

THE LIFE OF DALITS IN COLONIAL TELANGANA: AN INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

The present paper probes into the life journey of Dalits, particularly during the period of colonial, in the region of Telangana, India. The study presents a discussion of the life of Dalits under the rule of feudal landlords, the nature of landlords towards Dalits and vice versa, the socio-cultural practices or norms of the time and its impact on the day to day life of Dalits. The purpose of this investigation is to explore the malicious relationship between feudal landlords and submissive Dalits. The paper aims at studying some of these attempts by drawing attention to Dalit writings. The text chosen for study is *My Father Baliah* (2011), a life narrative of a Dalit family of Telangana region, written by Dr. Y.B. Satyanarayana.

Keywords: Dalits, caste hierarchy, classism, feudal system, untouchability

Introduction

In the present literary sphere, there are many Dalit writings which are creating anxiety, disagreement and confront among various social, political and cultural groups across the country. The early writings along with some contemporary writings were mainly aimed at depicting the social, political, religious and economic backgrounds out of their understanding and empirical knowledge of the writers in their existing time. The active participation of Dalits in various social and national movements made the writers to focus their emphasis of writings on discrimination in the socio-cultural, economic and educational fields. Such writings dealt with an attempt to emancipate subalterns from unethical social practices such as untouchability, bonded labour, caste-class-bias, political hierarchy, economical backwardness and so forth. Today, Dalit literature is available in the forms of fiction and non-fiction. The writers belonging to the underprivileged communities depict the life of their own community people in various genres from different perspectives. The life-writings such as autobiography, biography, memoir and oral narratives are playing a crucial role in framing Dalit literature as a subaltern literature in India to deconstruct the mainstream literature or to understand the literature of India from unvoiced perspective and various issues are given voice by the Dalit literature.

Statement of the Problem

Dalits in Indian society are discriminated systematically based on caste, class, race and gender. The hierarchy in the caste system has led to the ideology of oppressor and oppressed. The oppressive and undemocratic socio-cultural practices turned the lives of Dalits into marginalization and culturally stigmatized. And the writings of Dalits are overlooked in the mainstream discourses.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the life of Dalits under the rule of feudal landlords in Telangana region
- To infer the nature of landlords towards Dalits and vice versa
- To explore the social practices and cultures of the time and its impact on the day to day life of Dalits

Review of Literature

Who are Dalits? It is an important question in the present literary world. Several arguments have come up and expressed that the scheduled caste people and the scheduled tribes are only considered as Dalits. A few more arguments expressed that the people from backward classes, minorities and women are also considered as Dalits. And the others considered only to the 'Madigas' and 'Malas' belong to scheduled caste as Dalits in the Telugu states of India (Rani 21). Challapalli Swaroopa Rani presents her views on the same question and gives her own definition on Dalits as "People who have been subjected to untouchability and denied social, economical, political and cultural rights" (21). George Ashley also describes the term Dalit in his project work: "The term Dalit, which can be translated as oppressed or downtrodden, is now widely used in India to refer to the people who formerly were called untouchable. By all social, economic, political and religious criteria they rank at the very bottom of Indian society" (3). K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu state that Dr B.R. Ambedkar "referred to the untouchables as 'depressed classes', 'scheduled castes' and also as 'Dalits' depending on the context" (11). The word Dalit is popularized by Dalit Panthers who referred the meaning of word as "crushed down" (Satyanarayana and Tharu 11). In the present day, the term has gained its meaning as "an identity of the untouchable castes...a democratic identity of the socially oppressed untouchable caste groups" (Satyanarayana and Tharu 11). From the discussion, it can be understood that 'Dalits' are represented as an ethnic group who are historically victimized to the practice of untouchability and marginalized in the aspects of socio-cultural, religious, traditional and day to day life, and they are also deprived economically and politically. Hence, Dalits do not belong to only one particular community or caste. They are the people from various ethnic groups who are socially abandoned to have equal rights and back warded in the economic and political development.

Feudal Landlords and Dalits

This part brings the discourse on the issues of the first and the second generations of Dalits in the select book, *My Father Baliah*. It attempts to examine these questions: How is the life of Dalits under the rule of feudal landlords? What is the nature of landlords towards Dalits and vice versa? What are the social practices of the time? How is the life of Dalits affected by the social norms of the time?

Dr. Y.B. Satyanarayana comes from the family of 'Madiga' which is one of the Dalit communities in the regions of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Madiga caste people are skilled artisans. They are sorted out as a Scheduled Caste by the Government of India. They were settled down historically in making leather-items, as cobblers, rope-makers, basket makers and so forth. Satyanarayana narrates a long journey of his family struggle from marginalization to emancipation of various social evils in his book: *My Father Baliah* (2011). It is a biographical sketch of his family. It weaves the life journey of three generations of his family. The first generation is with Narsiah (great grandfather of the author), the second generation Narsiah's son junior Narsiah and his son, Ramaswamy was known as Baliah. Baliah and his sons are third generation. The author of the book comes under the last generation and sixth son of Baliah.

The book is organized in two parts. Part one is entitled as "Narsiah's World". It is narrated from the third person perspective. It illustrates the domination of feudal landlords, problems of Dalit in the villages such as social, cultural, livelihood, economical and health issues. Part two titled as "Sathiah Speaks". It is narrated from the first person perspective. The author of the book, Dr. Y.B. Satyanarayana, narrates the story of his family as a participant narrator. He delineates the problems which were faced in accessing the formal education, to overcome the caste and class discrimination, running family with meager income, and the practice of untouchability at residence, school and college level. He also recalls the teachers who helped and supported his brothers and to him in pursuing education. Finally, the book comes to an end with the fruits of education and the death of

Baliah. It will be a journey of liberation from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression. In other words, it is a journey of empowerment. The book is a source of knowing the cultural practices of Dalit, Dalit women's role and position in the family and it is a voice of inspiration for the Dalit community and other subaltern groups.

It is said that the individual history of family works as an agent in representing the history of community. S.R. Sankaran affirms it in the foreword of book: "It is not merely a family chronicle. Rather, it is the depiction of the life experiences of members of the Madiga community over several decades in different places, settings and situations, making it a unique social history of the times" (Satyanarayana, xi). Sharmila Rege also points out the same argument that the Dalit life-writings should be considered as not belonging to the genre of autobiographies but as testimonies. Traditional literary auto-biographers consider life narratives as only the writings of individuals' subjective experiences, but do not recognize them as documents that reflect the socio-cultural and political situations of the narrator's time. Thus, Rege argues that Dalit life narratives emerge as a genre that counter the norms of traditional literary autobiographies because of how intricately they are merged with social experiences, cultural interpretations and political examination. These Dalit life narratives, she notes, are "testimonies" act testifying or bearing witness legally or religiously" and "the narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation" (Rege 17). Dalit life narratives act as testimonios, "which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of cast oppression, struggle and resistance" (Rege 16). Satyanarayana and Susie also affirm: "Dalit autobiography as a social and cultural epiphany presents a wide range of social and cultural realities which can be significantly distinguished from mainstream celebrated literature" (Satyanarayana and Susie). Dr. Y. B. Satyanarayana states in the Preface that he has composed the book from the memories of his family members:

This is the story of three generations of my family, and I have woven it together from the memories I have of conversations with my grandfather Narsiah, my father Baliah, my aunt Pentamma and my elder sister Bachamma. Mainly, though the incidents narrated here were recounted by my father after his retirement when, every evening, I would get him a drink and sit by his side while he told me stories about the days when he and my mother struggled to raise us. (xix)

Therefore, *My Father Baliah*, as a family memoir or a biographical sketch works as an agent for narrating the social history of the Dalit communities in general particularly in the part of Telangana and to some extent in India.

Dalits are a group of community people who are being discriminated structurally and systematically from the begging. The discrimination is from social, cultural, traditional, religious, political, economical, and even from the day to day life. The religious text *Manusmriti* is one of the primary and religious resources of treatises of Hinduism on dharma which represents the so called upper-caste people obsession with hygiene while Dalits as contaminated people from their birth itself and their very physical existence is tainted. S.R. Sankaran recalls, in forward, how a Dalit woman was proscribed from taking water from the tank herself directly because of being an untouchable Dalit woman: "I can even now recall the image of a Dalit woman sitting on the banks of a water tank with a pot in her hand, waiting for someone to 'pour' water from the tank into her pot" (Satyanarayana, xii). Even nowadays no great-change emerges in the social structure of villages. It is the same symphony for many generations but not as much as seen in the feudal period. In the present times, the few Dalits are accessing what for they had been fought and been empowered in socio-politically too. Dalits led many social movements against the feudal oppressions, oppressive caste hierarchy, bonded labour, untouchability, social inequality and economic deprivation. The book reveals that the Dalits in villages are more sufferers than the Dalits in urban areas. The village is the place where people are divided into different colonies or streets based on the caste and class. Dalits are always

located geographically at the end of village. The reason for it was explained by Satyanarayana is that the houses in village are constructed in the direction of blowing wind that is from west to east. It is the so called upper-caste people not to be polluted even by the wind which is blown through the Dalits streets. That is why, he says, “the houses are built in ascending order of the caste hierarchy from east to west– Sudras, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and Brahmins” (Satyanarayana,4). How much deeply rooted the unethical social practice of untouchability is revealed through the cruel nature and the way of thinking of the so called upper caste and class people.

The way of addressing Dalits with derogatory suffixed names reflect the willful humiliating nature of upper-caste and the social discrimination against Dalits. It is depicted in the words of Satyanarayana:

A caste Hindu whose name is Malliah remains Malliah, but if he belongs to the untouchable community, he is called Malligadu; the suffix ‘iah’ is respectable whereas ‘gadu’ is contemptible. So too among women: the caste Hindu Pochamma becomes Pochi among the untouchables, the venerated ‘amma’ as distinct from the disreputable ‘i’. (18)

The way of dressing also occupies an important position to showcase the discrimination against Dalits. Dalits are not allowed to wear full dress. They are half naked. It will be an insult to the landlords, wearing full dress in front of them. Walking by looking at them is also considered as an insult. Instead, Dalits need to kneel down and wish them *Banchan Dora, ni kaallu mukkutha* (I am your slave, I touch your feet), when Dalits are come across the upper caste people.

The landlords of the time are so dominant and malevolent. They are out of the questioning and resisting world. They are not dared to object for what they want to do. Having such tyrannical ruling power, a much nuisance has been created in various aspects of Dalits and subaltern communities. Dalits and low-caste peasants are forced to render their services at no cost to the landlords whenever it was asked. Many poor agricultural peasants who are include Dalits and Tribals are turned as bounded labourers to the landlords by debts handed down for generations. Dalit and low-caste women besides working freely at the houses of landlords and in their fields, they are sexually exploited. Kamamma, a bounded labour, narrates how a bounded labour is treated and what his or her life:

Although my husband was a grown man the mistress used to beat him and ask him to work. They would eat meat but find it difficult even to give him a little tamarind paste....that was the life of a bounded labourer. Graze the buffalos, collect the dung, cook the food, one had to do everything (Stree 47).

It is inferred that the Dalit boys who are about ten to fifteen years old will be become the bounded labourers to the landlords and they are not allowed to go home except for having meals. They are often asked to sleep “in the cattle shed in order to be accessible to the landlord and his family at all time. He was also a confidant of his Dora, and received some grain and paddy when his master felt generous” (Satyanarayana 6). Pochamma, the wife of Narsiah, argues with him to get married their son—he was also called Narsiah, the father of Baliah— in order to liberate him from the bounded labour at least for night: “I don’t know how you will do it, but by the end of this summer my son should be married. Once he is married, the Dora will send him home and he will not have to sleep in the cattle shed, poor boy” (Satyanarayana 7). It is deduced the formed submissive nature of Dalits of the time from the injustice was done to Narsiah, the great grandfather of father of the author, Dr. Y. B. Satyanarayan, when he was gifted fifty acres of land for presenting “the nizam with a beautiful pair of shoes made from the hide of a young calf” (Satyanarayana, 4). In the next moment, Narsiah is summoned at the house of the village landlord and is humiliated for what he has done: “You son of a bitch, untouchable pig! How dare you present a gift to sarkar and receive land from him? ...You bastard, you are an untouchable! What will you do with fifty acres of land? Do you want to become a landlord and start sitting beside me?” (5) Instead of resisting against the oppressive nature of the landlord, Narsiah being a Dalit tends to be submissive and replays by bending head and folding hands from a respectful distance away: “Nee gulaponni, Dora, I am your slave...I am at your mercy; I live at your feet; forgive me,’...No, no, Dora, how can I commit such a sin? An untouchable

like me can never become a landlord. God will punish me. I will go blind! You are my lord, Dora!” (5). And having gifted fifty acres of land, he feels apprehensive instead of in high spirits and curses himself for presenting the gift to the Nizam. He feels happy for allowing him to access just two acres of land, out of his gifted fifty acres of land. It is because, S. R. Sankaran states in the Foreword of *My Father Baliah*:

I have seen fear writ large on the face of Dalits while in the presence of big landlords, known as Doras in the Telengana area, and have felt the intensity of social oppression denoted by the expression ‘I am your slave, I touch your feet’ which was the conventional salutation with which untouchables were called upon to address people belonging to the so-called upper castes. (xvi)

Dalits are not allowed to possess enough agriculture land as other caste Hindus have and “possessing even a small piece of land was a distant dream for these deprived, dispossessed outcasts” (Satyanarayana 5). It is said that the way social norms shape the behavior of individuals within the social system. Submissiveness was the nature of a common Dalit people of that time. They were never in the attitude of questioning. The very acquiescent nature of Dalit of the time was shaped through the Indian social structure which was constructed as per “the characteristic features codified by manu” (Satyanarayana 4). Pramod K.Nayar affirms that under the system of feudal society, there were two main classes such as the land-owning or the capitalist class and the peasants or working class. These two classes are always in dispute because of the exploitative nature of the upper classes and seek to have power over the working classes and according to the Marxist criticism all cultural forms are structured to remain the upper classes dominant and lower classes submissive or not to rebel or revolt against the dominant classes in a society (170-171). He also states that the particular forms of culture and forms of behaviour are developed by every class, of which can be described as ‘working-class culture’, ‘mass culture’ or ‘middle-class values’ (171). Dalits have their own way of cultural, religious and traditional practices of the time. Most of Dalits are poor and agricultural peasants. They work in the fields of upper cast first and then in the fields of lower caste people. They were not given reasonable wages. Drinking alcohol after retiring from their daily work and Eating beef mutton on the occasions of seasonal festivals are their common cultural practices.

Conclusion

Dalit writings emerged to describe the reality of their life under the unethical social practices, oppressive systems and institutions, and the various forms of discrimination. These life writings are claimed as a tool or an agent to fight against the marginalization, subjugation, subordination. It is also a form of resistance to claim freedom, identity, self-respect, dignity, equality, and democratic life.

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