

Literature from Margins: Dalits and Caste in Urban Spaces

Dr. V. Rajunayak

Assistant Professor

Dept of Indian and World Literatures

School of Literary Studies

English and Foreign Languages University

Hyderabad-7

Email: raju@efluniversity.ac.in

Abstract

Legally caste based discrimination is banned in India and on the surface level the upper caste intellectuals, social activists, politicians and religious leaders have created a myth that there is no caste based discrimination in India, at least in the urban spaces. In 1935, Mulk Raj Anand who is deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi while writing his novel *Untouchable* predicted that the use of technology while cleaning toilets would erase caste based discrimination because these people are considered untouchables for the dirty job they do. Just like most of the upper caste intellectuals untouchability has nothing to do with the nature of job rather it depends on who will own the resources both in India and abroad that is why untouchability is practiced in all the places wherever Hindus live. Whenever the upper caste Hindus feel threatened due to economic, intellectual growth, and social upliftment they become violent and use state machinery, non-state agencies as well as psychological torturing to push them back to their positions as evident from the way Payal Tadvi is tortured to the point of committing suicide. However in the age of democracies where they need number to form governments they try their best to Hinduize the Dalits.

This paper will look into different aspects of caste discrimination in the urban spaces in both India and abroad wherever Hindus live.

Legally caste based discrimination is banned in India and on the surface level the upper caste intellectuals, social activists, politicians and religious leaders have created a myth that there is no caste based discrimination in India, at least in the urban spaces. In 1935, Mulk Raj Anand who is deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi while writing his novel *Untouchable* predicted that the use of technology while cleaning toilets would erase caste based discrimination because these people are considered untouchables for the dirty job they do. Contrary to the understanding of most of the upper caste intellectuals untouchability has nothing to do with the nature of job rather it depends on who will own the resources both in India and abroad that is why untouchability is practised in all the places wherever Hindus live.

Ever since Gayatri Spivak posed a seemingly innocuous question: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In her seminal essay with the same name, marginal literature has faced several theoretical considerations and critical commentary. Indeed, the question has raised a whole host of critical debate on the nature of appropriation and marginalization. The end result is that the reflections, considerations and critiquing have taken into account various capacities resulting in an entirely new intellectual discourse with novel offshoot questions: is the subaltern allowed to speak? Will the mainstream

listen? Is the subaltern equipped to speak? Does the mainstream have a responsibility to speak for the subaltern? Is that a form of appropriation?

One thus understands that the mainstream's role in subaltern matters have been brought into question. It is within this framework that one could look at *Karukku*, an instance of life-writing by a Dalit life. She bases the truths in her work from her varied identities as a Dalit, as a Dalit Christian and finally as a Dalit Christian woman.

I intend to analyse *Karukku* as a narrative that aestheticizes pain but does not diminish it. The book is a clear case of a member from the margins narrativising their experiences in the form of a semi-autobiography. We observe that she does not hold back the sordid details of her existence as a Dalit woman. On the contrary, this becomes the very backbone of her novel. Dalit literature prioritizes pain as a theme that forces the reader to reckon the suffering meted out to them on account of their caste. However, this also yields a redemption arc that shows how bahunians have learnt to survive and fight against their oppression. Hence, *Karukku* becomes a form of testimonio in this capacity and is truly the voice of the subaltern. In laying bare the oppression committed against the author and her ilk for being a part of a Dalit community, Bama makes sure that the reader knows that such oppression pervades all facets of her life. We see that the narrative is non-linear and is not organized according to the chronology of events in her life. Rather, the narrative is sectioned in terms of identity markers—her life when she was a school-going girl, when she was a nun, when she worked as a teacher and so on. We see that in exploring the vastly different stages of her life, one theme runs common and takes precedence above all else: her identity as a Dalit woman. Moreover, there is a reason that this particular identity marker retains importance throughout the narrative. We see that the experiences faced by her can all be connected to her subjectivity as a Dalit woman. In short, being Dalit, and being a woman, has shaped her entire life. At this juncture, one could examine the argument put forth by Gopal Guru about Dalit women 'talking differently' (2548). Dalit women's claim to 'talk differently' assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, 'talking differently' can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of Dalit woman to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of 'talking differently' foregrounds the identity of Dalit women.

Hence, when Bama talks about each stage of her life, we see that it is her identity as a Dalit in a socially caste conscious society that drives the events of her life forward. Her life would indeed have been very different if she were born into a more privileged forward caste.

In keeping this particular framework in mind, I intend to analyze the life a boy undergoes a painful life in a school. Rather than confessing, he actually bears witness to the systemic oppression that Dalits have undergone. The incident speaks as a representative of his community and his life is meant to be the lens through which one understands the issues pervading the marginalized. Hence, this paper will look at his experiences in terms of his identity as a Dalit boy in the school, becomes an example of survival and resistance of the subaltern.

Yet, the focus is not solely on the impact that this event have had on Dalit, but rather the different forms of oppression that one suffers at each juncture in the life. For example, in his childhood, he witnessed the terrible atrocities that practice of untouchability brought forth. The example of police brutality is one such experience that no child of his age should have had to undergo, yet he does, owing to his caste. We see that his reality is composed of different forms of suffering and pain that characterises his identity as a Dalit. Even when he becomes a toper, he cannot escape the reality of his caste. He endures jibes and taunts aimed at lower-caste people silently for he

is too scared to speak up and own to his identity. Of course, this changes later when he does speak up and decide to leave the school. Yet, the fear and powerlessness that a Dalit subject experiences is captured quite heartbreakingly with that incident.

Further, in paying attention to the major chunks of his lived experience, rather than focusing on one singular event at a time, it makes sure that he foregrounds the pervasiveness of caste oppression in every facet of Dalit life.

As an autobiographical novel, we see that Bama refrains from focusing on writing solely about her internal feelings and emotions on a given matter, but also pays as much attention to her external surroundings. This ensures that we get a complete picture of the circumstances that surround Bama. She writes of her life in the village with vibrant imagery and colour. Yet, as Amala Dasarathi writes, the manner in which Bama writes does not make it seem like a place defined by a singular caste identity, yet it is also a place that never forgets, or is allowed to forget this fact (2017). She conflates everyday instances with caste oppression to show us how the shackles of caste are a daily reality of her life. For example, she writes about the games she used to play with her friends, the good meals she has had with her family, and then in the same breath writes about the oppression of her family and friends by the upper-caste, by the police and by the convent. Hence, her narrative is periodically punctured by the inevitability of suffering that her Dalit identity brings to her. She shows us that caste oppression does not only punctuate every waking moment of her life, but is also integrated into her lived experiences, especially as a member of the community.

Whenever the upper caste Hindus feel threatened due to economic, intellectual growth, and social upliftment of Dalits they become violent and use state machinery, non-state agencies as well as psychological torturing to push them back to their positions as evident from the way Payal Tadvi is tortured to the point of committing suicide.

In one more instance in a recent Facebook video that went viral a Dalit student getting brutally beaten up by upper caste students. In the beginning, it was not clear where it happened but after a couple of days, people came to know that it happened in Muzaffarpur, in the state of Bihar in India. It happened in a Kendriya Vidyalaya (a school run by the central government of India). The boy who is getting beaten up is a student of 12th standard. When the television channel NDTV asked him about it, he replied: "You see, I am a Dalit and so doing well in the examinations or academics, which brings me praise at home, earns me humiliation and abuse in my classroom," the boy said in his letter to NDTV. (The content of the letter is posted on the last page of this article.) This incident raises many questions such as whether the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes (SC/STs) have enough space in India to excel in the field in which they prefer to be or they need to be like as they were in olden days.

Based on several incidents like the one narrated above, it seems that a dubious idea of nationalism associated with upper caste Hindu identity is on the rise. Long-term activism by leaders of lower caste people such as Savitri Bai Phule and Baba Saheb Ambedkar were partly successful in making marginal sections coming to schools, colleges and universities. Scholars from marginal communities started writing and, as a result, challenging the dominant narrative from their experience and their perspective. This has become an indigestible narrative for extreme nationalists who believe in caste-based hierarchies.

Merit works in two ways in the upper caste mind. If SC/STs get a job they say that they got it because of "reservation" and look down upon them. It is important to pose a question to the "the privileged upper caste reader": how many of you do not think in this way? Answer honestly. When

somebody gets an open category Ph.D seat the usual reaction is, “Oh! You got in open category?” The internal attitude associated with this outward reaction must be animosity and, at best, condescension. Members of the Dalit and Adivasi communities also wish they could be treated like others, being complimented for their accomplishments and spoken to with directness and compassion in other contexts. The basic point is that they also wish to be treated just like others in the classroom. It is time for the country to think. Why do some children from privileged castes have so much hatred on the socially and economically deprived lower caste children? To me, it appears to be an arrogance, which they develop because of their internalized caste pride. Whereas marginal communities life itself is a struggle and it is for their existence in the caste-ridden society. The key question here is the source of the pride that forms the personalities of upper caste children. To address this question one needs to go deeper into the caste based society of the India.

Generations of the SC/STs suffered the humiliation of upper caste and it continues. The language of this domination has not changed yet. People who say that there is no caste in India need to justify their claim. In India, you hear people talking about their caste pride at home. Children from dominant castes get an unreasonable sense of self-confidence and this helps them significantly in being successful in society. Most of the times caste based ideas are acquired at home. Let us take the example of vegetarianism. When children of privileged caste parents ask, why they do not eat non-vegetarian food, the immediate response would have often to do with the superiority of people who do not eat meat relative to the barbarity of the meat-eaters. It is because of reasons like this that caste raises its ugly head in most parts of India today on beefeaters and we are witnessing dreadful incidents currently.

Why did these children from privileged castes beat the Dalit boy in school? Because students from upper castes often think, they have some kind of natural right to overpower anybody else in school. Sometimes physical abuse is used and sometimes mental torture. The impact of such torment can even be a suicide. Therefore, regardless of whether you are meritorious or unmeritorious, you can be at the receiving end of such violence. What matters here is, who you are and which caste you belong to. So, they beat up meritorious as well as non-meritorious students from the marginal sections in the country. Moreover, they try to impose their dominance on some other children who are in the same school. Sometimes the violence happens outside the school and unfortunately, still Dalit's, underprivileged, are not allowed to drink water from the bore well, the cycle of violence continues.

Educational institutions are expected to be more secular and should give enough space for all sections of the country. Instead, these spaces have remained rigid particularly; universities have been hegemonic places for a long time. The marginal communities have not reached university spaces yet. The result of this is that many universities in India continue to be Agraharas. After the late 90s due to reservation, slowly people started coming to universities and they started articulating their issues.

In a seminar organized by a prominent central government university, a professor who holds an explicitly regressive position of the denial of the existence of caste says: “ people come with caste certificate and get a job here. These assholes teach you” it is a clear indication of his arrogance and impatience that results from his origins in a real agrahara. In general, my point is that humanities professors who should be more sensitive to the centuries-old violence of caste, instead shows vengeance in a public meeting. An important issue raised by an incident like this is the following: what are the possible effects of such rhetoric on the minds of young and impressionable students of privileged as well as the marginalized castes?

Second, there is the question whether these kinds of statements develop harmony or hatred among students in the universities. Students come from various caste backgrounds and again some of the teachers inject same hierarchies in the growing minds. How do we expect that things will change? Statements like those that the one mentioned above develop hatred among the peer group.

For example, if you look at incidents of suicides in Indian universities during the last five years they are increasing day by day. Students are becoming outraged and restless by the existing environment in the educational spaces. Therefore, they are taking extreme steps to end their precious life by committing suicides in the universities, as it is clear from examples such as Rohith Vemula, Mudasir, Pulyala Raju and Krish in JNU. There are also instances of students from minority communities, such as Najeeb of JNU, who go missing from Universities.

Some recent incidents show that political disagreements and minor fights in educational institutions take serious turns and lead to suicides and disappearances. Monitoring bodies of the institution do not seem to be handling these cases with sufficient sensitivity. After the incidents happen, it is disturbing to see how these incidents create a huge uproar for a limited amount of time, but do not lead to social justice for the affected groups in the long term. A case in point is the amount of harassment faced by Radhika Vemula, who lost her son Rohith because of the casteist attitude of a university. The absurdity of the situation becomes evident when we note that all the suffering that Rohith faced in the institution was because he was Dalit and now his mother is accused of furnishing false information about their caste status. Presumably, the attempt from some powerful quarters is to save some influential persons from being charged with SC/ ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. Such incidents go against the idea that schools, colleges and universities should play a major role in creating just and inclusive structures.

It is incorrect to limit the problem only to universities. It is recognized across institutions all over the country and sometimes pointed out by leaders of mainstream institutions of national importance. For example, the former Navy Chief Ramdas wrote to The Times of India. "The Hinduism I knew and experienced was gentle, inclusive and filled with extraordinary diversity," writes Admiral Ramdas. Although my personal experience makes me disagree with his claim of the religion's gentleness and inclusiveness, I recognize his point about the stark instances of violence seen in the public sphere. He went on to write, "Today, as a veteran in my eighties, I am forced to hang my head in shame. Because a fellow Muslim has to prove his or her loyalty, and they are being repeatedly put in a situation where their places of worship are under attack, as indeed their eating habits and other basic freedoms" Just think of these words coming from a retired chief of a respected institution. The least that can be understood from this is that there is a serious problem that needs to be addressed by the state and the civil society however, the question is how?

One needs to think seriously, what is being taught in schools, colleges and universities and ask if such material is sufficient to sensitize students from diverse backgrounds regarding questions of social justice and equity. Personal, scientific and political goals merge in a quest for truth that would ideally free humanity from dogma. Seen from a progressive perspective, any discourse should help us understand the past and the present better. Learned people read any text -- novels, printed literature, and academic material -- to gain knowledge about their specific fields or the broader context in which their specific fields are situated. Through this, the reader, speaker and listener come to an understanding of themselves, their relationship with each other and their place in the world in their budding stage. This is especially true for children in the budding stages of their education. Ideally, it also helps mold them as citizens of this world. A better understanding of the world

imparted by education will help contemporary social existence and social reproduction. In this context, the state should think seriously and discuss the domain of education. Another incident that comes to mind is that of a Dalit student being attacked by a teacher for touching the mid-day meal.

Given the situation in India, it is instructive to look at a recent issue concerning California school textbooks. At present, as the California State Board of Education is revising sixth and seventh-grade history and social science textbooks, questions regarding what can be and what cannot be included are debated. The key issue here is the tension between the dominant discourse of the colonizer and the narrative of the colonized. This offers a model for how one can think of a new syllabus at the national level in India. An attempt should be made to bring in marginal narratives to sensitize children about histories of oppression and marginalization, which should not be repeated. Daily struggles of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women and other vulnerable groups should be dealt with as part of the curriculum. Questions of land and natural resources such as water also become central and should be addressed in the textbooks in relation to these vulnerable groups as they are the ones who are most affected by a shrinkage in resources. Moreover, the teaching community needs to come out and help students understand their fellow human beings through discussion and debate conducted with an attitude of empathy and not through hatred. For the marginalized groups, Ambedkar's slogan of "Organize, Educate and Agitate" remains as timely as ever.

If you spare some time and try to understand the language of the SC/STs, you would ask yourselves why their expressions are laced with some amount of sorrow. They either speak with a disturbed sense of sorrow or exhaust their breath to silence. This has been happening past several years. If you take the example of Mahasweta Devi's short story published in *Dust on the Road* "Chuni Kotal" She was pursuing her masters in Anthropology at Vidyasagar University Medinapur, West Bengal. One of the earlier and relatively well-known case is of **Chuni Kotal**, a tribal woman, **first woman graduate among her tribe of the Lodha Shavars**, who **committed suicide on August 16, 1992**, due to continuous caste-based harassment and discrimination. In her book review published in Economic and Political Weekly Susie says, "One of the most...disturbing pieces that I have read in the recent times is Mahasweta Devi's account of the life and death account of Chuni Kotal...failed at some basic level..." Since then what are the measures have been taken in universities in India? Is a question one can ask if your collective conscience permits you? Think why still Adivasis and Dalit students continue to live such a grim and hopeless lives even today. It would be wrong to limit it to only students given the scary current situation in India.

In this context I would like to distinguish between two types of pain that Bama talks about. The first of course is the intense emotional turmoil that one is bound to feel at being humiliated, tortured and oppressed for no fault of one's own. This kind of pain is often internalized to the point that, as mentioned earlier, the Dalit experience itself becomes characteristic of pain and suffering. It is traumatic and cannot be absolved easily. The trauma of caste oppression for generations altogether is then a mammoth force to be reckoned with. It is this exact pain that leads to action and rebellion. It becomes a marker of identity and a means of survival. In experiencing constant abuse and outright degradation for circumstances purely outside of one's control, survival becomes a trait, rather than a tactic. We see the same even in *Karukku* wherein Bama's narrative is also a survival guide—her method of rebelling and dealing against the trials and tribulations that she had to undergo as a doubly oppressed Dalit woman.

However, the second kind of pain may not be as permanent, yet it is relevant. It is the physical pain borne by not the psyche, but the body of the dalit. This is a constant theme in *Karukku*

wherein the body and the corporal form takes precedence. Bama constantly talks of how emaciated her family members are from toiling all day long at the Naicker's household. She details their sickly bodies, tortured both by malnourishment and neglect, but also by corporeal punishment meted out to them by the upper-caste men. She describes in heartbreaking detail the thin, sickly and emaciated bodies of the children playing in the street she lives. She describes their sharp and thin limbs in stark contrast to their disintended bellies- a sign of hunger and starving. Indeed, there have been days that she and her family have gone without food. It is not only her psyche, but also her body that bears the mark of suffering. She laments that her community members have nothing in else in life except to toil and toil all day for the Naickers—"...to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour" (42).

Perhaps, one could say that the incessant torture inflicted upon the Dalit body also inflicts similar wounds on the Dalit psyche. Hence, Dalit literature becomes one that is synonymous with pain and humiliation. It invokes the body to show us that Dalit bodies are punished simply for the crime of being born Dalit. Yet, there is always a streak of survival and resistance within such literature. We see this in *Karukku* too when Bama calls for the mobilization of her Dalit family to rise up and protest against the injustice delivered to them time and time again. The subsequent section will deal further with this manner of resistance.

In continuing with the strain of humiliation and pain being an integral part of Dalit narrative, first let us examine a few instances from *Karukku*. Bama speaks candidly about the degrading treatment she received in high school for being Dalit. Her caste also dictated her poor social conditions and financial background. She could afford the kind of clothing her peers could and often found herself hiding from college functions for she was too ashamed about the fact that she did not have a new sari to wear. We see how even such a banal thing as clothing becomes a prominent marker of caste oppression in this manner. The body is constantly signifying one's identity and social position, and Bama's description of these events makes it clear that caste oppression was something one could never hope to be free of. More importantly, a school or a college is an education institution, one that is supposed to be free of all markers of privilege and identity. They are meant to be equalizing spaces but Bama's experiences prove otherwise. She had to fight hard for her education, and we as a reader are impressed at the determination and perseverance it takes for her to do so in conditions that are less than ideal.

Karukku is also notable in the manner in which Bama articulates her sense of loneliness in the world. In multiple instances, we see her lamenting the fact that she has no one in the world—especially in the aftermath of her leaving the convent. Yet, it was this persistent loneliness and her admirable aspiration to do something for the community that she left home to join the convent, after working as a teacher. We see that even her aspirations are tied to her suffering and caste oppression. She hoped to contribute to a cause that would improve her community's standing in terms of caste, class and identity. However, to her utter dismay, she finds that the convent upholds the very same discrimination that plagued her throughout her life. Rather than being the sanctuary that she hoped the convent would be, it turned out to be an oppressive structure catering to the whims of the rich and ignoring the needs of the poor. The culture within such Christian structures is shocking for even they practice the same caste oppression that every other institution in society did.

One can clearly see the betrayal and shock Bama feels at being treated differently just because she is Dalit. Moreover, she found that the very reason that she joined the convent in the first place seemed to be a lost cause for no one there was really willing to do god's work, other than

follow the rigid routine of prayer and feasting. Bama was admonished severely each time she tried to stand up for herself or speak out in favour of whom the convent was really supposed to serve. We see that even leaving the convent was riddled with difficulties for her, probably, because of her intrinsic value and experience as a teacher. Yet, she was not respected or given dignity before she decided to leave, notwithstanding her experience as a teacher, but solely because of the caste she was born into.

Then again, you sense students make intense effort, but end up producing mere silence instead of human voices that urgently seek attention and justice. Most often, the system does not allow them to produce anything more than mere silence.

Despite, all instances of discrimination and exploitation the hegemonic castes could bring Dalits to Hindu fold and could make them feel proud on their Hindu identity. They could do it successfully because since the beginning of electoral based politics in India the upper caste leadership knew that without bringing the Dalits and Adivasis to the Hindu fold they cannot rule India therefore they used all possible means including media, government machinery, cultural tools, they also persuaded upper caste businessmen to invest money in religion for building temples and organizing temporary community mess (Langar) for Dalits. After a hard work of around two centuries they brought dalits to Hindu fold not for any social, cultural, or economic upliftment but for using them against religious minorities and establish the hegemonic Brahmanical order.

We do not need national museums in the name of the religion and its texts now. We do not need schools to be divided based on the caste. We need to humanize the nation so that the secular and democratic ideals to have the dignified life for all communities in India. My hope is that this happens soon so that we will never again see an incident like Dalit students being physically harmed or being driven to suicide as a result of functioning in cruel or indifferent institutional structures.

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