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Dalit Literature: Past and Present

In this paper, I intend to delineate the historical circumstances that produced the Dalit Literature. But before we discussed about Dalit Literature, it is very necessary to know who are Dalits ? India's caste system assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu beliefs. Traditionally, there are four principal castes (divided into many sub-categories) and one category of people who fall outside the caste system—the Dalits. The word Dalit—literally translating to “oppressed” or “broken”—is generally used to refer to people who were once known as “untouchables”, those belonging to castes outside the four fold Hindu Varna system.

The root of Dalit theory can be traced back to Rig Veda where we find the first reference of the caste system. According to it Brahmins were born from the mouth of Brahma, kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaisyas from his thigh and Sudras from his feet. Hence Brahmins are most superior and Sudras are very inferior in hierarchy. Brahmins have established the theories that the caste system is God made and not manmade. Because of this rigidity of the caste system Sudras are considered out castes, down-trodden, polluted, marginal and are exploited by the higher castes since centuries.

Dr. Ambedkar, the father of Dalit Movement rejected the notion that the caste system is God made. According to him, *“Dalithood is kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of the lower caste by the social, economic, cultural and domination of the upper caste Brahminical order”*.

Hence the term Dalit doesn't mean to refer to a particular caste. Raosaheb Kasbe says the term Dalit refers to all those sections of the society, which are oppressed for various reasons. According to him in every society there are certain sections of people who are deprived of socio-economic opportunities and are victims of social, cultural, and political exclusion.

It is a very obvious that one cannot choose one's parents; one cannot choose caste and community. But both caste and community are labels of identity that also define and determine social status and relationship.

Dalit Literature is, in fact, the writings that are about dalits. Dalit (Oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, 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' revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.

Arjun Dangle the editor of 'Poisoned Bread' says that *“Dalit Literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of new society and new people”*.

One of the first Dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an 11th-century cobbler-saint who lived in the reign of Chalukyas and who is also regarded by some scholars as the "father of Vachana poetry". Another poet who finds mention is Dohara Kakkaiyah, a Dalit by birth, six of whose confessional poems survive. The Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. Dalit struggle against cattiest tradition has a long history. Such, they call out-castes”.

In the 20th century, the term "Dalit literature" came into use in 1958, when the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) was held at Mumbai, a

movement driven by thinkers like Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. Baburao Bagul (1930–2008) was pioneer of Dalit writings in Marathi. His first collection of stories, *Jevha Mi Jat Chorali* (जेव्हा मी जात चोरली) (When I had Concealed My Caste), published in 1963, created a stir in Marathi literature with its passionate depiction of a crude society and thus brought in new momentum to Dalit literature in Marathi.

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Babarao Ambedkar, Dalit literature got impetus in Maharashtra. But before the name came into being in the 1960s, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat were already creating Dalit literature. In its formal form it sprouted out of a progressive movement called Little Magazine which was a kind of rebellious manifestation of the educated youth of those days against the establishment. These Dalit youths found inspiration in the movement of blacks in the distant land of North America; their black literature and Black Panther became the role models for them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit Literature.

Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective 'Dalit is dignified' there by rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order.

While dealing with the trends of Dalit literature, the writer will make a humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context it can be said that Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. Dalit literature is experience – based. This 'anubhava' (experience) takes precedence over 'anumana' (speculation). Thus to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. Dalit communities have been enslaved physically, socially, religiously, educationally, legally and mentally. They have also relentlessly fought against the unjust practices observed by the dominant class of the society. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expressions of the Dalit writers have become sharp. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of society. As Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer puts it, "Even the Sun needs to be changed."

Dalit literature is experience – based even though many writers of different states who are non Dalit by birth, go to the level of Dalit sensibility and expressed themselves very clearly. Especially Gujarati writers like Chinu Modi with 'Kalo Angrez' Kishorsingh's Mashari, Jayant Gadit's Badlati Kshitij, Pradip Pandya's Manjil Haju Door Chhe, Manilal H. Patel's Andharu, and Pravin Ghadhvi's Aakrosh are the major weapons to fight against social injustice and hopes and aspirations for new society devoid of discrimination.

The modern time should be very thankful, to Dalit and non Dalit writers who show their sensibility to downtrodden, as people at large have begun to realize and share the plight of their fellow countrymen. Education and books have played greater role. Education is one of the important means of reducing ignorance and in equality in society. It helps the individual to raise one's social status in various ways. Knowledge, skills, values and attitudes acquired through education, help one to lead a desired quality of life. It is only through the education Dalits have become aware that they have the capacity to make their own space on the basis of their qualities. Books may not bring immediate change but they can force readers to think in a new way.

Now a day with the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages in to English, Dalit literature is supposed to acquire national and international presence. Today Dalit literature has progressed intrinsically and extrinsically. For intrinsically Dalit literature has moved from protest and victimhood to progress and honest self criticism; from its search for existence and identity to assertion and importance and extrinsically it has moved from print publication to web pages. We have website on Dalit life and literature by the name of www.dalitindia.com and blog like dalit.org also.

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- 3) A special thanks to my colleague prof.Dr.Pravin S.Vaghela (Gujarati Department) M.M.Chaudhari Arts College Rajendranagar.
- 4) www.dalitindia.com and Dalit.org

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