

The Dark Rock of Indian History: Neglected EX-Untouchables

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the neglected parts of the Indian untouchables that have made a major contribution to Indian literature. There are certain books written by Dalit writers themselves, and they are designed to be debated so as to carve out a new identity for a new genre of Dalit literature. The question of pertinence is to what extent these books have succeeded in transmitting their messages to those who are unfamiliar with the language of modern social discourse or social fabric into the mainstream. It was commonly assumed that devoid of literacy and publication, Dalits were essentially a part of just the oral tradition. Their representation was considered to be confined to orality alone, and the memories contained in it were expected to become fossilized and static when confronted with an ever-flowing cultural stream. Untouchable's literatures have continuously been knocking at the door but have always been refused entry even into the amphitheater of the established and recognized arena of articulation. The paper analyses the legendary figure of Angulimal, Shambook, Valmiki, and Ambedkar to trace the conflict between the past tradition and the contemporary movement. It also shows how Sant Ravidas and Kabir found to have greater influence over Dalits and mainstream writers thought processes as compared to Buddha or Marx and their writings deserve to be included among the literary greats. Earlier it was literature for the Dalits, by the Dalits, and of the Dalits, but now these are alternative writing with a new epistemological purview.

Keywords neglected, untouchables, pertinence, discourse, mainstream, epistemological

History can be and has been an important epistemological tool to evaluate and confirm the civilizations of the past that depict not merely the material achievements of that civilization but also its institutional arrangements that defined its trajectories and offered them the required momentum for surviving. Delving into the ancient period of the Indian past, one finds that a major segment of the Indian population known as Sudras (untouchables and backward) were both coercively and persuasively pushed to a corner of society wherein they were denied all the rights that accrue to a being by virtue of his birth as a man. Such a phenomenon was the consequence of the rigid caste-stratified social system in which the privileged position of few depended upon the deprivation of others. How did it happen? What is its aetiology? This is a perplexing question

before humanity. Theories of an economic, sociological, anthropological, and cosmological nature have been advanced to explain its development, but none of these have succeeded in satisfying the curious mind, to the extent that they are forgotten as sociological arrangements of the past: always propelled by the ethos and scarcity of resources during the primitive phase of social progress, or accepted as an inevitable ingredient of social equilibrium governed by the rigorous laws of history.

Modern education in India was initiated by the Christian missionaries in the eighteenth-century AD by opening schools in various parts of the country and inviting children of all the sections of society to attend them. It has a subterranean design of the creation of a culture based upon reason and experience, a reason that is skeptical of the given truth, individual or collective. Further, it aimed at the Anglicization of Indian culture and proselytizing of people into the fold of Christianity, adding to it the lessons of individual freedom and liberty, equality, as well as the role of the individual in moulding the given phenomena and ascertaining social ontology through cause and effect methodology, and developing solutions to rectify the inconsistencies therein. It was for the first time in the history of India that a platform was erected where children from all castes could sit together and acquire the same knowledge. Badri Narayan says: William Adam in his report prepared around 1835-8 has shown that in the villages of Bihar and Bengal, students belonging to the higher castes as well as untouchable and backward sections of the society could be observed sitting together in the schools run by the missionaries (Narayan 15).

However, it was not smooth sailing. Violence protests against such an iconoclastic educational system erupted. Some schools even failed to register or enroll the Sudra students in their schools, as is evident from the observation of some critics that the public schools are virtually closed to the Chamars. Both teachers and pupils in the schools make it most difficult for low caste born to sit in the classrooms. The result is that boys of the lower castes are not found in any numbers in the school 'that boys of the lower castes are not found in any numbers in the school.

However, with all the stiff opposition and social constraints disfavoured the educational acquirements of the untouchables and the backwards, the number of untouchables successful in obtaining education in the United Provinces alone was 46,000 in the year 1917. Consequently, the section of Sudras that were now educated attempted to re-read history and analyze it from a different perspective. The coming of the print media further effectuated the articulation of their voices of dissent and popularization of a different framework of history with new analytical tools. Dalits challenged the Brahminical hegemonic order by utilizing the print medium: they further used it to counter the value framework erected by the dominant power group. In other words, the

print medium was being utilized by the Dalits to subvert the ideological and cultural structural persisting since ancient times. It was commonly assumed that devoid of literacy and publication, dalits were essentially a part of just the oral tradition. Their representation was considered to be confined to orality alone and the memories contained in it were expected to become fossilized and static when confronted with an ever-flowing cultural stream. Therefore, for injecting new confidence and enthusiasm with greater mobilization power, the print medium was found to be highly effective by the dalits. Moreover, the writings of the ruling class are always full of spaces that could be exploited by the dalits to counterpoise their own ideologies. The double standards of the ruling class are always evident in their own ideologies. The written content of the oppressor when confronted by a similar content of the oppressed produces scope for dialogue which demolishes the grossness of the oppressed. Moreover, written materials using printed mediums are successful in providing a homogeneous ideology to those divided by scattered thoughts. Further, the print medium gives cultural self-expression to such groups through the efforts of the organic intellectuals of the community. This was understood by a visionary like Achhutanand in North India, and the dalits in the future followed rigorously the tradition laid down by him.

The question of pertinence is, to what extent these writings have succeeded in transmitting their messages to those who are unfamiliar with the language of modern social discourse or whether they contain significant messages for the common man who yearns to see rays of hope in real social transformation of his image. Had it been so, these books would have been available in the rural areas, *melas* (fairs) that are held there or in the bookshops designed to popularize Dalit identity by selling cheap booklets written in the most common language narrating their reality in most uncommon way. The book on Kabir by Dharamveer exhibits an unconditional epiphenomenalist methodology of putting every interpretation of Kabir under the banner of Brahminical interpretation, oblivious of the fact that no personality in medieval India has advocated so vehemently the existence of plurality of understanding as Kabir, and none has challenged so vociferously the monistic dominance of a specific faith or ideology. Moreover, how exposition of the Brahminical mode of interpreting Kabir is going to help a community that is yet to liberate itself from the complexes of outsidership in his psyche is left unexplained.

These booklets have come to form an alternative source of knowledge, as their sale is not governed by the economies of the library, review of academic critics, the beauty of language, coherence of logic, the status of the publisher, and quality of the production. Being nearer to folk language and folk mode of epistemological transmission, the scope of receptivity stands enhanced. Folk literatures popularity among the untouchables cannot be denied by any stretch of the imagination.

Such literature is in abundance among Ravidasis, Kabir panthis, and Satnamis and has also ecumenic popularity. Similarly, the poems of certain Sufis are equally acceptable and popular to the extent of transcending the boundaries of caste and creed. But what is special about the Dalit popular literature is that it is acceptable among dalits only. It is a literature for the dalits, by the dalits and of the dalits. This literature is not meant for the solace of the mind weary of the present but an immediate and axiomatic device for identity formulation and formation. No doubt, these are also meta-narratives which communicate a meta-narrative that is a negation of the meta-narratives of the Brahminical order. Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to call these alternative writings, as these are an alternative writing with a new epistemological purview.

Delving into the past, and old religious scriptures, they discovered anti-heroes, i.e., the actors, who, according to them had been pushed into the villainous realm by authors of the Brahminical order. They picked them up and glorified them within a selected thematic parameter conducive for an early Dalit awakening and mental fructification. They also searched the peripheral actors in history and placed them at par with the nodal personalities. Manu was discovered as the real enemy of the Dalit cause because it was, he who had promulgated social laws governing society, laws that were favourable to the upper castes and antithetical to the emancipation of the Sudras. Manu's philosophy dominates all the meta-histories in the form of epics, *Puranas* and *itihas*. Therefore, they counterpoised Shambook against Ram, Eklavya against Dronacharya, Jhalkaribai against Jhansi Kee Rani, Ambedkar against Gandhi, and Buddhism against Hinduism. Their discovery and invention of history proceeded in a parallel way and, thus, many booklets written on cheap paper, costing a minimum amount, were published and sold to the members of the Sudra community, with results that are too obvious to escape the attention of members of the Dalit community, desirous to locate themselves in the social structure and pave the way to ascend to the citadel of political power. The paper analyses the legendary figure of Angulimal, who is a ferocious robber converted by Buddha. Daya Pawar sees Angulimal as the symbol of the fierce society around him:

O Siddhartha! (Name of the Buddha)

You made a tyrant like Angulimal

Tremble

We are your humble followers.

How should we confront

The ferocious Angulimal?

O Siddhartha (zelliot 294).

Angulimal stories show the achievements and challenges as well as the scope for the liberation of dalits from the clutches of Brahminical orthodoxy with the coming of Buddhism.

In the other drama, *Shambook Vadh* Shambook is shown to belong to the local inhabitants of the land, and his erudition and organizing skill reveals that the spiritual wealth of India was not a gift of the Aryans alone. Aryans were exterminators of knowledge and knowledgeable persons belonging to the non-Aryan community. Thus, Aryan supremacy was not a product of a natural competitive process of the power struggle in the realm of knowledge and military skills but a consequence of conspiratorial and manipulative crusade against the indigenous population. *Shambook Vadh*, nothing concrete is visible for those opposing the system. (Periyar Lalayee and Ram Auttar pal 34).

Ambedkar has wielded a tremendous influence in developing a search for identity among the Dalit masses. He has remained a driving spirit behind the literary works of many Dalit writers. They owe their critical imagination and struggles for identity assertion to the teachings of Ambedkar and his zest for Dalit liberation. Namdev Dhasal, in his poem 'From Dr. Ambedkar,' expresses his feelings thus:

You are the one ...
You are the only one, charioteer of our chariot
Who comes amongst us through fields and crowds?
And protest marches and struggles.
Never leaves our company
And delivers us from exploitation
You are the one
The only one (shah 223).

Thus, in marginal literature, there is recognition of the fact that Ambedkar, Angulimal and Shambook helped untouchables in raising their consciousness, to instill in them a sense of self-pride and self-dignity. They were instrumental in making them aware of the indignities and dehumanization arising out of untouchability.

Raidas was one of the greatest figures of the saint movement in the medieval period. He, along with Kabir, Namdev, Chokhamela, and Dadu formed the backbone of the medieval anti-caste movement. But unlike Kabir, who comes across as a radical and revolutionary saint, Raidas is more often than not projected as a devout Ram worshipping saint. This creates some reservations

in the minds of progressive Dalits in accepting him as one of their icons. This image, projected by Brahminical writers, is an illusion, as we shall see. Raidas belonged to the Chamar community, which, like all Dalit communities, is Buddhist in origin. Contrary to popular belief, the term Chamar is not derived from *charm* (leather) but from the Pali word *chivar*, which means a *bhikkhu's* robes. He calls himself a Chamar, states that his trade is low, his labour is degrading, his caste not honoured. More than any other saint, he sings about his traditional work: 'My trade is dressing and cutting leather and daily removing dead cattle round about Banarasa '(Punekar 37). In his poetry, Ravidas, like Chokhamela, challenges the very concept of purity and pollution, but in a different idiom. As Anne Murphy has given us in a new translation, Ravidas questions it in this way: In another song from the *Adi Granth*, Ravidas shows that anyone who is devout and pure rises above caste:

In whatever family a good Vaishnav is found,
Whether they be high caste or outcaste, lord or pauper,
the world will know the one by its flawless fragrance (Punekar 39).

Another character Valmiki places his and his Dalit friends' encounters with upper caste teachers in the context of the Brahmin teacher Dronacharya tricking his low caste disciple Eklavya into cutting his thumb and presenting it to him as part of his gurudakshina or teacher's tribute. This is a famous incident in the *Mahabharata*. By doing this, Dronacharya ensured that Eklavya, the better student of archery, could never compete with Arjun, the Kshatriya disciple. Indeed, having lost his thumb, Eklavya could no longer perform archery. In high caste telling, the popular story presents a casteless Eklavya as the exemplar of an obedient disciple rather than the Brahmin Dronacharya as a perfidious and biased teacher.

While condemning the caste system and other forms of discrimination, Kabir apparently accepts caste as a secular phenomenon. Thus, he names a large number of castes- many of them based on professions- such as, washerman, barber, carpenter, potter, cobbler, oilman, kshatriya, Vaishya, etc., without questioning their duties and privilege. Kabir preached the equality of man and denounced vehemently caste distinctions:

God to whose power all are subject
First created light.
From one light the whole mankind issued,

Who are high and who low?
Do not be misled by error, brother men!
The creation issued from the Creator
And the Creator pervades the creation everywhere (Singh 45).

Many of the ideas of Kabir's, voicing dissent against the existing institutions and values are echoed by his successors. Raidas (born c. 1415), a cobbler by profession, does not explicitly denounce the caste system, but subscribes to the idea that differences of caste or status do not matter where saints, and their devotees are concerned.

So, our heroes who desire to awaken from the slumber of the past necessitated Dalit intellectuals to capture their present by exposing the 'misdeeds' of the elites and construct a 'new consciousness' that paves the way for them to assert their demand for social respect from which they had remained deprived since centuries. The heroes of the oral culture were transferred to the written page, and networks of qualities were woven around them. Also, the important personalities of the past, present and medieval period in history were highlighted in these booklets in a manner so as to eclipse all other heroes belonging to the non-Dalit communities. Some important and popular booklets are Ambedkar ka Jeevan Darshan, Mool Vansa Katha, Bheem Pacheesa, Buddh Ke Baad, Achut Virangana, etc.

The new emerging consciousness, so anxious to form its identity and counterpoise its own heroes against the heroes of the Brahminical order, accepted these interpretations enormously. The writers of these texts belong to the Dalit community and are political activists. They were new intellectuals who were organically linked with the people at the grass-root level of society. Unlike the books written by elite dalit writers, these booklets are published from small publication units, often located in small and medium towns or in the periphery of the big cities but hardly in cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, or Kolkata. To these writers, power was the exclusive parameter of status or identity. Their concept of power has hardly any resemblance to the Marxist, Weberian or Russell's notion of power. Power is not an instrument but an end that fulfills all other ends. Power, identity, status are clubbed together. Its basic purpose is to be recorded in society and history. When accomplished, it shall, through its own intrinsic nature, create a respectable place for those ignored in the past by civilization. Das analyses: Indian literature discovered a new potentiality in the life of the low and the lowliest, the deprived and the humiliated. At the hero-centric world finally vanished, yielding place to the anti-hero. The adalit literature however, was yet to emerge,

but the signs had already appeared (Das 178). What we have seen that untouchables were never provided a proper status in Indian historiography. Also, the authors believe that till now Indian history is mostly written by Brahmin historians so they have not attained the status which is due to them. Thus, history by dalits can be called as 'Dalit popular history'. The present social position of untouchables which is marked by will to capture power and use it for identity assertion, makes them to think architects of an alternative culture in which they can regain what has been snatched from them in the past.

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