

Starvation, Victimization, and Accusation of being Dalit: A Study of *The Poisoned Bread* by Bandhumadhav

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Abstract

Dalit narrative has clearly evolved from the conventional idea of Victimisation and exploitation. It is also marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the so-called untouchables who have been marginalised from social, economic and political mainstream. The emergence of Dalit literature can be traced back to the writings of Buddha, Chokhamela, Dr. BR Ambedkar, Jyoti Rao Phule, and many more. The state of Maharashtra is considered to be the centre of Dalit literary activities, since it was the motherland of Dr. BR Ambedkar. Dalit literature reflects on the suffering and day to day exploitation and discrimination against Dalits by so-called Hindus. In Maharashtra, Mahars are considered as untouchables who are given certain specific tags of inferiority and low-born: good-for nothing fellows, lazy, feeble minded, ignorant, and their women are considered as lusty who cannot be controlled by their male partners etc. Therefore, certain educated people could not digest such bitter and derogatory remarks, and took their weapon, pen, to fight the battle, not for fame or for materialistic gains but for a respectable and self-esteeming life. This paper will focus on Bandhumadhav, one among such writers who has first hand experience of all the insults and deep wounded scars on body as well as the psyche of underdogs. In his short story, *The Poisoned Bread*, through his protagonist, Yetalaya Aja, he has portrayed psychological enslavement of Mahar community residing at out stretched or one can say the suburb of Maharashtra. Nevertheless, Mahadeva, a city-bred and bit learned grandson of Yetalaya is shown as aggressive, with a flame of revolution in his eyes, and call for action against age old slavery and exploitation in the hands of Caste-Hindus who think themselves as a superior race, bestowed by 'their God', with certain assigned specialities which their other fellow brothers do not have.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Mahar, Victimisation, Exploitation, Starvation, Enslavement, Submissiveness, Revolt etc.

Definition of the term "Dalit" and "Dalit Literature": In 1958, the term "Dalit" was first used in Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha conference, held at Mumbai. The word "Dalit" does not refer only to the Buddhist and Backward class people. Babu Rao Bagul, a Dalit writer, gave the definition of the term "Dalit" and said "all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed are called Dalits." With regard to the Dalit Literature most of the literary scholars and critics are of the view that Dalit literature is not the literature of a particular caste. Arjun Dangle in his essay "Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future," says "Dalit Literature is not separatist" and that "Dalit Literature is not restricted only to Buddhists." Therefore, there are so many such debates have been going on, and many

scholars and literary critics raised the questions: who are the Dalits? And who can be consider as Dalit writers? But in brief Dalit Literature is based on experience (i. e. based on ‘anubhava’) unlike literature based on speculation, written by non-Dalits. One of the striking feature of Dalit writers is that they have language of their own to pen down their sufferings, sorrows and miseries. Hence one can say that those who have first hand experience of oppression and exploitation can be considered as Dalits writers. After 1950s there came a sparkling trail of Dalit writers such as BaburaoBagul with his collection of short stories, *JevhaMeeJaatChoriHoti*(When I Had Concealed my Caste), published in 1993, DayaPawar (*Baluta*), Sharan Kumar Limbale (*An Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*), Om ParkashValmiki (Jhootha), Bama (*Karukku*) etc..

Introduction:

When we talk about any literary genre or literary theory it means we are one way or the other reflecting upon the social, cultural, economical and political issues and conflicts of that particular society, community and the nation or nationality as a whole. Similarly, Dalit literature is the outcome of social, cultural and economic conflicts between the upper and the lower caste, the oppressor and oppressed, the have and have nots. Dalit literature is indigenous and is firmly rooted in the history, politics and culture of dalits. Dalit literature has its roots in Bhakti poets such as Chokhamela, Ravidass, KabirDass. These saints started a revolution to remove untouchability in all forms. What these writers accepted tacitly the tenets of Hindu religion, and philosophy, namely, the theory of Karma and Varnashramdharma. Nonetheless, these saint writers throw some light on the miserable condition of untouchables and also regretted on their despicable status in the society.

Contemporary Dalit Literature is said to be Ambedkarite literature which portrays the agony, sorrows, and sufferings of the marginalized people. Ambedkarite literature is also called as Renaissance in Dalit Literature. Therefore, it was the time to revisit, reconstruct, and redefine the dalit aesthetics on the stage. Dalit contemporary literature is a revolt against the age old dogmas and conventions of Hindu religion, what actually oppressed and exploited the dalits. Gradually some other writers came into forefront such as NamdeoDasal (founder of Dalit panthers), N.R. Sende etc., strengthen Dalit Literature.

Starvation, Victimization, and Accusation of being Dalit:

Bandhumadhav is also one of the great contemporary Dalit Writers who has delved deep into the psyche of his community and tried to hit hard on the ills of untouchability, and landlord system especially in Maharashtra. *The Poisoned Bread*, a short story peeps into the life of Mahar family. The title itself has a great symbolic significance. The title *The Poisoned Breads* symbolises that how poisonous the caste system is, and how this poison has took the unaccountable innocent lives. The story throws light on the life of YetalayaAja and his grandson Mahadeva, who worked hard in order to subdue the hunger of their stomach. A small piece of land would have made them respectable and equal to the upper caste people of their surroundings but they are not even given their share, and force to depend only on the crumbs of breads thrown by the

BapuPatil. Mahar are considered as untouchables in Maharashtra, and they are always kept at the margin or periphery. Even their sight in the morning can pollute and curse the day of BapuPatil. Who remarks with hostility:

“Hey, what brings you here at such an early hours? Hope you haven’t come here with your mind set on evil.” (P. 2. The Poisoned Bread)

YetalayaAja remained quite because he has accepted all the dogmas and conventions of Hindu religion. YetalayaAja and his community are cursed with the stigma of low-born, and forced to beg otherwise they would be starve to death. In reality, there was nothing as such that Mahar is supposed to do menial works only, and cannot claim for equality. If anyone of them seems to be raise his voice against the suppression and discrimination, or tries to rise the ladder of caste system, he will be considered as atheist, defying the god and his scriptures. As BapuPatil becomes furious:

“ Come on, don’t you know that the rain-god enraged because you the Mahars and Mangs have profaned religion, and abandoning caste, have defiled Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur.”(P.2. The Poisoned Bread)

Actually BapuPatil has nothing to do with the God. He was not as much concerned with the God as he was afraid to lose his position as an uppercaste. They did not want to work in the field and farms that is why they wanted that religious hierarchy must be maintained.

Mahadeva, second generation dalit, who has tasted education, could not resist himself and confront with BapuPatil, face to face:

“Patil, will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the God?...And would you please tell me the name of the God whom the Mahars and Mangs can claim as their own?”(P.2. The Poisoned Bread)

Here Mahadeva, influenced by Ambedkarite movement, wanted to make BapuPatil clear that dalits have awakened to their senses, and knew they can understand the pseudo-Brahmanical caste system. As Dr. Ambedkar said I do not believe in a religion which cannot consider every individual as equal. Mahadeva also wanted to say that if their mere touch can pollute the God, then Mahars and Mangs have no God to worship. The biggest problem of upper caste Hindus is that they always take dalits as low-born, lethargic, passive, ignorant etc. As BapuPatil remarks:

“Put every man in his proper place, as they wisely say. A chappal is never worshipped in place of God.”(P.3. The Poisoned Bread)

Dalits are always compared with boots and chappals whose duty is to clean the shit of upper caste people. They are accused and abused every now and then. They are not allowed to read and write. However, by Ambedkar and other saintly figure’s grace

dalits are given the right to education, ordained in Indian constitution. But the idea of dalit education make BabuPatil furious when he is told by YetalayaAja that his grandson is a city-bred and has started to read and write:

“And mind you, even if a Mahar or Mang gets education, no one will ever call him a Brahmin. A Mahar is a Mahar even if he passes L.L.B. and becomes a barrister.”(P.2. The Poisoned Bread)

Similarly, when we talk about Dalit Aesthetics in literature, the upper caste people mocks the idea that how a low-born and uncivilized person or society can have any sense of aesthetics. It is for this reason dalit literature needed to be revisited and reconstruct in order to claim the aestheticism in dalit literature. The conventional idea of aesthetics, based on beauty, is discarded by dalit writers. And if someone says that dalit, being low-born, not having any kind of sense of beauty or not having any kind of experience of living with beauty, cannot produce aesthetics then they received aesthetics in very narrow or limited sense. As Modernism in English Literature gave rise to many other literary movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism etc. All these movements do not deal with the traditional sense of beauty, rather it define beauty in new fashion.

Dalits are always accused of being lusty and good for nothing fellows, who escape from work, though the reality was not which BabuPatil and other upper caste people speak about. When BabuPatil found Yetalaya absent from threshing floor, he became furious and started abusing in very humiliating and insulting manner:

“Has he gone to fetch the tripod or to whore with his wife.” TukaMagdoon further throw oil into the fire: “Oh these Mahars are a lousy lot. You will never find them at their work.”(P.4. The Poisoned Bread)

These upper caste people take it as their birth right to abuse and accuse dalits. They think themselves to be authorized by their God with such rights. Dalits, not only abused, sometimes threaten and beaten to death. TukaMagdoon incited BabuPatil to kick Mahadeva in the loins because, according to TukaMagdoon, he deserves nothing more than that. Despite being working like animals in the fields, dalits deserve nothing but only fets and kicks. This is the fate of Dalits in India. But Mahadeva did not accept all these ills against him and his community. He believes that our people have been misled from the time immemorial that it is our birth right to beg. But begging further will make them beggars. They have to fight with foot and nails only then they will be able to live a respectable life. Mahadeva says:

“We must free ourselves from the land-bondage and learn to live independently, with a sense of pride...we forget all the while that the crumbs they give us make us slaves.”(P.6 The Poisoned Bread He was quite right when he says that Mahars have to fight in order to free themselves from the bondage of slavery and oppression. As A. Philip Randolph rightly said:

“Freedom is never given, it is always won.”(Wikipedia)

It has good resemblances with caste-conflicts in India. Because the oppressor never wanted the oppressed to rise high before his eyes. On the other side to break the shackles of this caste system one must be active and bold in one's consistent efforts. It is Mahadeva who has the streaks of boldness and revolt in his blood, and a fire of revolution in his eyes. That is why he found himself like a caged bird fluttering but cannot break the bars, and with agonized soul was choked with numberless question in his mind:

“When shall the meek and humble people of my community be uplifted? And when shall they be treated like human being...when?” (P.6 The Poisoned Bread)

Gone are the days when Dalit were unaware of their rights and privileges. But with the advent of education they can understand that the caste-system made only to suppress and exploit certain section of society. There is nothing logical behind the hierarchy of caste-system which we found in Hindu Vedas and scriptures. Mahadeva knew it very well that there is no difference between untouchables and upper caste Hindus. It is full of pathos and wit when Mahadeva replies to BapuPatil who asks Mahadeva to abide by the position:

“So you think you can treat us like your footwear! But are we really like that? Aren't we also made of the same flesh and blood as the rest of you? We too are born after nine months in our mother's womb.” (P.3)

Mahadeva is quite right in his view, and even BapuPatil also know the fact that there is nothing logical behind caste system. But why he will leave that system which has kept him on the top without any hard work. In the whole human history there is always a conflict between the poor and rich, lower and upper caste, between capitalist and proletariat etc. One particular group always tried to dominate other claiming its superiority.

In Indai, caste system is as old as mankind itself, and dalits find it difficult to come out of this rooster coop. Though they flutters their wings but could not be able to fly out. As Yetalaya says:

“Do you think I feel happy about being suppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling on us. But, my boy, I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering.”(P.5.The Poisoned Bread)

In '*The Poisoned Bread*' we came to know about the transformation among dalits or untouchables. Yetalaya represents acceptability and surrender while Mahadeva represents resistance and revolt. Mahadeva symbolizes the revolution which will liberate the untouchables from age old oppression and slavery. Though it is not easier to free them from the clutches of Hinduism. One of the greatest freedom fighter, for the under privileged black race, Nelson Mandela says:

“There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere and many of us will have to pass the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.”(Wikipedia)

It is a well known fact that without knowledge one cannot see the light of freedom and independence. It is only education which can empower these underdogs and untouchables to claim for equality and freedom. While counting his last breaths Yetalaya articulates and direct Mahadeva towards the gate of freedom:

“I can only say: never depend on the age old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accused bread from the mouth of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man...”(P.7 The Poisoned Bread).

Therefore, these poisonous bread make them so dependable that they have forgotten that they too are human beings with same flesh and blood, and they too can lead a respectable life, and live independently. But caste-system has degenerated them to the extent where they are not better than animal, even worse than animals. Because they depend on those rancid crumbs which are even rejected or discarded by the animals. But Mahadeva and the likes are not in a position to tolerate such insult and shame, and they ask a question about their living standard which seems to them, “no better than cats and dogs”.

Now it becomes the responsibility of Mahadeva and his fellow brothers to move forward boldly and courageously following the footsteps of great freedom fighters for the cause of downtrodden and under privileged section of society in India. The story ends on a optimistic note where Mhadeva is very eager to retaliate and revolt:

“They inflamed me with a sense of fury and disgust, prompting me to retaliate.”(P.8)

Conclusion:

Instead of pessimistic and Submissive Dalit have to be optimistic and bold to claim their rights otherwise they will have to depend, forever, on the crumbs thrown by upper caste. The poisonous bread, they eat, have denied the very humanness of man, and degenerated them to mere animals or even worse than that. The rejection of the breads will symbolise their conscious efforts against the Victimization and exploitation from the time immemorial. But they must, collectively, show resistance and revolt in order to make their dream come true i. e the dream of freedom and equality. Therefore, they have to fight the battle by themselves to throw out the stigma of being lower caste and all the other ills predestined in Hindu religion.

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