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Negotiating Environmental Injustice, Caste Oppression and Dalit Politics in Daya Pawar's *Baluta*

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Abstract:

Dalit autobiographies share an inextricable relation with some dominant issues like environmental politics, societal castigation and the perennial struggle between oppressed downtrodden community and the people enjoying privileged social status. Daya Pawar's canonical text *Baluta* enunciates the saga of an outcaste community called "Mahar" in interior villages of Maharashtra and in Mumbai. My paper endeavours to manifest how the malignant impact of casteism makes Mahars an easy prey to social and environmental injustice. My paper also tries to illumine an insight into the psychological torment and humiliation meted out to the Mahar while they try to procure their share of *Baluta*. It approaches to showcase how names, unhealthy habitation at the borderland of the village, linguistic pattern and occupational identities assert the ignominious social position of Mahar community. The paper proposes to focus on certain social and cultural changes brought by Ambedkarite or Dalit-Buddhist movement in the lives of Mahar people. It also analyses how the forced and mass migration of the Mahar community to cities, their conversion to Buddhism and the rejection of performing age-old profession of petty servile demeaning jobs give a new dimension to their social, ethnic and cultural identities.

Keywords: environmental injustice, societal castigation, casteism.

"The Dalit's subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. It is eternal and unalterable" – (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Limbale 3)

Dalit autobiographies share an inextricable relation with some contentious problems and allied issues like societal castigation, environmental politics, and perennial struggle of humiliation and ignominy of the oppressed downtrodden community at the hands of people enjoying privileged social status. Daya Pawar's canonical text *Baluta* enunciates the saga of an outcaste community called "Mahar". *Baluta* is not only a bildungsroman showcasing the tale of a Mahar boy from childhood to maturity; it is also the chronicle of an untouchable caste called "Mahar". The Mahars become an easy prey to dual oppressions namely social victimization and environmental injustice. This paper intends to focus the connection between social exclusion and environmental exclusion. It endeavours to highlight the psychological torment and humiliation meted out to the Mahar while procuring their share of *Baluta*. It approaches to showcase how a set of names, unhealthy habitation at the borderland of the village and in the fringes of Mumbai,

linguistic pattern, and occupational identities are inextricably interwoven with the Mahar people's ignominious ethnic and social identity. Daya Pawar's canonical text *Baluta* grapples with the multiple layers of marginality which affect and shape the identity of Mahar community. Under the umbrella term of "Dalit" Mahar community has carved a singular niche for itself. But before highlighting the dilemmas and traumas of a Dalit community we need to pay focus on the very definition of the term "Dalit". The term Dalit as defined on the webpage of "National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights" goes as follows:

The word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means "broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed." Those previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes, and Harijans are today increasingly adopting the term "Dalit" as a name for themselves. "Dalit" refers to one's caste rather than a class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have borne the stigma of "untouchability" because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. Dalits are 'outcastes' falling outside the traditional four-fold caste system consisting of the hereditary Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra classes; they are considered impure and polluting and are therefore physically and socially excluded and isolated from the rest of society. ("Who are Dalits? & what is Untouchability?")

Another definition of Dalit as given by Sharankumar Limbale goes as follows:

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm labourers, workers, the suffering masses, nomadic and criminal tribes. (Limbale 30)

Now the paper would approach towards making the nexus between Dalits and social marginality. In the essay entitled "Concepts in Social and Spatial Marginality" by Assefa Meheretru, Bruce Wan, Pigozy and Lawrence Sommers locate varied classifications of Marginality.

Marginality is a complex condition of disadvantage which individuals and communities experience as a result of vulnerabilities that may arise from unfavourable environmental, cultural, social, political and economic factors. Although most discussions of marginality deal with distressed economic and ecological conditions of life, the concept of marginality can also be applied to cultural, social and political conditions of disadvantage. (p.2)

In Pawar's *Baluta* the social marginalization as well as ostracization from using natural resources like water, lays bare the maltreatment meted out to the socially stigmatized Mahar community. Daya Pawar's memoir not only seeks to explore the marginalization of untouchables from upper-class society but also stresses marginalization of Mahar within the marginalised Dalit

community. The text also delineates through the portrayal of characters how Mahar people are ostracized and face “double marginalisation”. They are even segregated from interacting and sitting at par with other Dalit groups like Thakars. From the very introductory chapter, the author lays bare the list of names that inarguably proclaim the downtrodden people’s ignominious existence. Just like Ambedkar who was convinced that caste was rooted in the Vedas and Shastras, (the sacred scripture of Hindus), Daya Pawar also reasserts the same belief by vehemently hurling attack on Manusmriti which from ancient times gives genesis to the idea of stratification of class. The social marginalisation begins its journey since nativity. The children are named reckoning with their low-born diminutive status. According to Daya Pawar:

The Manusmriti has a list of names for Shudras; it requires that our names should reflect society’s contempt for us. Brahmin’s names signify learnedness- “Vidyadhar”, for instance, Kshatriyas’ names signify valour – like “Balaram”. Baishyas can be named after the goddess of wealth, say “Laxmikant”. And Shudras? For us, names like declare our low-caste status. That was the order of things for centuries. (5)

The panorama of Dalit Literature inarguably manifests the social exclusion of untouchable communities. Mahars face exclusion in the village of Maharashtra as well as in metropolitan cities. Their existence in pigeon-holed rooms in Kawakhana in Mumbai proves their dehumanized status. Pawar’s experience substantiates this.

The Mahars lived in squalid homes, each the size of a henhouse, each henhouse having two or three sub-tenants. Wooden boxes acted as partitions. But they were more than that: we stuffed our lives into those boxes. At night, temporary walls would come up, made of rags hanging from ropes. (7)

But probably this vehement practice of social oppression inculcates and induces a strong ethnic bonding among the Mahars. What comes to fore with Daya Pawar’s narrative is the ethnic bonding between Mahar people. Their cocooned existence at the boundary of a village or in the circumference or fringes of metropolitan cities makes them harbour a close bonhomie with each other. The sense of solidarity, group ethos, and cultural rites makes the Mahar community feel united and help them to resist the invasion of external force. The following excerpt bears close testimony to that:

We supported each other. During a fight, it would seem to the outsider that the combatants would never speak to each other again; that afterward we would go our separate ways, but nothing like that ever happened. If you try to uproot a bean-pod creeper, all the bean-pods will fall. The Mahars were no different. (10)

Throughout the course of the novel, we would see that how the waves of globalization and the struggle for existence sets the Mahar community’s existence unsettled at the village and lead towards the disintegration of the Mahar community’s ethnic bonding. From the very first

chapter, the readers are introduced to the humdrum lifestyle and the demeaning jobs imposed on Mahars. The Mahars are entitled to work as scavengers in the city. The Mahar women are worst affected. They “scavenged scraps of paper, rags, broken glass, and iron from the streets, sorted those out and sell them in the next morning” (7). Mahar women receive trenchant oppression at the hands of their counterparts. They are doubly colonized. First by their inmates and secondly by the rich people who would try to rob the honour of those Mahar women. Daya Pawar with painstaking realism succeeds in projecting the plight of Mahar women who remain vulnerable to the lecherous gaze of upper caste society. *Baluta* also shows Dalit women are treated as scapegoats. We find how ‘Religion’ is employed as a tool for alluring the women from Dalit stratum. The upper echelons assign the outcast women the task of performing certain ritual rites. In this novel, we find Taibai had been dedicated to Khandoba (a village goddess) in childhood. Sacrificing a girl child at the altar of folk God or Goddess would entitle them to observe life-long celibacy and end up doing sex work. Under the cloak of religion, the Dalit women are forced to assuage the carnal thirst of men. The vulnerability of Mahar women is brought into force by deftly handling and portraying the wretched condition of Taibai.

The acute dominance over the subaltern Mahar people by Marathi people and other upper-caste is manifested by a sheer exhibition of isolation. This can be analyzed from eco-socialist perspective. Eco-socialism defines or states that “the difference in the distribution of wealth is at the base of such an experience of environments. Social exclusion leads to environmental exclusion, where the poorer classes do not have the same access to clean air or water” (Nayar 247). *Baluta* literally means a share in village’s production or a share in village’s harvest. In the introduction by Jerry Pinto (who translated Daya Pawar’s *Baluta* in English) the term is defined as follows:

It is interesting that Pawar chose to name his book for a demeaning practice that kept the Mahar in something close to bonded labour to the village community at large. There were supposed to be baarahbalutedars, twelve categories of labour which were to be offered free to the village by those who were born into certain castes. They would not be paid to perform those services but in return, they were entitled to Baluta, a share in all of the village’s produce. (xii)

The list of services includes skinning and disposing of dead cattle, announcing deaths and births throughout the village, playing music at the wedding of upper-caste etc. As the narrative runs:

We were supposed to run in front of the horse of any important person who came into the village, tend his animals, feed and water them and give them medicines. We made the proclamations announcing funerals from village to village. We dragged away from the carcasses of dead animals. We chopped firewood. We played music day and night at festivals and welcome new bridegrooms at the

village borders on their wedding days. For ball this, what did we get? Baluta, our share of the village harvest. (66)

The Mahars have to go through an utter ordeal of humiliation while they queue up to receive their share of grains from farmers. Their social castigation and stigmatized social position don't let them perform or choose any respectable profession to meet both ends meet. The author deftly projects the wretched condition of Mahar people. In this regard, it would be relevant to constitute a correlation between Pawar's journey from childhood to maturation with the trials and tribulations undergone by Dalit community. Because of Pawar's *Baluta* inarguably laden with collective and identical experience of all downtrodden Dalit class. Saharan Kumar Limbale's minute observation of Dalit's pitiful existence is worth to be mentioned. Alok Mukherjee (translator of Limbale's book) makes an insightful observation in the chapter entitled "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*":

Limbale establishes Dalits' subalternity not in a colonial structure, but in the caste-base social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. Here, the village becomes the metropolis, and Dalits exist literally on the periphery. Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements; they are actually outside the boundary of the village. This physical segregation signifies other separations. Dalits do the work, live the life, eat the food and wear the garment that the upper-caste Hindu will not. They draw water from a separate well and cremate their dead in a separate space. Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's Other. (Limbale 2)

In cultural programmes and in wrestling matches the Mahar boys perform the role of mute spectators. A demarcation line is drawn between Maharwada and the rest of the village. They always remain as victims of social oppression. But the cantankerous vile practice of social oppression expands its tentacles to other spheres of life. The demarcation zone expands its boundaries to the realm of environmental injustice too. This paper approaches to specify how the ecological spaces are denied to the Dalit communities. The Dalits in *Baluta* especially Mahar are vulnerable to environmental injustice. They are denied to access natural resources. Be it land or water the Mahar, as well as other Dalit Castes, receive the ugly brunt of casteism. Environmental racism or it will be perfect to term environmental politics is closely interwoven with social exclusion of minority groups. In *Baluta* by Daya Pawar readers can locate how the invisible demarcation line is drawn between the wells used by the Mahars and the wells used by people from upper caste like Marathis. The very existence of Dalit community is rendered as a pollutant. The obnoxious practice of discrimination of ecological resource finds the moving presentation in the humiliating incident which Daya undergoes while studying in a school. Even education fails to eradicate this persistent issue. As the Mahars are considered pollutant other castes refrain themselves from giving water to even a school-going boy. Daya Pawar recounts "If we were

thirsty, there was no water for us at school; we had to go back to the Maharwada to drink. The Chabharwada was close by but they too would not give us water”(45).

Here is an excerpt of Pawar’s experience on this:

But it was the quarrel over water that continued at a low boil. The Mahar well was to the west of the village. To fetch water we had to cross the village, and walk past the Maruti temple too. The villagers’ well was below the village. The local Board has a notice there: ‘This well is open to people of all castes and creeds.’ Be that as it may, no Mahar was ever seen there; (70)

Another context which can be interpreted from eco-critical perspective is the incident that happened with Thakras. In the novel, the readers see how the right of indigenous poor people in the woods of forest has been snatched away by forest guards. The idea of ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (an idea developed by Ramchandra Guha) propagates the right of local communities “to use nature for survival without (First World) intervention on behalf of animals or nature”(Nayar249). But here the right of Adivasi is snatched away from under the disguise of eco-preservation.

The Mahars are also castigated from entering into temples. It is assumed that their very presence would pollute the sacred abode of God. Even the Mahar women are victims of social disparagement for letting their shadows fall on Maruti temple. But the text shows the counter-resistance employed by Mahar people. They don’t take resort to passive resistance. The protest against Marathas by Mahar community can be considered as a stepping stone towards upsetting the hegemonic power of Marathas.

One day the village woke up to the fact that the Mahar women were polluting the Maruti temple when their shadows fell on it as they passed up and down to fetch water. So they closed the road. The other route to our well went past the lake, a mile-long struggle against sludge and slime. The Mahars fought back; they took recourse to the law. ‘We won’t give up our right of way. You can install Maruti somewhere else’, the Mahars announced combatively.(71)

This protest in embryo form paves the way to the protest for entering the temple of Kalaram Satyagraha. The Ambedkarite movement instills in the Mahar people to fight for equality. The struggle for seeking entrance at Kalaram Satyagraha is also an offshoot of this movement which imparts a radical transformation in the people of this subaltern clan.

The Mahar Movement in Maharashtra initiated by Ambedkar brings in various social and occupational changes in the lives of Mahar people. The paper proposes to focus on certain social and cultural changes brought by Ambedkarite movement in the lives of Mahar people. It also analyses how the forced and mass migration of the Mahar community to cities, their conversion to Buddhism and the rejection of performing age-old profession of musicians give a new

dimension to their social, ethnic and cultural identities. ‘The Mahar Movement’ for giving equality to untouchable castes dissuades the Mahar from performing demeaning jobs and tries to invoke in them the lost sense of social dignity. As Sharankumar Limbale notices

The experiences articulated in Dalit Literature have not yet been expressed in any other literature. They are the experiences of a particular community. Experiences conveyed in Dalit literature have several characteristics. They constitute an engagement in self-search to achieve self-respect and the rejection of tradition and a religion that are opposed to such self-respect. They make a rebellion against overbearing religion and tradition, as well as hypocrisy masquerading under seductive names such as freedom or democracy. (Limbale 32)

From time immemorial Mahar community has experienced the pangs of social subjugation. Ambedkar addresses every disparaging issue and tries to fight for the right of Mahars. The continuous social exploitation of Mahar, harrowing subjugation at the hands of upper castes instill in them a fervent desire to liberate them from the palpable bondage of casteism. The movement started by Ambedkar for equal right also gives vent to this urge. In *Baluta* we find the mass conversion of Mahar Community to Buddhism from Hinduism. C. D. Naik, in the preface to “Buddhism and Dalits: Social Philosophy and Tradition” also discusses the reasons for this conversion with a critical eye:

The most compassionate feature of Buddhism was its adoption of Dalits as its own and rendering service to uplift them on par with generality. Dr. Ambedkar, the 14th Dalai Lama, Yen. Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksha and alike belonged to this social stream of Buddhism. They have always espoused the cause of the most degraded and downtrodden sections of society and set them free from the thralldom of social slavery, economic exploitation, educational backwardness and political subjugation. (12)

Pawar recounts the event when Ambedkar converted lakhs of his followers to Buddhism. This brings a social and cultural change in the lives of Mahar people. They refuse to worship Hindu goddess and strive towards leading the life of Buddhist in search of peace. Their sheer aversion to performing any Hindu rituals finds expression in Daya’s reminiscence:

When we converted to Buddhism. We promised: “I will not worship the Hindu religion’s Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, nor any of the thirty-three crore gods associated with it” (257).

But neither Dalit Politics nor the Mahars mass conversion to Buddhism effaces the identity they harbour from their nativity. Their ethnic identities as Mahar always pull back them to the tangled cobweb of casteism. To denote their servile past heritage as Mahar they are classified as “Neo-Buddhist”. The author scathingly criticizes this hypocrisy and dubiousness and interrogates with a tinge of sarcasm. He asks “When a Hindu converts to Islam or Christianity, how come we don’t hear terms like neo-Christian or neo-Muslim?” (259). So, the

overarching umbrella of Buddhism even fails to shelter the Mahars from societal castigation. They remain an eternal prey to societal exclusion.

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