

# A Voice to the Dalit Cause

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In recent decades, social theorists have differed in their views over the blatant and blanket usage of the term "Dalit," which too often has ignored the patterns of differentiation that exist among them. The argument that many scholars uphold is that social scientists should be more cautious in using the term Dalit, because their analysis of social reality should not be influenced by the writings and speeches of political leaders. However, there are voices, which argue that the term Dalit has a validity of its own, because it enables scholars and civil society groups to highlight the large-scale discrimination and injustice faced by a section of humanity in the name of caste and jati ordering. The moot point that is seldom addressed in this debate is that Dalit is not a caste, but rather a constructed identity. Nonetheless, the new identity helps the socially and economically discriminated groups to challenge the processes that have led to their centuries-old subordination (Bharati 2002: 4339).

## Dalit and Dalitness

The term Dalit is not a recent coinage; the etymological roots of it go back to the 1930s when it was formed as a part of the Hindi and Marathi translation of the census category "depressed classes," who were later designated as Scheduled Castes. Marathi intellectuals had been fairly conversant with the usage of this term, and the Dalit Panther further popularised it to include the combined struggle of the Scheduled

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Tribes, neo-Buddhists, working people, landless and poor peasant women and also all those who had faced the brunt of political, economic and religious discriminations (Bharati 2002).

In other words, the terms Dalit as well as "Dalitness" have their own unique meanings and have a rather ubiquitous cultural definition that seeks to encompass social groups which experience a great deal of oppression in their everyday lives. The meaning of the term had been well-conveyed by the Marathi intellectual Gangadhar Pantawane, who had observed,

To me, Dalit is not the caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. (Zelliot 2001 cited in Bharati 2002)

Social theorists have sometimes provocatively argued that the nationalist imagination in India was by no means an elite cultural experience, represented only in the language of self-determination and national pride, rather it also portrayed the language of self-respect, which marginalised groups utilised for their own normative aspirations (Guru 2011: 100). The Dalit encounters with nationalist imaginations helped them to physically and intellectually challenge the nexus of Brahminism and capitalism that

had led to their social inferiorisation. The Dalit primacy over self-respect has to be seen as a creative response to the failures on the part of the nationalists to resolve the caste question in India. However, the postcolonial state with its emphasis on liberal democracy has sometimes thrown a spar on the path of the Dalits to define what is exactly meant as "social" by them. Liberal democracy and the lure of institutional politics have their own retarding effects and issues of Dalit identity remain too much enmeshed within the prescription of identity politics. Undoubtedly, this poses a barrier before their own fights against the social norms justified in the name of caste and religion, that too under the apparently watchful eyes of the liberal state.

## Interpreting Dalit Identity

*Readings on Dalit Identity: History, Literature and Religion* locates changes over a period of time, presumably since the 1970s which witnessed the popularisation of term Dalit to its recent fruition into a new movement challenging all forms of social hierarchies and castes. The way Dalit identity has constructed and articulated conveys exact anger and frustration on the part of the socially excluded community in the Indian society vis-à-vis the caste system. These protests are something linked only to contemporary political developments, rather they assumed various forms in different periods of history and always challenged dominant cultural discourse by an "alternative past giving the socially marginalised an honourable place" (p 1).

The contests involving the less visible traditions and the dominant tradition inevitably lead to the sanctification

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a positive, if not a creative identity, restoring the honour of the socially marginalised groups. The introduction of *Readings on Dalit Identity* is rich in terms of description of a large number of researches which are associated with Dalit pasts and presents. While on one hand, the book highlights researches which have investigated and situated the factors responsible for the creation of Dalit consciousness and Dalit identity, on the other, it focuses on studies which have tried to understand the diverse facets of Dalit political mobilisation. The inclusion of recent and provocative works in the sphere of history writing and literary studies in contemporary India should definitely lend an academic prestige to this book.

However, the introduction does miss out some crucial studies which could bring out the regional variations within the Dalit movements. Moreover, Dalit history, like any other aspect of Indian history, is a narrative heavily influenced by "men's history," rather than a "women's

history." Something that is also lacking in the volume is less representation of the intersectionalities between gender and caste. Despite a well-written introduction, the new questions, which have attracted some of the social scientists, have remained unanswered in the book.

The other major point of criticism is regarding the planning of the monograph, which incorporates mostly the writings published in established journals and edited contributions. It is not clear whether the author and the publishers wanted to have a reference book/reader or whether they wanted it to be published as a new volume on Dalit studies. The inclusion of some old intellectual contributions accounts for both the limitations and strengths of the book.

## Retreating to the Alternative Pasts

The efforts to recover a past that is seldom presented in dominant historical scholarship have been a major intellectual investment for contemporary

scholars interested in a more critical understanding of the past through the re-interpretation of history literature and religion. In fact, this is a complicated task and it necessitates the assemblage of ideas, drawn from different disciplines and ideologies. The issue of alternative identity forms the grouping of several articles which locate the diversities in terms of resistance to the Brahminical tradition. Michael Bergunder has interpreted the processes through which the ideas of 19th century Western Indologists and missionaries led to the construction of the Aryan migration model, which undoubtedly was accommodated within the elite upper-caste historiography ("Contested Past: Anti-Brahminical and Hindu Nationalist Reconstructions of Indian Prehistory"). Nonetheless, as Bergunder points out such constructions of the past were rejected by Jyotirao Phule and other Dalit intellectuals, who opposed the Aryan migration theory to restore the lost respectability of the Shudras and the Ati-Shudras. The

search for alternatives reached the desired levels through the writings of Iyothee Thass and B R Ambedkar, who were responsible for an alternative discourse, negating the primacy given to the Brahminical traditions in the writing of Indian religious history.

In "Inventing Caste History: Dalit Mobilisation and Nationalist Past," Badri Narayan locates the "imagined world" of the Pasis of Uttar Pradesh, who publicised their glorious pasts based on myths, thereby providing the intellectual justification for the Dalit-Bahujan movement. Narayan believes that such alternative discourses, championed by Dalit communities, rarely found a place in mainstream history, which ignored much of the Dalit cultural traditions. He discretely goes back to the writings of Western social theorists who had depicted the Indian culture in terms of the differences and connectivities between the "Great" and "Little" traditions.

Rajshree Dhali's study "Making of an Identity: Meghwals of Rajasthan" is indeed praiseworthy possibly because her writings are a bit less circulated as compared to the more established researchers in the field. She has located the process of identity formation of the Meghwals, a Dalit community of western Rajasthan. She reiterates the crucial points made earlier by Gerald Berreman and Robert Deliége that the model of sanskritisation is least reliable in comprehending the consciousness in the Dalit communities. The Meghwals vented their anger against the caste discriminations, without drawing any intellectual sustenance from the Brahminical cultural traditions thereby encouraging social theorists to look for *de-sanskritisation* as a more effective theoretical tool for understanding Dalit identity.

Swaraj Basu in his article titled "Contested History of Dalits: An Alternative Perspective" has argued that the changes set forth by colonialism created a space for the Dalit intelligentsia to challenge the legitimacy of the Brahminical tradition by upholding the ignored dimensions of alternative traditions. M C Rajah popularised the view that the Aryan migration theory proved beyond doubt that the Aryans were clearly the outsiders

in South India, who were responsible for the destruction of the glorious history and cultural traditions of the original inhabitants, "who were the followers of Buddhism." Subsequently, there were also assertions by Ambedkar that in the ensuing conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism, the followers of Buddhism were pushed to the periphery and designated as "broken men." Thus, both the ideologues of Dalit identity shared a sense of common purpose, since they chose to write histories based on what they perceived as authentic "facts," which should have been parts of "authoritative history," despite the editor not being fully convinced of it.

D R Nagaraj, a well-known literary theorist and social critic, has traced the relations between cultural memories and the thought process that guided the dominant ideas related to development ("The Problem of Cultural Memory"). However, the most important in his theoretical intervention is the reference to "alternative memory" which emphasises that caste is the central feature of Indian society and in this sort of a situation the experiences of the Dalits go unrepresented. Nagaraj believes that capitalism and modern development strengthen the dominance of caste, because the institutions of capitalism are controlled by the upper castes.

## Dalit Literature and the Diversity of Its Meanings

The section on Dalit literature can be seen in terms of a broad intellectual discourse which tries to foreground Dalit public identity and possibly provides the much-needed stream for expressing Dalit consciousness. Sharankumar Limbale's work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* is the subject of study of Alope Mukherjee who had translated and edited it ("Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*"). The introduction to this translated volume appears as a chapter in this section. Following the assertions of Limbale, Mukherjee argues that caste Hindu society has not only marginalised the Dalits, but the emotive part of their life also has been kept out of Indian

literature, something synonymous to "Brahminical literature." Yet, Dalits were rarely silent onlookers and they had their own counter-public in the *lingua* of the common man. As has been argued, Dalit literature created an alternative tradition by rejecting the aesthetic concerns and the linguistic framework of Brahminical literature.

Subsequently, J M Parakh sought to locate the antagonisms between Dalit writers and others over the claims of the former that they only can write Dalit literature in his paper "Struggle for Identity and Dignity: Dalit Literature in Hindi and Joothan." This sort of an idea cannot simply be explained in terms of Dalit subordination in the hands of the upper castes; rather it embodies the much broader issue of lived experience, frequently expressed by Gopal Guru and several other social theorists.

Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay unravels the hidden side of Dalit biographies, which often bring out the reasons behind the marginality and the alienation of the Dalits from the upper-caste Hindu world ("Meaning of Work in Dalit Autobiographies"). Upadhyay believes that the experience of the discrimination and subordination is not to be viewed as an aspect of rural living, rather it is considerably prevalent in the urban localities, apparently believed to be citadels of secularism. Raj Kumar has studied some of the autobiographical tracts to understand the experiences of Dalit women in Maharashtra in his article titled "The Making of History: Autobiographical Extracts of Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde and Urmila Pawar." He brings out clearly the intersectionalities of caste and gender, because Dalit women face more socio-economic oppression than their male counterparts and upper-caste women. In fact, through the autobiographies they tried to express their dismal social existence and take up the cudgels for a fight for their liberation. The autobiographies written in an informal style, more in the form of day-to-day conversations, do highlight issues, representing the Dalit women's everyday struggle for existence.

The issues of a Dalit distinct sensibility and consciousness find a place in

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the chapter contributed by K A Geetha ("Shifting Terrains: The Fashioning of the Tamil Dalit Subject"), who argues that before Ambedkar launched the movement for the empowerment of the Dalits, Tamil Dalit intellectuals like Iyothee Thass Pandithar, raised their voices against Brahminism and caste system in the name of the Dalits. Geetha comprehends the search for a distinct Dalit identity in contemporary Tamil Nadu, by analysing the thematic transformations in the Adi Dravida literature in a period spanning a little less than a century. She seems to be more interested in identifying the shifting terrains of this Dalit identity, something which passed through phases of reconstructions and constructions. However, there is a problem if one premises solely on autobiographies, since they are at times based on critical moments and fail to provide a narrative of the bigger whole.

## Interrogating Religion and Caste Identity

The main plank of the argument that runs through the contributions in the section dealing with religion and identity is undoubtedly based on the critique of the caste system. M V Nadkarni's "Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism? Demolishing a Myth" is a more thematic presentation, wherein it has been argued that the survival of the caste system was definitely not because of Hinduism, but because of socio-economic and ecological factors, seldom linked to Hindu religion. While the occupational mobility was quite visible in the Indian context, there seems to have been an ambivalence in the literary presentations of the Dharmashastras, including *Manusmriti* on the continuity of the caste system. The dilemma raged over the fact whether the Dharmashastras were emphasising caste to preserve the jati ordering or whether they were simply trying to exclude a vast section of people from their entitlement to the resources. Differing with Nadkarni, as to whether caste is one and the same as in the past or present, it could be possibly stated that like any other institution, caste system in course of history responded to the structural changes. It incorporated

new features, which define its presence in contemporary times.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay understands the new social identity of the Namasudras of Bengal by undertaking the study of the religious philosophy of the Matua sect which challenged idolatry and caste system ("Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal: The Matua Sect and the Namasudras"). The early proponents of the sect borrowed some of the philosophical tenets of the bhakti tradition, but discarded the supremacy of the guru, thereby advocating a direct communication with god through individual devotion. Bandyopadhyay has situated the foundations of the Matua sect in terms of the perceptions of a "lowly, self-assertive peasant community," clearly expounding as to why it maintained an oppositional form vis-à-vis upper-caste Hindu bhakti culture in colonial Bengal (p 323).

The same sort of narrative privileging on the connections between the religious movements of the Dalits and the Dalit identity is to be found in the writings of Ronki Ram, who had undertaken a study of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab titled "Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab." Ram describes in detail the factors responsible for the movement, its objectives and strategies and its role in the changing sociopolitical context of post-independence India. While it is true that the class system often went unchallenged in this religious discourse, the feeling of oneness, as reflected in the construction of a *qum* or community, gave a new sense of history to the Dalits.

Gyanendra Pandey has dealt with the mass conversion of the Dalits to Buddhism in 1956 in the context of the bigger issue of decolonisation in his article "The Time of the Dalit Conversion." He correctly points out that Dalits and other disadvantaged communities feared a Hindu backlash with India becoming independent from British rule. He takes us back to the entire debate on Dalitism in the 1940s which continued to be referred even in the succeeding decades. Pandey argues that decolonisation set in at a time when Dalits were thinking of overthrowing their inherited subalternity and conversion helped them to overcome the

trauma of violence, something integral to the partition. Nonetheless, a few questions remain to be answered. For instance, it is not very clear as to how much the partition was a guiding factor behind Ambedkar's call for mass conversion. If not, was it to encourage the Dalits to find of new ways of survival, in the wake of the rough rides of the Republican Party of India in the 1950s?

## Overview

This book is undoubtedly of great interest to scholars of Dalit studies, despite the fact that the contributions often privilege the more well-known facets of Dalit history. In some ways or the other, scholars have been often drawn towards the elitist stream of Dalit history and literature, which does not always include subaltern Dalits. In fact, Dalit identity could be a crucial form of cultural identity, but it is by no means ubiquitous, because sometimes communities feel a bit confused over the usage of the term. It is now possibly the time to go beyond this holistic identity and identify the fragments of Dalit experience, something which may be an exercise in terms of commonality and difference. Yet, Dalit history and literature will have a special place for the Dalit communities, because it builds on the logic of a common past, when they were humiliated by the upper castes and also when they challenged this oppression. This volume gives a voice to the Dalit cause, at a time when India is not looking forward to pluralism but to one of an *akhanda* identity, presenting the possibilities of the erasures of the differences that have been obliterated in the imagination of the "nation."

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