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## **Hindu: Activism, Aesthetics and the Future**

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Sharan Kumar Limbale's novel 'Hindu' is a significant addition to the process of reformulating a new aesthetic rubric of Dalit literature. Moving away consciously from the mode of sentimentality, binaries and universality, Limbale's novel attempts to negotiate a new artistic vocabulary for the Dalits in a fast changing world where old certainties are vanishing at a mind numbing pace. ArunPrabha Mukherjee, in her introduction to the novel points towards the significant departure that Limbale's novel articulates, by undermining several practices of bourgeois narrative technique. Both Limbale and Mukherjee seems to assert that in a complex and dynamic world of dalit realities, experiences and corresponding techniques of representation should be recalibrated to bring out the intricate nuances of the specific life-world of the erstwhile 'untouchables'.

Limbale's novel traces not a romantic story or an autobiographical trajectory of an exploited dalit. Instead it attempts to look objectively at the socio-political ramifications of the category of 'dalit' as a community. In the complex world of Bhimnagar in the novel's landscape the reader encounters a plethora of dalit and non-dalit characters, each individualistic in their significant ways and each conscious of their individual political standing. Limbale's novel presents a world in transition where the old world exploitative mechanism was metamorphosing, keeping up with the demands of a constitutional democracy. Hindu becomes the microcosm of a nation grappling with social upheaval on the heels of political demands at a particular historical juncture of its existence. The setting has all the specificities of the Indian society in the 1990s and the narrative almost emerges as a yardstick to gauge the progress of the constitutionally mandated Indian polity and seems to argue that the exploitative mechanism continues to operate unhindered, albeit under the guise of change and benevolence.

Limbale's novel has Anchalpur, a small Maharashtrian hamlet as its immediate territorial setting and records the clash of interest between the savarna and avarna Hindus. The village turns virtually into a gory battleground where the increasingly vociferous dalits attempt to topple the appellation of the traditional stranglehold of the Savarna Hindus. However the skirmishes that frequently take place cannot be understood through the traditional prism of Brahminical persecution of the untouchables, but as pitched fights between the OBC (erstwhile shudras) and the Dalits. With the political and economic empowerment that was realized through constitutional alteration post 1970s the OBCs have become the neo-Brahmins, evident in their penchant for Dalit persecution, and this is exactly the condition that Limbale criticises. However unlike traditional Dalit narratives, the tone is not of lament but a poignant mix of resolve and objectivity as Hindu is ready to delve into an inward journey to look for the malady and possible remedy within the dalit fold itself, instead of blaming the 'other'

The narrative has multiple strands and Limbale uses multiple points of view to put across his contention that the dalit movement itself has reached a critical juncture whereby it faces the threat of losing its relevance and radical edge by being subsumed by traditional forces. Limbale warns against the device of co-option that conventional forces use to silence dissenting forces and also shows how scampering for material privileges has resulted in

wearing out the potency of the Dalit movement. Thus, the narrative of Milind Kamble is interspersed with overwhelming elements of guilt at betraying the 'cause' of the movement. His conscious complicity with the Machiavellian upper caste characters, Manikchand and Gopichand and indulging in immoral, nefarious activities only points at the fissures in the Dalit community which the Dalit movement has to cope with. Though the movement has historically been able to highlight the plight of the downtrodden and opposed the heinous practice of untouchability, in more recent times it has faltered to take cognisance of the fact that due to several changes in the material conditions of the Indian society a unilateral, monolithic conceptualization of caste struggle was no longer tenable. With increasing degree of complexities in the social nomenclature, the idea of an 'authentic' dalit voice needs to be revisited.

Thus, in *Hindu* the readers encounter three categories of Dalit individuals in the form of the three Kamble brothers-Tatiya, Sadanand and Milind, each trying to make sense of their existence through their own idiosyncratic lenses. Tatiya Kamble, the talented singer-activist alone seems to carry forward the revolutionary ethos and political consciousness bestowed by Babasaheb Ambedkar on the Dalits. His insistence on unravelling the deeply entrenched casteist grain in the Hindu worldview is a direct threat to the upper caste Hindus in Anchalpur and he has to pay for his 'audacious' stance with his life when the Village Mukhiya's son, Prabhakar Kamble in connivance with other savarna youths lynches him publicly. Tatiya Kamble's politics replicates the Ambedkarite activism which provided the Dalits their first political voice in the nation's history. However Limbale's novel is not a mere celebration of Dalit activism, instead there is an attempt to unravel the malignancy that has entered in the erstwhile movement in the form of material lure. Milind Kamble, though the narrator, is an apt representation of the threats that the Dalit movement faces in India post liberalization and globalization in the 1990s when the Middle class dream of possession and prosperity made the promise of activism facile. Milind Kamble is the quintessential opportunist middle class character who has sacrificed his caste identity in lieu of bolstering his class position. The other brother is the naïve Dalit subject who has internalized the slavish subjectivity albeit under the impact of centuries of exploitation and fear of the dominant ideology. Hence Sadanand immediately responds to Gopichand and Manikchand's offer to get him elected and utters probably the most poignant and revealing line:

*"I will never disobey you"*

The dismay and concomitant satirical tone of Limbale becomes evident when he further notes, "Sadanand Kamble fell at Manikchand and Gopichand's feet. Manikchand felt ticklish with joy while Gopichand patted Sadanand Kamble's back". This is the archetypal Gandhian reformist moment of condescending paternalism that was the primary irritant for the activists of the Ambedkarite mould who sought to premise their whole ideology on the need for self-dignity of the *dalits*.

Hence what we primarily notice in Limbale's novel is the concern about the possibility of multiple narrative strands and therefore the readers are presented with non-linear, often contradictory perspectives. The alternative aesthetic also emerges from the discontent generated by the increasing splintering of the collective *dalit* voice and Limbale seems to be advocating for the aesthetics of instrumentality.

*Hindu*, the novel refuses to either be a *carnavalesque* novel of subordination or a romanticized novel about exploitation and redemption. It has no such pretensions but instead portrays 'the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradations, ridicule and poverty experienced by dalits' in a

holistic representation. In this venture Limbale therefore integrates the epic debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi regarding the need and nature of Dalit representation. Hence we have Taty Kamble's well attended *Ambedkar jalshas* positing a direct challenge to the traditional Hindu fold and the rhetoric is particularly radical with a noted Ambedkarite emphasis on the need for religious conversion. The novel reveals the acute sense of dread that such a possibility initiates in the Hindu communal psyche. Hence, there are references to upper caste processions in the Maharwada, where the trident wielding savarna Hindu youth shout slogans to desist the inhabitants from converting. Such incident also reveals the curious relationship that Hinduism fosters in different sections within itself. On one hand the Hindu insistence on hygiene and purity largely depends on the work done by the lowest caste, whereas in the process the same lower castes are declared impure and maligned for living an unhygienic existence. The innate inhumanity of the purity norm is thus laid exposed and is shown to be a criminal manifestation of the practice of using unpaid labour.

Another significant device that this paper hinted about earlier is the use of multiple narrators, primarily the voices of Milind Kamble and the omniscient narrator. This device helps Limbale to create a kaleidoscopic effect and in the process shows the reality through multiple juxtapositions and multiple characters. The multifaceted reality that emerges thus helps the readers to feel the texture and tension of the casteist society emerged in a hostile communal one up man ship game. Limbale's strategy also points at the role of rumours and gossips in an already tumultuous scenario and its destructive but often subversive potential. In the contemporary political scenario which solely values a majoritarian show of strength, such a device can very well be used potently by the dalit activists to up the ante. However the novelist also seems to warn against the misuse of such devices. While it can help to foster an immediate unity in the face of hostile threats, the same means could be appropriated by dominant castes to spin the web of their own dominant ideologies further. One such instance in the novel in fact highlights this particular sinister possibility whereby the upper caste controlled media subsumes the real concerns of the *dalits* over Tatiya Kamble's murder and instead substitutes it with an alternative narrative, creating a semblance of egalitarian justice.

Limbale's other potent literary tool is brevity, both in terms of expression and description. Also associated with it is his tendency to provide descriptions in a reportage fashion. He often mentions certain information about significant incidents leaving the readers to comprehend the expected implications. The novelist does not have the leisure to linger over his narrative, as was the wont of most upper caste authors. He is a *dalit* author on a mission and he ought to complete his task without thinking about the extraneous aesthetic effect. This emphasis on objectivity and brevity in turn accords a certain degree of sharpness to his narrative thereby upping its political value. He reveals the cruelty of a social system that has left no other alternative for the *dalit* writer other than to create a matter of fact subjectivity. Such a device also allows the novelist to demand an active reader who will consciously try to unravel the dark underbelly of the Indian society, rather than delving into a narrative of exploitation during moments of leisure.

*Hindu* also has sufficient references to traditional modes of humiliation hurled upon the *dalits*. Thus the readers are told how a *dalit sarpanch* is stopped from unfurling the national flag on independence day, the upper caste's insistence on tearing pages that spoke about Ambedkar from the school books and also how the *mahars* were restricted from entering temples. Limbale shows his nuanced understanding of the life pattern of *dalits* when he refers to the bickering among the *dalits* themselves and how the upper caste gleefully took advantage of the factionalism to ensure that the *dalits* stay 'grounded'.

However Limbale's novel is not limited in its portrayal as has been repeatedly pointed out in the course of my presentation. The novelist is also aware of the strange possibility of subordination that the Indian political democracy accords to the Dalit subject. Therefore the delicious irony of the slighting that the *Kavales* receive when the Dalit minister's car goes past them without acknowledging their obeisance cannot be lost on the conscious readers. Also Sadanand Kamble's sudden escalation is not to be missed either. The stream of bureaucrats, ministers and reporters and other dignitaries visiting Bhimnagar and the jealousy that the Anchalpur villagers feel at seeing the facilities provided to the Dalit community is also a reminder of emerging possibilities for the Dalit community. However Limbale is quick to imply that such provisions were necessitated by political compulsions in an electoral democracy rather than any genuine change in the Hindu national perspective. Time and again the innate casteism of Indian officialdom is hinted at. It is here that one can sense the voice of the 'activist' Limbale who tries to emphasize upon the need for Dalit unity to ensure continuous development. There is an obverse side to this ardent plea, a subtle reminder of the dangers of infighting and increasing splintering, as Limbale tries to show through the successful manoeuvres of Manikchand and Gopichand who exploit the vulnerability of Dalit 'individuals'. This has been the strategy of the dominant caste all throughout, whereby the unity of the *dalits* has been repeatedly ravaged by luring few of the naïve outcastes to betray their brothers.

The discussion of the novel would however remain incomplete without a discussion of the gender politics in the novel. Limbale seems to suggest that gender oppression is another heinous occurrence in the Indian society that cuts across caste lines. Thus the readers encounter incidences of misfortune in the lives of Draupadi Mang and other Dalit women who had to satisfy the mindless lust of the upper caste men and at the same time Limbale gives a poignant description of the stifling living condition of Shonali, wife of Pravakar Kavale in her In-laws' place. There is no relief for either Sheila Shatpute or Surekha Mane from the diktats of patriarchal reservations. Even Lahu Mang and Narendra Patil, irrespective of their caste affiliations unite in their desire to subjugate women.

The novel is essentially a social document that attempts to bring the Dalit problematic to the forefront and intends to understand the nuances of the struggle. In the process it remains consciously self-critical and displays its distrust of the Indian polity even in its present benevolent, democratic avatar and Limbale in fact leaves little in suggesting that beneath the veneer of benevolence and magnanimity, India as a nation still suffers from partial vision and the movement that had the initial promise to rectify it, itself seems to have compromised. Thus Limbale's novel is a narrative of stock taking and argues about the urgency of such an act.

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