

THE STRUGGLE OF THE MARGINALIZED GROUPS—A STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS OF EDWARD LUCE AND ANAND GIRIDHARDAS

Shilpa Bhat
D, Phd Gujarat University
(Commonwealth Scholar, University of Toronto)
Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

ABSTRACT

The Dalits have been oppressed through generations. This paper seeks to analyse the historical dimension of the dalits and how they have been portrayed by two journalists—Edward Luce and Anand Giridhardas. How they situate the issues of the Dalits as exploited classes who have been stripped of their dignity to live as human beings and how in spite of their traumatic situation they have struggled to rise in modern India and create an identity of their own through making a comparative analysis referring to various regions, proffering examples and suggestions. There is plenty of dalit fiction that portray the problems of the dalit. Interestingly, there are several non-fiction narratives too that discuss the problems and position of the marginalized class. Dalit activists have been making concerted efforts to secure attention and justice to this chronic malady through fostering linkages nationally and internationally and nonfiction narratives is another medium to bring this issue centre stage.

Basic human rights are not the prerogative of a few but that which all human beings should and must enjoy. This has been a theme of intense debate and discussion not only in social circles but also in narratives. Researchers are familiar with dalit fiction—passionate stories and poems of the “inscription of pain” of the suppressed classes. There are also non-fiction texts that confirm and discuss the issue as one with contemporary significance. In this paper, I shall consider non-fiction narratives of two journalists that refer to the plight of the Dalits and their struggles. Edward Luce, a British journalist who worked for the Financial Times, attempts to analyse the plight of the marginalized classes in his essay “Battles of the Righteous—The rise of India’s lower castes” in his seminal work *In spite of the Gods—The Strange Rise of Planet India*. He throws light on how they have risen in the political sphere and emphasizes the role of education in uplifting them. Anand Giridhardas—who writes for ‘The New York Times’ and the ‘International Herald Tribune’ online, is a journalist in America and has lived all his life there but has been visiting India. In his incisive work, *India Calling—An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking* and in the chapter titled “Ambition” he portrays the position of the dalits and their economic conditions epitomized in the servants who attend on him during his visit in India.

For the purpose of my study, I have analysed the non-fiction narratives and supported their views through data as evidenced by researchers. A brief introduction to the journalists and what prompted them to write about the subject is essential to fathom the context and the methods that they adopt to prove their point. The two writers have lived outside India most of their lives and are appalled by the plight of the dalits and try to probe the conditions of the suppressed voices. While Edward Luce unravels the trajectory that the activists adopted to salvage the dalits from upper caste brutality; Giridhardas studies the dalit system as one where the ‘upper strata’ is seen looking

down contemptuously at the lower sections of the society on the basis of class and professions. What is unique is the manner in which they study the case. As journalists their method is distinct. Luce interviews people, gathers their perceptions, provides photographs and images of dalit oppression and emancipation and then offers his personal reflections on the matter. Anand Giridhardas observes and studies the attitude of the dalits and communicates his views passionately on the subject to the readers. It is almost as if he is dialoguing with himself. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the two, in their humanistic endeavours, situate the issues of the Dalits within the framework of modern India and what according to them could be the possible ways of alleviating their problems and elevating their position. They attempt to do this through encapsulating the past, present and future in the course of the dalit movement and struggle.

The Ups and Downs of the Dalit Movement

Ancient India's idea of *dharma* implying an individual's adherence to duty; and its creation of social stratification based on occupations resulted in hideous divisions within the Hindu society. These laws were outlined by Manu who stated that "It is better to do one's own duty badly than another man's well" (qtd. in Luce 107); suggesting that interest in a particular profession other than the one prescribed by 'dharma' was objectionable. Luce cites the instance of Emperor Ashoka who was originally a 'sudra' but who rose to the eminence of being the ruler and establisher of the epoch-making historical Mauryan dynasty. Nevertheless, this according to Luce is an exception. The general condition of the lower castes was revolting and had no preference. So unbending was the system that it was justified as divinely ordained and that the birth of an individual was a consequence of the deeds of his previous birth. This amalgamation of the religious and the social complicated the situation further because what it suggested was that the birth in a particular caste was irrevocable and irredeemable. Anand Giridhardas in this connection comments that the caste system had impelled the:

Indians to lay bricks if born bricklayers, to skin cattle if born cattle skimmers, to preach if born priests and to do these duties without complaint or protest, knowing that the reward in a future life would be proportional to one's degree of acceptance in this one....ensured that the designations were reflected in family names. (44)

So, there was no escape. What is notable is the idea of 'stacking' the masses according to their professions one above the other or in other words, one below the other. It is like a pyramid wherein the apex is shiny and the base gets dirtier and dirtier. With more and more 'subs' in the term caste, the system only got murkier and too convoluted to resolve. The mental conditioning had taken place over several centuries and to such an extent that it came to be believed that nothing couldn't liberate the so called 'lower caste' from repugnant restrictions that unfortunately was the characteristic feature of the Hindu society. The feeling of helplessness and permanent rootedness is palpable. Annapurna Waughray in her article "Caste Discrimination and Minority Rights: The Case of India's Dalits" states that "Despite being a notional construct, Untouchability is conceptualised in corporeal and immutable terms as a permanent quasi-physical inherited characteristic which cannot be shed or removed" (Waughray 329). This combination of the dalit issue with spirituality ensnared the oppressed so much that it seemed as if there was no respite and liberation from the atrocious circumstances.

Edward Luce notes that the symptoms of revolution among the dalits showed up right during the 8th and 9th centuries in India in the form of Muslim invasions and the 'Bhakti movements'. Meerabai, Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas, Akka Mahadevi and several others stirred spiritual movements throughout the country and emphasized on rising above the caste hierarchies. All these

saints underlined that human beings were equal and that it was ridiculous to see them divided into castes and religions because these were different paths to God.

One of the conspicuous differences between dalits and the upper castes was the mode of worship and rituals. The rigidity in the method of offering prayers was one of the causes of perceived stratification. Ramananda, a bhakti saint “removed virtually all caste distinctions and further relaxed rules of worship” (Stahl 142). The alteration and flexibility was supposed to bring in the idea of bhakti, that is, devotion to God. The emphasis was more on feelings of submission to God rather than the style of worship. In one of the couplets Kabir says “Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West. Look within your heart, for there you will find both Karim and Ram; All the men and women of the world are His living forms. Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram: He is my Guru, He is my Pir.” (qtd in Stahl 143). The couplet suggests that all human beings are children of the same God, obliterating in the process the differences in religion and castes created by man.

Therefore, *bhakti* also a social movement and historically significant as it introduced radically different views. The evils of the caste system were recognized as debilitating factors in the progress of society. Christian Lee Novetzke states that “The sense in which *bhakti* enters the history of India is not through the private realm, but through the social world of caste, labor, media (both written and non-written)” (Novetzke 255). It was prominently caste considerations that became a major reason for the popularity of *bhakti* and it had tremendous cultural, literary and social implications. Plenty of literature in various forms, especially poetry became popular during the period suggesting that human beings were all equal before the eyes of God. The whole scenario produced a discourse that emphasized that differences were man-made and preposterous and the new ideas stirred the imagination of the contemporary society. So, there was an attempt to create awareness regarding this in that period but then these cults themselves turned into sub-castes and gradually became a part of the Hindu traditional hierarchy. Criticizing the inherent contradictions of the religion, Luce comments that “Hinduism has a way of pacifying and accommodating its challengers. It is simultaneously rigid and flexible” (108). This innate nature of absorbing new-born streams within the larger framework of religion continued to keep the marginalized in a subordinate position denying them freedom and dignity. However, the changes by way of bhakti movements and introduction of Islam religion in the Hindu society cannot be sidelined because every incident contributed to the general cause of improving the situation. This is exactly what happened in the history of the dalit revolution. Every event created awareness and laid the foundations for future transformation. To a certain extent, the *bhakti* movement took up the cause of the dalits but the issue remained largely unaddressed in practical terms.

One of the most decisive influences on the dalit ideology was of course Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who tried to give the movement a whole new direction. His choice of the Buddhist religion was a result of his perception that it “was the most egalitarian of the world’s religions” (Luce 110)—a choice based on intellectual understanding and conviction. Along with him, several dalits had converted and it is interesting to observe that many of the converts kept a “small figurine of Ambedkar among their pantheon” (112). The conversion of the dalits into the Buddhist or other religions has always been a matter of discussion. Vivek Kumar states that “Faced with the atrocities within the Hindu social order, at the very outset dalits in India face a challenge whether to remain within the Hindu folds or convert to Buddhism or to any other religion” (Kumar 2799). In the wake of a tyrannical system, one of the alternatives that was seen as a considered possibility was conversion because it appeared to offer relief from the clutches of caste and class prohibitions. Here, it is essential to understand that proselytization is not easy. It calls for mental preparation for a huge transformation in one’s attitude. In the search for liberation, there were attempts to study other belief systems that seemed to offer respectful existence. Buddhism was one such religion that

was seen as unshackling. Hence, Ambedkar found it inviting in terms of conversion and faith. As a leader, he inspired several others to consider this possibility.

He symbolized the spirit of the dalit movement and Edward Luce points at his statues that can be found throughout the country epitomizing his success at providing fillip to a revolution in its nascent stages. For the dalits, he had risen to the position of God. Luce uses the picture of dalits sitting silently and with folded hands 'At prayer before Bhimrao Ambedkar, who gave hope to those marginalized in Indian society' (between pg nos. 116 and 117). To inspire a mass of traumatized people is not a diminutive task. The amount of courage it takes to assert one's identity as a human being is enormous and the loss of such a stalwart becomes evident in his absence.

Dalit Resonance Globally

After Dr. Ambedkar's death the Dalit Panther Movement came into existence. In this connection, Edward Luce, who is a journalist in his typical journalistic endeavour interviews a museum curator and captures his pathos when he says "We feel a lot of kinship with what blacks suffered in America before the civil rights movement and what blacks suffered in South Africa under apartheid" (114). The feeling of oppression is obvious but alongside is the hope for change with effectual laws and empowerment just as it happened in America and South Africa. In fact, it is common to find critics drawing parallels between the ordeals of the Blacks with the Dalits. What Luce underlines is the essential realization in the dalit movement of the need for a critical stroke and action. Like the policy of apartheid, the evils of the caste system could be fought only through a strategic plan and course of action and this the Indian Dalit activists had realized.

It would be very interesting to note that the agenda of Dalit movement has been carried forward not only nationally but also globally through institutions and also through the organization of international conferences by the dalit diaspora settled in various parts of the globe. Lerche states that "Pressure groups belonging to the dalit diaspora in North America and Europe such as 'Volunteers in the Service to India's Oppressed and Neglected' (VISION) and the 'Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace' (ACJP), based in Washington DC and Toronto" (245 qtd in Lerche). It is remarkable that diaspora has played a crucial role in providing momentum to this revolution.

North India versus South India/Urbanisation

Edward Luce makes a comparative and in-depth analysis between the dalit revolution in North and South India and he infers that in the North the emphasis is more on the politics of the game while in the south there are efforts to empower people through education. He provides an appealing example to prove his point, when tsunami afflicted Tamil Nadu in South India, in December 2004. The state government had renewed and improved the region in a short span of only a year. He visits Tamil Nadu and happens to interact with a Tamil doctor who said "In Orissa the women were too afraid to come out of their huts and talk to me.... 'In Tamil Nadu it is difficult to get the women to stop talking" (Luce 137). What he was suggesting is that the women questioned anything and everything they felt was unethical and unjust. The reason for this promptness in enquiring and understanding, according to Luce can be ascribed only to education and so his suggestion is that in Orissa, the literacy levels are very low as compared to Tamil Nadu and that is why there was a great difference in their attitude and confidence. Empowerment is extremely essential for progress, especially educational and financial. The women in Tamil Nadu were able to wrestle unfairness because of awareness of their rights and the empowerment that they achieved on account of education. The women in the episode mentioned by Luce questioned "where is the three thousand crores [\$750 million] that the World Bank pledged?" (140) and "We have only been compensated for eighty-four boats but we lost ninety-six" (140). These women were able to question authoritatively and confidently because they had started feeling powerful.

Therefore, the power of literacy cannot be undermined in this regard. Edward Luce takes into account the development taking place in this state and makes an elementary observation comparing the dalit revolution in Tamil Nadu with the movement that had been taking place in North India. He states that “Tamil Nadu proves that caste sentiments can be diluted, especially in the urban settings.... Certainly, in an urban setting it is easier to escape the traditional caste functions and taboos that are still likely to govern your life in the villages” (143).

This suggestion of the urban environment as conducive to get rid of discriminatory behavior is critical. The urban setting is advantageous primarily because of its emphasis on modernity as opposed to traditionalism. Globalization, urbanization and modernization are terms that underline progress. They are considered consequential and impactful nationally and internationally. The urban scenario locates the dalit in an altogether new setting enabling him/her to connect to modern ideas of education, technology, law and culture.

In this context, it would be interesting to observe that Luce uses a few photographs in his essay, perhaps because he is a journalist, to illustrate the idea of how the downtrodden have been advancing over the years. However, he doesn't discuss these images with particular reference. For example, he shows the image of Nandan Nilekani but then he doesn't talk about him or even mention his name in the entire essay. Now, this necessitates some explanation. It is said that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. Nilekani, who is the co-founder of the Infosys Company, has been tremendously responsible in bringing in technological changes in India and is an icon for the youth and the ambitious. In other words, he has played a key role in urbanizing regions because when you have software companies, there are so many other means of livelihood that crop up around it. Better opportunities encourage ‘uprooting’. Restaurants, schools, housing facilities, transportation, places of entertainment and interest—all develop speedily around a technology booming area. Take for example, the picture of Bangalore. All those areas where there are companies, there are plenty of other businesses thriving. ‘Uprooting’ or migration to the place that seems lucrative in terms of jobs and there is also plenty of variety and choices for those who want to move to a new place for financial, educational or cultural reasons. Hence, urban areas can be perceived as opportunities for escape from the fetters of the caste system and form the ‘sites’ that are relatively free of nagging social and cultural atrocities.

Now, it is precisely this that Luce is talking about. In the city, he suggests that discrimination is comparatively less and subsequently the process of technological and cultural reform can play a crucial role in changing the mindset of the people. It is not just taking up of jobs in the urban areas that can redefine the condition of the dalit. As a creator of jobs too there are plenty of prospects. Interestingly, at the political level also there have been efforts to encourage dalit entrepreneurs. Sudha Pai, while analyzing the industrial scenario mentions that “The Rani Durgawati Scheme (RDS) was introduced in early 2003 to provide the margin money for bank loans for dalit/tribal entrepreneurs who wished to establish their own supply/manufacturing enterprises” (Pai 232). A scheme like this one speaks a lot about how the dalits can explore ways of progress through entrepreneurship or some such ambitious projects. Of course, this is not sufficient and there is a lot to be done but these aspects need to be probed in detail so that new perspectives and directions can be worked out. One of the yardsticks of success for anybody is the availability of options. When there are fewer alternatives, it becomes restrictive and suffocating.

Medium of Expression—English or Vernacular Languages?

Incidentally, Nandan Nilekani's book *Imagining India—Ideas for the New Century*, while analyzing the English language issue during the democratic evolution in the country makes a perceptive remark in connection with the dalit movement. He states that:

For the Dalits, English was a language exempt from the restrictive conventions of Indian literature, which was imbued with the traditions of caste and untouchability...many of the early Indian reformers, Dalits leaders viewed English as emancipatory, free of the smudgy fingerprints of Hindu discrimination and the stigma of 'untouchable' traditions. The Dalits also came to support English as a language that enabled communication across linguistic regions, giving the low castes a 'nationwide solidarity', and enabling their voices to be heard in the public sphere (Nilekani 90).

Here it is necessary to take note of the fact that we have plenty of Dalit literature in several Indian languages which constitute Indian literature. So, in that sense, regional languages of India have also served as emancipatory languages. The linguistic dimension is always important because it represents culture and sentiments of the dominant groups but it is also true that they can be used by individuals as weapons of expression. Language has 'codes' that represent particular cultures and beliefs. Debjani Ganguly in his article "Pain, Personhood and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives" states that "Life-writing texts first emerged in Marathi, for the post-Independence Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra. Since the 1980s, the genre has spread to other literary/linguistic clusters such as Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada and Punjabi" (431). It is remarkable to have narratives on the dalit subject in various languages because it suggests that there are voices being raised in various regions and the matter is not confined to a particular place.

Agitation has always been a conspicuous aspect of the dalit protest but dalit literature has also played a major role in critiquing the nauseating division of human beings into castes, sub-castes and untouchables through distinctly passionate stories and poems. Dalit literature articulates the problems, the pain and anguish, the helplessness and at the same time hopes of redemption.

Let us take a look at what Anand Giridhardas has to say in connection with the dalit situation. Giridhardas lived all his life in America and in his text, he discusses his very brief Indian visits as a child and when he takes up a job in India he travels throughout the country and captures his experiences in his book. In one of the episodes he visits Delhi and feels revolted when he sees the dalit servants working in great humility and tries to draw connections with the servants in the other parts of the world. He comments "The hierarchy that seemed so new to me was, of course, a very old fact of the world, from European feudalism to American slavery to Russian serfdom" (44). He compares the dalit situation with historical phases in the rest of the world like Luce does when he mentions the apartheid policy in South Africa, trying to draw parallels. This situates the dalit issue in the global scenario and within the human rights agenda. Edward Luce and Anand Giridhardas express their opinions in this regard fervently. They have portrayed the picture of the dalits from a humanitarian point of view. Nevertheless, both the journalists are of the opinion that the dalit case is exclusive and both suggest that in modern India, changes were taking place politically too. In North India, for example, several politicians had risen to influential positions symbolizing dalit power. The author observes the legal changes and also the importance given to education, Giridhardas states:

But in modern India caste was no longer what it once was. Untouchability, the heart of the evil, which dictated certain castes to be so low as to be impure and untouchable, had been outlawed before my parents were born, and over the course of their youths India had taken long strides towards dismantling the regime. (45)

This idea of "dismantling" is critical because it suggests a complete overthrow of a dominant group. It is no ordinary idea to state since its implications are progress and modernity and the assertion that the exclusionary groups can conquer through revolutionary ideas, literature and social movements.

The texts that I discuss in this paper show the exploitation of the dalits but they also illustrate, how inspite of their traumatic situation they have resolutely endeavoured to rise in modern India and create an identity of their own. Dalit activists have been making concerted efforts to secure attention and justice to this chronic malady through fostering linkages nationally and internationally and Dalit literature encapsulates the struggle which is ongoing but which hopes for a better future positively and optimistically. There is not only fiction on dalit oppression but also non-fiction narratives that discuss the dalit predicament. The very fact that journalists who are rooted in foreign cultures have analysed the dalit issue in India and choose to write about it demonstrates that it has been noticed globally. Nevertheless, their observations are unbiased and reflect the march of the Dalits from the Vedic period to the present day.

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