

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Spectrum of Caste, Identity, and Resistance in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Hindu*

Vikram Singh

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Maharaja Ganga Singh University,
Bikaner, Rajasthan.

&

Dr. Santosh Kanwar Shekhawat

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Maharaja Ganga Singh University,
Bikaner, Rajasthan.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15316366>

Article History: Submitted-23/03/2025, Revised-12/04/2025, Accepted-26/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

Abstract:

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Hindu* is a powerful Dalit literary work that interrogates the deeply entrenched structures of caste oppression, identity politics, and resistance in Indian society. This study examines how Limbale depicts the living reality of Dalit communities and their fight for self-assertion and dignity by critically analyzing the book through the prism of caste marginalization. The research explores the protagonist's internal struggles and outward resistance against Brahmanical rule by looking at the interconnections between caste and identity. The novel reinterprets what resistance means in a rigorously stratified society in addition to exposing the sociopolitical systems that sustain exclusion. This analysis assesses Limbale's narrative techniques, character development, and ideological positioning using an analytical framework based on Dalit literary discourse and subaltern studies. At the end, it emerges as a crucial text

that challenges dominant caste narratives and reclaims Dalit agency, contributing significantly to the discourse on caste, identity, and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords: Limbale, Oppression, Resistance, Brahmanical, Dalit.

Caste is a social construction which has a connection with psychological phenomenon (Shopan & Nair 1). In this context, India is a vibrant name whose social structure is deeply entrenched in the hierarchical caste system. It has historically dictated social, economic, and political relationships. One of the most distinctive features of Indian society is casteism, which has served as an instrument of oppression as well as a social structure. The prevailing Brahminical ideology has maintained the idea that caste is a creation of God, establishing the higher castes as legitimate rulers and condemning Dalits and other oppressed groups to a life of servitude. Dalits, who continue to be at the bottom of the social scale, have been systematically excluded and denied basic human rights as a result of this ideology, which has been supported by religious and sociocultural narratives. In contemporary society, *jati* plays a crucial role in shaping the hierarchical framework of a given region. It establishes the structure through which social stratification is understood and maintained. According to Chakravarti, these divisions are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts, influencing social interactions and power dynamics within communities. He writes:

Broadly there are three major divisions: the upper castes which may comprise of the brahmanas, rajputs, banias and other castes such as the kayasthas in northern and eastern India; the middle castes such as the jats, yadavs, kurmis and other castes which could be dominant, but could also be part of the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) as these

backward castes are called officially, especially with reference to indicators of social status but who are not polluting; and the low castes who are at the bottom of the hierarchy and whose touch was often regarded as polluting. There is great regional variation in the placement of castes/jatis within a framework of hierarchy (Chakravarti 9-10).

Limbale in his novel *Hindu: A Novel* is set in 1990s and early 21st century, provides a microcosm of the larger social problems that Dalit populations experience by eloquently describing the repressive caste reality in the little Maharashtra village of Achalpur. The novel is set in the historical backdrop of Maharashtra, a place that played a crucial role in the Dalit struggle led by individuals such as Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, and subsequently electrified by the Dalit Panther struggle. The narrative is resonant with the cry for equality and resistance.

The novel captures the intense power struggle between Savarna (upper-caste) and Avarna (lower-caste) Hindus, highlighting the shifting dynamics of caste oppression. Unlike traditional portrayals of Brahminical dominance over Dalits, *Hindu* presents a nuanced exploration of intra-caste tensions, particularly between Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). With the socio-political and economic shifts following constitutional reforms in the post-1970s era, the OBCs, once marginalized as Shudras, have gained prominence and, in some cases, assumed roles of dominance, replicating oppressive structures against Dalits. Limbale critiques this emerging hierarchy, shedding light on how caste-based discrimination persists in evolving forms. However, *Hindu* departs from conventional Dalit narratives that focus solely on victimhood; instead, it adopts a tone of resilience and self-examination. The novel urges Dalits to reflect on

their internal challenges rather than attributing their struggles entirely to external forces, making it a significant literary intervention in the discourse on caste, identity, and resistance.

The study of caste has undergone significant evolution within social scientific literature, transitioning from early anthropological monographs on 'village communities' in the 1950s and 1960s to contemporary analyses of Dalit politics and identity. This transformation is not merely a matter of shifting scholarly focus but mirrors broader changes in societal discourse around caste. It also signifies the profound transformations in how the concept and category of caste have been understood and redefined over the past century. This progression reflects the dynamic interplay between academic inquiry and the evolving socio-political realities surrounding caste, showcasing its enduring relevance and complexity.

The hierarchical socio-religious Hindu system propagated the notions of filth and purity, which are the basis of the practice of untouchability. The concept of "varna," which refers to a social structure in which individuals were allocated certain vocations that reinforced caste groups and divides, is emphasized in ancient Indian Hindu literature like the Manusmriti and the Puranas. As "hereditary groups arranged hierarchically with unequal rights, a separation based on taboos of marriage rules, food customs, and a resistance to unification with others," the varna system divided individuals into four communities (Chaturvarna), often referred to as castes or jatis (Thapar 9). The four main caste groupings are the Vaishyas (merchants and businesspeople), the Sudras (servants and peasants), the Kshatriyas (warriors and leaders), and the Brahmins (priests and instructors). Ati-sudras, or "untouchables," were not included in the varna system. As a result, according to Anderson (154), the caste system was "constructed by religion and divided by occupation" (30). The four primary castes that make up the majority Indian social structure today are divided into almost 3,000 smaller castes, each of which is arranged

hierarchically above the others (D'Souza 13). The caste system, which encourages social inequality and division, is examined in this thesis along with its enduring effects and problems.

Surinder S. Jodhka in his book *Caste in Contemporary India* (2015) delves into the concept of caste as a "closed system," wherein "succeeding generations did similar kinds of work and lived more or less similar kinds of lives" (6). Ambedkar also described caste as a "closed class" (Moon 15), emphasizing that it is not a class that allows for movement. Ambedkar stated that this exclusive system started when Brahmins decided to be married to each other. Since the inferior imitates the superior rather than the other way about and imitation intensifies "the greater the social distance between the two groups," as Gabriel Tarde calls social imitation, other castes adopted this process (Jaffrelot 33). As a result, Ambedkar said that endogamy is a prominent example of how the "caste system evolved because Brahmins were imitated by other social groups," not because Brahmins forced it on society (33). "A belief in the superiority of the Brahmins and of the acquiescence by other castes of their inferiority" (Ambedkar 17) served as the foundation for and conformity to the social order and imitation.

Parshya, the protagonist of the book, is a representation of the Dalit community's overall suffering. Limbale explores the terrible reality that Dalits confront via Parshya's life, illustrating their unwavering struggle against upper-caste rule. The novel begins with detailed depictions of the filthy living circumstances found in the Dalit basti, which stand in sharp contrast to the comparatively luxurious dwelling quarters of the upper caste. Limbale's meticulous portrayal of the social and physical surroundings draws attention to the Dalits' systematic marginalization, since they are both physically and figuratively restricted to society's edges. The basti is a symbol of the socioeconomic obstacles that Dalits must overcome in addition to being a real place.

The novel shows the idea of conversion serves as a crucial point to emphasize Dalits' rejection of traditional Hindu deities and rituals and their conversion to Buddhism in their quest for equality and dignity. "Dalits have now embraced Buddhism. The Hindu gods' and goddesses' idols have been dumped in the garbage. A few had interred them. A significant change in religious and social identity is highlighted by Limbale's narration, which states, "Dalits were now following new faiths, new ways of worship" (Limbale 5-6). This shift is not without its challenges, though. Characters like Milind Kamble and his spouse have to balance their newfound ideals with their traditional values in a stressful way. While Milind's wife continues to secretly worship Hindu deities, Milind himself draws strength from Hindu gods in moments of weakness, yet confidently turns to Ambedkar and Buddha when feeling empowered. This duality captures their inner dilemma and the broader tensions in the neighborhood undergoing transformation.

Their rustic area was renamed Bhimnagar, a profound political and social statement that represents a shift from the confines of a "village," which, according to Ambedkar, is a term loaded with casteist connotations, to a "nagar," or town, signifying a new public identity and a shared desire for a more just society. Yet, Milind Kamble's beliefs on equality and homogeneity across households are at odds with his behavior, both his relationships with members of the upper caste and his own goals within the movement. This contradiction illustrates the constant conflict between individual growth and group development, illustrating the complex reality of negotiating societal transformation in the face of strongly ingrained caste structures. It is reflected in the text through the following passage:

‘How shall we give money when we don’t give them water to drink?’ Then let them convert!’ ‘It will endanger the Hindu religion.’ ‘The fear is not about damaging the Hindu religion but about treating Mahars equally. Think about that.’ (Limbale 113).

Limbale introduces Tatya Kamble, a character who passionately advocates for Dalit conversion to Buddhism on Dhamma Chakra Parivartan Day, symbolizing a transformative break from the cycles of caste oppression. The chakra, representing the cyclical nature of life, is used metaphorically to discuss the cyclic persistence of casteism, which Tatya believes can only be disrupted through religious conversion. However, Limbale subtly suggests that true transformation extends beyond religious identity, emphasizing that "[complete] transformation is not possible until the economic slavery of the dalits is destroyed" (82). This complexity is focused by the narrative of Tatya Kamble's murder early in the text—an act of violence instigated by his so-called hate speech against Hinduism, as recounted by two upper-caste men. This event is depicted as "the disfigured face of social terrorism," shedding light on the brutal reality of caste-based violence.

Limbale further explores the insidious ways in which caste oppression is sustained, noting how upper-caste figures like Vishnu Pandit and Shankar Pujari not only perpetuate violence against Dalits but also strategically keep them from power by corrupting the intelligentsia and restricting political rights. The entangled web of caste relations and the roles prescribed by societal norms are reinforced across different layers of society, making the challenge of dismantling these structures daunting. Yet, hope is offered through education and intellectual empowerment, as exemplified in a lecture about Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's advocacy for religious conversion. The lecture points towards the necessity of a shift in perspective concerning caste and Dalits, emphasizing the pivotal role of education and

intellectual enlightenment in achieving societal change. Through these narrative strands, Limbale's work not only critiques the deep-seated structures of caste oppression but also underscores the potential for liberation through collective awakening and reformation. In this context, Laura R. Brueck notes down:

The term Dalit consciousness has significantly influenced the lives of millions of Dalits by awakening them and inspiring them for self-realization of their identity as a human being beyond caste and creed, though it is a complex term to be described. It is a general perception that Dalit consciousness is the awareness that makes Dalit realize what they actually are and what they are said to be. Various Dalit writers, scholars and critics have defined Dalit consciousness differently some call it 'a revolutionary mentality' whereas some others call it, deconstructive consciousness (Brueck 51).

The novel also depicts the insidious ways in which caste-based discrimination manifests the Muslims. The smearing of Muslims with gulaal, a red color, serves as a visual representation of religious hierarchy, while the suppression of teachings about Ambedkar in schools reveals the deep-seated fear and hostility towards Dalit empowerment. Limbale deliberately exposes the vulnerability of children within this oppressive societal framework, as seen in the mimicry of violent acts by students, underscoring the malleability of young minds exploited by casteist ideologies.

The story also explores the nuances of religious and cultural tolerance, with characters such as Kasbe Guruji having to deal with threats for advocating Ambedkar's ideas, while comments about Hinduism's purported tolerance—which are sometimes invoked to defend forced conversions such as 'Ghar Wapsi'—face opposition. In a culture full of power

differentials, systematic marginalization, and economic inequality, Limbale questions the whole idea of tolerance and its implementation. Therefore, examining Dalit writings provides a deep understanding of the real-life struggles of one of the most marginalized groups in India. From the periphery of society, Dalit writers have employed writing as a potent medium to express their hardships, tenacity, and defiance in the face of centuries-long prejudice based on caste. These authors use their stories to challenge prevailing beliefs, giving voice to people who have been oppressed for too long and highlighting the brutal reality of violence, oppression, and marginalization.

At the end, it can be said that Limbale's novel offers a nuanced depiction of identity, persecution, and resistance while serving as a potent critique of the profoundly ingrained caste system. The story questions traditional narratives that only consider caste oppression from the perspective of Brahminical domination by revealing the changing dynamics of caste-based systems. Rather, Limbale draws attention to the changing marginalization patterns, especially the conflicts between Dalits and OBCs, demonstrating how caste still influences social and political reality in modern-day India. It encourages reflection within the Dalit community itself while also elevating the voices of the oppressed through its unvarnished and unreserved storytelling. The story promotes an internal reformation that fortifies Dalit identity and togetherness rather than portraying resistance as merely opposition against outside powers. Ultimately, *Hindu* stands as a crucial text in Dalit literature, reinforcing the need for continued discourse on caste, social justice, and the quest for dignity in an unequal society.

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