

BY MNI KRISHNAN

THE LEAD

writ because I cannot kill.

— Manoranjan Byapari

In 1992, two years after the Ambedkar centenary, Father Mark Stephen ran a workshop for Dalit teenagers in Madurai, and had invited writer Manoranjan to talk to the participants and evaluate their work. “What shall we write about, Father?” asked the youngsters, understandably nervous in the presence of the celebrated writer. “What can anyone write about? Write about your experiences,” he said, and left them to it. At the end of two days, when Prapanchan read the submissions, he exclaimed, “If you youngsters start publishing it will be the end of the rest of us!”

At exactly the same time, Sister Faustina in Jammu concluded that caste was more powerful than the church she had hoped to serve when she had entered it seven years ago, and was making plans to leave the convent. Her arrival in Madurai pleased no one, least of all her teacher, Father Mark, who was the only person at least prepared to listen to her story of disappointment and trauma.

“Well, write about it,” he said. “It will give you some relief.” What she wrote turned out to be a minor contemporary classic, but at the time, publishing *Karukku* was the last thing on her mind. However, Bama Faustina Soosairaj’s teacher thought others should read what Bama had written. Every publisher he approached rejected the work as ungrammatical and off-key. Finally, Father Mark published the 30,000-word book, titled after the knife-edged leaf of the palmyra tree.

It cannot be said that *Karukku* began anything because Dalits had been writing for nearly a century and there were many notable autobiographies before it, in Marathi, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam.

Indeed if we are to name Dalit women writing in Tamil, P. Sivakami’s *Pazhayaana Kazhidalum* and *Anandhayi* were both published before *Karukku*. But via Lakshmi Holmström’s English translation, Bama’s direct style drilled a hole through society’s religious hypocrisy and caste consciousness.

Nearly everyone who read the book

Their lives, in their words

April is Dalit History Month, and a time to look at how a historically oppressed people are using literature to reclaim agency

was shocked into awareness, and it is still the first Dalit work in English translation that most non-Dalit readers encounter.

With lava from my belly I will script a new geography.

— Bichitrnanandan Nayak

It isn’t often that many works, all striking at the heart of a social issue, appear within a relatively short span of time. Even if they do, they may not impact either the established literary idiom or the community of readers. But when they do, history describes it as a literary movement. Dalit memory texts, autobiographies, and memoirs might be said to have achieved this, making it impossible for a sensitive reader to return to old values.

Was there a trigger?

The first breakthrough, three decades ago, was the explosive realisation that not only could first-generation writ-

ters among Dalits reach publishers, but that there was also a market for the writing. Driven by a sense of personal and historical injustice, autobiographies by Dalits, burning with bewilderment and anger, became a form of liberation, a kind of activism, and a way of confronting an oppressive system.

These works, often roughly structured, laced with humour and somewhat disjointed, set off a sort of gold rush. Here was protest literature in the form of memory texts with a sharp difference and carrying experiences readers had not only not imagined before but in a style and language that fractured all norms and aesthetic expectations that a casteist society had enshrined as Literature. Rocketed into visibility by English, a body of work long slighted by a culture of denigration became one of the fastest growing branches of Indian publishing.

Most autobiographies glorify the self but not so Dalit memoirs and testimo-

gies. Each is, in a sense, the history of a community or a village. Seven years before *Karukku*, Sharankumar Limbale published *Akkarmashi* (*Outcaste*), and preceding him by two years was Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, written at least 20 years before it was published.

Ten years after *Karukku*, Urmila Pawar published *Aaydan* (*The Weave of My Life*), which opens with a line of dedication to “the long standing debt I owe to the toiling women of my village who carried me up and down the hills with heavy loads on their heads.”

In 2004, Lakshman wrote about how the struggle to just stay alive, clinging to self-respect, was a daily challenge. His autobiography *Samboli!* set in Kathriguppe village, Karnataka, goes beyond caste, and winding through resentments and humiliations, describes Dalit activist groups, where he finds apartheid of a different kind and exploitation of Dalits by their own communities.

What B.R. Ambedkar described as ‘graded inequality’ also informs one of the best autobiographies titled *My Childhood on My Shoulders* (Sheoraj Singh ‘Bechain’), where the very family that undertakes to perform a particular ritual is humiliated when preparations for the feast begin: no vessel from their household is accepted by the cooks who are themselves Dalits. Singh’s book also carries a memorable and ironic ditty beginning, “Does anyone call Tata a Luhar, or Bata a Chamar?”

This birth is strewn with the small change of curses.

— Thai Kandasamy

The oppression of the poor and the powerless occurs everywhere in the

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world, but discrimination based on birth is unique to caste-bound India. This inequality, based on utterly false notions of purity/impurity, and racial superiority/inferiority, is perched on a fear of defilement so deep-rooted that it prevents most traditionally raised Indians from realising what a national catastrophe the practice of caste is.

The image of Indian society that circulates outside the country is one informed by compassion, tolerance and peace. For those who suffer the brutalities of casteism here, this is a bitter falsehood. Even today, Dalits in most villages may not use certain streets or wear slippers within sight of caste Hindus. Not so long ago, in Kerala, Dalit children were not allowed to wear the same kind of underwear as Thiyaas and Nairs. As recently as 2012, grave-diggers near Pollachi had to sleep in the graves the night before a corpse was laid there. If the list of atrocities reads like a nightmare, for the oppressed, it is a waking nightmare.

Significantly, however, until fairly recently, the oppressors had no sense of wrongdoing. Nor did Dalits know or have a way to resist. Today, atrocities against Dalits appear to have intensified precisely because they are no longer voiceless and are asserting themselves.

Will you deny this sunrise?

— Sharan Kumar Limbale

More recent memory texts put mythical imagination to good use and, although acutely aware of the interde-

pendence of various communities, have developed ways of expressing both anger and agony in more politically conscious language than seen in older accounts. There is greater consciousness of their artistic mission without losing sight of their original concerns. The reception of Dalit autobiographies has always been mixed. Some readers instantly became sensitised sympathisers; others are hostile, believing it to be divisive, obscene, propagandist and so on.

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The other side of this picture is the analysis by literary critics and sociologists, who feel that translations of Dalit life-writings appeared at a juncture when the market-driven space of publishing in Indian-English peaked and met an academic interest in descriptions of counter-histories. Both suited capitalist-driven publishing.

Meanwhile, Dalit intellectuals outside India have become a new bureaucracy with nowhere left to go since their struggles are over. Sharmila Rege called them emancipated, de-caste Dalits, citing Narendra Jadhav’s memoir *Outcaste* (2003) as an example.

While the cultural rage of Dalit politics at home still has no national network of solidarity, neither has education created an all-India grid of Dalit writers. Raising political consciousness or Dalit *chetna* has become a literary goal, but at no meeting of Dalits from different regions have I heard any writer from one part of India discussing or referring to writing by a Dalit from a language other than theirs. Meanwhile, atrocities against Dalits intensify as they threaten generations of privilege in their attempts to merge with mainstream society.

Can a Pulayan write?

— Kallen Pokkudan

Realising that most non-Dalit archival material on caste was written and preserved to protect the interests of the dominant classes, scholars and researchers include Dalit autobiographies as relevant documents of social history. Since no government has sponsored a history of Dalits (they even go missing in military accounts) the community of 170 millions speaks through its writers.

Those who compile and edit collections of Dalit writing must keep in mind that the Dalit experience is not homogeneous; nor do all Dalits believe in the same things. For instance, Kallen Pokkudan never once uses the word ‘Dalit’, preferring ‘Harijan’, which the rest of the world of Dalits set aside long ago as condescending and patronising (*My Life Among the Mangroves*, 2002). Imayam and Poomani do not want to be known as Dalit writers at all, believing the tag to be irrelevant to their writing.

Ninety-seven years ago at a public function, Poikkal Appachan sang, “I see no alphabet about my race, there is no one to write our history.” (trs Catherine Thankamma) Today, using myth and folklore and freeing themselves from the realist mode, there are a hundred voices and more ready to write Dalit history. Will they be suppressed again with the recent attempt to dilute the laws that protect them?

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