

**Dalit literature: The combat of the Dalit with
social discrimination and personal dilemma for
social justice**

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Literature is not only a gateway to the past; it is also suggestive of our present and future. Literature allows a person to step back in time and learn about life, culture, tradition, problems, etc. on earth. We can have a better understanding of culture and the problems of a society of any period with the help of literature. Literature has the power to reform a nation and can create movements. The impact of literature cannot be denied. Literature is a reflection of humanity and ways for us to understand the nature of society, during different periods.

Although, literature has no religion but when the term “Dalit” appears in association with the term literature, then this literature stands tall apart from traditional literature. Dalit literature is the literature of the Dalits but not only written by Dalits and also not only for the Dalits. Dalit Literature is a vast phenomenon to our contemporary society. Dalit literature emerges to shout for all those oppressed, deceived, exploited and deprived communities who endured the social inequality and exploitation for centuries. Dalit literature has been used as a weapon to defend and attack for their rights. Dalits use their writings to vent out their anger against the social hierarchy, inequality, discrimination etc which are responsible for their degradation. The consciousness of Dalits, in the form of Dalit literature, disturbed the so long slumber of mainstream caste society. Dalit literature shatters the silence

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surrounding the unheard exploitation of Dalits in a country.

Dalit literature represents a powerful emerging genre in the Indian literary scene. To have a complete conception on Dalits, the Dalit literature must be read. Dalit literature has arisen from the cultural and social conflicts. Dalit literature is the projection of the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, deprivation and inequality endured by Dalits. In the pre-established rigid social structure of Indian society, one cannot imagine social justice. Here, people humiliated in the name of caste, colour, religion etc. Dalit literature has an appeal that every human being must find liberty, honor, security and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of the society.

Key words: Dalit, Dalit Literature, Social Discrimination, Social Justice.

Social Justice and Dalits

Social justice, the term is used to form a system that is based on the principles of equality, in every walk of life. It establishes balance in society and allows everyone to share equal opportunities social justice can be established by challenging negative discrimination and unjust policies. It is a concept of fair and transparent relationship between the people and society. Social justice provides equal rights and responsibility in the institution of society, through which one can receive basic benefits. In the contemporary society the term, social justice finds a prominent place. Being a revolutionary concept, which provides meaning and significance to life, makes the low dynamic and cry for the equality among masses. Social justice is not a blind but a broad concept. It appeals for the justice to everyone concerned to social order. Social justice sweeps out all the inequalities and afford equal opportunities to all citizens in social affairs as well as economic activities. Unfortunately, in a country like India where people are humiliated in the name of caste creed, religion, colour, a new era social justice and equality still remains a dream to be achieved.

Justice to Whome?

No doubt justice to the people who is exploited economically, socially, politically, and from all the spheres of life, by the rigid traditions of the country, who are none other than Dalits. The untouchables of the past are the Dalits of the present time who in the society are not only downtrodden but also traditionally oppressed and exploited. They are not only socially degenerated and discarded but also religiously disdained, morally snubbed and economically exploited and impoverished. Dalit is not a new word but a modern concept. A Dalit is one who has suffered operation and discrimination; one who has suppressed; one who has been exploited and oppressed; one who is on the margins of society; one who has considered animal; one whose human rights have been denied. The term Dalit took interesting turn when British in the government of India Act 1935 used its English translation as depressed classes to mean downtrodden people of India. One cannot deny the contribution of B.R. Ambedkar to uplift the Dalits. The term Dalit was popularized by the economist and reformer Ambedkar, who chiefly included all depressed folk irrespective of their caste into the definition of Dalits. Ambedkar himself was a Mahad, that's why he knew the ins and out of the rigid behavior received by the Dalits. The term Dalit is a modern concept. Though, it was first used in journalistic writings as far back as 1931 to connote the untouchables. In the 1930s, the use of the word Dalit by Ambedkar, was invigorated unconstitutional by India's national commission for schedule castes, because modern legislation prefers schedule caste.

The origin of the term Dalit can be traced back to ancient Indian social structure. Indian society is characterized by its well established structural inequality, deprivation and hierarchy associated with caste, religion class etc. in Vedas it is mentioned that Brahmans were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaisyas from his thighs and Sudras from his feet. Hence Shudras are the most inferior in the hierarchy. The caste system become so rigid that gradually it led to the emergence of a group of new caste called the

untouchables(achhutas) or Pancham, the downtrodden section of the society who through the ages were subjected to numerous discriminations and humiliation. In ancient period Dalits were called in different names “adhamas”(low people), “asprishya”(untouchables), “avarna”(outside the four verna), “pancham”(the fifth caste), “hina jati”(degraded caste) and so on. “Harijans” (man of god), a glorified term coined by Narsimha Mehta, a “Bhakti Saint” of the 17th century CE, who appealed to caste Hindus to use the term harijans instead of antyajah and adopted and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. The Dalits have been given different names time to time but their pangs and grief remained the same.

Dalit Literature and Emergence of Consciousness towards Equality, Rights and Independence

A new literary genre of our society that has attracted the great attention of various scholars, activists and reformer from all over the world, is the Dalit literature, about the deprived people who calls themselves Dalits. Dalit literature has been used as a weapon by Dalits to eradicate social discrimination inequality and victimization. The ultimate goal of Dalit literature is the liberation of depressed class, who have been, for centuries, subjected to the maltreatment of the upper castes. Dalit literature or the literature of the oppressed, does not spread hatred, jealousy but strikes on the rigid beliefs and discrimination. Dalit literature challenges the mainstream literature and appeals for equality, liberation and rights. It depicts the common man’s (Dalit) suffering and presents what life was and what it would have been if the problem of discrimination found no place right from the beginning. Dalit literature is the representation of Dalit reality and in which Dalits himself express his anger, resentment against caste people and rigid social structure, those who are responsible for their present state.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a champion of Dalit’s rights has beautifully summed up the essence of Dalit Literature: “*My words of advice to you is to educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. For ours*

is a battle not for wealth or power it is a battle of freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality". Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as- "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary".

Dalit literature possess resistance which mainly focus on the discrimination and marginalization of oppressed communities, women and even caste people who lacks the equal opportunity in society. The Dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights of education, possession of assets and right to equality. Thus Dalit literature emerges to raise voice for oppressed communities. The origin of Dalit literature can be traced back to medieval 'Bhakti' literature. It can be observed, most of the poets of 'Bhakti' writings were low-caste preachers. Through their writings they appealed to break the then Hindu canonical practices. They were highly against Brahminical orthodoxy. According to the definition of the scholars, the poets like Ravidas, Namdev, Tukaram, Eknath, Chokhamela, Kabir and others can be considered among the first Dalit writers, as they belonged to the lower caste and they wrote primarily against the high caste discrimination against their community in particular and the humanity in general. These poets gave a foundation to the Dalit literature. Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler- saint from the 11th century, is among the earliest known Dalit writers. However, it was later, primarily in 19th century the Dalit Literature assumes the form of an instrument of renaissance. With the arrival of great thinkers and social reformers in the 19th century, Dalit Literature gradually shape itself into a broader genre altogether. Narayan Guru, for instance, throughout his lifetime, he wrote about the oppression Dalit people face. Joytirao Govinrao phule was also a prominent thinker who wrote many plays, poems and essays which attacked on Brahmanism. his most important work is Gulamgiri, which depicts the significance of caste. His writings provide a strong critique of Brahmanism.

Dalits were always on the marginalized side of the country. Dalit society became aware of its slavery following the thoughts of B.R. Ambedkar. Then they start crying after centuries of silence, about themselves. Ambedkar often considered the pioneer of Dalit Literature, wrote several notable works throughout his lifetime, including the highly recognized “Annihilation of Caste” (1936). Dalit Literature, as a prominent genre like we observe it today, came into shape with the emergence of 20th century. In the year of 1958, the term “Dalit literature” was used at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Mahashtra Dalit Literature Society). Some scholars defined the 1960s, and 1970s, as the decades of Dalit Literature emergence. We can observe a fully developed Dalit representation emerged first in the Marathi language then it spread its wings in other languages with the passes of time. Baburao Bagul, Nadeo Laxman, were the representors of Dalit exploitation through their writings the foundation of “Dalit Panthers” in 1972, by Dhashal, along with J.V. Pawar, and Arjun Kamble, brought about a revolutionary change. It revolutionized Marathi Literature. Thus the wheel of Dalit Literature gradually expanding its area from time to time for the betterment of depressed community. The literary world has seen an emergence of a new genre, Dalit literature, which generally explores the problem in the lives of outcaste. Dalit literature gradually takes its rightful place among well established literary genres of the world

Dalit Literature Portrays the oppression of the Oppressed

Dalit Literature is the fine representation of all oppressed communities who challenge the rigidity of caste system, inhumanity and demand liberty and equality. Dalit Literature represents the bitter lived experiences of Dalits from centuries. The anguish and grief represented by the Dalit writers are not that of an individual but of the whole downtrodden society. It depicts the unheard cries and exploitation of Dalits in the name of religion, caste and other social rigidities. Several Dalit movements, which started in Indian sub-continent,

greatly influenced Dalit writers to such an extent that they become conscious of their identity. Faceless people got inspiration to depict their problems related to their existence, in literature. The idea of such humanistic values as equality, liberty, fraternity and justice, are mainly represented in Dalit Literature. The new writers emerged from various sections of the society with their marvelous representation of their own issues, environment, condition and languages. These writings brought a clear-cut picture of Dalit lives. Dalit Literature brought a renaissance in the heart of the deprived community. It is the representation of Dalit reality. The anger and resentment of Dalits against the social inequality comes out in the garb of Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature beautifully portrays the grief, sorrows, slavery, degradation, ridicule, poverty and inhuman behavior endured by the caste people. The emergence of Dalit Literature has a great significance. This has arisen from the cultural conflict of Indian society. Inequality with the Dalits, was the main source of the marginality, which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. It is simply impossible to analyze the true nature of Dalit Literature, without knowing the status of Dalit for centuries. Dalits were always on the other side of the society. They were being treated as animals by the caste people. Dalits, therefore constitute the most oppressed castes in India. The untouchables of the past are the Dalits of the present. The caste people have considered the Dalit's shadow, touch and speech to be impure. The caste people chained them into various rigid rules and regulations, which they have to follow unquestioningly. This has regarded them as untouchables and guilty. Dalits were not allowed to possess property and wear gold ornaments: they should live outside the village. They can have food only in clay pots, use only shrouds for clothing and take unrefined names. For centuries, Dalits have been kept under the caste people and kept deprived of power, property and position. Thousands of generations of Dalits have continued to endure this injustice. Dalits were assigned the duties of serving the other three Varnas, they were deprived of higher training of mind and clearly denied social status. Thus Shudras

were considered clearly most inferior and have been positioned at the bottom of the rigid Indian caste society.

Dalit women positioned at the bottom of India's caste and gender hierarchies. Dalit women experience gender and caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Violence against Dalit women shows a clear evidence of widespread exploitation. The statistics shows the report that in India three Dalit women raped, everyday. They have to tolerate physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, domestic violence, forced prostitution and so on. Dalit women are soft victims of social and cultural practices like Devdasi and Jogins. The term Devdasi (female servant of God) used for a young woman who forced to dedicate her life to the worship and service of a Hindu deity or a temple. The Devdasi expected to take up the traditional duties performed by a Hindu wife belonging to that time period and had to take care of temple. At present this system has disappeared completely. According to the modern concept for Dalits general women who are being deprived and oppressed can be counted as Dalit. The children of Dalits are forced to clean classroom, toilet and urinals on a regular basis. They are forced to perform cleaning and scavenging work. They have face discrimination in every walk of life.

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspiration of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their problems, the sufferings they have undergone, their lifelong experiences all these events are portrayed in it. Dalit literature represents the collective consciousness of social, political, economic, and discrimination suffered by Dalits for hundreds of years. The efforts made by the social reformers and the governmental policies and programs have helped to bring about a certain amount of change among the Dalits but got no prominent result.

Revolutionary Writers: Contribution Towards the Social Justice

There are several factors such as racial discrimination, religious diversity, social rigidity and oppression, economic disparity etc. were

responsibility for the origin and development of Dalit Literature. Since ancient time there are so many writers who pen the pangs of Dalit through their marvelous creation. They used their writings as a weapon to create a sensation among society. They raise their voice against rigid social structure, in favor of Dalits, women and oppressed class of society. Some of the writers whose writings break the slumber of caste people are as follows:

- **Madara Chennaih** was a 12th century Kannada vachana poet, who lived in the reign of western Chalukyas. He was a cobbler by profession. He is widely regarded as the first Dalit writer in India. scholars admired him as the first spokesperson against the rigid Brahman orthodoxy. He raised his voice in favor of Dalits.
- **Baburao Ramji Bagul** is regarded one of the pioneers of the Dalit Panthers and modern Marathi literature, Marathi writer came to limelight with his 1963 collection of short stories “Jenvha Me Jat Chorali Hoti”(When I had concealed my caste).
- **Bagul** (1930-2008) was an important literary figure in the Indian short story during 20th century. His first collection of stories, Jevha Mi Jat Chorali 1963, it created a stir in Marathi Literature with its passionate depiction of a crude society and thus brought in new momentum to modern Marathi literature; today it is considered by many critics as the epic of the downtrodden. The second collection of the short stories Maran Swasta Hot Ahe (Death is Getting Cheaper) 1996, which gave him a prominent place. After 1968 he became a fully dedicated writer of literature which continued to deal with the lives of marginalized people of Maharashtra. He was greatly influenced by the thoughts of Karl Marx, Jyotiba Phule, and B.R. Ambedkar.
- **Namdeo Laxman Dhasal** is one of the most recognizable face of the Dalit Panthers, an organization formed along the line of the Black Panther movement in UN. Dhasal was a Marathi

poet, writer and Dalit activist from Maharashtra. A member of the Mahar caste, he grew up in dire poverty. In the year of 1972, he published his first volume of poetry, *Golpitha*. Dhasal wrote two novels, also published pamphlets such as *Andhale Shatak* (Century of Blindness) and *Ambedkari Chalwal* (Ambedkarite Movement), which was a reflection on the socialist and communist concept of Ambedkar. Dhasal was fully inspired by the work of Bagul. He depicted a critical view on rigidity through his writings.

- **Omprakash Valmiki** was an Indian Dalit writer and poet who got iene popularity through his masterpiece “*Joothan*”(1997). Valmiki was born at 30th June 1950 in the Muzzafarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. Besides *Joothan*, Valmiki published three collection of poetry: *Sadiyon ka Santaap*(1989), *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka*(1997), and *Ab Aur Nahin* (2009). He also wrote two collection of short stories, *Salaam*(2000) and *Ghuspethiye*(2004). His writing gave a new perception to think and analyze the condition of downtrodden caste.
- **Jatin Bala** was born In 1949 in East Pakistan, Bala had lost both his parents by 1953 and had to bear the tribulations of the Bengal partition without the support of a family. Despite having to live in refugee camps, he educated himself. The Bengali writer is the author of several anthologies of poetry and short stories as well as novel. Poetry like “*Jeebaner Naam Jantrana* (The name of life is pain) “*Minati Keu Rakheni*” are noteworthy. Noels like “*Aariter Jiban Kotha*” provide hi a prominent place among the Dalit writers.
- **Bama Faustina Soosairaj**, born in a family of agricultural laborers, donned many hates before she finally become a writer. The semi fictional autobiographical novel “*KARUKKU*” (1992) is her most famous work, although she has written more novels and short story collections since then. Originally it was written in Tamil. The translation of this novel

into English language in 1998, brought a Crossword Book Award in 2000, for Bama.

- **Shantabai Kamble** is one of the prominent writers in the field of Dalit literature. *Majya Jalmahi Chittarkatha* her first novel can be considered the first novel written by a Dalit woman at that time. It chronicles life of Naja through childhood, marriage, hunger and labour. She was born into a Maharashtrian mahar family in Solapur. As a child she denied education being a Dalit and as a woman, but her yearning of studying was such that she sat outside the class and studied. Thus she succeeded to portray a true picture of Dalit life in her writings
- **Urmila Pawar** was born into the Hindu Mahar family in Maharashtra. *Aidan* (1988) is also available as an English translation titled *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*- is her autobiography written in Marathi details the life of her family members and also gives insight into everyday life of Dalits. *Aidan* means bamboo and her family traditionally were bamboo basket weavers. She portrayed a fine picture regarding the Dalit lives.
- **Vijila Chirappad** was born in Perambra in Kozhikode in Kerala and used to write poetry since college days. *Adukala Illathaa Veedu* (A Home Without a Kitchen, 2006), *Amma Oru Kalpanika Kavitha Alla* (Mother is not a Poetic Figment of our Imagination, 2009), and *Pakarathi Ezhuthu* are collection of poems which depicts the hardship and anguish of Dalit life. Most of her work talk about gender and caste.
- **Babytai Kamble** was born in an affluent family. Though belonging to a Mahar community she led a fairly comfortable life. Despite her comfortable stature her books talk about the poverty and filth faced in general by the community. Her book *Jina Amacha* (The Prison We Broke) is the depiction of Dalit women of Mahar community and their tribulations. The roots

of her writings were deep rooted to the Dalit ground.

Dalit Literature in Respect to the Non-Dalit Writers

Dalit Literature is the portrayal of oppressed community, seeking justice from the centuries on the name of caste. Reformers, thinkers and authors from different caste backgrounds are coming forward to participate in this budding genre of literature. They are come forward to wipe the tears and to sweep out the long established rigid social system. Dalit writers have already created some milestones in this genre. The representation of Dalit character in literature has always remained a sensitive issue. Although Dalit writers claim that it is necessary to have Dalit identity to be a Dalit writer as they believed that Dalit literature is 'lived literature'. Dalit writers claim that the portrayal of Dalit character by non-Dalit writers always lost its reality.

However, the novels by some prominent writers on Dalits deeply enthrall us. Mulk Raj Anand, the pioneer of Indian English literature made a sensation with the publication of his novel "UNTOUCHABLE" (1935). His first novel Untouchable was welcomed by few but criticized by many. Several newspapers in London criticized as "A DIRTY WORK". Anand, a socially committed novelist, has produced a good deal of literature. He focused his attention on the sufferings, misery and wretchedness of the poor as a result of exploitation of the downtrodden class of Indian society. Religious hypocrisy, feudal system, east-west encounters, the place of women in the society, superstitions, poverty, hunger, are the common themes of this novel. The novel depicts the inter-caste exploitations. The supremacy of Brahman is clearly seen in the form of Pt. Kali Nath. The acceptance of slavery and exploitation by Bhaka's father is noteworthy. Bakha the protagonist of the play receives physical and mental oppression from caste people. The novel Untouchable is the true depiction of Dalit life. The contribution of Anand to portray Dalit's exploitation cannot be denied. Other prominent writers also depicted the grief of Dalits in their writings, Premchand, in his "Kafan" depicted a rustic image of Dalits. Mulk Raj

Anand's novel proves that non Dalit writers can have better command on the issues of Dalits.

Conclusion

Dalit literature is the literature of hindrance which primarily focus on exploitation, social justice and marginalization of oppressed communities, outcaste and even women. Dalit Literature is characterized by authenticity in representation. Dalit Literature stands apart from the traditional literature, when the term Dalit appears in conjunction with literature. We can easily trace the rejection and rebellion in dalit literature along with self realization. It advocates equality, liberty, rights and opposes feudalism, brahminism and varna system. Dalit Literature rejects the appreciation of literature based on Sanskritic and western poetics. The pangs, that the Dalit castes suffered for hundreds of years was revealed to us through Dalit Literature. It has been used as medium to achieve social justice. The long history of Dalit Movement and the subsequent evolution of Dalit Literature from it, it is clear that Dalit writings in various parts in India are characterized by certain similarities in ideology and style of expression as they have all emerged from similar socio-political background. They felt the grief of outcastes from the core of the heart. They write for the sake of seeking social justice with the downtrodden people. Dalit writers gave a new wave to the outcaste and attracted the attention of the whole world. Dalit writers explore the hitherto unexplored, painful and prosaic realms of Dalit existence. For Dalit writers, life is not illusion and history is not mythical as the Hindu metaphysical approach to life suggest. The Dalit writers also make use of language that is realistic and that reflects nuances of the language of the outcaste. The contribution of non dalit writer, like Mulk Raj Anand, is noteworthy. He successfully pen down the actual sufferings of downtrodden communities. His writings have also a greater appeal for social justice to the outcaste and women.

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