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Dalit Movement and Kannada Dalit Autobiographies Translated into English

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Writing autobiographies has not been traditional in India. When we wrote, we wrote with new zeal. Autobiography, as a literary genre, added a new charisma to Dalit movement through its frank expressions. Dalit autobiographies grew along with the Dalit movement in India, both were unique to us. It is the Dalit movement that inspired many young Dalits to pen their experiences in autobiographies. There are two such autobiographies in Kannada; *Ooru Keri* and *Government Brahmana*, which spread light on the Dalit movement in Karnataka from the inception. The texts are inspired by the Movement and portray vivid pictures of it. So, the paper makes an attempt to analyze the two autobiographies in the backdrop of Dalit movement in Karnataka.

The Dalit movement, like any other phenomena, has no single ground; it is multi-dimensional in its historic, socio-political and cultural elements. These dimensions are reread and reinterpreted from time to time. Each interpretation has brought a new dimension to the movement, at the same time we are put to ponder over pitfalls. Dalit literature, in particular Dalit autobiographies, provides a spectrum of different issues around Dalit movement. Dalit autobiographies reflect the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Ramasamy Periyar, Babu Jagjivanram, Karl Marx and post 1970's developments in their own style. Both Dalit movement and autobiography have an intense and close association. An autobiography is generally known to record personal achievement, but a Dalit autobiography is quite different. It records an individual's suffering, and speaks for his or her community. Along with the personal pain, it registers the socio-political conditions of the author's time. Dalit writing has given autobiography a new life, and autobiography has provided space for Dalit experience through expression. Kannada critic and writer D. R. Nagaraj aptly says in the Afterword, "Reading a literature autobiography is at once matter of interest and anxiety. Interest because it is an exploration of a new world of experience. Anxiety because the violence of caste society is intrinsic to the genre. When we read Dalit autobiographies in Kannada and Marathi we get the feeling that we looking at a bonsai tree. They compress several novels into a small autobiography" (Siddalingaiah. 109). Therefore, the paper aims to see Dalit autobiographies in the backdrop of Dalit movement in Karnataka.

There are few autobiographies written in Kannada but only two have been translated into English; Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* and Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*; former one

is located in Magadi and Bangalore; latter one in different places of North Karnataka. These two autobiographies narrate two different individuals' lives in the backdrop of Dalit movement in Karnataka. They grow along with Dalit movement and give us vivid picture of it. On one hand *Ooru Keri* narrates the story, with a light tone and humour, of an active student in Bangalore slum who has migrated from a village due to poverty. Dr. D.R. Nagaraj calls this narrative style 'laugh of Dalit' ironically, which can be interpreted in many ways. On the other hand *Government Brahmana* gives an account of Dalit movement through the narration of a village student who faces miserable situation due to his caste. It presents a cultural plight of our contemporary society. The two autobiographies capture the stories of Dalit movement such as *bhoosa* (cattlefeed), from different places like Mysore, Bangalore and Dharwad in two different tones. Their narrative styles describe Dalit movement with different perspectives. Therefore, the spirit of Dalit movement prevails through these autobiographies.

The autobiographies, along with celebrating the triumph of the Dalit movement, pose certain questions to the readers and call on for self introspection as they reveal some interesting facts around the movement. They stamp questions on incidents of subaltern issues and register oppressed voices. Perhaps a close observation of few incidents of Dalit movement recorded in the autobiographies would help us to understand our current issues that are persisting now.

Vanguard of Dalit Movement

Literature and Dalit movement share a close association. They inspire each other and keep the race on. Dalit Literature plays the role of a vanguard of the Movement as it protects the interests of root cause of the movement. Dalit autobiographies are the monuments of self-respect. There are three factors that dominated both the movement and a dalit autobiography; hunger-self-respect, education-employment and untouchability-insult. In general terms an autobiography is a record of gray hair experience, but a Dalit autobiography breaks such traditional notion. That is why we find details in dalit autobiographies related to dalit suffering and dalits' upsurge. For instance, *Ooru Keri* opens with a picture of subhuman treatment on dalits. The narration is associated with Siddalingaiah's emotional attachment. Throughout the text one can find the reflection of Dalit movement- narrator's uncle's win in election followed by his death, Srirampura slum education, hostel days, and association with various political and literary activists. The beauty of the text is that human humiliation at every stage is shown with 'laughter'. Siddalingaiah laughs at the hypocrisy of our society, "A dalit in Bangalore Rural district had been assaulted. We visited the village. He had huge injury on his head. They had tied a bandage around his head. We told him to get a photo taken so that we could hand it out for press publicity. He was smiling in the picture. Just before clicking, the photographer had said, 'Smile'. He had smiled. Thus the case of the assaulted man became weak" (Siddalingaiah 104-5). In contrary, Aravind Malagatti aims at social equilibrium. He uses simple but effective narration. Perhaps his style brings the text to every Dalit's experience. He says "I feel it is meaningless to get obsessed with centuries-old animosities... I have been haunted by the question whether it is fair on anyone's part to place these ancient enmities at the doorstep of a

few people who are with today”, he continues, “They teased me endlessly. Since I was getting the benefits of the government’s reservation policy they called me ‘Government Brahmana’” (Malagatti, *GB*. 61). This constant churning of thoughtful dilemma and confusion over existence recurs in *Government Brahmana*. Thus, the two autobiographies register human suffering which becomes backbone of the movement.

Basavalingappa Episode

Scholars like V. T. Rajashekar Shetty, renowned journalist, mark Basavalingappa’s *bhoosa* incident as the beginning of Dalit movement in Karnataka. We get various interpretations on this event. In 1973 media reports that Basavalingappa’s calls Kannada literature a ‘cattle feed’. Having influenced by Buddha, Basava, Ambedkar and Marx, Basavalingappa has had initiated social change wave. He calls any literature that does not propagate nationalism and socialism is useless like *bhoosa*. It results in his resignation. Yet he gives his clarification to *Dalita-Patrike* over his stance, and justifies himself. But Siddalingaiah gives a vivid picture of this incidence. He admires and advocates the action of Basavalingappa in 1973 and 74.

Later Siddalingaiah expressed his disappointment over Basavalingappa’s concept of power and struggle, “Basavalingappa was ambitious. He aspired to become president of India. He wanted to play the role of Rama, but society pressed him to play the role of Anjaneya. He did not like Anjaneya’s role. Being a rebel, he chose the role of Ravana” (Siddalingaiah. 96). So, Basavalingappa’s abrupt withdrawal from social activity leaves Siddalingaiah, his own follower, skeptical. Here, Siddalingaiah’s observation gains immense importance as it was the question of Dalits’ morale. Dalit movement was certainly affected by Basavalingappa’s ‘power’ agenda. He believed that only political power would enable him to tackle with dalits’ issues. Unlike *Ooru Keri*’s large space, Malagatti does not give an elaborative detail but gives an objective reference. It is because of time and space gap.

No Ideological Consensus in the Movement

It is apparent that a vibrant social change has come to halt. Lack of ideological consensus and of a spearhead to lead the spark of Dalit awareness always haunted Dalit movement in Karnataka. The two autobiographies express this anguish excellently. Though Basavalingappa brings in hope, he himself shatters it. In North Karnataka, Dalit movement suffered because of ideological differences among Bandaya (Rebellious). Malagatti expresses his mental coldness over tea invitation, “Bandaya, the revolt forum constituted by the Dalits and the non-Dalits, though full of contradictions, is unique. While meat eating, drinking, smoking and other such habits were seen as being progressive by non-Dalits, getting rid of such habits marked progressiveness for Dalits in a sense, the friendship between Dalits and Bandaya people like that of a friendship between a tiger and an elephant. This relationship is beyond questioning. Apparently the carnivorous tiger tried to become a vegetarian for the sake of friendship and in turn, the grass-eating elephant tried to eat meat for the same reason. Such relationship is

unimaginable in a system like in India. That society warmed up to this adventure is unprecedented. Nurturing such a bond amidst theoretical contradictions is indeed unique, but the strength of the bond is debatable” (Malagatti, *GBt.* 92).

“Rationalist Society” and “Chicken Bone”

Both the authors seem to be unhappy with their association with rationalists. Though Siddalingaiah initiates Vicharavadi Parishat’ (Rationalist Society), it does not move beyond limited sphere. Their fights are limited to hostel toilets issue, arguments with fraud magicians, debates on college dais etc. Perhaps it is Malagatti who catches the pulse of rationalists and keeps a measurable distance. Being invited for meals, Aravind again feels the coldness of caste. The host tells while eating,

“No chicken bones like in your house, boy!

We are quite strict regarding food,

In other thing we are normal, simple... reformist...” (Malagatti, *GB* 101).

Malagatti finds these words provocative. Rationalists, reformists and other pro-dalit activists have their own limited agenda to join Dalit movement.

Left and Right

Left was left; Right was never right. With his regular sharp wit Siddalingaiah mocks at communist leaders, “During the summer holidays, I attended a camp of the Communist Party of India at Krishna Bhavan in Malleshwaram. The speakers were all worshippers of Russia. If we delegates asked critical questions about the Soviet Union, they exploded in anger” (Siddalingaiah 99). Siddalingaiah uses the place names intentionally for juxtaposition. DSS, Janatha Party, Vicharavadi Parishat and others were organizing and spreading their ideas from their huts and public parks; Communist Party was able to hold a discussion in A class hotel, and it is the same party that propagates class equality. Malagatti too refers to a hypocritical situation of a communist thinker. Immediately after lunch he tells the narrator, “My wife is not at home, I told that, didn’t I? We wash our plates.” Malagatti tells himself, “I too stay alone. Don’t I wash my plates at my house? Is this also a common communist attribute?” (Malagatti, *GB.* 101).

Apart from leftist thinkers, ardent followers of Ambedkar too caused a pervading gloom on Dalit movement. Devraj Urs, being the Chief Minister of the state, could not deliver on. Our ignorance to identify the right person at right is also harmful. Mallikarjun Kharge, former Union Railway Minister, hardly got attention or opportunity to deliver his action. Any political or cultural event was centered in Bangalore and Mysore, at most Dharwad. Dalit movements leaders are the writers could not notice forceful deeds of Bheema Sena led by Kharge and Shyamsunder. DSS was not given any political support. V. T. Rajeshekar Shetty critically observes, “Revolutionaries like Shyamsunder are seldom born in Hindu India... But senseless as

we are, we curse them when they live but worship them after they die” (Shetty. 19). Therefore, we gradually get a doubt; was Dalit movement really nationwide agitation?

A Cultural Revolution Deviated

In a hurry to create a counter-culture to the dominant Brahmanical culture, Dalit movement seems to have embraced all “like-minded” organizations, Of course, which was the need and necessity of the time. The movement’s fresh ideas made forget the ideological differences. Today, the same differences are fanned for political gain. The two Kannada Dalit autobiographies explore such hidden aspects. They offer a treasure of untold stories in and around the Dalit movement. They provide a fair chance to bury the pitfalls provided we opt for an open discussion.

The two texts explore one more important development. In postmodern context dalit literature is read under the banner of Subaltern studies. Unfortunately, attempts have been made to project the movement as a homogeneous cultural movement without proper preparations and awareness. Compared to Maharashtra, Karnataka is far away in attaining such dalit awareness. Hence, a brilliant dalit victory has paused; a vibrant cultural movement has been halted.

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