



# Expressing the Oppressed: The Rise of Indian Dalit Literature

Ashish Ranjan

*Student, Tillamajhi Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar*

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**ABSTRACT:** " It's in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression." Literature is frequently considered as a reflection of the society. Same was the case with Dalit Literature that sprang out from the inequalities, atrocities and demarcation faced by the crushed lower strata in the society. This paper on Dalit literature is an attempt to bring to the fore the demarcation, brutality, and ostracization faced by the Dalit community in India and how the Dalit writers have penned it down. It not only examines the history of repression, condition of the suppressed and origin of Dalit jottings but also includes the study of movement and compass of Dalit literature. It's extensively believed that all Dalit erudite creations have their roots in the Ambedkarite studies. The paper also dissects the stark realities of Dalit and their estimable attempts to upraise socially and presents the growth of Dalit Literature over the decades.

**KEYWORDS:** Dalit writings, Oppressed, Untouchables, Caste, Expression, Identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the fastest growing countries yet is notorious for its rigid caste system. Literature has been an integral part of India since time immemorial and in the post modern era when the problems regarding human rights occupy the central stage, it becomes an evident step to literally portray the marginalised community. Dalit literature is an attempt to bring to the fore the discrimination, brutality, and ostracization faced by the Dalit community in India. The members of the Dalit community have been pushed to the margins and their lived experiences have been disregarded by the majority. Their stories have been deemed unworthy to be written about.

The advent of Dalit literature, comprising poems, novels, memoirs, and the like, is rectifying this situation slowly by depicting the nuances of the Dalit culture. Dalit literature is one of the most

important literary phenomena in post-independence India that is trying to restore dignity to a community that has been wronged for ages. Their struggles relating to their stigmatized identity as "untouchables" are finally being acknowledged. Dalit literature has become synonymous with the Dalit consciousness, on both individual and communal levels. The writings of B.R. Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule, and Periyar constitute the foundation of Dalit sociopolitical movements and literary productions.

## II. THE CONCEPT OF DALIT

The word Dalit comes from Sanskrit and it means downtrodden, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. Literally it means oppressed and is used to refer to the untouchable casteless sects of India. Dalit, also called outcaste, is a self designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables.

Dalits are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over India, South Asia and all over the world. There are many different names proposed for defining this group of people like Ashprosh (Untouchable), Harijans (Children of God), Dalits (Broken people) etc.

## III. ORIGIN AND GROWTH

The term 'Dalit literature' was first used in 1958, at the first ever Dalit conference held in Bombay. However as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit panthers. The name expressed their feelings of kinship and solidarity with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African - American rights in the U.S.A. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit panther movement, writes: "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with



a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”

#### IV. DALIT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

The earliest known Dalit reformer was Lord Gautam Budha, who preached the abolishing of untouchability. The earliest known reformation within Hinduism happened during the medieval period when the Bhakti movements actively engaged in the participation and inclusion of dalits. In the 19th century, the Brahmo samaj, Arya samaj and the Ramakrishna mission actively participated in the emancipation of Dalits. Saint kabir, mahanubhava sect, varkari sect in Maharashtra rejected the term untouchability and embraced Dalits as brothers. Maharashtra state was the key state in the reformation of Dalit or on the transformation of untouchable to touchable.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Rajashri Shahu Maharaj, V. R. Shinde and the pinnacle towering figure Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar were the prominent social reformers in Maharashtra. In the 1950, Ambedkar turned his attention to Buddhism and converted thousands of untouchable people in Buddhism with himself. In west Bengal chaitanya prabhu initiated a movement called ‘Namo shudras movement’ (bow to Dalit) which changed an attitude towards untouchable community. Overall, Dalit reform movements had been in India since ancient period right from Gautama Buddha. Still it is in course of reforming state by creative efforts of social reformers.

#### V. INDIAN DALIT LITERATURE

Indian Dalit Literature, which can be traced back to a corpus of writings from Maharashtra in the 1960s, refers to literature of the oppressed, usually associated with a diverse group of people historically considered the lowest among the Indian population and known as Untouchables. While Dalit literature developed in response to concerns specific to Indian social and cultural history, over the last twenty years Dalit literature has got itself a spot in the World Republic of Letters through translations into English. The style of Dalit literature covers a wide range of literary genres. It solely aims at generating awareness of dalits about their social situation in the society, to all conscious readers.

Printing technology and the freedom movement helped in the creation of a specific literary genre that eventually came to be identified as Dalit literature: the literature of the oppressed. They also gradually paved the way for the dalit

writers to express and reach more people. As a result, over the years a decent body of work has been made available in the form of songs, poetry, fiction (short stories and novels), memoirs and biographies.

In this context, well-known second generation Dalit politician, Mrs. Meira Kumar, former Lok Sabha Speaker, had to say about Dalit literature:

"Great literature, the classics, is time-tested, invariably painted on large canvases and are stories that have shaped generations. And then there are books like Amritlal Nagar's Nachyo Bahut Gopal, which are revolutionary and made a significant impact on me. I object to the classification of literature like this as Dalit Literature. It is the sort of label designed to keep a book in its so-called place. By assigning labels to writing as anarchists, we try to push them further out into the fringe. "

#### VI. A NEW FLAVOUR

One of the solid arsenals produced by the Dalit community, apart from its resolute commitment to love, forgive and fight, is the articulation, through literature, of human emotion, and writing about bodies and sexuality, compelling rage and justifiable challenges to authority. Over the first half of the twentieth century, besides BR Ambedkar, a proliferation of Dalit writers produced work in multiple vernaculars, writing in a tone that conveyed their selves in the most direct form. The list below attempts to cover some of the recognised and popular works, which gained prominence through their craft and expression. They have given rise to thought, philosophy and meditation, and let many bathe in the pain and joy they put forth.

For generations, Dalits had to be locked in someone else's hateful interpretation. Their registers of protest and sweetness in life were not only undermined but stolen by their oppressors. Dalits, therefore, had to witness their beauty being manipulated and relegated to an ugly demeanour. Dalit writers, though, used this to their service. Time was made unavailable to Dalits, so they slashed the rigid conventions of temporality and space in their writing.

#### VII. CANONICAL WORKS

I. Annihilation of Caste by BR Ambedkar (1936)

II. The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables by BR Ambedkar (1948)



III. We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar (1989) Translated to English by Wandana Sonalkar (Zubaan, 2008)

IV. Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki (1997) Translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (Columbia University Press, 2003)

V. Jehnva Mi Zaat Chorli Hoti, or When I Hid My Caste by Baburao Bagul (1963) Translated from Marathi by Jerry Pinto (Speaking Tiger, 2018)

VI. Karukku by Bama (1992) Translated by Lakshmi Holmstorm (Oxford University Press, 2001)

VII. Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature Edited by Arjun Dangle (Orient BlackSwan, 1992)

VIII. Ooru Keri by Siddalingaiah (1996) Translated from Kannada by SR Ramakrishna, as A Word With You, World: The Autobiography of a Poet (Navayana, 2013)

IX. Strike A Blow to Change the World by Eknath Awad (2012)

Translated by Jerry Pinto (Speaking Tiger, 2018)

X. Dalits: Pasts, Presents, Future by Anand Teltumbde (Routledge, 2016)

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Dalit writing interrogates and protests, the system of caste-based hierarchy and discrimination in India; the stories and memoir here provide a nuanced picture of a complex society. The first person narratives of the Dalit Writers not only makes the readers aware about what the Dalits had to suffer from but also provides us a clear picture of the society and the mindset of the people of that time. The writers like Mukta Salve, Bama, Meena Kandasamy, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble etc have all successfully portrayed the plight, suffering and agitation of the Dalits in their writings.

Dalit literature and Dalit activism have become strongly integrated in the modern world. Literature is quite a powerful weapon, after all. The literary world has seen an emergence of new Dalit writers, transforming the space with their powerful writings. P. Sivakami, for example, is one of the most prominent Dalit writers today. Her book *The grip of change* is a very powerful piece of writing, considered one of the finest by many people. Vijila Chirrapad, another Dalit women writer is based in Kerala and has published three collections till date. Her writings generally explore the problems in the lives of women. Dev Kumar, born in 1972, is a Dalit writer as well as dramatist. He founded a

theatre group (Apna Theatre) in 1992, and has produced several plays arousing Dalit consciousness. Meena Kandasamy is among the most famous feminist writers of our country. Based in Tamil Nadu, her writings are deeply linked to the anti-caste movement.

As Dalit writers slowly take their rightful place in the literary world, there is a clear transition to be seen. While earlier, the literary sphere was dominated by Dalit characters that didn't have a very strong voice (for example, Lakshmi from *Children of God*), the modern day characters are penned down boldly. Young, Dalit writers are making their presence felt, telling their own story for a change.

Dalit literature in India over the past many decades has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in many Indian languages. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation and marginalization due to hierarchical caste system. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality.

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