

The Predicament of Dalit in ‘Untouchable Spring’

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Abstract: *In an age of advancement in science, technology and culture, no significant transformation has been found in the lives of Dalits (untouchables) in India. Social, economic and cultural life of a Dalit has not changed since immemorial. Dalit literary movement, which had started in the early part of the twentieth century, has been an offshoot of the exploitation of Dalits by the upper castes. Through literary works, they have been trying to preserve their self-respect, identity and heritage of their community. ‘Untouchable Spring’, a novel and historical document, illustrates the plight of Dalits in a post independence era. The writer G. Kalyan Rao, a Dalit, who believes in the revolutionary ideology, portrays the lives of Dalit Christians and their humiliation in the hands of caste Hindus. It also highlights how they “discover their humanity through defiance”*

The paper aims at providing a historiography of the deprived over several generations paving way for the emergence of powerful voice in subaltern literature.

There are so many things which make India ahead of other countries in the world. An Indian can boast of having a prehistoric civilization, multicultural ethnicity, a land of religions and rich heritage. It also gave birth to geniuses of the world such as Aryabhata, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, A. K. Ramanujan; etc. The social stigma in India is its caste system which discriminates one against the other.

Origin of this caste system dates back to thousands of years. The Aryans from South Europe and North Asia arrived in India around 1500 B.C and defeated the aborigines – Dravidians, who were the founders of Indian Civilization. To continue dominance over the original inhabitants of India, the Aryans created the caste system in which the natives were expelled from their own society with the name of ‘Sudra’ which means slave. The natives of the land were treated as ‘Untouchables’ or Dalits.

The term ‘Dalit’ - meaning ‘broken people’, was first coined by Joytirao Phule (1827-1890), a Marathi backward class social reformer to describe untouchables and outcastes in India as the scared and broken victims of the Hindu society. The expression Dalit is the constant reminder of the inhuman and atrocious nature of the upper castes especially Brahmins over certain sections of the people. They are forced to live in a state of abject poverty. Therefore, the status of Dalits in India is characterised by their relative deprivations and disabilities. Dalits, as a distinct group by virtue of their heritage, are downgraded lot in the social system, and are employed as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers etc.. They have also been suffering from social, cultural and religious, as well as educational, economical and political deprivations since ages.

In an attempt to overcome the agony and the horrors of the centuries old Varnahrama Dharma, Dalits have been forced to engage themselves in struggles and protest movements of several types since long time. The protest movements are aimed at achieving their desired goals of “**social equality, social dignity and de-stigmatised social identity**”

The most important strategy of the Dalit movement is coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope. It further characterizes the entire history of Dalits as a tale of humiliation and violence of both physical and mental. The modern Dalit then has to seek his rebirth in a state of fearful loneliness. He has nothing to rely upon in his immediate Hindu surroundings. Thus, the Dalit movement is built out of the articulation sections of the culturally, socially, and economically persecuted castes and sects. As part of their revolt against subjugation and hegemony of caste Hindus, Dalit writers felt the need for voicing their concerns by adopting various literary genres.

Dalit literary movement, which had started in the first quarter of the twentieth century, intensified in 1990s in a remarkable way. It has been an offshoot of the experience of the Dalits who have been exploited by the upper castes. According to S.K. Paul “Dalit Literature is flowing into the 21st century mixed with blood, sweat and anger flowering with the greatest poetry that this country is producing now.”(21). Through literary

works, the writers of Dalit Literature have made a significant attempt to draw the attention of the readers to the sufferings, hunger, pain, agony and human rights of Untouchables. They also eulogized and celebrated the sacrifices of Dalits while preserving self-respect, identity and heritage of the Untouchable communities.

The noted and influential anthologies in Telugu Dalit literature, during 1990s were Dalit-Bahujan writing—ChikkanautunnaPata (1995), edited by G. Lakshmi Narasaiah and TripuraneniSrinivas, and PadunekkinaPata (1996), edited by G.LakshmiNarasaiah. Both the anthologies highlighted the Dalits' positive reaction to the Left Movement. The other anthology, Dalit Manifesto (1995), edited by Keshav Kumar and K. Satyanarayan is different from the earlier ones. It combines both Left and Dalit consciousness. Spartacus (G.MohanRao)'s KahakiBatukulu(1996) which is about the caste problem in the police department. ChilukuriDevaputra'sPanchamam(1998) deals with the caste discrimination experienced by Dalit officer, and YendluriSudhakar'sMalle MoggaGodugu:MadigaKathalu(1999) are some of the popular writings during this decade.

Mr. G. KalyanaRao, the author of 'Untouchable Spring', is a contemporary writer and a Dalit convert Christian. He believes in the revolutionary ideology and armed struggle of leftists to propagate and promote the need for social, economical, and political share of Dalits on par with upper castes.

'Untouchable Spring' is an English translation of Telugu literary work 'AntaraniVasantam' published in the year 2000. It is "significant for its critique of literary historiography. It contests several prevailing tendencies of literature such as the privileging of the written modes versus the oral modes, the prosodic poetry over the song, the textual and bookish language over the ordinary, everyday language. This is done not only by the actual use of non-standard forms like the oral re-telling of stories, weaving of songs etc., but by critiquing the 'accepted standards.'"

He claimed that, he has 'written out his life', and also expressed the hope that 'those who have read it found their lives in it.' Therefore, the novel is to be seen as an autobiography of the author. In the novel, he also questions the authenticity of "written histories." Mainstream histories, he complains, do not represent the truths regarding the way certain communities have been discriminated in a democratic country like India. He says that 'the untouchables 'were being kept out from even coolie work during the digging of the Buckingham canal-a historical event that the text tries to re-present, kept out of standard histories. It is construed that historians are sometimes misled or influenced by the upper caste people thinking that supply of authentic information would spell a doom to their existence in the caste dominated society.

In "The story behind the story" of AntaraniVasantam (Untouchable Spring) the author talks about the grim state of Dalits (Untouchables) in India. Dalits, as he pointed out, are born artists - "Art was in their veins", in their blood, in the depths of their hearts, in their very sweat." In spite of their innate talents, they are discriminated and treated as low caste people destined to suffer as long as they live on the face of the earth. The lyrics are an outcome of their pain, agony, curse, hunger and abuse. He narrates the predicament of Dalit in a society where caste decides the destiny of man over his knowledge and natural gifts he possess right from his birth. Through literary works, Dalit writers are trying to preserve the self-respect, identity and heritage of their community.

Dalits became singers, musicians, composers and lyricists only "to forget hunger, to forget the child crying out for milk, to forget the pain of the bent back." Yellanna, a folklorist and natural stage performer in the novel, used to drag the tune along with him with utmost perfection which was considered natural, even "pundits call it a wind-swept song." VeedhiBagotam (a street play) is a great representation of the combination of song, music, dance and expression of Dalits in rural areas. "In fact, it is only in folk art that there is purity and integrity. There is frankness and naturalness. That's why it is still alive even though it has been thrown out and castaway). As opined by John Keats "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Unfortunately, Dalit artists, whose ballads are natural and emotional in temperament, are not duly recognized and encouraged even after India proudly celebrating its over 60 years of Independence. The literary and artistic skills of down trodden are not acquired consciously but it's a cry of their "wrenching hearts." Mr.Rao laments that "in this country, more than art and literature, caste has become important. Art and literature have been assessed from the perspective of caste. The dominant upper caste culture does not feel ashamed of this. That's the tragedy here.....AntaraniVasantam (Untouchable Spring) is an exploration of this." He also grieves over the way "a cruel horizontal line across the lives of the people of this country" is drawn to separate "the touchable from the "untouchable people."

As memory text and historiographical document, it depicts the "social and cultural life of generations of Dalits". The author has undertaken "a wonderful journey" into the hearts of Dalits who have discovered their humanity, identity and self-respect through defiance. The text 'Untouchable Spring' is an attempt to expose the intolerable treatment meted out by the Brahmanical upper castes to the downtrodden. It is a living testimony of Dalit experience. The novel has introduced several faces belonging to "the castaway caste, "as artists, songsters, lyricists, musicians, and knowledgeable people in Puranas, heroes and heroines in real life, above all human beings in true sense with love, affection, emotions, and feelings as against the hypocritical life and culture of the upper castes.

One note worthy character in the novel is UrumulaNaganna whose eyes, voice and dance were remarkable, and he also "knew numerous secrets of puranas" who "could out smart any learned person". Subhadra of YennelaDinni another character which represents the Dalit women folk, was known for her valour and strength. When the malas and madigas were attacked with sticks and crow bars by Atchireddy henchmen for making an attempt to fetch potable water for quenching their thirst in the midnight, it was Subhadra who picked up the spade and challenged the upper caste men by digging the channel to be flowed in to their fields. The author lamented that women contribution to the freedom struggle of Dalits is hardly acknowledged and recorded by historians.

"The main stream histories, the author complains "do not represent the truths regarding the way certain communities had been treated." They have failed to recognize the Dalit freedom fighters such as Narigadu, Mataih, Yellanna, Immanuel, Jesse etc., who fought for the human rights, food, water, and social justice of Untouchables. The "life" of an Untouchable "was a kind of bonded labour. Horrid even to think of it"..... a mala or madiga could not live in YennelaDinni without doing bonded labour." Apart from the Church archives, the facts about the downtrodden have been passed from one generation to another generation in narrative oral forms and 'self'-driven autobiographies.

The agonies of Untouchables over centuries are kept under wraps, and no honest attempt has been made by the historians to bring out the facts to light. There are no records that history has made a note of them in its pages. It is alleged that even the historians are prejudiced and biased in not making note of "the blood they (untouchables) shed" "the revolts, the struggles, the sacrifices and the courage of the Untouchables" in their effort to attain freedom from the caste Hindus, who treated them inhumanly and slavishly on their native soil. The author laments that "there is no page in the history of the struggle of this country that has not been soaked in their blood.....they have fought for their lively hood, self-respect....not an ideal, a necessity."

An attempt is made in 'Untouchable Spring' to provide an alternate history. It interrogates the written forms of history by relying on the experiential knowledge of people who have been denied access to the basic needs of life. Yet they cultivated their own art forms of music, theatre and dance. "Denial of these forms therefore, amounts to denial of their knowledge. Integrational memory is an important medium they use for the preservation of their knowledge. Hence, the novel thrives on narrativising memories of many generations of Dalits to authenticate the experience of their suffering over centuries."

It is understood that the socio-economical and cultural problems in the country are created, fostered and pampered by some sections of the society for fulfilling their selfish desires at the cost of others, under the guise of Puranas. Dalit literatures, however, have been struggling to portray the lives of the deprived and disabled communities in order to make the people of the country comprehend and realize the social evils of caste system and its impact on the holistic development of the country. As a historiographical writer of the deprived community in the twenty first century, KalyanRao has paved way for the emergence of powerful voice in subaltern (post-colonial) literature.

References:

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