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Philosophy of the Marginalized: The Dalits

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Abstract:

The paper tries to answer some questions- the why, what and how of Dalit theology and Dalit liberation- problems, paradigms and possibilities. It probes deep into the meaning and identity of the marginalized. The philosophy of the marginalized is an important topic in the Indian context. Dalit consciousness when discussed in the context of philosophy makes it very easy for a student to understand that it is not a difficult subject and given this background, it is known; academicians as well as students in various disciplines must take extra interest to learn the subject of philosophy in order to investigate the meaning and relevance of such issues in a better manner.

Keywords: Dalit theology, Dalit liberation, Dalit consciousness.

The question of the philosophy of the marginalized refers to two important senses to be taken into account- the connotative and the denotative dimension of the marginalized. Specifically with reference to the Indian context the question of marginalized applies to the issue of the dalits. Dalit, connotatively means something and denotatively it means something else. Connotatively, it means the issue of suffering, the sensibility of unjust suffering met to the people who are called dalits. Denotatively, it refers to the category of the people. Thus, philosophy of the marginalized specifically with reference to the people who are called dalits has got two important philosophical significances. On the one side, it is a response to the problem of unjust exploitation and on the other it is a struggle for a liberated philosophy. In this sense, the philosophical significance of dalit philosophy of liberation is that it problematizes the very issue called philosophy of liberation within the Indian philosophical context. So, philosophy of the marginalized especially with reference to dalit category of people in the context of casteism and patriarchy becomes vital within the Indian context.

What is meant by the identity of the marginalized people, especially with reference to dalits? The identity comes out of a consciousness which constructs one's identity that is basically a consciousness which is constructed through experience. So, dalit experience becomes the embodiment of dalit consciousness and dalit identity. The central experience of dalit is all of a social exclusion; exclusion in various aspects of life- social, political, economic, cultural and religious. So, everywhere they feel they are excluded from the main society. So, this is a basic reality, this is a basic experience of the collective community called the dalit, this is where they

form their consciousness and this consciousness forms the identity. There are two-three ways of understanding identity- how I am looked at by others, how I am, and what I want others to know about me. So, this is basically dalit identity.

It can be said from the experiences that dalits are looked at as a dirty thing. The three major areas in which dalits are discriminated like AIDS are- right to land, right to education and right to housing. This embodies the whole life of a dalit and dalit identity means how these people are thrown out of the society. So, the dalit identity from the point of view of the dalit is all of brokenness. This is how dalit identity is there but as a category of people now they contest this identity. Now, they are not just to be thrown out of the society but like to empower themselves. So, it is basically dialectic between thrown away and also being empowering oneself.

The multiple factors that go to constitute or construct the dalit consciousness can be simplified by classifying the principles that constitute dalit consciousness in terms of two important aspects- the internal and the external. The internal aspect refers to the consciousness that is being constructed by various factors, philosophical factors themselves. The external aspect refers to the cultural factors that go to constitute dalit consciousness. So, it becomes a very relevant inquiry in philosophy to consider the philosophy of the marginalized from the standpoint of the dalits. The internal factors for example need to account the dalit consciousness at two levels. First, consciousness as subjugated, consciousness as dominated, consciousness as domesticated and consciousness as oppressed. The other level of consciousness with reference to dalits- the dalit consciousness or the sub-consciousness of the subjugated people. One is, their consciousness is subjugated, another one- the consciousness of the subjugated against the subjugation. In other words there is double negation process that operates in the philosophical setting of the question of dalit consciousness. It negates the very negation. Whatever philosophy, whatever social reality, whatever economic, political factors or historical factors that went in to constitute the whole context of caste domination had heavily laddered on the shoulders of the dalits as untouchables. Dalit consciousness is a moment of restoration of those consciousnesses that has been subjectivised or objectivised. So, the question of dalit consciousness can be looked from these two angles- the internal and the external. The internal from two aspects- consciousness as subjugated consciousness and consciousness that works against the very subjugation in the lays, the study or in the lays of Indian philosophical cultural tradition. It is known how internally a person personalizes this kind of consciousness.

There are also certain factors which influence the construction of dalit consciousness at the external level. One of them is material prosperity. A consciousness constructed is based upon one's material life- how rich or poor, what type of society he lives in, whether in a very poor locality, in a slum, in a colony or he lives in a very posh area. So, these external realities also influence in constructing dalit consciousness. The other external factors which make a great impact upon constructing dalit consciousness are the cultural symbols like art, dance and music. The culture can be used as the symbol of dalit liberation at two levels. One is- this first empowers the person through cultural expressions. Example- when the drum is beaten- the

sound, the music, the rhythm that makes a sense of belonging, a sense of empowered self within the person. This constructs the dalit consciousness. Location, like Madurai is a place where dalits come every year for cultural night and brings different communities of dalit origin, different groups which come there, leave aside all the differences, they feel one there, as dalit unity, as a unified group. So, that also constructs the dalit consciousness. So far, who understood himself or herself as disempowered self feels that collective consciousness takes place there. So, in this way the cultural symbols play a very crucial role in constructing dalit consciousness. The other also decides and determines what type of consciousness one constructs – be it submissive consciousness or liberated consciousness.

Social profile is very-very important for a dalit because these are a kind of major agents or major stimulants where dalit consciousness is constructed. It is like a laboratory where a person constructs his own consciousness either in the submissive side or in the liberated side or the assertive side. Example- once so happened in a small village in Ramna district near Madurai, basically a dalit who went to a washerman to wash his clothes and iron it but the particular washerman did the whole work for the caste people, not for the dalit people. On being asked that why he did not do for him as he too would pay the money, the washerman reported to the higher communities. Immediately, he and his family was caught and beaten thoroughly. From then such a social boycott was imposed upon the village, upon the whole dalit community and especially on this person that they found very difficult to live when small incidents triggers off all other aspects of a dalit life. Socially, the whole community boycotted them and the religious place was also taken away from them, then the economic, they could not be given any job because dalit people are always depending on the dominant caste people for the day to day life existence. Everything is denied. This is how one incident embodies the whole gamut of dalit oppression, dalit discrimination. This is a good example where dalit constructs but this person did not border upon submissive consciousness. He went to the press, he went to the police, he went to the DSP, then the collector, brought out the issue which means he did not want to buy the submissive consciousness as the given but he wanted to create his own liberative consciousness, his own assertive consciousness. He tried to assert his space socially, economically, politically, religiously, even culturally. So, this is how a person constructs a submissive consciousness or oppressive consciousness.

The conceptualization of the philosophy of liberation with reference to the dalit is an important project with the very enabling of the dalit consciousness in terms of the question of liberation. The whole issue of philosophy of liberation of the dalits, in terms of helping themselves, by helping themselves; helping the Indian social context- the caste of discriminated society. They project a serious sensibility, a philosophy of liberation. The whole philosophy of liberation is to be understood from the point of view of the philosophy of domination. Dalit as people as mentioned earlier, their consciousness has been subjugated by both internal and external factors. This means there is a strong philosophy. Culturally, historically, to some major extent philosophically dominated their consciousness and allowed them to suffer a sense of

subjugated consciousness. In other words, there is a specific sense of a philosophy of domination that is operative within the context of caste with reference to the dalit category as people.

The caste context between two peoples within Indian caste culture X and Y can be seen like this. The X, the individual self historically, philosophically constitutes as a superior self. This can be termed differently as the 'singular self', the dual self- the 'prakriti' and the 'purusha'. In other words, the X constitutes philosophically as the superior category as against the Y, an inferior category or the secondary category. So, the primary and the secondary categories are constructed. This construction is philosophically justified with the help of metaphysical question. Metaphysics happened in terms of the primacy of the superiority of the self, the dualistic category- the primacy of the self and the secondary position of the matter. The dalit question is not only a cultural question but is a serious philosophical question from the point of view of the logic that constructs a serious sense of slavery, a serious sense of domination. The logic of domination between X and Y metaphysically and culturally constitutes as the dominant principle as against Y, the dominated principle which means X is culturally invested and assumes a sense of power over Y, Y, refers to dalit category- the woman of the patriarchy , dalit within the caste category, the common within the professional category. Woman along with man is an integral part of human civilization and no overall development of the nation or society is possible without her active participation. But she is given second place everywhere. As Seema Bawa points out, "Although the place of women in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that women has never been considered the equal of man" (Gopal 34).

Therefore, there is logic of domination. The first principle within the whole construction of a philosophy of liberation with reference to the dalit question of liberation is to take into account what are those philosophical principles that constitute this sense of domination. It is a very serious inquiry in the entire gamut of philosophy. The inquiry that has to be taken into account to constitute the whole question of what are those philosophical principles that keep them under consciousness – slavery, not just the slavery in terms of untouchability which is a serious problem but slavery in terms of consciousness. The dalit philosophy as a philosophy of marginalized with reference to suggesting a philosophy of liberation problematizes the very philosophical constructs themselves. It is metaphysics against metaphysics. It is a kind of search of logic of liberation against the logic of domination. The logic of liberation or the principles of liberation that goes to constitute the question of dalit liberation is not exclusively for the dalit people, in fact many who appreciate, understand the dalit category not in the sense of a reference to a caste category. Dalit means an anti-caste category. Limbale defines Dalit in the broadest possible way to include all the dispossessed and oppressed of India:

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits. The term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable

castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included. (Limbale 11)

Dalit is not the categorization of caste. Dalit refers to against any social discrimination. In that way dalit is a discourse that X and Y needs to be brought under for a discussion. Therefore, it is not a discussion of a particular category, class of people that it is their interest and it is the interest of the common person, the academicians, the professional because the dalit looks at the issue of domination that both X is dominant or subjugated because his consciousness is subjugated within the metaphysics of domination and now why his consciousness is also dominated within the metaphysics of the slave domination. Therefore, the question of philosophy of liberation seriously takes into account the philosophical principles that go to constitute, justify and sanctify the philosophies of domination. This is one side of it.

The other principle that needs to be accounted for example the question of identity discussing from the point of view of dalit reality, dalit philosophy of liberation, identity is no more singular. So, if it is no more individual and the question of liberation is no more individual, liberation in terms of individual 'mukti', the dalit looks at the whole question of liberation totally from a different angle. That is why the dalit search in the area of philosophy is to problematize the very philosophy. It is a very insightful search. In that sense the question of identity for the dalit is plural. Identity that looks not as a single caste category of this X and Y. Identity is a relational category, dalit is creative category, dalit is a relational category, in other words it looks for, it work towards a communitarian plurality of selves as identities. In this sense of the relationality the whole context of philosophy of liberation of the dalits has to be located and that is a very serious search that has to be taken into account.

There are four important agents or principles that construct collective or liberative dalit consciousness. One is education; it has been known from the surveys that education is the master key to dalit liberation and dalit empowerment. Lack of education breaks the spirits of Dalits. Bama Faustina Soosairaj, a Tamil, Dalit feminist and novelist, understands it clearly and says, "Because we haven't been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes" (Bama 118).

Education operates at two levels- at the material level, when dalits are deprived of any other possession- education operates as a vehicle for social mobility. Second being that it creates critical consciousness to question within them how they are, why they are and where should they move. Second agent is- a sense of history, dalit history. Most of the problems for the peoples are because they do not know who they are, where they come from, and why they are here. So, a clear sense of history, a historical consciousness creates in them an empowered self. Now, this is what I am, I have been in this state because of somebody else. So, I have to protest, I have to resist it. The social movements too play a very crucial role in constructing collective consciousness because a dalit as an individual feel himself as a submissive being but when he is related to other people in terms of social movements, when they come together and then see that

they are big group and they have power, they have potential. So, the mobilization due to social movements becomes an embodiment of dalit power or dalit leadership which is related to this. Even after sixty years dalits speak of Dr. Ambedkar as he becomes the embodiment of an ideal leadership for dalit emancipation and empowerment. Lot of leadership coming from every State and for Uttar Pradesh youth, it is Kashiram who gave a sense of political identity to the dalit people and that is a kind of a powerful tool in bringing people together as power. It is not I am sitting alone, I am not standing alone but I am connected to people now. I am not one, I am many, since, this sense of collective self gives him the power to protest, to assert, to demand, so it is no more a kind of begging, it is no more a kind of getting for some concessions but it is claiming for my right. It is claiming for my share and all this happened in a collective manner. Social movements play a very crucial role and the leadership is a kind of stimulant factor to bring people together. That is why all the cultural festivals, protest movements are different kinds of means of bringing people together to feel this collective self within them. So, these are some of the agents which create, construct collective Dalit consciousness in the subordinated community.

In conclusion, “if we do not like something we should refuse it only after knowing all about it. We should not say no to it without knowing anything about it” (Gunasekaran 72). Moreover, “The pathos only serves, however, to highlight the symphony of existence. Flowers bloom only to droop; huts crumble and dreams are swept away like cobwebs, but all this does not invalidate the act of blossoming. Huts have to be built and dreams must be dreamt. Man is entitled to fight for the preservation of his right to dream. Life goes on” (Mohanty vii-viii). So, this paper is an appeal to the readers and society at large to not to be friendly with the rogue of the divides in humanity, else would end up in jail of inhumanity.

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