



## **Subverting Canonical Narratives: Dalit Re-readings of Indian Epics and Mythology**

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### **Abstract:**

Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* continue not only as literary texts but also as Brahminical metanarratives that have advocated social order and the division of power based on caste for centuries. Modern Dalit literature is redefining the existence of oppressed Dalit-Bahujan characters in these legends with a resistance perspective. The main focus of this research is to remove the layers of divinity surrounding characters like Shambuka, Ekalavya, and Ravana, who are labelled Vile or Villains in standard narratives, and to make them symbols of social justice struggle. In the works of Ambedkar's *Riddles in Hinduism* and Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's Dalitization theories from *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, these reinterpretations challenge standard aesthetics and invent a new Dalit aesthetics. Recognised as Lived Experience as Knowledge, this literary revolution has been paving the way for an integrated cultural structure in contemporary democratic India.

**Keywords: Dalit aesthetics, mythological transgression, resistance literature, Indian epics, Ambedkarism.**

## **Introduction: The Politics of Myth**

*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not just epics in Indian cultural and literary history. They are great narratives that dictate social structures and moral values. However, modern intellectuals question how these epics served as tools to cement upper-caste and patriarchal supremacy. According to Prakash C. Balikai's argument, these classical epics reflect the norms and dominance of the upper castes (957). These portray the downtrodden sections and women of society only as unimportant characters or victims. According to Deepak H. Shinde, the laws of aesthetics prescribed in ancient texts such as Bharata's *Natyasastra* revolve solely around the lives of upper castes, thereby demoting untouchables to an inhuman status (989). Here, mythology or the *Puranas* appears to be a political tool for maintaining power, rather than a sacred text.

Against this backdrop, Dalit literature does not stop at simply rejecting these myths. It is trying to regain human dignity and textual authority that was lost through the Re-reading of these articles. Dalit literature is not just a medium for indicating suffering, but a form of rebellion (Singh 107). This reinterpretation explores the loopholes in the stories circulating as standard and helps rewrite narratives and history from the perspective of oppressed characters (for example, Shambuka and Ekalavya). This is called alternative aesthetics. Pallathadka and Deb Roy also theorised this as part of a broader Dalit hermeneutical practice, in which marginalised groups develop sophisticated interpretive strategies that transform these works into resources for liberation from oppressive forces (52). Through such figure rehabilitation, characters like Ravana and Bali - quiet in dominant readings - are revived as symbols of resistance and respect (Pallathadka and Deb Roy 44).

An important change to note in the analysis is the transition from Victimhood to Agency. As Gail Omvedt explains, it was during the colonial period that the Dalit movement

shifted from social reforms to a democratic revolution (7). The characters who were punished in the epics until then have become questioning voices in modern Dalit literature. As Eleanor Zelliot points out, in the process of transitioning from "untouchable" to "dalit", building an independent political and literary entity for themselves is central (267–331). This transformation challenges the Brahminical ideals of the *Puranas* and makes Dalits active in the epics. Therefore, this research paper identifies Dalit literature not only as a literary genre but as a Resistance Epistemology (Pallathadka and Deb Roy 38).

### **Theoretical Framework: De-Brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space**

Mere literary analysis is never enough to understand Dalit re-reading; It requires a strong theoretical foundation. In building this foundation, Dr B.R. Ambedkar's *Riddles in Hinduism* serves as the foundation. Ambedkar used Logic of Subversion as a weapon to solve the Brahminical conspiracy behind the Divination of legendary characters. He questions the morality of Hindu gods and portrays them as mere humans who have committed human natural weaknesses, violence and immoral acts. For example, analysing some moments in Krishna's life, Ambedkar pointed out contradictions in his behaviour rather than his divinity (323–40). Through this process of De-divinization, Dalit writers have gained intellectual freedom to view heroes in epics with a critical eye.

This intellectual resistance was further driven by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd through a socio-cultural lens. Ilaiah conceptualises Dalit-bahujan culture as a productive culture <sup>2</sup>, explaining the fundamental difference between Dalitization and Sanskritization. According to Ilaiah's argument, if the culture of the upper castes was based solely on rituals, mantras and unproductive activities, the Dalit-Bahujan lifestyle was associated with creative labour such as ploughing the land, tanning animal hides, and raising cattle (70–122). It is this productive labour that he identifies as knowledge. If the divine powers in Brahminical culture resort to

violence by holding weapons, Dalit deities like Birappa and Kattamaisamma are symbols of community protection and productivity (Ilaiah Shepherd 62). Through this theory, it is possible to reject the Prime Ideals of the epics and showcase the beauty and dignity of Dalit labour.

Therefore, this theoretical framework is fulfilled by Resistance Epistemology. Eminent scholars Sephora Jose and Prashant Ingole see Dalit Historiography as a means of resistance. Dalit historiography is not just a record of past events; it is a process of challenging the Historiographic Erasures of mainstream history (Jose 418). That is, bringing back to the limelight the characters who have been suppressed in history and in mythology. As Prashant Ingole argues, a disciplinary space can be de-Brahmanized by discussing Dalit existence and culture in academia (94). It is not just about changing the texts and content in books, but about changing the dominant tendencies in Knowledge Production. Ingole clarified that Dalit Experience and Humiliation are the foundations of a new doctrine. Thus, the ideologies of Ambedkar, Ilaiah and modern Dalit intellectuals combine to build a powerful counter-strategy that paves the way for a re-interpretation of mythology.

This research approach considers Dalit aesthetics as a form of literary style, but also as a critical practice of historiography. In reclaiming characters erased or demonised by canonical texts of Sanskrit, Dalit literature is thus engaged in this approach, what Sephora Jose describes as historiographic erasures that challenge the order (418). This approach works by considering lived experience as a major archive, in effect re-creating a history of the marginalised in which conventional records provide only silence or denunciation. Thereby, the re-reading of mythology turns into the counter-historic act that will turn sacred icons into sociopolitical witnesses to the past and present conflicts.

## Re-coding the Villain & Decentering the Hero

Dharma is a central theme in the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. However, the Dalit perspective or interpretation raises the question of whom this dharma favours and whom it punishes. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, in his work, discusses the connection between dharma and caste in the *Mahabharata* and explains how the existence of characters belonging to the lower castes points to the dharma deficit of the epic. Especially characters like Ekalavya and Shambuka<sup>1</sup> are not just epithets; They are cases where there is Radical Salience that points at the Systemic Flaws in the established order. Seeking Ekalavya's thumb as Gurudakshina is not just a sign of devotion to the Guru; it is the culmination of the caste discrimination that prevents a talented person of a lower caste from surpassing an upper-caste Kshatriya (Mukherjee). Thus, the heroes Arjuna or Drona of the epics appear not to be the protectors of Dharma, but as the protectors of the caste (Mukherjee).

Dalit reinterpretations have stopped seeing these characters as mere victims and have made them symbols of resistance. Mohan Parmar, in his plays, associates Epic characters with modern Dalit Identity as seen in *A True Saga of Satyanarayana*, where a Dalit challenges divine authority (11519). According to Parmar, characters that have been depicted as villains in mythology are actually indigenous people of the land. Brahminical intellectual supremacy branded them as Asuras or Rakshasas and portrayed their destruction as the establishment of Dharma (11516). It coincides with the practice of reclaiming what the scholars Pallatadka and Deb Roy identify as figure rehabilitation, depicting Asura people as representatives of local or lower castes portrayed as demons by the Aryan or Brahmin groups (44). This Rakshasatva finds a new definition in Parmar's plays; It turns into a rebellion that does not accept structural hegemony, especially in a play titled *Bahishkar* (11518).

This literary analysis is strongly reflected on the silver screen as well. Directors like PA Ranjith have completely subverted the mythological symbols in their films. In the movie *Kaala*, Ranjith portrayed Ravana not as a villain, but as a Dalit-Bahujan leader who protects his land and people. Here, the character Haridas Desai, who reflects Lord Rama in white dresses symbolising holiness, shows caste pride and Authority (Ranjani et al. a331). In contrast, Kaala wears all black, which is usually depicted as a symbol of evil, but is showcased as a symbol of hard work and resistance (Ranjani et al. a331). This Asura-Protagonist trend is a sign of a phenomenon in Dalit politics. That is, Dalits are now proudly accepting the Asura seal imposed by the dominant culture and turning it into a form of resistance (Ranjani et al. 326). Pallathadka and Roy theorised this as part of a broader hermeneutical strategy, where multiple Dalit commentators reinterpret Asura characters from epic mythology, challenging their negative portrayal in dominant readings (44).

What this analysis reveals is that Dalit re-readings are not merely a reshuffling of roles but a process of reclaiming the history, land, and culture of the indigenous communities of this country. By criticising the excellence of Heroism In the epics, the Humanity of the marginalised comes to light. This process introduces the new Dalit aesthetic (Shinde 992). This transforms the downtrodden from the silent objects of epic narratives to the talking figures of their own history, a necessary step towards the social democracy envisioned by Ambedkar (Chandra 50).

### **Reinterpretation in Poetry & Folk Tradition**

While the cinema offers a visual location of the rehabilitation of the figure, poetry offers a more personal, linguistic location of historical revolt. Poetry in Dalit literature is not just an expression of emotion; it is a historical revolt (Adagale 52). Especially how Marathi Dalit poetry has subverted the symbols of the *Purana*, as analysed in depth in his research by Anil Suresh Adagale. Dalit poets challenged the portrayal of Sitaram, hailed as an ideal couple in

Hindu epics. Heera Bansode portrays Sita not as a mute victim, but as a woman who has been subjected to ordeals by patriarchal and caste systems (54). Although Anil Suresh Adagale offers the much-needed mapping of the Marathi Dalit poetry, his work is most crucial when it reveals the sacredness of the Ramayana as a cover to the patriarchal and caste violence, in this instance, the character of Sita (52–54). Adagale argues that Dalit poetry recognises the Rama Rajya of the *Ramayana* as neither an ideal kingdom nor a kingdom that slaughtered wise men like Shambuka, but rather a system that exiled women like Sita (52). Through this re-interpretation, Dalit poets exposed the violence behind the sacredness of the *Puranas*. Poets like Namdeo Dhasal, in their poetry, have relocated these mythological characters to the streets and slums, thus igniting a new Dalit consciousness by questioning their divinity (Adagale 55).

On the other hand, whatever history the written Sanskrit texts have erased, that history has been kept alive by folk arts and oral traditions (Suman 1351). Santosh Suman, in his analysis, described folklore as a counter-discourse. While standard texts portray Dalits as inferior or non-historical, Dalit folk songs and stories glorify them as heroes, kings and scholars (1353). For example, Dalit and Adivasi heroes like Jhalkari Bai and Birsa Munda are completely neglected in mainstream Brahminical writings, while many Dalit-Bahujan folk tales portray them as benevolent leaders (Suman 1352). These oral traditions serve as a form of alternative libraries (Suman 1354). Santosh Suman rightly refers to folklore as a counter-discourse, but more to the point, his analysis demonstrates that oral traditions are an alternative libraries that maintain Dalit agency even in situations when the written history tries to deny it (1351–54).

The agony of Shambhuka or the silence of Ekalavya, heard in folk songs, challenges the dominion of words in Sanskrit poetry. According to Suman, these folktales served not just for entertainment, but also to promote unity and a sense of belonging among Dalit social groups

(Suman 1355). Dalit folk writers have built a counter-history by defying the standards prescribed by Sanskrit texts and rewriting in their own language and style. Thus, poetry and folklore, together, shake the foundations of standard mythology and bring to light truths that have been suppressed for centuries (Suman 1354).

### **Intersectional Subversions**

Dalit reinterpretations are not limited to the caste dimension but also deeply question Gender hierarchies. As Sharmila Rege explains in her '*Writing Cast, Writing Gender*', the narratives of Dalit women, Testimonios, <sup>3</sup> that shred the idea of Ideal Women built by brahminical narratives. This evidence, by bringing direct experience of caste and gender into the public sphere, challenges the selective amnesia of the Dalit and women's movements (75). Similarly, Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, in their documentation of the Ambedkarite movement, reclaimed the history of women's political radicalisation in programs such as the Mahad Satyagraha and their leadership in meetings, demonstrating a long history of resistance (Rege 53). Because of this intersecting view, the foundations of Brahminical patriarchy are exposed and contested. This criticism is based on what Pallathadka and Roy describe as challenging the theological legitimacy of the caste hierarchy through the concepts of divine immanence beyond social boundaries - if divinity resides equally among all living beings, no human being can be considered ritually impure or inferior (48).

Dalit autobiographies emerged as a powerful counter-public. As Meenakshi Thapan states in her analysis, autobiographies such as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki are like an axe blow to the ideology of Epic idealism in *Puranas*. While the Epics promote brilliant ideals like Ramarajyam on the one hand, Om Prakash Valmiki, in his autobiography, shows the brutal reality in the lower layers of that society and the humiliation of being blindfolded (5–6). According to Thapan, these autobiographies are not merely personal stories; They are

collective voices questioning organised oppression. They build an alternative Public Sphere, revealing the truths covered by mythology and narratives (10–11).

Thus, this reinterpretation, through the Dalit feminist perspective and autobiographies, undermines the sanctity and idealism that underpin epics. This leads victims to stand up and recognise their experiences as authentic knowledge (Rege 13). These prove that the real history of this country is the labour of Dalit women and the fiery experiences of Dalit writers rather than the great leadership of the epics (Ilaiah Shephard 17–18, 62, 122). This epistemological change valuing direct experience over textual authority reflects what they call experience as a descriptive resource, where people from marginalised communities use embodied knowledge of consequences to challenge dominant frameworks (Pallathadka and Deb Roy 52).

### **Conclusion: Towards a New Aesthetic**

The most important aspect to be clarified in this research paper is that the reinterpretations in Dalit literature are not merely a rejection of mythology, but the foundations of a new Dalit Aesthetics. As Sephora Jose argues, Dalit history writing is an act of resistance - challenging the historical descriptive deletions of mainstream history by bringing repressed characters and communities back into visibility (Jose 418). This aesthetics identifies the living experience of Dalits as more authentic than artificial idealism in mythology (Shinde 990). Dalit writers have, through their writings, broken through the truths that have been covered by illusions and divinity for centuries. As intellectuals such as Shinde and Balikai explain in their works, this process breaks down the Brahminical meta-narratives and replaces them with little narratives (994; 958).

The need for these reinterpretations is not limited to literature; It is essential for an egalitarian Democratic Indian identity. True democratic values can only be established by

questioning caste discrimination and violence in Mythologies and history (Chandra 50; Balikai 957). To achieve the social democracy that Ambedkar hoped for, it is necessary to constantly review the dominant trends in culture and history. These reinterpretations not only give voice but also a powerful Epistemology to the oppressed communities (Chandra 53; Shinde 995). In conclusion, a re-reading of Indian epics from a Dalit perspective is a historical responsibility, an intellectual revolution that makes Indian society more inclusive and dignified.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Although the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are conventionally read as Brahminical texts, with the punishment of Shambuka and Ekalavya as required to maintain Dharma, Dalit re-readings focus on these moments as formative examples of state-caste violence.

<sup>2</sup> Ilaiah's idea of Productive Culture clearly connects the spiritual and the material, where the deities of the Dalit-Bahujan are not abstract but embedded in the community's science and manual work.

<sup>3</sup> The term Testimonio is utilised in Dalit feminist discourse to create a parallel between the struggles of marginalised groups in Latin America and the life narratives of Dalit women, highlighting the political act of witnessing oppressive structures.

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