Dalit. A Dalit writer rarely takes to self-analysis of his personae as individuals. Consequently the writer's personality almost merges with the uniqueness of his community. Ultimately, he becomes the writer of the folk or the masses.

There is a marked difference between the folk and the masses in Dalit literature. The folk have roots, ties to the earth, whereas the masses constitute float-some, uprooted people ill-fitted to the harsh, unfamiliar, urban environment. Dalit literature offers a sense of belonging to the uprooted Dalits.

Dalit artists and politicians today reject progressive paternalism as well as conservative castism. They realise that as long as the uppercastes set the norms for them in politics or in culture, they will continue to be discriminated against. For the Dalits, the post-independent era is a period of coming to terms with this fact. During this period they come to realise the norms of their art and culture. After the 1970's Dalits begin to write with the pride of being Dalits and create a literature which challenges the mood and tone of the aristocrats. The last decades of twentieth century will go down in Indian literary history as the period when India discovered the richness of Dalit oral tradition. An unexhaustive Dalit oral tradition itself is the greatest charm of the Dalit literature in the new century. □