

Narrative of Pain in the Consciousness of Marginality : A study with special reference to Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*

By

Y. Jayanthi

Asst. Professor in English
RBVRR Women's College
Narayanguda, Hyderabad.

&

R. Raajitha

Asst. Professor in English
University College for Women
Koti, Hyderabad.

Abstract

The term 'Dalit' and marginalization of minorities and Dalits is not new in literature and the writings about Dalits have been brought to the forefront of the people in 1930s itself as study of 'depressed classes'. This was a term the British used for what we now call the Scheduled Castes. In the 1970s, 'Dalit Panthers' gave a new meaning to the term and expanded its reference including Scheduled Tribes, poor peasants, women and all those who were exploited politically, socially and economically and also in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste but a symbol of 'change and revolution'.

*The article focuses on selected short stories from **Poisoned Bread: translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature** (1992). It is a collection of poetry, autobiographical extracts and political essays from the Marathi Dalit literary production of the 1960s and then on. The significance of the work is all of seminal moments in Dalit writing and translations of Dalit literature into English.*

Keywords: Dalit, depressed class, Dalit Panthers, Marathi Dalit Literature, Poisoned Bread

Introduction:

'*Poisoned Bread*' was the first anthology of Dalit Literature published in 1992. The writers who contributed to the collection were almost prominent figures in Marathi Dalit Literature.

About Arjun Dangle:

Arjun Dangle was born in Mumbai in 1945. He holds an M.A. from University and stands reputed in the politics and literature of Maharashtra. He was a founder member of the militant Dalit youth organisation, the Dalit Panthers. His collection of poems, "*Chhavani Halte Ahe*" won the Maharashtra State Award in 1978. He has also a collection of short stories to his credit, '*Hi Bandhavarhi Manse*'. His Dalit Sahitya – Ek Abhyas is a critical work recognized as a standard reference book in many Universities of Maharashtra. He published '*Dalit Vidroha*', a collection of essays on politics and literature. Many of his poems and short stories have been translated into various Indian and Foreign Languages.

In his Marathi poem, '*Kranti*', Arjun Dangle depicts true picture of Indian Dalits and this poem has been translated into English by Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliott titled, '*Revolution*'. The poem *Revolution* takes us to the past four decades and also helps others to understand the plight and sufferings and feelings of Dalits in India.

Publishing URL: : <http://www.researchreviewonline.com/issues/volume-7-issue-98-june-2021/RRJ738227>

Modern Dalit Literature:

Modern Dalit Literature received its importance with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra who raised their voices, the issues of Dalits through their works and writings. Their works inspired many Dalits to come forward with writings in Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Punjabi and other languages. Dalit Literature is a distinct part of Indian Literature. It is a Literature about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian Caste System. Dalit Literature gained prominence after 1960 starting with Marathi and soon appeared in other languages. Self-narrative poems, short stories and most importantly autobiographies depicting stark realism contributed greatly for its literary development.

Encyclopedia:

Dalit is a self-designation for a group of people, traditionally treated as 'low caste'. They are a mixed race of groups all over South Asia and speak various languages. Indian Constitution laid down the principle that the caste system has been abolished, we still find the discrimination and prejudice against Dalits in South Asia. Anyhow, significant steps have been taken to provide opportunities in jobs and education since Indian independence. Encouragement has been seen to give better conditions to Dalits through improved education, health and employment. Dr. Ambedkar is of the view that a common can be known an uncommon by the uncommon work. He himself stands as the best example among many Dalits in India. His thought of philosophy of life and sacrifice and his commitment for bringing a revolutionary change in the lives of the weaker sections of the society is applauded. Dalit literature portrays the suffering and pain of the Dalits. The poem Revolution is one such example to depict their suffering.

'Revolution'

*"We used to be their friends
When, clay pots hung from our necks
Brooms tied to our rumps
We made our rounds through the Upper Lane
Calling out
'Johar Maybap'
We fought with crows
Never even giving them the snot from our noses
As we dressed out the Upper Lane's dead cattle
Skinned it neatly
And shared the meat among ourselves
They used to love us then
We warred with jackals, dogs, vultures- kites
Because we ate their share
Today we see a root to top change
Crows-jackals-dogs-vultures-Kites
Are our closest friends
The upper Lane doors are closed to us.
Shout victory to the Revolution
Shout victory
Burn, Burn those who strike a blow at tradition"*

Ancient Dalit Writers:

The main motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit struggle has a long struggle. For instance, let us go back to the first Vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. Another instance is of 12th century Dalit Saint, Kalavve who challenged the upper castes in the following words:

*“Those who eat goats, foul and tiny fish:
Such, they call caste people.
Those who eat the Sacred Cow
That showers frothing milk for Shiva:
Such, they call out-castes”.*

One can see the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with respect to Dalit literature in Maharashtra. By then, people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Mandhav, Shankarao Kharat already were creating Dalit literature during 1960s. Many Dalit youths were inspired in the movement of Blacks in the distant lands of North America. Their Black literature became the role models of their sorts. This protest gave rise to a new form of literature called Dalit Literature. Many poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies were written by Dalit writers thus creating an insight on the question of “**Dalit identity**”. The subaltern communities came together with the perspective ‘**Dalit is dignified**’ thus rejecting the sub-human status that has been thrust upon them by the Hindu social order.

The efforts of Eleanor Zelliot, Arjun Dangle, Mini Krishnan and other’s works have been translated. Among them can be named ***Poisoned Bread***, ***Vasant Moon’s autobiography Growing up Untouchable in India*** and ***Bama’s life story Karukku***. Few non-Mahar writers and few women contributed to the collection in *Poisoned Bread*. This is a critically acclaimed work produced by Dalit writers in the post-independence period. Mahar community had a relatively higher economic mobility and political maturity during colonial times due to their entry into the industrial working class. Dalit women had lack of their voices which resulted in less access in the literary field as well as in gaining recognition in traditionally masculine literary circles.

Though Dalit Literary Conference held in 1958 did not gain much notice, by 1972 Dalit literature took a serious political turn with several Dalit writers and poets coming together, led by **Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale** who established a movement called the **Dalit Panthers** in Mumbai. Arjun Dangle, the editor of *Poisoned Bread* and a former Dalit Panther puts it,

‘Dalit literature is not simply literature. Although today, most Dalit writers have forgotten its origins, Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change’.

He also asserted that if literature is examined, we observe that it is not the one and only medium to bring about a social change. Values of life are spread through literature which remains inevitable but one cannot use it effectively unless one has a correct estimate of the medium. That literature alone can create a revolution is only an illusion. To bring about a revolution, one should have the necessary philosophy and a plan of action and a group to implement them.

Arjun Dangle’s *The Poisoned Bread*:

The ***Poisoned Bread*** is a collection of alienation of both social psychic thematic concerns. The dalit protagonists in this collection are socially unfriendly and psychologically fragmented in the

village. We do not find the pastoral ‘whole’ subject becoming alienated after contact with the urban and industrial landscape that usually takes place in many other narratives of early industrialisation.

In the first ‘cluster’, one finds the Amitabh’s short story, ‘*The Cull*’ and Bhimrao Shirvale’s ‘*Livelihood*’. These stories exhibit Dalit inhabitants as subhuman marginality. ‘The cull’ especially portrays a pervasive motif of ‘animality’, of the scavenging beast. The narration opens with the discovery of a dead cow, a ‘sacred one’ that belongs to Timaji Patil. The Hindu caste restricts eating carrion whereas Dalits cannot afford such restrictions as their struggle is avoiding sheer starvation. Here, in this story, the Dalit is just one more animal carcas-eater, the crow, the jackal and the stray dog. Anyhow, beef is not eaten by people of Hindu caste but we find Amitabh’s choosing of carrion, especially a temple cow, underscoring that the untouchable stands outside the Hindu caste domain by thus not taking part in the most strongly established practices. However, the sacred cow is already dead. The Mahars of the village then jump into action, claiming their ‘rightful’ share and not of the ‘surplus’ but that would be of the unwanted, discarded waste that has been already found decaying. Here Amitabh describes the savage attack of the Mahars on the dead cow as follows:

“(They) pounced upon the prey, raising a full-throated battle cry ... young and old, all marched forth, flashing their knives. Everyone had an eye on the thick thighs and buttocks. They pulled and tugged at the carcass. Tens of knives were sawing at the chest at once. Whatever piece, small or big, they could manage, they cut and put into their containers. The knives slashed and sliced, chunks and chunks of meat were piled into the hampers and baskets ... They were all covered in blood as if they had played Holi. Their hair was red. Their limbs were red. The dirty rags they wore were red. From top to toe they were all dyed in the same colour—red”. (193-5)

Amitabh portrays the roots of this brutal act with the exchange of the act of violence on the Dalit body. The Mahars are depicted to compete with each other for scraps and are compared to the kites, vultures and crows that sprang into action. The dogs attacked the skeleton while the crows over the heads of people going home and swooped down on the receptacles they carried on their heads. Here arrives Nilya, the scholar and asthmatic who ‘*had been reading till late night in the light of the kerosene lamp*’ (192). He is on his way home with a few piece of meat he finds to feed his large family and is attacked by the animals. He is isolated and weak, left bleeding on the ground most of the meat stolen or fallen in the dirt. Finally he manages to ‘rescue’ his pot containing a few bones covered with dust. The story concludes with ‘the birds still hovering over his head, swooping and pecking and dogs barking’. But ‘*Nilya is busy filling up his pot*’. (196)

The village is then a space of terrifying competition not between Dalits and Hindus but between animals and fellow untouchables. He is shown as an intellectual self (that reads by night) but is reduced to a cowering animal by day. This becomes the locus in the text.

The philosophy of Karma sees untouchables and other ‘low’ people especially women, Shudras as being one in debt to the larger community, the Hindus, for the sins of their previous incarnations. Dalits were unwaged labourers generating surplus for the village. In spite of many Dalits having taken interest to break free of this philosophy of Karma and enter the capitalist market place, still the economic mobility for the untouchables are precariously grim.

This crisis emerging from living under the infamous ‘poverty line’ of capitalist economy is shown in Bhimrao Shirvale’s ‘*Livelihood*’. Here, caste however is not shown as a factor in the abuse that its protagonists suffer. Instead the focus is on an underclass in the margins of urban economy as the story shifts from the village to the city slum. The mark of caste ideology on the Dalit body seems

to be erased. The emphasis is laid on the sexual appropriation of labour from the body of a Dalit woman, Kashi. In the first instance, her mother is killed by an oncoming train when she collects coal off the tracts to make her living. Kashi's husband is one with '*some education but no qualifications*'. (173). He is without work and cannot stay on 'straight' road. He finally pawns a brass pot; one of his dead mother-in-laws's left valuable possessions, to a Marwari pawnbroker. The pawnbroker however, unscrupulously cheats him and is killed by the husband who is sent to jail. No one to take care, Kashi is left to face the dangers of the city on her own. Bhimrao writes:

The dawn broke. A Bombay dawn. This dawn doesn't break with the crowing of a cock. It breaks with factory sirens, the shattering thunder of trucks, milkmen, vendors, newspaper boys. Their raucous voices together wake the Bombay sun. It was dawn and Kashi still lay awake in her rented hut. How was she going to pay the rent now? How was she going to live? ... But when Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger came to console her with a ten-rupee note first thing in the morning, she knew that life without Dharma was going to be dark and dangerous". (175-6)

Kesu looks hideous with a torn tendon in his leg and one eye blinded. He had been to prison too. Though Kashi resists Kesu's advances, she later understands that she needs Kesu's 'protection' and becomes his mistress. Soon she is pregnant with his child. The insane and jealous Kesu continuously abuses and ill treats her. One day, he stuffs lime into one of her eyes that permanently becomes blind. Kesu would not see any sign of attractiveness in Kashi and her ownership of her body would be expunged. Unable to find any regular work with his gruesome appearance, he robs a couple on Marine Drive resulting in his getting sentenced for three years in prison. Kasha undergoes premature 'labour' on hearing the news and delivers the child on the pavement. Her child is horrifically deformed, says Bhimrao in the following words:

With a distended stomach and limbs like match-sticks, the creature bore no resemblance to humanity. And it had begun to scream from the moment it was born. Kashi grew fearful of the child's terrifying ugliness. She saw in its noseless, lipless race an image of Kesu's cruel race, and she felt the urge to strangle it on the spot with her own hands". (179)

Kasha falls into extreme depression. She is '*loose and flabby*' and is no longer useful to men. She soon finds that her son, the '*monster*' is a saleable product. She sets out to beg on the streets with the child on her lap. People would throw coins at her looking at the '*terrifying ugliness of the baby's face*' (180). The exploitation of her own body is transferred to that of her son.

Conclusion:

The Dalits formerly called, "*untouchables*" were silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression. They finally found a powerful voice in a revolutionary social movement launched by their leader, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, unparalleled in writing poetry, prose, fiction and autobiography with a maturity, depth and richness of content, portraying the bitterness of their experiences.

Rig Veda first traces the root of Dalit theory and the caste system. According to it, Brahmnas emerged from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaisyas from his thigh and Sudras from His feet. Hence Brahmnas are most superior and Sudras, very inferior in hierarchy. It was Brahmins that have established the theories of caste system being made by God and not manmade. Sudras hence were considered out castes, downtrodden and polluted and exploited by higher castes

since centuries. The father of Dalit Movement, Dr. Ambedkar rejected this very concept that the caste system is God made. According to him,

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”.***

People by and large began to realize and share the pains of the fellow Dalits. Education and books have played a great role in reducing ignorance and inequality in society. Dalits have gained awareness that they have the capacity to make their space on the basis of their qualities. Education would help individual to raise one's social status in various ways. The growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various vernacular languages into English has proved to be progressive intrinsically and extrinsically. There has been a change from protest and victimhood to progress and honest self-criticism. Arjun Dangle's focus on social, political and economic status of Dalits shows the true face of Indian Society. Equality finds its space on paper.

In spite of all these tremendous changes in Indian society, even today many Indian Dalits are living the life of slave where their life is full of suffering, trouble, torture and humiliation. Arjun Dangle's writing is based on his experiences and observation of the society. His works are a source of Dalit's suffering. He feels that upcoming generations should not become the victims of caste system and so he has been putting all efforts in his writing to bring a positive change in Indian society. Dangle has a great hope that a day would soon come and caste would be totally vanished from the Indian Society.

After the completion of many years of Independence, India shines, for whom? The structure of Indian economy is very strong. Here each one of us ought to ask for one self.

Has India succeeded in making weaker section strong?

References:

- Ambedkar B.R. (2014), *Annihilation of Caste*, Volume 1, New Delhi: Soft Group.
- Aston, N.M. Ed. *Dalit literature and African-American literature*. Prestige Books, New Delhi. 2001. ISBN 81-7551-116-8. Print
- Dangle, Arjun *Poisoned Bread* editor, Orient Longman Limited 1992. Print
- Roy Pascal. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P. 1960. Print
- Dhasal, Namde. *Poet of the Underworld: Poems 1972-2006*, Navayana (translated by Dilip Chitre). Print
- Kamble Baby. *The Prisons we Broke*, Orient Black Swan, 2009. Print
- Pawar Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009. Print
- Limbale, Sharankumar *Towards and Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* in English Orient Longman (translated by Alok Mukherje) 2004, ISBN 81-250-2656-8. Print
- Mishra, Jugal Kishore *A Critical study of Dalit Literature in India*. Swedish South Asian.
- Natarajan, Nalini ed. *A Handbook of Twentieth-Century Literatures of India*. Greenwood Press: Westport, CT. 1996. Print
- Dalit Literature: Social and Literary Perspective, a national level seminar held at Unjha College, March, 2013.
- www.dalitindia.com and Dalit.org