

# Exploring Dalit Literature with A Focus on Women's Lives and Experiences

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## Abstract

Dr Ambedkar quoted that 'Breaking up the caste system was not to bring about inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages but to destroy the religious notions on which caste was founded' India has seen tremendous progress over the years. But has this progress really achieved the true liberation of people. Even today in a country with diverse languages, cultures, religions and economic status, we live in unity. To a great extent this unity is limited to books alone. Considering the communal riots, honour killing, and the caste inequalities in our country, it creates a curiosity to know the past and the present outlook of caste system in India. In the traditional Indian caste system a member of the lowest caste Dalit is also known as 'Untouchables' and considered the lowest social group in the Hindu Caste system. The word Dalit means 'oppressed' in the 1930's. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an entire population in India and Hindu regions of Nepal, Pakistan, Srilanka and Bangladesh is often considered contaminated from birth because they are 'Dalits', they face discrimination and even violence from members of higher castes or traditional social classes, particularly in access to jobs, education and marriage partners. This paper intends to find out the real life of Dalits as depicted in literature and the life of women of this caste group, both in the past and present. If India speaks of unity then why is half of the dalit population living below the poverty line and more than 60percent still illiterate.

**Keywords:** Depressed Classes, Discrimination, Dalit literature, Untouchability, Resistance, womanism.

## Introduction

Dalit literature where dalits write about their lives, forms an important and distinct part of the literature that emerged in the 1960 across the country in various language, like Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla, Hindi and Marathi, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and autobiographies, which stood out due to their harsh portrayal of reality

Dalit literature has a great historical significance. The causes and effects leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of marginalized class of nation's vast population are also observed in many other parts of the world. Most of the marginalized groups all over the world have a similar system of oppression but the titles are different as per the class divide. In India it was under the pretext of the Caste and in the western World it was under the name of the Race.

## Findings

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar tried to promote education to untouchables and uplift them. He intended to promote education as well as welfare of outcastes who were referred to as depressed classes. He started five periodicals and personally wrote a separate set of recommendations for the constitution of India. He then

launched active movements against untouchability. He began with public movements and marches to open up public drinking water resources. He also began a struggle for the right to enter Hindu temples. Ambedkar publicly condemned the classic Hindu text, the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu), for ideologically justifying caste discrimination and "untouchability", and he ceremonially burned copies of the ancient text. , he led thousands of followers to burn copies of Manusmriti. Later, British announced the formation of a separate electorate for "Depressed Classes", Gandhi fiercely opposed a separate electorate for untouchables, saying he feared that such an arrangement would divide the Hindu community. Gandhi protested by fasting. Following the fast, Congress politicians and activists organized joint meetings with Ambedkar and his supporters at Yerwada. The agreement known as Poona Pact was signed between Ambedkar (on behalf of the depressed classes among Hindus) and Madan Mohan Malaviya (on behalf of the other Hindus). The agreement gave reserved seats for the depressed classes in the Provisional legislatures, within the general electorate. The text uses the term "Depressed Classes" to denote Untouchables among Hindus who were later called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under India Act 1935, and the later Indian Constitution of 1950 [6]

Dalit Literature is literature that is about Dalits. Dalit (Oppressed or broken) is not a new word. It was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes', a term the British used for what are now called the Scheduled Castes. In 1970s the 'Dalit Panthers exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution. Inequality was the main source of this marginality which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Marginalized sections were always on the periphery and distanced from the power centers. Dalits were always on the marginalized 'other' side of the Indian society. So when they started voicing after centuries of silence, about themselves, we have the literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination.

The Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits, the struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. Some of the important writers whose writings will find a place are: Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Imayam, 2 Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi and others.[1]

In the year 1992, Indian Literature virtually started a new chapter, with the publication of Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*, which was the first ever attempt to anthologize Dalit writings in English. He involved the entire genre available in Marathi Dalit literature-poetry, short stories, essays, autobiographical excerpts and public speeches. As a result, today we have several collections of Dalit writings coming out in both Indian languages and English. Following are some of the most widely read writers of Dalit literature that are available in English translation Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Dr. Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outside: Akkarmashi*, Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Baby Kamble's *Our Existence* and Imayam *Beats of Burden*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Some of the prominent Dalit writers are Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Rabi Singh, Namdeo Dhasal, Dutta Bhagat, Lakshman Mane, Neerave Patel, Palamalai and Sudhakar. [1]

Dalit women's voices have been inadequately represented or sometimes completely erased from the literary canon. Other times, Dalit women have been represented in romanticized narratives, without a

real examination of their marginalized position in the hierarchy of caste and gender. The Dalit feminist struggle began when the upper caste women's movement discarded the category of caste as impactful of the woman's position, claiming that caste had been transcended by category of "woman". The exclusion of dalit women from the women's movement gave rise to dalit feminism.. There was a radical shift in feminism when Dalit women began to vehemently question Indian feminism's exclusive focus on the issues of upper caste/middle-class women. Some of the noteworthy women contributions are as follows: Shantabai Kamble has written *The Kaleidoscopic Story Of My Life*(1983) The book is a group of pictures which when put together, take into account the life lived as a Dalit woman. Urmila Pawar in *Weave Of My Life* (1988) has published several short story collections which talk about the caste-class and gender axes in everyday life. Babytai Kambl has written *Prisons We Broke* (1987). Her book has detailed descriptions of a life lived in the poverty of Maharwada. She talks about the skewed division of labour in her community.. Kumud Pawade wrote *Thoughtful Outburst* (1981) wrote of the double exploitation Dalit women faced due to their gender and their caste. She strongly believed that caste could be excluded to understand a certain community's humiliation and oppression. She wanted to take a patriarchal/male-centric view of women's narration of their lives as lived and experienced as Dalit women. Gogu Shyamala *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* (2012) she writes about oppression and discrimination faced by the Dalit women in clean short prose and raises questions of the dignity of individuals from communities thus far marginalize.[2]

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Dalits in India have been portrayed as minor figures that watch from the edge of life and literature. Dalits were not allowed to learn Sanskrit, so as not to pollute the language or this canonical literary tradition. Therefore, they created a new literary canon in the local languages. As they have historically been stigmatized as a community of Untouchables, for the Dalits the community stands above the needs of the individual. What has emerged is a literary tradition that in its desire to restore the dignity of its community poses a challenge to mainstream Indian literature both in content and in form. literature since they look at the Indian social hierarchy from below, rather, than above and instead of depicting the plight of any individual in particular, they depict the life of the community as a whole because for the Dalit, the individual's predicament can only be defined in relation to its community. They narrate the conflicts of a community. These narratives go beyond the limits of Hindu propriety as they use a style of language that is sometimes considered as being coarse or crude and, therefore, a challenge to canonical Indian literature. The idea is that if Dalit narratives constitute a literature of dissensus, they should reject Upper Caste standards not only through the subject matter addressed but also through the language employed, which should be truthful to the Dalit reality. These narratives do not depict other worldly concerns, as Indian canonical writing might do, or involves itself with the insecurities or desires of the individual. Rather, they portray the life of their community in all its harshness and complexity.

Also, unlike the representation of Dalit characters even by well-meaning canonical writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) who reduce Dalits to a discourse marked by sympathy and compassion the men and women who populate the pages of Dalit narratives might not have happy or easy lives, but at no point are they constructed as being martyrs due to their circumstances. Instead, they are presented as people who are not afraid to put up a fight in order to preserve what belongs to them. Through its body of narratives, then, Dalit literature tries to counteract the discourse of the caste system by offering a corrective view of how the Dalit subject's identity has been constituted by its condition of existence.

What emerges is a literature of commitment and resistance that in making room for a people who have been traditionally overlooked. Traditionally, Dalit women have been excluded and subjugated by the men and women of the higher castes as well as by the men of their own caste and their own family. Their vulnerability is due to sexual oppression, economic exploitation and social discrimination. In order to survive, they have to fight for the basic needs such as food and water. Though relegated to minor tasks that people from the higher castes and even Dalit men refuse to do, many times these women are the sole providers of their family. The fact of being excluded even from the Indian Feminist Movement has turned them into fighters rather than victims. They have thus founded Dalit Feminism or better, Dalit Womanism, in order to define their conditions of experience. The term 'Womanism', is much more appropriate to the condition of Dalit women than the more restricted term Feminism because it refers to racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic and political conflicts.

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One of the ways through which Dalit women have been able to produce a rupture in this paradigm of oppression due to gender, caste and class is through the writing of autobiographical pieces or life, which can be considered as testimonies of their own condition. These writings that intertwine the fictional and the nonfictional, literature and experience defy the established hierarchy of Dalit and non-Dalit women by investing the latter with knowledge and power. These narratives study the caste, social, economic and political specificities that have constructed Dalit women as such in order to rescue them from this position of inferiority. However, if in canonical literature by progressive men writers, Dalit women are depicted sympathetically but always as victims of violence or rape, Dalit women writers portray themselves and the women of their communities as subjects who resist and fight back. The Dalit women's marginalization within the tradition of Dalit literature is evident at several levels. Their narratives are written in the regional languages and have seldom been translated into English to reach a wider audience.

In other words, their literature goes beyond a portrayal of the condition of the Dalit women as objects of pity to become a serious critique of the caste system encouraged by Hindu society that has historically subjugated them. Early autobiographies in India focus on the lives of individual women, who, even though belonging to upper caste families, narrate their own stories in very adverse circumstances, after learning to read and write almost by themselves or with the help of their more illuminated husbands, but always in hiding, without the knowledge of the traditional women of the family. In the hands of the Dalit women writers, autobiography [3]

India is well known for its caste system, but not many associate the world's biggest democracy with what Dr Sonkar, and many other Dalits, call an apartheid-style state. "Unfortunately the Indian government, made up of the upper castes, has successfully convinced the international community that caste discrimination is an internal, cultural issue. But the truth is, it affects the very way this country is run," Dr Sonkar, who in his thesis compared affirmative actions in India with those of post-apartheid South Africa and the United States, argues that in India despite all legal provisions, 15% of the population is still kept on the very margins of society because of untouchability. India's constitution banned the practice of untouchability - in which members of India's higher castes will not touch anything that has come in physical contact with the Dalits, the lowest caste.

Recently, an organization called Video Volunteers, which runs a network of community correspondents throughout India, launched a campaign called Article 17, named after the constitutional provision that

banned untouchability. They are now preparing to file a lawsuit in the Supreme Court and ask the government to take steps to stop untouchability practices. The campaign and the lawsuit are based on video evidence gathered by Dalits themselves. The short clips that come from all over India include a man who complains that a local barber refuses to cut his hair, a group of children who are forced to eat lunch separately from their classmates and women who walk for hours to fetch water because they are not allowed to use the public tap in their village.

None of the footage on its own is particularly dramatic, but the persistent, systematic discrimination that it documents is deeply disturbing.[4]

Protest is starting to brew in institutions of higher education. At Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, hundreds of students gathered at the Ganga dhaba on the eve of Vemula's 27th birthday on January 29 to organise a candlelight vigil. Slogans sliced the silence of the winter night: the students held a protest rally at the city's RSS headquarters in Jhandewalan to celebrate Rohith's birthday. The police retaliated with batons.[5]

## Conclusion

Today, years after Independence, as Dalits continue to bear the brunt of violence and discrimination-highlighted in recent weeks by the tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Ph.D student in the Hyderabad Central University who hanged himself, blaming his birth as a "fatal accident" in a chilling final note-we could not be any further away from what the Constitution had demanded from a free and fair India. Students protesting against the death of doctoral student Rohith Vemula. Rohith's is not the lone tragedy. A spectre of suicide deaths by several Dalit students is haunting India. Out of 25 students who committed suicide only in north India and Hyderabad since 2007, 23 were Dalits. This included two in the prestigious All-India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, and 11 in Hyderabad city alone. Systematic data does not exist for such suicides, but the problem runs far deeper than a few students deciding to end their own lives after being defeated by the system. Dalit dilemma in India reads like an entire data sheet of tragedies. According to a 2010 report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. Every day, on average, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits murdered, and two Dalit houses burnt. According to the NHRC statistics put together by K.B. Saxena, a former additional chief secretary of Bihar, 37 per cent Dalits live below the poverty line, 54 per cent are undernourished, 83 per 1,000 children born in a Dalit household die before their first birthday, 12 per cent before their fifth birthday, and 45 per cent remain illiterate. The data also shows that Dalits are prevented from entering the police station in 28 per cent of Indian villages. Dalit children have been made to sit separately while eating in 39 per cent government schools. Dalits do not get mail delivered to their homes in 24 per cent of villages. And they are denied access to water sources in 48 per cent of our villages because untouchability remains a stark reality even though it was abolished in 1955.

We may be a democratic republic, but justice, equality, liberty and fraternity-the four basic tenets promised in the Preamble of our Constitution-are clearly not available to all. Dalits continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in villages, in educational institutions, in the job market, and on the political battlefield, leaving them with little respite in any sphere or at any juncture of their lives.

All this even while there has been no shortage of political rhetoric, or creation of laws, to pronounce that Dalits must not get a raw deal. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, prescribe punishments from crimes against Dalits that are much more stringent



than offences under the IPC. Special courts have been established in major states for speedy trial of cases registered exclusively under these Acts. In 2006, former prime minister Manmohan Singh even equated the practice of "untouchability" to that of "apartheid" and racial segregation in South Africa.

In December 2015, the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Bill, passed by Parliament, made several critical changes. New activities were added to the list of offences. Among them were preventing SCs/STs from using common property resources, from entering any places of public worship, and from entering an education or health institution. In case of any violation, the new law said that the courts would presume unless proved otherwise that the accused non-SC/ST person was aware of the caste or tribal identity of the victim.

So why have violent incidents against Dalits increased, rather than decreased over the years, in spite of Constitutional protection and legal safeguards. Caste is not simply a law and order problem but a social problem. Caste violence can only be eradicated with the birth of a new social order says Chandra Bhan Prasad, co-author of *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs*. He argues that the upward mobility of some Dalits caused by market reforms post-1991, ironically leads to higher incidence of atrocities in the form of a backlash.

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