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A Regional Study of Dalit Autobiographies from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab

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Since time immemorial, Indian society has remained a fragmented society owing to the religiously sanctioned inequality called the caste system. For ages, people of this land have been negotiating an unconcerned justification of the caste system through the belief in *karma* and sins of the previous births. In fact, the Hindu tale of the creation of human beings and castes shows the oppressive workings of the system. The gods are not only content with creating a society, but they create a wretched social order too. In other words, as Arjun Dangle in his discourse on Dalit literature observes, “religion and the state joined hands and bound the lowest class namely the *shudras* into mental, cultural and social slavery and later into untouchability” (Dangle 235). From medieval times onwards but, there came many saints and social reformers who tried to castigate the caste system in India, their overall impact has been minor. Mahatma Jotirao Phule was the first to use the word Dalit in connection with caste.

They were ‘broken men’ and ‘Protestant Hindus’ to Dr. Ambedkar and ‘Harijans’ to Mahatma Gandhi. To the Britishers they were the ‘untouchables’ and the ‘depressed’ classes. They were [put under a Schedule and] referred to as the ‘scheduled castes’ in the Constitution of India. ‘Dalit’ is a recent term adopted by the Dalits themselves to indicate the fact that they are the most oppressed, exploited and dehumanized section of Indian culture (Massey 81).

It was in the twentieth century that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was able to sharpen the consciousness of the ‘untouchables’ as a group and groom them as a powerful component of the present-day political system. But Dalits, who constitute one-sixth of India's one billion people, remain at the lowest rung of the social ladder even today. In remote villages, they are still kept outside and subservient to the four-tier hierarchical caste structure sanctified by *Varnashrama Dharma*.

Caste based oppression permeates every aspect of our lives. Contrary to the expectations that were generated among these people during the freedom struggle, Independence has not brought any significant change in their lives. Atrocities against the Dalits continue unabated even today.

In recent times there has been a host of publications mainly dealing with the Dalit predicament in India. A body of literature called Dalit literature has appeared on the literary horizon that perceives the world from the Dalit angle. It is not only a literature of protest and rejection but also a literature of reconstruction of the past. The recent spurt in Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence, and poverty of the Dalit. This phenomenal growth in Dalit writing is part of a growing need of the Dalits themselves to articulate their experiences. These voices question the institutions and ideologies that have placed them at the margins. As Arjun Dangle observes:

Dalit Literature is one, which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the

experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. [...] 'Dalit' means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country (Dangle 264-65).

Within the literary purview, there is one genre that gives the most explicit expression to Dalit consciousness and that is the genre of autobiographical writing. Eleanor Zelliott emphasises this while enumerating two ways of understanding the situation of Dalits in India closely. She professes that while one way is to read careful statistical and unbiased accounts of violence and discrimination against them, the second and more important one is to examine Dalit autobiographies. This is mainly because the Dalit autobiographies authenticate the real world of unique practices; of social exile, caste discriminations, economic and sexual exploitation, and political subordination; of wants, miseries, insults, humiliations but also the world of Dalit dreams, aspirations, struggles, sacrifices and rise.

In the 1980s, English translations of Dalit autobiographies began to appear in a large number. Beginning in Maharashtra, the idea of publishing autobiographies in translation so that they could be shared outside their language area spread to many regions and many classes. Most of them tell stories of success, of eventual triumph over adversity, and of a journey of education and eventual progress. Sharan Kumar Limbale's Marathi autobiography *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* (1984) deals with the troubled situation of illegitimate children born of an untouchable woman and her higher-caste caretaker or master. Further down the spectrum, we have Omprakash Valmiki's 1997 Hindi autobiography *Joothan* (Leftover food) that details the harsh conditions of untouchables in a village in North-Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The Dalit autobiographies appeared even later on the Punjabi literary horizon. Balbir Madhopuri's Punjabi autobiography *Chhangia Rukh (Against the Night)* appeared in 2010 and stirred the Punjabi literary world by baring the real rural social life the way it was not done before.

This paper in studying the above mentioned autobiographies, would like to frame a regional analysis of the same. A study of Dalits in terms of their predicament and their religious leanings in these three different regions, will aid us in understanding these autobiographies from a broader Indian viewpoint, giving us a picture of the similarities or differences among Indian Dalits belonging to different States, and to conclude whether or not they form a coherent whole.

Studies of Dalit Autobiographies from Different Regions

When it comes to obtaining a scholarship on caste, a study of religion also becomes essential because it is religion that has played the prime role in making members of the untouchable castes Dalit. They have been employing their own religious strategies to get rid of this religiously sanctioned exploitation. However, there exist ideological differences between Dalit organisations as well. The regional diversities which are a hallmark of Indian society are not confined only to the upper castes but also boil down to the Dalit communities. There are present a wide range of local-regional-empirical level of differences among Dalits of different regions. In view of these diversities, the typical brahminical view of caste that posits a notion of a single, consistent and uniformly applicable conception of the condition and status of Dalits in all parts of India stands unwarranted. Hence, regional studies become important in obtaining a more nuanced and composite understanding of the predicament of

Dalits. This paper would be studying the historical evolution of Dalits, within the regions of Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Besides, if we are to make sense of the Dalit experience in the autobiographies mentioned, it becomes all the more important for the narrative to be placed in the context of historical and contemporary realities of social life in these regions.

Context of Maharashtra

It was in the state of Maharashtra that Dalit movement such as it is today, took off in the nineteenth century. Tapan Basu in the *Introduction* to the anthology he edited notes how caste tyranny was intolerably oppressive under the domination of Chitpavan Peshwas in Maharashtra; under whose regime the Dalits had no human or civil rights whatsoever. Dissent was expressed only through the devotional bhakti movement that endeavoured to spread a reformed Hinduism devoid of caste hierarchy all over India. During the British era a number of reformers started a fight against untouchability in their own ways. The most prominent among whom was Mahatma Jyotiba Phule.

Phule, who belonged to the Mali caste, led an uncompromising attack on Brahminism. His aim was to establish a casteless society and for this purpose he founded the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (truth-seeking society) in 1873; and organized widow remarriages, marriages without Brahmin priests, etc. This movement paved the path for “adi” movements in other parts of country like Adi Dharma in Punjab, Adi Hindu in Uttar Pradesh, etc. These “adi” movements later provided inspiration to Ambedkar, a Mahar by caste, to enter the ongoing movement for Dalit liberation in Maharashtra in the late 1920s (Basu xxvii-xxx).

It would be useful here to consider Eleanor Zelliot’s description of Mahar religion at the turn of the century as resembling other forms of Dalit religion in having distinct deities, saints, and ceremonies. In Chokhamela, a fourteenth century poet-saint, they had their own Bhakti saint who was admired by all, but his acceptance of *dharma-karma* was a barrier to Mahar advancement. Ambedkar’s own efforts at change were not devoted to Mahar religion as such, but first to gaining for Dalits a respected place within the Hindu ‘great tradition’. When that proved to be impossible, he turned to the ‘great traditions’ of other religions in India to which he and his people might convert. The turning point came in 1935 at Yeola when he announced his intention not to die a Hindu. The conference encouraged individual conversion among Dalits and some few here and there did convert. In the end Ambedkar became a Buddhist just before his death in 1956. (Zelliot 1969, 238).

Omprakash Valmiki in his narrative is seen as acknowledging Ambedkar’s books for having “awakened [his] consciousness” (Valmiki 72). We can also find references to Dalit Panther movement of Maharashtra in his autobiography from the time the author spent a few years working there. I quote him thus:

It was during my Chandrapur days that I absorbed the strongest currents of Dalit movement. It was in this part of the country that I came across the marvellous glow of Dalit consciousness (Valmiki 100).

It is worth noting that in the western and the southern parts of India, caste based discrimination and atrocities have been most rampant. A more detailed insight into the state of affairs in the western State of Maharashtra can be found in Sharan Kumar Limbale’s autobiography *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)*.

The title of Limbale's book which is a Marathi word signifies exclusion, for an outcaste who is excluded from the community and is deprived of all kinds of privileges and rights in society. Limbale's autobiography is a frightening story of a half-caste child who grows up fatherless in a village in Maharashtra, and of the anguish he suffers for not fully belonging to it.

After the gradual awakening of self-hood and maturity, the author provides an inside view of life in a Mahar village, as he says in the acknowledgement note:

I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable, as a half caste, and as an impoverished man. There is a Patil in every village who is also a landowner. He invariably has a whore...High-caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me calling 'akkarmashi'. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority. And this book is a tale of this burden (Limbale x).

The author describes how this illegitimate status haunted him all his life. He begins with his school days when he describes the anguish he felt when the village chief refused to sign on his school application form because he was unsure about who his father was. When it was suggested that the author be given his grandmother's name, the chief refused on the grounds that his grandmother was living with a Muslim. The author laments his condition as follows:

But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body? But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all (Limbale 59).

He describes graphically the skinning of a cow carried out by the Mahars and how he usually helped in small ways like holding up the legs etc. Eating beef was a custom in the Maharwada but he notes how he was humiliated for the same in school when he was called a "base born who swallowed [their] ox" (Limbale 16). After this incident he "developed an aversion to dead animals" (Limbale 19).

The dominant theme throughout the book is the Dalit's constant battle with hunger. Limbale describes a school picnic when he his Mahar friends had waited for the high caste boys and girls to finish their meals and then pounced on the leftovers with relish stuffing themselves "greedily" (p 3), an incident that takes us automatically to Valmiki's UP-based *Joothan*.

Later, when he shifted to the boarding school in Chapalgaon, and came into contact with other Dalit educated boys around him, Ambedkar's "Buddhism began to cast its spell on [him]" (Limbale 74), and when years later he was tying the knot, he chose to get married according to Buddhist rituals. However, religious intolerance again stepped forth when his brother-in-law who was ironically a Dalit Panther activist found out about his father-son like relation with Dada who was a Muslim, and Limbale was barred from entering his in-law's house. He expresses his sorrow in a monologue thus:

What kind of religious burden do we carry like a porter his load? Why is this burden of religion thrust upon us? Why can't we discard it? How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family? (Limbale 105).

Thus, his plea is for a just society wherein all are alike and there exists no religious and religiously-sanctioned caste barriers whatsoever. The fact that Maharashtra was the torch bearer for Dalit emancipation, and still could not free itself from such shackles is most revealing.

Context of Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's fifth largest State, located in the northern part of India, has the second largest population of Dalits standing at 21.1 per cent according to the 2001 Census. Situated in what Tapan Basu calls the "cow-belt" of India and being the heartland of Hindutva chauvinism, awareness of Dalit rights has been ambiguous in UP. Political consciousness and participation in politics by Dalits in UP has also been traditionally low. Though the State did witness an "adi" movement under the leadership of Swami Achhutananda called the Adi-Hindu movement, no full-fledged study is available on the same. Whatever minor research which is available asserts that it was centred mainly in the urban areas and could hardly reach the rural regions. This naturally undermines its importance for this paper since Valmiki's autobiography deals with the rural environs of UP.

Moreover, in contrast to parts of western India like Maharashtra, which came under the influence of Ambedkar, UP did not experience any large scale anti-caste movement even during the colonial period. The reason may lie in the fact that caste structure in north Indian plains differs fundamentally from that of southern and western India; in that it is less rigid.

The only movement the people of UP had access to during the British era was the Hindu reform movement of Arya Samaj. Valmiki, the surname that the author of *Joothan* has imbibed came to him under the influence of this very movement. Arun P. Mukherjee in the "Introduction" to the translated text of *Joothan* mentions how Arya Samajists were alarmed by the conversion of large number of Chuhras to Christianity and Sikhism in the 1920s and 1930s. They started challenging the Christian missionaries by opening schools and hospitals for the untouchables and performing *shuddhi*, a ceremony to reconvert the Christian converts. Arya Samajists were used to tell the Chuhras that they were the descendants of Valmiki, the creator of the Sanskrit Ramayana. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki narrates how,

A Christian used to visit our neighbourhood...He would sit with the children of the Chuhras around him. He used to teach them reading and writing. The government schools did not allow these children to enrol (Valmiki 2).

Valmiki's growing estrangement from Chuhra rituals worries his father that he may have converted to Christianity. But when Valmiki's father finds out that his son had begun to use Valmiki as his surname, he shows signs of being ecstatic. This reiterates the absence of any substantial Dalit movement in UP.

It was only in the post-colonial period that a small section of society, influenced by the ideas of Ambedkar, was able to mobilise Dalits for a short period of time. However, since the mid-1980s, a new wave of caste-based mobilisation in north India has brought the Dalits into politics in UP under the leadership of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), formed by Kanshi Ram. This mobilisation has had effects on the emergence of Dalit literature as well. One prime example is Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*.

The title of Valmiki's autobiography translates into leftover remnants of food, especially from weddings and other feasts that were relished by the Chuhras. The Chuhras

used to eat them and also save dried up pieces of it to feed themselves during difficult times. When the author recalls his family doing the same, he ruminates as follows:

What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan...When I think of those days today, I feel nauseated (Valmiki 10).

In *Joothan*, we find an incident of skinning of the cow similar to the one recounted in *Akkarmashi*, with the only exception that in the absence of author's other family members he was obliged to lend his uncle a hand despite his mother's resistance and was made to do the actual skinning. He describes how his hands trembled as soon as he gripped the knife. He adds:

That day something broke inside me. I skinned the bullock under chacha's guidance. I felt I was drowning in a swamp...The wounds of the torment that I suffered with chacha on that hot afternoon are still fresh on my skin (Valmiki 35).

He relates how on seeing him his mother had burst out crying and describes the scene when he got back home:

I was covered in muck from head to toe. Stains of blood were clearly visible on my clothes. Bhabhi [sister-in-law] said to my mother, 'don't make him do that work...We can bear hunger...Don't drag him in this dirt.' Those words of bhabhi shine like a light in the darkness for me to this day (Valmiki 35-36).

Later, after facing numerous hardships while trying to gain an education; after being put through the work of sweeping the school playground by the teacher on the very first day of schooling, after being teased incessantly by the fellow high caste students, Valmiki somehow landed up in a job. When he informed his father, who since Omprakash's childhood has been maintaining how 'caste' can be improved only through education, he was delighted.

He kept saying repeatedly, 'At last you have escaped "caste".' But what he didn't know till the date he died is that 'caste' follows one right up to one's death (Valmiki 78).

Valmiki developed this mentality because he found that in matters of untouchability the people of Bombay were no better than the simple un-educated villagers amidst whom the writer had spent his childhood. He says:

My village was divided along lines of touchability and untouchability. The situation was very bad in Dehradun and in Uttar Pradesh in general at this time. [But] when I saw well-educated people in a metropolitan city like Bombay indulging in such behaviour, I felt a fountain of hot lava erupting within me (Valmiki 95).

Valmiki concludes his narrative by pointing out the fact that caste still remains an indispensable part of our lives and it would involve a lot of courage and strength to shake off the age old fetters imposed on the innocent beings named Dalits.

Context of Punjab

According to the 2001 Census, it is the state of Punjab that has the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes in India, constituting 28.9 per cent of its total population and yet the ideological basis of untouchability is markedly weaker in this region than in other parts (Madhopuri xvii). Denzil Ibbetson who conducted the first serious survey of castes in Punjab for the 1881 Census, observed that by religion, the then Punjab was “more Mohammedan than Hindu” and that instead of rigorous ritual purity norms of caste hierarchy, “the people [were] bound by social and tribal custom so far than by any rules of religion” (Ibbetson 14-15). Likewise, as Chaman Lal observed much later, Punjab had never been afflicted with the sort of caste oppression that was to be seen in states like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. He adds:

Though there has been no movement comparable to those led by Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar in Maharashtra..., yet a certain liberal ethos created by Sikh religion and the Sufi poets did make Punjabi society a little less casteist as compared to the society in other states of India. But that does not mean that Dalits in Punjab did not suffer socially, economically or culturally (Lal 298).

The large scale conversion of low castes to religions which did not believe in ritual pollution and *karmic* retribution, like Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity marked the first step towards an upward mobilization in Punjab. However, the status of the Hindu outcastes did not change even after they joined the Sikh *panth* (Madhopuri xix). And perhaps this frustration led to a difference of relations between these converts and their fellow Hindu outcastes. For instance, a Chamar character in conversation with Madhopuri’s father is shown as remarking thus:

Just look at these Ramdasias [Chamars converted Sikhs]! They are our people, and merely because they have accepted Sikhism, they act superior to us! At one time they drew water from our wells, but now they have their separate well! They say that the land near and around our well reeks of tobacco from the water of the hookahs! They don’t say it outright, but they are no longer the same as us! (Madhopuri 61)

Mark Juergenmeyer conducted a research project on religious identities and distinguished between three forms of religious identity. *Quamik* identity is that of a large religious community, best explicated by the Muslims. *Panthik* identity is that of a “fellowship of those who revere a lineage of spiritual authority” (e.g. of a Sikh guru) and *Dharmik* identity is derived from following “customs and codes of social obligation and spiritual behaviour such as those entailed by caste or ritual and implied in observing the polarity between pure and impure” (Juergenmeyer 2).

Juergenmeyer argued that among the Dalits in twentieth century Punjab “older *Panthik* forms of religion were used as a basis for creating a *quamik* form, in which the less agreeable *dharmik* customs of religion were discarded and replaced” (Juergenmeyer 3). His primary subject matter was the Ad Dharm movement and its leader, Mangoo Ram, a Chamar. Beginning in the mid-1920s, when the movement began, its leaders argued that all Dalits were one *quam* whose religion was Ad Dharm. Their ancient civilization was destroyed by the Aryans and they were subjugated to the point where they forgot their own identity. In restoring that lost identity Ad Dharmis held to a non-theistic view of divinity, worshipped low caste saints like Kabir and especially their fellow Chamar Ravidas, collected their writings, and read them in their *satsangs*, which resembled Sikh worship. Ad Dharm spread

in the villages as a *panthik* movement consistent with the people's *dharmik* religion, while in the cities it emphasized *dharmik* change. A high point came early in Ad Dharm history when they gained recognition as a separate *quam* in the religion chapter of the 1931 Census and recorded 418,789 Ad Dharmis. However, in the years between that census and independence, as it sought to implement its social vision, it became involved in politics, split into factions, and disintegrated, to be revived again in the 1970s. Though these Ad Dharmis broke their allegiance with the Hindu religion, they were and still are no doubt, treated as other low castes. It is in this Ad Dharmi caste that Madhopuri was born in 1955. He however came to regard himself as an atheist, and viewed "the obsession with religion and spiritualism among Dalits as an escapist distraction from the larger project of social democracy" (Madhopuri xxvii).

However, Harish K Puri in his *Introduction* to Madhopuri's translated text, mentions the presence of an "intimate other-ness" between the upper castes and the Dalits. He says that the overt expressions of deference and kinship towards the Dalits by the high-caste Jats cannot be ignored. He adds as follows:

Madhopuri's narrative, in the meaningfully titled chapter 'Daadi's Saga', draws our attention to the layered dynamics of the relationship between the proverbial oppressor and the oppressed. Mutual cooperation and empathy was not an insignificant part of that relationship. The normal usage of affectionate kinship terms of addressing elders – *Bebe, Tai, Taaya, Chaacha, Bua, Massi*, etc; cordial as well as hot exchanges between the two sections; the not uncommon practice of seeking the advice of a seasoned old Dalit, the grandmother of the author, by upper-caste ladies on a host of matters; the not so ungrudging submission by the latter to her rebukes and commands; as well as the spectacle of the massive outpouring of village kinship in the mourning at her funeral, are a part of that reality" (Madhopuri xxvi).

All the more, some uncommon cases of human care and generosity were also a part Punjab's complex social reality. For instance, the chapter 'An Oasis in a Desert' portrays an intimate relationship between the family of Madhopuri and a Jat family, which, sometimes appeared to fill the caste gap. The author ends this chapter with the following lines:

Now, whenever I think about the love and affection given to us by this Jat family, it seems to me that their love, which made our lives beautiful and colourful as the spring, had been an oasis in the barren desert of our lives (Madhopuri 162).

However, the Punjabis too had their own share of sufferings. Madhopuri minutely describes the feelings of humiliation and helplessness of an adolescent mind. When a Jat *Bhai Ji* (Sikh religious priest) in order to disperse a group of Dalit children who had assembled to receive *prasad* in a Gurdwara shouts, "Haven't I told you, 'again and again' you low castes, to sit patiently in one place", it makes the heart of the reader bleed (Madhopuri 12).

Describing another incident, Madhopuri writes that his father went to one or the other farmer as a daily wage labourer.

"We would go to the houses of these zamindars, sit in their courtyards, and put out our bowls for rotis. Their women threw the rotis from the top and we would adroitly catch them. The dal and vegetables were also ladled out from above into our bowls, and sometimes blistering hot splashes fell on our

feet...Defilement – I had confronted this word time and again, the way the rope in our well had frayed by constant rubbing against the wall” (Madhopuri 33).

Since belonging to the cobbler caste, Madhopuri and his family was not entrusted with the work of skinning of cows but there is a brief reference in the pages of his narrative to some Chuhra kids dragging away the dead animal and he helping them out.

Thus, though we might consider Punjab to be more liberal and more or less free from caste based discrimination, the reality is far from this assumption.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to understand the differences and similarities between the predicaments of Dalits in three Indian States. Although the surface appears the same everywhere, the different Dalit movements discussed do give us an idea of the underlying disparity. Interestingly and unexpectedly, I found the answers to my questions within the self-narratives of the Dalit authors included in this study.

After having experienced both the environs of UP and Maharashtra, Omprakash Valmiki found not much difference between the two. Here’s what he had to say:

There is no real difference between Maharashtra’s Mehtars and Uttar Pradesh’s Chuhra Valmikis; except for the language, everything else is similar. They too breed pigs. They too make an offering of pig and liquor in the worship of their gods and goddesses. Their customs and traditions are pretty similar as well (Valmiki 110).

The above dispels our doubts, if any, about these two Northern and Southern States. As far as the region of Punjab is concerned, Balbir Madhopuri gives us an interesting insight into the issue through a conversation between his father and a few people from Uttar Pradesh, whom the Punjabis preferred to call the easterners. One of the men from UP sings the blues about how they cannot use names like the ones used by Thakurs or Rajputs. If they do they get beaten up. He adds:

The conditions in eastern Uttar Pradesh are deplorable – the *doli* of the bride still goes directly to the Thakurs. They send for our daughters and daughters-in-law whenever they feel like (Madhopuri 72).

Another one bewails:

Don’t ask what happens during the Holi festival – the Thakurs come in the evening, drunk and armed with lathis, and order our women to entertain them... We want to stay here in Punjab, where things are not as bad. There is less rigidity about untouchability also... We have been living here for the last three-four years and have observed things (Madhopuri 73).

At such instances, it seems like that the shared sorrow demolishes the barriers of language and geography between these unprivileged men. From my findings, all I can conclude is that while Maharashtra stands the lowest with regards to caste-based discrimination; and Uttar Pradesh if at all, does only slightly better; it is Punjab that has always given a comparatively habitable environment to the Dalits and continues to do so.

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