

The Subaltern and Dalit Literature

Goutam Barman

PhD Scholar

Seacom Skills University, West Bengal, India

goutamenglish@rediffmail.com

Abstract

The paper seeks to explore the Dalit literature which establishes Dalit's subalternity in Indian caste phenomenal society. Indian Dalits are dominated, oppressed, marginalised and exploited socially, politically, economically and culturally. Dalits are untouchable in the society, underpaid in work places, humiliated in educational institutions, and insulted in cultural fronts. Rendered landless they are left to live on the leftover food of the high caste Hindus and revolt against the age-old caste-based discrimination to press for liberty, equality, justice and a humanitarian identity.

Key words: *Subaltern, Dalit, Hegemony, Hindu*

Etymologically the term 'subaltern' is derived from late Latin 'subalternus', (sub-'below' or 'under' and 'alternus- 'every other') literally meaning 'low', 'inferior' and 'subordinate'. After its late-medieval English use for vassals and peasants it was applied for the lowered ranked army personnel in the British army suggesting peasant origin. Antonio Gramsci first adopted the term in his cultural studies to refer to those who are subjected to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Gramsci not only used the term as synonym for proletariat but also for the subordinated in terms of gender, class, caste, race and culture. He intended by the term 'subaltern' to mean "those who were on the margins of the society"¹. He observed the subaltern's history as "necessarily fragmented and episodic"² and the elements of subversion are well discernible in them. Gramsci noticed that "In the novel *The Betrothed*, there is not one common person who is not teased or laughed at...they are depicted as wretched and narrow people with no inner life. Only nobles have an inner life"³. Zene observes, "Gramsci cannot avoid noticing that the official interpretation of the subalterns offered by Italian intellectuals does not rest merely on a narrow definition but strikes at the very heart of their personhood as human beings, leaving them incapable of "an inner life"⁴. Being inspired by Gramsci, the Subaltern Studies Groups headed by Ranajit Guha used the term for the 'colonised' south Asian people who were oppressed generation, working classes and muted women in their post-colonial critique of the South Asian history. Guha interprets the

Subaltern Studies as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and officer or in any other”⁵. The Subaltern Studies Groups provide space to only the peasants or working classes who were oppressed under the colonial hegemony and who rose in rebellions against colonial exploitation. Finding flaws in the Subaltern Studies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the subalterns cannot speak. But she is partially, if not totally, wrong in her intellectual observation as the subalterns have their voice and violent mobilisation in the regional literature of vernacular languages as in Dalit literature. Green observes “The subalterns not only resist the forces of exploiting apparatuses but are able to transform their social subordination”⁶. Therefore, the subalterns who reside on the margins of history are the most dispossessed, oppressed and suppressed populace across the countries and continents and offer their utmost resistance against the exploitation by the hegemonic power structure. In this sense, the Dalits of India, ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, Afro-Americans and victims of other stigmas, superstitions are seen as subalterns.

“Dalit” is an old Marathi word derived from Sanskrit ‘dal’ meaning “ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally”⁷. “Dalit” is now widely used in place of the word “untouchable”. To define “Dalit” Sharan Kumar Limbale says:

...The term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes...People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included.”⁸

Indian caste stratified Hindu society has four varnas-Brahman, Kashtriya, Vaisya and Shudra. The savarna Indian society has been sanctioned by the hypocritical Brahman manipulated religious texts like *manusmitri*, *puranas*, *veds*. The Brahmanical society with the help of the Kshatriyas implements the manoeuvred laws of the religious texts and imposes on the so-called Shudras the laborious and scavenging activities of the society to be performed by birth. For this dirt cleaning works they earn the stigmatised nomenclature “untouchable”. They have no right to touch the wells of the upper caste. They have separate wells. Their shadow as well as touch is considered as impure. Moreover they are kept landless to farm or to dwell on. They are relegated to the margins of the society, beyond the villages beside forests or on the banks of the rivers. They are prohibited to learn the language of the gods lest they learn the cheatings of the high caste society. They have been kept well aloof from the access to education to keep them in the darkness of ignorance and utter poverty. They are duped from their due wages for their back-breaking works in the lands or the houses of the upper caste. They have to live on the staple scrap food of the upper caste homes. When they have no work they have to go without any food for days. As if they live only to serve the upper caste people. They are the marginalised “Other” of the hegemonic Hindu society. They have become subalterns not in the colonised India but in the caste stratified Indian Hindu

society. Injustice, ill-treatment, deprivation, oppression and dehumanisation are part and parcel of their lives. For them alterity or subalternity has become spatial/territorial, economical, social, cultural, educational and above all, religious or ontological segregation.

The question of humanity lies at the core of the compositions of the Dalits. “We too are humans” is the vibrant cry of the Dalits who are compared by the upper castes lower than the dogs or the lowliest animals of the society. The Indian Dalits experience a self-negativism of their being or existential crisis as “humans” not just as a social practices but from an ontological perspective. As Gheeta says, “The ontological hurt is endured by the untouchables”⁹. In fact they are pushed to the lowest stratum of subalternity. Their situation is more degrading than that of the Afro-Americans who at least can stay in the houses of the whites and they are not untouchable.

Hindu society does not satisfy banishing Dalits beyond the physical margins of the society. Dalits were consciously kept out of the Hindus’ established literary discourses. Contextually Alok Mukherjee is worth quoting, “A review of Indian literary history would show that the untouchable was absent from Sanskrit and other regional literature as well...The untouchable Other simply had been written out of existence”¹⁰.

The genesis of Dalit literature of all dominant genres owes its indebtedness to Ambedkar who made a clarion call to all Dalits and made them conscious of their inhuman and degrading socio-cultural and economical existence in the society which exploited them by keeping them in the darkness of ignorance and superstition and poverty. Arjun Dangle says, “Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change”¹¹ of the Dalit society. Dalit literature translates pain and anger of the downtrodden Dalits. Dalits through their literature and social movements seek the rationality of their exploitation and throw revolutionary challenge to the Hindu hegemony.

Omprakash Balmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* presents a heart-rending account of Dalit’s mistreatment, subjugation and miserable subalternity in the caste hierarchy. The caste-based discrimination is a common refrain for ages. Balmiki’s Dalit Chamar community keeps the surrounding localities of the upper caste clean by removing the carcasses or darts. In return they get negligible wages accompanied with misdemeanour. Their hard but humiliating works only deserves them to get scrap food from the upper caste. The Hindu society recognises the Dalits not by their names but by their caste. Balmiki says, “They did not call us by our name. If a person was older than we were, he would call as “Oe Chure”¹². They are not treated as human as the writer says, “The Chuhra was not seen as human. They were simply things for use”¹³. In school he has to sit on the mat at the back amidst humiliation and insult of the upper caste students and teachers. Once Valmiki had to bear a lot of beating for his question to his teacher, “Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?”¹⁴ He could not touch the hand pump to get drinking water as it would become impure. One day an upper caste boy snatched and threw his books away. He observes that, “It seems that reading

writing is not their lot”¹⁵. Despite the insurmountable hurdles he completes his education, gets service and hold pen against his community’s caste-based identity and oppression. He successfully encourages other members of his community to send their kids to school and urges them to come out of the pal of ignorance.

Laxman Mane’s *Upara* reflects a painful journey of a subaltern of the dalit kaikadi community from social marginalisation, discrimination and economic deprivation via untouchability to rebellious self-assertion. Being landless and homeless the kaikadis moved from uncertain destination to destination undertaking different odd jobs like selling cane-basket, working in the lands and houses of the upper caste people. The upper caste Hindus always deprived them of their due wages for their works. Poverty was rampant in them. They could not manage the minimum provisions to lead their life. They awaited the stale leftover food earned from the high caste homes in return for their scavenging works. When there were no works, they went foodless and were left to starve. They resorted to pilferage which earned them a thieving community. The police always found them guilty for any theft occurred in the village whether they were involved or not and harassed them. Moreover they were stamped as untouchables in the society. Any high caste people who happened to touch a kaikadi would bathe again to retain purity. They were forbidden intruders to ceremonies like wedding, birth-day etc. Mane in his childhood had to leave his meal half-eaten from a high caste wedding ceremony. He had to suffer, “Son of a kaikadi, low-caste. Have you take leave of your senses? Get up and get out!”¹⁶ He had to digest the teasing and harassment of the high caste students and teachers at the school. He had to hear from his Brahmin lady-love: “I had presumed that you at least be a Maratha...Now that I know your caste, I don’t think I can marry you”¹⁷. Being first educated in his kaikadi community he convinced other kaikadis to voice for liberty and equality and justice.

Laxman Gaikawd’s *The Branded* details the tragic hand-to-mouth existence of his uchalya people who were left with “no native place, no birth date, no house or farm. No caste either”¹⁸. They cannot meet the basic needs of their lives by doing some odd jobs. The children hungrily waited for the elders coming with food. They resorted to stealing. The uchalya community was legally branded as the “criminal” or thieving community. The police always harassed them on flimsy grounds. Once Gaikawd’s grandmother, being accused of theft, suffered greatly at the hands of the police who, according to her, “hang me upside down by the legs and lash the sole of my feet with a whip, thrust burning cigarette butts into my anus”¹⁹. Gaikawd says, “...a tribe that, having been denied all lawful living, is forced to thieving and pilfering to satisfy the basic wants-hunger and shelter”²⁰. Trifling obstacles Gaikawd educated himself first from his community. Realising their duped and deplorable social situation he urged consciousness among his community to raise collective voice and to transform their marginalised lives.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a voice against the stigmatised and impoverished existence of the dalits and a search for their social identity. The caste Hindus always used to exploit the Dalits by making them do the most menial works in return for a piece of bread. Deprivation, poverty and hunger are rampant in Dalits's home. Sharan says, "I always felt half-fed"²¹. When Sharan attended a school picnic he languishingly watched, "Their mother [high caste] had given them fried food, whereas we had just pieces of dry bhakris which were hardly enough to satisfy the carve of hunger"²². The high caste patils sexually exploited Mahar women who went to work at patils' families for meagre wages. The patils denied recognition and responsibility for their illegitimate children. Sharan, one of such illegitimate children, laments, "I had no father's name, nor any caste, nor a caste"²³. Sharan, a real subaltern, protests against his mother's rape and rebel against such humiliation.

Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* exposes the battle between a marginal self and a dominant society. Hazari, born into one of the scavenging communities, was one of the untouchables who were deprived of land and had no food security. The low wages for their works in the rich farmers' land provided them sustenance to live on. They went hungry when they had no work. The author says, "Our livelihood came from the work we did in the town, cleaning the market, disposing of the dead animals..."²⁴. Hazari had to take admission to a madrasa as the upper caste never allowed him to get admitted in any school. He became a dropout because of his family's abject poverty. But lastly he was able to continue his education at the generosity of an English man. Hazari even concealed his name and his caste at the fear of caste victimisation. He changed his religion twice to search for a stable humane caste-free identity.

Dalit women's writings particularly involve the subaltern voices of the Dalit women. The gravity of the situation is intensified when the subaltern is a Dalit woman. She has to bear the double-pronged attacks, one from caste and another from Dalit patriarchy. Being Dalit she suffers caste discrimination outside and being woman she suffers victimization at Dalit patriarchal order in the family. While the upper caste men sexually molest them in the work places, at home they are crushed by their men. The predicament of the Dalit women is most miserable. Being at the centre of the oppressive caste and the dominating Dalit patriarchy, they are the subaltern of the subalterns. Dalit feminist writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, P. Sivamaki, Urmila Pawar and Kumud Pawde have endeavoured to bring to the limelight the common experience of oppression shared by the Dalit women at the work places and at the homes in their works as a mode of resistance and subversion to these oppressive hegemonic institutions.

Bama's *Karukku* establishes the subhuman positions of the paraya community who are pushed on the outskirts of the village. The high caste Naicker community possesses "most of the land"²⁵. The parayas work at Naicker's lands only to be deprived economically. As they are considered untouchable, "Naicker woman would put water from a height of four

feet”²⁶ to the cupped hands of the thirsty paraya women workers. Bama says the Christian church also behaves with the Dalits discriminatively. Bama’s *Sangati: Events* delineates how Dalit women were pitted at the hands of caste, class and patriarchy. The women worked in the fields as hard as the men. Then they reared the children and maintain the household activities at home. Despite that their husbands inflicted hellish torment on them thinking them as their property. Thaayi’s husband used to flog her “like an animal with a stick or with his belt”²⁷. Raakkamma’s husband dragged her by hair and kicked at her lower belly. Bama says the family always prioritised the baby boys than the baby girls. The Dalit woman was sexually exploited by the high caste man. High caste Kumaraswami molested Mariamma, but put the blame on Dalit Marikkam. The Dalit panchayat believed Kumaraswami’s fabricated version and punished innocent Marriamma only, releasing Marikkam. In P.Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*, widow Thangam was raped by high caste Paranjothi while she was working in his sugarcane field. She said, “I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice...”²⁸ Her late husband’s brothers beat her, dispossessed her of her husband’s assets and banished her from home. Because, as she said to her saviour Kathamuthu, “My husband’s brothers tried to force me, but I never gave in. They wouldn’t give me my husband’s land, but wanted me to be a whore for them! I wouldn’t give in...”²⁹ Kathamuthu also raped her helplessly and took all her money making her a maid to his home. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* portrays women’s subalternised and grounded existence in tripartite loopholes-caste (Dalit), class (poor) and gender (woman). The high caste people deem Dalit most untouchable and polluted animal. The upper caste man warned the innocent child to keep away from the Dalit Mahar woman: Chabu, hey you, can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch. Keep your distance”³⁰. Dalit patriarchy confines the women within the four walls. Baby says, “It was custom to keep the woman at home, behind the threshold.”³¹ Everyday Marawada can listen to the cry of the helpless and hapless women either beaten by their husbands or tortured by their sasus. Baby narrates, “They had no food to eat, no proper clothing to cover their bodies; their hair would remain uncombed and tangled, dry from lack of oil. Women led the most miserable existence.”³² Shantabai Kamble’s autobiographical extract “*Naja goes to school-and Doesn’t*” says her father wanted to kill her at her birth, for she was a girl. She being a Marar girl, her Brahmin classmate’s mother insulted her at their home. Kumud Pawde in her “*The Story of My Sanskrit*” says she was initially prevented to learn the language of Sanskrit as she was a Dalit.

Dalit writers establish the Dalit’s subalternity in Indian caste-based hegemony. Scripturally rendered landless and invested to perform only the scavenging works of the society the Dalits are relegated not only beyond the physical periphery of the villages to lead an inhuman lives in subhuman conditions but also out of the periphery of the literary discourses of the Hindus. Dalits are exploited economically by depriving them of the due wages for their strenuous works. They are prone to the teasing and indignities of the high

caste students and teachers at the academic institutions. They are deemed as polluted untouchable souls. So they are the subalternised Other in the hegemonous Hindu society. Dalit literature is the angry outburst of the oppressed Dalits against such caste-based inhuman oppression. It seeks liberty, equality, justice and above all, humane identity of Dalits in all fronts of the society. So the Dalits in Indian caste phenomenal society are the real subalterns who, through their literary cannons, expose their abject subordination-domination and seek an equalitarian society and assert their humane identity in the Dalit-Hindu binary.

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