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Narratives from the Margins: A Reading of Tamil Dalit Literature

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Abstract:

The paper analyses the rise of Dalit literature in Tamil in the early 1990s as embedded in a historical clash between polarising narratives pertaining to a monolithic nation and the counter narrative emerging from the hitherto silenced and marginalised communities. The centenary celebrations of Ambedkar allowed wider dissemination of his writings through translation into regional languages, most notably in Tamil. This provided an impetus to marginalised communities to find a voice of their own distinct from linguistic or class identities thrust upon them by Dravidian or Marxist hegemony. Dalit literary discourse emerged as a powerful narrative that interrogated a homogenised political construct and identity consolidation. The critique problematised narrativizing the Nation and the Self and paved the way for a pluralist, inclusive literary discourse. The paper seeks to historicise the rise of Dalit literature in Tamil and argues for wider translation of Tamil Dalit texts into other Indian languages to initiate a dialogue on re-configuring the self, community and polity.

Keywords: **The Nation and the Self, Interventionist discourse, Aesthetics, subversive politics, marginalised.**

The Constitution of India framed by the constituent assembly under the chairmanship of Babasaheb Ambedkar was a historic, aspirational construct of a nation that had been recently freed from the yoke of colonial rule. The Preamble set forth an egalitarian social matrix, promising equal opportunities to all its citizens. The 42nd Amendment in 1971 inducted two key words, secularism and socialism, into the Preamble thereby enhancing the representative and aspirational discourse of the nation in the making. Such a discourse is, however, seriously challenged, by Dalit writers who

endeavour to narrativise the nation in their writings from their marginalised location in the society. As Kancha Ilaiah observes, "The makers of history themselves should become the writers of history so that the interaction between history and the makers of history is a living interaction" (Mohanty: 2004: 227). If the nation was sought to be constructed by the leaders through the Constitution, Dalit poets rip it apart and posit their own experiential account of the nation that is entirely at variance with what is enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution.

A Tamil Dalit poet, Raj Kumar N.D. questions:

Does 'we' mean us?

Or does it mean that

You are different

And I am different

We are different

And you are different?

(Muse India,2006)

And another poet, Ravi Kumar cautions:

If we just keep on watching

We can only give testimonies (Muse India,2006)

Dalit literary discourse in Tamil emerged as a distinct literary trend in the early 1990s. Despite a strong tradition of 'committed' literary writing in Tamil, Dalit voice remained unrecorded, unrepresented in the writings inspired by either Dravidian or Marxist ideology which dominated modern literary trends and movements in Tamil. Dalits had been subsumed by the category of 'worker' or 'the poor' whose caste identity was left unspecified and therefore remained unrepresented or foregrounded in literature. The self-respect movement subsumed the Dalits within the backward castes, many of whom were drawn from the landed gentry and were often the direct oppressors of the Dalit farmhands. Dalits remained excluded from the benefits that other backward castes managed to bargain from the state. Literature inspired by Dravidian ideology did not foreground caste inequalities that lay embedded within a homogenous linguistic community. The privileging of the Tamil identity silenced the Dalit voice rather unfairly. As Raj Kumar N.D. writes:

*Only the words, 'all are of one family
of one race, that all are one people'
Are the silent killers.
(Muse India, 2006)*

Certain events and political decisions of the late eighties and early nineties facilitated the emergence of a distinct Dalit literary writing in Tamil. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 paved the way for an interrogation of Marxist paradigms that governed literary representation in mainstream Tamil literature. The centenary celebrations of Babasaheb Ambedkar in 1990 marked by translation of his works into Tamil enabled the marshalling of focus on Dalits in literature.

The decision to open the locks of Babri Masjid in June 1989 by the government led by Rajiv Gandhi, the decision to implement the Mandal Commission report on 27% reservation for the Other Backward Castes in government sector jobs and in educational institutions in August 1990 by the government led by V.P. Singh led to significant polarisation of society on the lines of caste and creed. One clear manifestation in the political domain was the Rath Yatra in 1990 initiated by L.K. Advani. The intent of re-ordering the construct of Hindu selfhood was articulated in the slogan, *Garv Se Kaho Hum Hindu Hain* -- Be Proud to Be a Hindu. This sought to consciously undermine the ideal of 'secularism' introduced in the Preamble to indicate the core principles of the Republic. These emerged as some of the significant decisions that impinged upon the emergence of Dalit literature in Tamil. The context of re-configuration of power relations in a unipolar world coupled with the post-Mandal, post-Babri social rubric in India indicate the political, cultural milieu that allowed for a radical re-narrativisation of the self and the nation by those hitherto marginalised in the arena of political as well as literary representation, It is in the context of such a historical backdrop that Dalits in Tamil Nadu took to articulating their experiences, aspirations and forms of oppression they have been subjected to even after Independence, in their writings. Dalit assertion of identity and self-articulation requires to be historicised as it is essentially an interventionist, political and subversive form of writing.

Advani's Rath Yatra yielded his party a sizeable 120 seats in the Parliament, the following year in 1991. The Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, followed by communal

riots and blasts in different parts of India ushered in a sectarian politics that sought to woo Dalit votes under the guise of Hindu identity. Dalits in Tamil Nadu turned towards Ambedkar's writings, widely disseminated during his centenary year in 1990, through translation into Tamil, to find their voice against oppression and resist the same through self-articulation in literary domain. The Hindu nationalist challenge at the close of the 20th century polarised the nation on the lines of religion, caste and ethnicity. The "dynamic interconnections" that Manoranjan Mohanty outlines between class, caste and gender in the "context of social transformation" are well glimpsed in the Dalit writings that emerged in the context outlined above. (Mohanty: 2004: 25)

An examination of Dalit literature in Tamil between 1992 and 2002 in the context of events that shaped the nation's history in the said period, marked by demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujarat riots that took place in 2002 would strengthen the argument that the reformulation of the nation in the 90s and thereafter took a strong revivalist, Hindu nationalist tenor. The polarisation of the nation on caste and religious lines was institutionalised in Indian politics in the post-Mandal, post-Babri demolition period by leading political parties at the national and regional level. The discourse of Hindu nationalist agenda sought to contain identity formation in our nation within the paradigm of its reformulation of the nation as a majoritarian Hindu entity. This trend that began to permeate the national political domain filtered through the cultural space very quickly making rather ominous inroads amongst the middle class of our country, hitherto proud of its liberal, secular profile.

I wish to argue that such a divisive, alarming formulation of the nation was seriously interrogated and undermined by Dalit writers writing in the period in Tamil roughly between 1989 and 2002 and thereafter. We thus have two sets of narrativisation of the nation and questions which are vital to identity formation. One was formulated by political representatives and ideologues of religion, politicians, the mass media and an alternative one as envisioned by the socially marginalised and economically exploited community which had largely remained excluded from mainstream corridors of power, culture and literature. The Dalit literary trajectory in Tamil traces an oppositional trend in terms of its production, quality of protest and literary strategies in the reformulation of

genre, diction, form, narrative and aesthetic paradigm which offer a powerful, subversive sub-text to nationalist/revivalist discourse regarding the self and the nation.

Sivakami's *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* (1989) opened up the debate concerning a corrupt political leadership that requires to be dismantled and replaced by an organised, educated and ideologically committed Dalit youth that would strive to move away from Dalit leadership that stands co-opted in the prevailing political system. It also initiated a self-reflexive mode of writing that addressed intra Dalit friction and the presence of Dalit patriarchy. Gauri in the novel embodies the vision of hope and an intelligent, engendered social module that puts to practice Ambedkarite thought, Marxist praxis and feminist vision to address Dalit concerns. Sivakami's second novel *Aanandai* (1992) put forward a sustained critique of domestic violence prevalent among the Dalit community and the violent abuse of Dalit women by Dalit men – fathers, husbands, sons, landlords, fathers-in-law and the containment of Dalit women's sexuality. The twice oppressed lives of Dalit women, on grounds of caste and gender as discussed in the works of Sivakami and Bama offer a rigorous interrogation of the monolithic, masculinist culture that had been held out as the normative in our society.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) offers an exercise in demolition of another kind, nonetheless no less political and irreversible in its impact. Adopting the autobiographical, confessional mode, Bama's narrative is a documentation of oppression against the individual and the community at the hands of the state, church, upper castes and further, Dalit men's containment of their women folk at home and outside. *Karukku's* implication of the state in the systematic oppression of Dalits (in particular the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu) is a scathing critique of the 'Mera Bharat Mahan' campaign that sought to homogenise as well as sanitise the nation. The caste inequalities, the absence of social justice and the political and social marginalisation of Dalits in post-independence India as shown in *Karukku* seriously undermines the cherished ideals of the anti-colonial nationalist discourse and exposes the claims of the revivalist discourse as hollow and inauthentic. *Karukku's* critique of institutionalised religion's essentially upper casteist, patriarchal, unjust and discriminatory attitude towards the Dalit community points out the oppressive, casteist Hindu society's exclusionary practices that

pushed Dalits to convert to Christianity. However, the casteist structure had invaded the Church and its rigorous entrenchment as reflected in its treatment of Dalit Christians was no less discriminatory. At one stroke *Karukku* demolishes the Hindu revivalist construct of the nation as a monolithic, Hindu entity and exposes institutionalised church as non-egalitarian and oppressive towards Dalits. The fissures within Hindu society on the one hand and the hypocrisies among the Christian elite on the other hand that *Karukku* shows up offer a significant interrogation of the socialist, secular construct of the nation from the subaltern position, indicative of awakening of the construct of a sub-nation and its distinctive identity formulation.

At another level, Bama's *Karukku* demolishes the traditional aesthetic paradigm and literary norms. Her writing transgresses conventional categorisation concerning genre, diction, style and narrative. The intersection of literary forms of autobiography, fiction, testimony or conversion narrative in *Karukku* and *Sangati* is a deliberate subversive strategy that argues for an alternative literary/aesthetic structure. The repetitive, cyclic form of narration in Bama's fiction underscores the recurring, continued oppression of Dalits by dominant castes in collusion with state power. Her use of Dalit women's vocabulary, and subversive humour as tools to critique casteist structures that lay embedded in the functioning of the panchayat, the police, agricultural sector, the Church and educational institutions has helped change the course of Dalit writings in Tamil. Bama's *Sangati* (1994) presents Dalit women's cultural history and critiques Dalit patriarchy as an alignment of hegemonic structures of power. *Sangati* offers a counterpoint to upper caste, middle class version of Indian culture as limited. The violent containment of Dalit women's sexuality and subversive strategies of Dalit women to counter the same, often falling back on humour are the highlights of Bama's writing.

Dalit writing in Tamil can be viewed as a counter narrative to the majoritarian discourse thereby subverting privileged, normative notions of cultural, political and religious motifs that are vital to identity formation. Markku's *Yathirai* (1993), in its title and narrative makes an oblique critique of the Rath Yatra politics. In the novel, Dalit Christians are not allowed to participate in the chariot festival organised by the Church. The Church is shown to be dominated by upper caste bishops and archbishops who do not let Dalit Christians to participate in Church rituals, festivals, or in the choir. Dalit

Christians cannot bury even their dead in the Christian cemetery. The protagonist, Father Raja renounces the Church at the end of the novel:

“I hereby renounce this corporatised church. I hereby renounce my renunciation. The god that you uphold is no god. I am going to announce to the faithful there is no god in this church. This church has been sold out to the rich and high castes. Your god is only wealth, position and caste hatred. You may keep this god to your (holy) self.” (241, tr. mine).

Dalit short story collections by Unjairajan, Abimani, Idayavendan, Imaiya as those by Sivakami offer a critique of casteist structures within the Hindu social structure. They also posit collective protest by the community and show how organised action yields positive results. In Idayavendan’s *Nandanar Theru* (1991), the Dalit community gets tired by persistent indifference by the Municipal corporation concerning insanitary conditions prevailing in the Dalit cheri and absence of public toilets in the colony. Dalits decide collectively to defecate before the commissioner’s office to draw his attention to their long pending demand. Gunasekaran’s plays *Bali Aadugal*, *Arikuri* (1999, 2002) critique the nexus between patriarchal, brahminical and state authoritarian forces that held sway over the country at the turn of the century culminating in the politics of intolerance and hatred as witnessed in the Gujarat riots of 2002. His play *Pavalakodi* (2001) offers a feminist critique of Hindu religious icons and their collusion with patriarchal power structure. Gunasekaran’s theatrical innovations and reordering of theatre idiom, stage traditions are radical and subversive both in form and content.

Anbadavan’s *Nerupil Kaychiya Parai* (2003) alerts us to the continued marginalisation of Dalits in the job market and the denial of Constitutional guarantees to the community. The poet announces in one of his poems, *Ini Em Murai*, (It’s now our turn) that armed resistance would not be unethical to overturn the prevailing casteist structure. Another Dalit poet, Raj Kumar ND observes, “*He who desires peace under oppression / is a fraud...*” (*Muse India*, 2006). Gunasekaran in his autobiography, *Vadu*, comments, “Our villages signify castes and castes signify villages in our country. And it is such villages that Gandhi adored so much.” (*Vadu*: 91)

The Ambedkarite edict to Dalits of “Agitate Educate Organise” is upheld in Dalit writings. The presence of Ambedkar in Dalit theatre, both as an ideological presence and

as a character (for instance in *Bali Aadugal*), adherence to his analytical strategies in Dalit fiction and his agitational style adopted in Dalit poetry are, in themselves, a counter narrative to the grand narratives of mainstream literary discourse inspired by Gandhian/Nehruvian principles/policy. If we concede that there can be no neutrality in accounts of history, then surely, Dalit narrativisation of history is an authentic, experiential narrative that reflects on social processes. Gopal Guru raises the question, “Can literature produce reflections on social phenomena? Can literature lead to epistemological knowledge?” (Guru:2007). The answer, from my readings of Dalit writings would be a vociferous, yes. If we need to revise literary or theoretical touchstones to concede this, then we had better do so.

Dalit critiquing of caste embedded social structure is not a well theorised one as in their writings primacy of thought prevails over theory. If theory is elitist thought, Dalit literature derived from people’s tradition of self-articulation is thought-derived, not theory driven. The stark criticism of continuing colonial social structure in independent India in the words of a poor, landless Dalit woman to writer Hugo Gorringe as quoted by him in his book *Untouchable Citizens* (2005) would illustrate the above argument:

Arulmozhi tells the writer, “They say we got independence in 1947 from you, from the white people. But they (higher castes) are the only ones who gained independence and they seek to suppress us just as much as your lot did.” (2005: 231)

Dalit literature in Tamil is not an isolated social or literary phenomenon. Its liberationist agenda can be better realised when it gets translated into other Indian languages so that a healthy traffic amongst Dalit writings from other languages like Telugu, Marathi, Kannada, Hindi and Gujarati which have a rich and time- tested corpus of literary output succeed in engaging with their counterpart in Tamil. Dalit publishing houses like Vitiyal has already begun the process through its translation of Marathi autobiographies in Tamil. Laxman Mane’s *Upara* (2001), Kishore Shantabai Kale’s *Kulathi* (2001) are examples of such endeavours.

However, Tamil Dalit texts are more readily translated into English than to other Indian languages. Bama’s *Karukku* was made available in English in 2000, *Sangati* in 2005, Imaiyam’s *Koveru Kazhudaigal* in 2001 and Sivakami’s *Pazhainya Kazhidalum* in 2006, the last being translated by the author herself. Although English translations

grant Tamil Dalit writers greater visibility in the academia, they fail to marshal a vigorous political impact in terms of mobilization of Dalit masses or reckoning with its subversive political strategies in terms of thought as well as craft. Tamil Dalit writers' innovative, experimental, interrogative craft is often lost in translation as the original premise that is being attacked is unfamiliar to the English reading public. The deliberate use of Dalit vocabulary, colloquial, spoken rhythms of the language remains untapped in English. Besides a homogenised, standardised English adopted by the translators often leaves the subversive import of the original unappreciated and eludes access. Marginalised voices translate more powerfully into Hindi or other Indian languages as they share familiar, at times common literary traditions, idiomatic vocabulary and subversions of such tropes work out better to the mutual advantage of both the languages.

Dalit writers themselves privilege English as a source of dissemination but I believe that such a choice seriously limits the impact of the political import of their writings at ground level in the domain of agitationist politics. A smoother traffic amongst the different Indian languages would greatly enable Dalit writing to realise its subversive politics. The radical innovations at the level of craft and aesthetic norms can be better nuanced in other Indian languages. Besides, the interconnectedness between Dalit narrativisation of the nation and the self and its dissemination through translation would greatly aid the future course of Dalit movement and writing. If Dalit writing is a re-narration of the nation's history and culture, translation of such writing would help in evolving a more authentic, grounded, self-reflexive image of the nation that seeks to accommodate rather than contain multiple, differing, dissenting, interrogative perspectives on the nation and identity formation of its citizens.

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