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## **The Unforgettable Stigma of Caste in Datta Bhagat's *Routes and Escape Routes*: Divulging the Hypocrisy of Caste Equality in India**

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### **Abstract:**

The fourfold caste system in India is a social anathema from which we have never recovered. Despite constitutional safeguards and legal measures to eradicate caste-based discrimination, the social reality remains grim for the lower caste and Dalits. Datta Bhagat sheds light upon this paradox and brings forth the hypocrisy of caste equality prevalent in society in his seminal work, *Routes and Escape Routes*. Bhagat offers a piercing critique of Indian society's failure to translate the legal equality into social reality as the upper caste social reformers masquerade concealing their darker aspects and aggravate the situations. This paper explores the representation of caste in Bhagat's work, divulging the hypocrisy of caste equality and the pervasive nature of caste-based oppression. This paper also argues that Bhagat's work reflects the complex intersection of caste and politics highlighting the limitations and shortcomings of independent India which ultimately advances towards mobocracy and anarchy.

**Keywords:** Dalits, Caste, Equality, Politics, Hypocrisy, Existential Crisis.

The caste system has long been one of the most oppressive and divisive forces in Indian society. Despite India's constitutional commitment to equality and affirmative action policies designed to uplift Dalits (formerly known as "Untouchables"), caste-based discrimination continues to define social and political realities. Rabindranath Tagore, in his book *Nationalism*,

writes, “OUR REAL PROBLEM IN INDIA IS NOT POLITICAL. IT IS SOCIAL” (64). He further adds, “But from the earliest beginning of History India has had her own problem constantly before her— it is the race problem” (64). Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century these words of Tagore find significance as we have never recovered from the race or caste problem in India. The caste hierarchy, with its deeply ingrained social and economic implications, persists in both rural and urban India. The persistence of caste discrimination challenges the very foundation of India's democratic ethos, revealing the gap between constitutional ideals and social practices. Datta Bhagat’s play *Routes and Escape Routes* delves into this unresolved tension. Written in the context of post-independence India, the play reflects the paradoxes of caste in a society that claims to have moved beyond it. Bhagat’s work explores how caste shapes the lives of Dalits not only through social ostracization and economic deprivation but also through psychological trauma and internalized inferiority. The play also examines how political movements that claim to represent Dalit interests are often co-opted by upper-caste interests or undermined by internal divisions.

The caste system in India is rooted in ancient Hindu scriptures such as the *Manusmriti*, which categorised society into four primary varnas (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) along with the Dalits (formerly "Untouchables"), who were relegated to the lowest social status. This rigid hierarchy was justified through religious and social norms, with Brahmins occupying the highest status and Dalits being condemned to perform "polluting" tasks such as manual scavenging, handling dead animals, and other forms of menial labour. After independence, the Indian Constitution, under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, sought to dismantle the caste system through affirmative action policies, including reservations in education, employment, and political representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST). Despite these measures, caste-based discrimination remains pervasive. Violence against Dalits, such as lynchings, sexual violence, and social boycotts, continues to be reported across India.

Moreover, caste-based social hierarchies persist in educational institutions, workplaces, and political structures. The idea of caste equality remains largely rhetorical, with the lived reality for Dalits reflecting systemic discrimination and exclusion.

The problem of caste in India is a fractured discourse. Mahatma Gandhi accepts his Hindu identity, but he believes that the Hindu scriptures should be interpreted from different perspectives. So, he gives his own interpretations and denounces anything that does not find significance in his idea of spirituality. He asserts, as Gail Omvedt informs, “Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spontaneously experienced” (*Dalit Visions* 11). In addition, Omvedt, in his *Dalit visions*, inserts certain words of Gandhi which clearly showcases that the caste in the present prevailing sense is a constructed truth. The lines in the book read:

Caste has nothing to do with religion... it is harmful to both spiritual and natural growth. Varna and Ashrama are institution which has nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling... The calling of a Brahman— a spiritual teacher— and of a scavenger are equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God... (11).

Many other foremost leaders have contradicted the idea of caste in a derogatory sense, which succumbs to the Brahminic hegemony. The idea of caste is therefore not a rigid one and the rigidity must not be given adherence. Jawaharlal Nehru never establishes his idea of caste based on exploitation and he severely condemns the pervasively scathing view of Brahmins on low castes as he argues:

The caste was a group system based on services and functions. It was meant to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowing the fullest latitude to each group... The organization of society being, generally speaking, competitive and

nonacquisitive, this division into caste did not make as much difference as they might otherwise have done. The Brahmin at the top, proud of his intellect and learning and respected by others, seldom have much in their way of worldly possessions... (*Dalit Visions* 11).

Datta Bhagat emerged as one of the most influential voices in the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra. Born into a Dalit family, Bhagat's work reflects his lived experience of caste discrimination and his commitment to social justice. Dalit literature, which gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, was driven by the desire to reclaim the dignity and agency of Dalit communities. Influenced by the teachings of Ambedkar and the larger civil rights and anti-caste movements, Dalit writers sought to challenge the dominant Savarna (upper-caste) narratives that marginalised Dalit voices. Bhagat's writing is marked by its stark realism, political urgency, and profound psychological insight. His plays, including *Routes and Escape Routes*, expose the existential dilemmas faced by Dalits, the betrayal of Dalit political leaders, and the complex relationship between caste and modernity. Bhagat's work reflects the deep contradiction between the constitutional promise of equality and the social reality of caste oppression. Hemangi Bhagwat, in his journal, *Dalit Theatre: A Theatre of Protest*, writes:

Bhagat has tried to present in his plays the ideological politics which is rare in the entire Marathi theatre scene. For example his plays *Kheliya* and *Wata-Palwata* (*Routes and Escape Routes*) have a multilayered social and cultural level. Especially in *Wata Palwata* Datta Bhagat has tried to portray the deterioration of the Ambedkar's movement after his death in 1956. (378)

Bhagat through his dexterous description and diction portrays three generation before us and problematises several crucial issues and peculiarities that become prominent obstacles in gaining caste unity. Three major characters of the play, Kaka, Prof. Satish Godghate and Arjun

are the representative of three generations— Kaka has no institutional education but is deeply influenced by Ambedkar and ready to accept any kind of hardship for the betterment of their community, secondly we get Satish, an educated scholar who abides by the rules and laws properly and finally, in the third generation, comes Arjun who is completely frustrated with the selfish political parties who never miss any chance to take advantage of the Dalit community. Through these characters the playwright brings forward the limitations, shortcomings and the hypocrisies of the Dalit movements that made it defunct after the death of Ambedkar as Bhagwat later asserts, “Bhagat also touches upon issues like politics affecting the field of education, the issue of inter caste marriages, the attitudes of the so called higher castes of looking at the Dalits especially in the rural areas and the hypocrites like Dasrao Guruji who are fake freedom fighters” (378). Erin B. Mee shares similar kind of view in his edited volume *Drama Contemporary: India* and asserts in the introduction:

Routes and Escape Routes dramatizes the conflict between three characters typifying different positions within the Dalit movement. Kaka, Satish, and Arjun each represent a different generation of the movement: Kaka is an unquestioning follower of Ambedkar, Satish is an educated activist who teaches in college; and Arjun is a radical student activist. Routes and Escape Routes asks: what is the future of the Dalit movement: what kind of movement is it becoming? (17).

Bhagat in his play *Routes and Escape Routes* dwells upon the problems from socio-economic and political view. He shows that the tag of caste is irremovable from one’s identity. Education and inter-caste marriages can’t be a key to the solution of caste problem and it is applicable for both upper and lower caste people. Several instances can be traced from his play that bring into focus the barriers to attaining caste-unity. Satish marries an upper caste girl who belongs to the brahmin community and Kaka doesn’t accept this marriage; decides not to stay with Satish. After putting a strenuous effort, finally, Satish becomes able to convince Kaka to

stay with them under the same roof. Satish's wife Hema tries her best to adapt with Kaka and his whimsical demands. The beginning of the play shows us that how caste identity is deeply rooted in every Indian's mind. Instead of a cultural mingling we see that Kaka is not ready to budge from his view and forces Hema to practice their way of answering to someone's call, for the conversation follows:

KAKA: (*Stops leading in the Middle.*) Sunbai...

HEMA: (*From the kitchen.*) Coming... (*Enters.*) Yes, What?

KAKA: (*Angry.*) What do you mean "what"? How many times do I have to tell you? Never say "what" when I call you. Say "ji". That's proper. Can't you be a bit polite?  
(Mee 288)

The brief conversation bears evidence that Hema's way of answering caused indignation in him as Hema belongs to Brahmin caste. Kaka never allows Hema to do things in her own way. Kaka wants to eradicate the caste system, but here he appears like a hypocrite by getting infuriated. Hema falls prey to the tortures of Kaka inside the family sphere due to her caste identity. When Hema argues with him, he focuses on the unfulfilled vision of abolishing the caste system and inserts:

KAKA: Oh, well! How can I help it if the truth slips out like this? (*Plainly nettled by her attack.*) Who likes caste? Tell me, who does? I have worked with Babasaheb for more than forty years against the caste system. But has it disappeared? No. How many years has it been since your marriage? Five. Why, it's more than three years since Satish came here, to this town, to take up this job. But what do people say even now? Tell me: Satish Godghate, professor, a Buddhist, and his wife, a Brahmin! And there is no dearth of peeping Toms around us, let me tell you. Even small girls bend over backwards just to see what's happening in our house. Tell me why? (Mee 288)

Thus, the caste system becomes a perpetual stigma for both the communities and the lower caste people also see the upper caste with much disgrace for they have divested the oppressed class off from their human rights considering them the “Other”. Omvedt interpolates in his book *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, “Dalit and non-Brahmin movements developed their own theory of caste, drawing upon the debates and theories put forward by those around them.... In taking this as their goal they made certain assumption, i.e., that the caste has an origin in history, and just it has an origin it could have an end.” (22). The afore-mentioned words of Kaka refute the assumptions of the reformers as there was no improvement in people’s consciousness and that creates an existential crisis for them. The revolutions fail to attain any healthy conclusion as the society follows certain rigidity succumbing to the Brahminic hegemony.

The character of Kaka who unfolds multifaceted discourses of Dalit Ideology is very much interesting. Kaka has his own routes, and he rejects his nephew, Satish’s Ideology. Kaka firmly believes in the teachings of Babasaheb Ambedkar but finds way to fit them in the present scenario ingeniously. He develops some tricky methods to find Shewanta, a Dalit widow, a false teaching certificate. He opines in his own way:

The poor girl wants to learn. She’s a widow. Shouldn’t we help? She’s even got admission to the course. B.Ed or D.Ed, whatever they call it...Who the hell does he (Satish) think he is? The God of Truth? Why did he get educated if he did not want to help his own people? Ha! I would have procured ten such certificates had I been in my own village! (Mee 288)

This incident puts forward a question before us; the nature of help that can be rendered to someone who belongs to the oppressed class. Satish has ethics which do not allow him to accept Kaka’s view, and he doesn’t want to take any wrong route to help Shewanta get that certificate.

Shewanta, on the other hand, being a widow lacks agency and by teaching poor students to get the certificate will compel her to lose a year. So, Kaka's view is that unscrupulous means are applicable if needed. Once again, he shows his double standard. Arjun adopts some unfair means and collects funds to bribe government officials. Kaka severely berates him. Kaka's dissatisfaction regarding Satish's marriage to a Brahmin girl is further reinforced when Kaka propagates:

KAKA: She is gem of a girl recently. So what she's a Brahmin! But suppose she has not married her... wouldn't a girl from our own poor families have lived like a queen in this house? This is what I call eating the cake and having it too... We, as a people, are ready a hundred times over to Forget Caste, but are you people ready to forget it Guruji?... (Mee 293)

Though Kaka wants to annihilate caste system he too wants a Dalit girl to be married to Satish which would allow the girl to enjoy riches and prosperity of Satish. However, he is complacent with Hema and her behaviours and gives further contemplation to it due to Hema's attitude to mould herself to fit in the family structure. Kaka's question to the upper caste people whether they can ever forget the caste discrimination is also of paramount significance here which unveils the mentality of upper caste people trying to pervade the caste-based discrimination. Another issue attracts our attention when Sonal, the daughter of Dasrao, falls in love with the student of Satish, Arjun, a lower caste boy and demands Hema's support as she has married out of caste. On the other hand, Arjun, a Buddhist, lashes out at Hema for her upper caste identity, and Hema, while talking to Satish, being frustrated, resists in a sound tone:

HEMA: . . . Then there is Arjun! .... he lashed out at me in a fit of anger! If you call someone a Mahar, that is an insult! And what if you call someone a Brahmin? Is that supposed to be an honour? I rejected my caste when I married you. It's a deliberate

insult to me to be called a Brahmin! A downright affront! Everybody claws at me with their savage caste nails. (Mee 321)

The problematic outlook of upper caste is further interpolated by the character Dasrao who is an educated person as Bhagat portrays a vivid example of upper-caste people's dissatisfaction and exasperation regarding the reservation policy. Dasrao claims to be a social reformer, but his attitude towards reservation is opposite. Kaka and Dasrao become relatives by inter-caste marriage, and when Kaka utters about their relation, Dasrao instantaneously demands share in the government policy offered to Dalits:

DASRAO: Yes. So what if we are related by marriage! You wouldn't give us any place in your thirty-three percent would you, Kaka? Tell me seriously, would you?

KAKA: (*Understands the taunts.*) Oh, oh, oh! A sharp eye, indeed, on our reservation! (Mee 292)

This clearly shows that upper-caste people are not satisfied with the reservation policy, and they keep a sharp eye on it. Dasrao, a reformist, thus proves his hypocritical attitude in the play. Dasrao is a double-faced man, and he appears sweet in front of everyone but launches scathing attacks on Satish and Hema. Dasrao's masquerading face is once again unveiled when he refuses to give Satish shelter after knowing his caste identity which Hema comes to know about and speaks bravely to him on this matter:

HEMA: Since you've asked, let me tell you something. Satish was going to rent rooms in your house, Guruji, after getting a job in this town. Remember? And you had even collected your rent from him in advance! But when you came to know his caste, what did you do? You simply told him that the house had already been rented; that your wife had taken an advance from someone else without informing you! That was your pretext, remember? And you returned his money. (Mee 296).

Satish, an educated and established young man, also fails to escape the stigma of caste. Marrying Hema, he breaks free from the stereotypes of society but he is considered as a rational person only because Dasrao considers him a half Brahmin. Dasrao as if proclaims that only the Brahmins should be attributed as rational beings in the society when he says, “. . . We consider you half Brahmin, sir! By that, of course, I mean rational!” and Satish promptly replies, “Are only the Brahmin’s qualified to be rational, Guruji? . . .” (Mee 318-319). Dasrao’s disguise is once again intensified when he comes to know about his daughter’s feelings for the Dalit boy, Arjun, and he does not even hesitate to insult him and his caste identity along with Hema:

HEMA: (*With tears in her eyes.*) Guruji called Arjun and not only did he revile his caste but but...

SATISH: Go on Hema!

HEMA: He said, "God knows from where this Godghate has brought that female! Boasts she's a Brahmin! But who knows what she really is!" That's what he said about me, that man! And he comes here so often! Speaks such honeyed words! But what a filthy mind! And he is a teacher, even a freedom fighter! (Mee 321)

One must take notice of the conflict of colour complexion presented by Bhagat in the making of the plot of the play. Bhagat, on one hand, shows the contemptuous attitude of the upper-caste people towards the lower-caste people and on the other, he provides a deeper and thought-provoking view when we see how a *Savarna* boy faces humiliation due to their own ill treatment of the Dalits:

SATISH: There was this project for simple toilets, you know. A group of four or five boys was working at a money-lender's place. In spite of their protests, the moneylender arranged tea for them. The tea came, eventually. The moneylender distributed the cups among the boys. When, however, they looked at one tea cup, they were furious and

immediately walked out of his house without drinking his tea? They told their teacher that they would never go to the moneylender's place again.

DASRAO: Why?

SATISH: The teacher in charge of the NSS made inquiries and discovered that one of the cups distinctly different! It was set aside specially for Dalits. (Mee 298).

Dalit's abode and residences are usually placed in the outskirts of the villages to evade contamination as they are untouchable according to the upper castes. In order to otherize these people the upper caste people alienate them in every condition and here they serve tea to that boy in a different cup. According to the generally held assumption, the Dalits are dirty and ugly with dark skin. Here the effect of the action is backfired as later Satish states, "...That cup was given to that one ugly, dark boy from that group. You know who that boy was? Arvind Deshmukh." (298). Omvedt in his book *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* writes, "This was the 'Aryan theory of race', originated by European Orientalists, propagated by British administrators in their censuses and provincial studies of caste groups, picked up by early modernist Brahmans as a way of asserting their equivalence with the white-skinned conquerors and their superiority to the darker-skinned lower castes, . . ." (23). Therefore, dark skin complexion becomes an identification mark for the lower caste Shudras and Atishudras whom the Brahmins do not consider as the descendants of Aryans.

The failure of Government and frustration of young generation is brought out by Arjun in the play. Arjun finds the name of Dasarao Guruji who is a brahmin in the flood victim list. He follows the way of violence to help the real victims who are mostly Dalits. In a conversation with Satish, he describes to Satish the double Standard of Guruji, which befuddles Satish:

SATISH: Dasrao Guruji's name? In the list of flood victims?

ARJUN: And these are the people who brand me a casteist! People in Bhim Nagar have been living in hutments that leak. The rains are just around the corner. I made arrangements for them. I don't have monopoly rights to think on behalf of everybody! I won't think for the others. I'll think only of my caste. That's all. (Mee 303).

Arjun thinks that the accumulation of filth in the society has reached its peak and the prevailing caste system stigmatises him. Consequently, he moves towards violence, disregarding the legal system and the long-term effects of his deeds on Dalits. He takes the law in hand and battles with these issues with his own hyperactive way of thinking that leads to lawlessness and anarchy. He forcefully takes hold of Milind Nagar, starts collecting a monthly allowance from them whom he provided shelter there and finally throws out Shewanta, the poor widow for not paying the money. Arjun confesses to Satish that he takes the money to bribe people and Bhagat presents a question here— how does one accommodate Arjun's act of taking money for bribes. This is where the movements turned towards mobocracy.

Sharankumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* writes, "Dalit cultural and critical productions make a significant critical intervention in the thinking and writing about Indian society, history, culture and literature." (Mukherjee 1). This literature is not restricted to only Dalits, instead it dismantles the scathing and vicious aspects of Hindu society. Thus, Bhagat's drama becomes a significant vehicle in arousing consciousness among Dalits and all the other ordinary people at large. Arjun Dangle in his introduction to *Poisoned Bread* writes "Dalit literature is not simply literature. . . . Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change." (xii). Bhagat's drama do Justice to the aspect of the Dalit Literature. The reformers like Kaka who has been working from Ambedkar's time doesn't find any improvement. Inter-caste marriage is not a proper solution to the stigma of caste as Hema who married out of caste belongs to nowhere and suffers from an existential crisis. Haresh Kakde, in his critical essay *Theatrical World of Datta Bhagat with reference to Wata-Palwata*

writes, “. . . through inter-caste marriage, the outlook or world view of people should be changed instead it has created a wall between two castes and inter-caste married family disintegrates rather than coheres the social fabric. So instead harmony in nation, the nation stands on unhealthy social construction.”

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