



Representation of academic institutions in select dalit autobiographies

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Abstract

Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's exhortation to 'Unite, Educate and Agitate', the Dalit writers and activists look upon education as a means to bring light to the life of the Dalits, and it is a way to help them gain recognition and power. But this mode of empowerment grows self-contradictory when the educational institution discriminates and humiliates a child for belonging to a particular caste or community. The Dalit writers in their autobiographies often consider themselves as victims of pervasive caste culture of the Hindus, as powerless objects of application of the hegemony of Brahminism, and to them the apparently harmless academic institution is also an accomplice in this discrimination and maltreatment on the basis of untouchability and caste. In their experience the school is what Foucault calls a 'disciplinary institution' that in a subtle way serves the interest of the powerful ruling class. To them it is a space for defining the power relations of domination-subordination in the caste-based Indian society. This paper focuses on how the protagonists in the select Dalit autobiographies look upon the educational institution as an oppressive agency that perpetuates the caste structure and assigns caste roles to the Dalits, and how the teachers, and the curriculum they teach, support the ideology of Brahminism in the Hindu society. It also shows how this mode of representation, and the consciousness it generates, becomes a tool or strategy in the political struggle of the Dalits to build an inclusive society.

Keywords: education, institution, caste, discrimination, brahminism, power, hegemony, subordination, representation

Introduction

Dalit literature is a literature written by a Dalit or non-Dalit writer about the experiences of the Dalits. The term 'dalit literature' was first coined by the Dalit writers and activists in a literature conference held in Bombay in 1958. Though originating from the Sanskrit verb 'Dal' meaning 'to trample' and 'to crush', the term was conceived as an adjective by Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to describe a section of poor and ignorant people who have been oppressed and exploited for centuries for their low birth and untouchability by the powerful caste Hindus. But as Arun Prabha Mukerjee observes: '... as an identity marker, the term Dalit came into prominence in 1972, when a group of Maratha writer-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The name expressed their feelings of solidarity and kinship with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-Americans' rights in the United States of America' (Mukherjee xii). So Dalit literature has a sociological goal of spreading the Dalit consciousness among the Dalits whose numbers exceed one fifth of the total Indian population. It also aims at making the non-Dalits aware of the miserable living conditions of the Dalits and thereby effect a change towards making an inclusive society characterized by the Ambedkarite ideals of justice, equality, fraternity, and human values.

Autobiography is a favourite genre of the Dalit writers as it gives them a space to write about their real life experience in an authentic and elaborate way. It is a sort of annals of their lives and a development narrative. However, a Dalit autobiography is different from the mainstream autobiography. The former's scope is greater than that of the latter. While the latter mainly confines it in detailing the life

of the writer, former adds the life of his or her community along with his or her own experiences. It is more realistic and socially oriented, and becomes a tale of the community as well. Taking its birth from Maharashtra, Dalit autobiographies are being written across various Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, Gujrat, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. There are many Dalit autobiographies but some of the well known include Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, Kumud Pawde's *Antosphot*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and the Tamil writer Bama's *Karukku*. The aim of the present paper is to show how the academic institutions where the protagonists of these narratives had once been, are represented, how their experiences there condition their perception of the society around them, how they influence their political life, and finally to enquire if such representation is motivated by the ideology of Dalit politics.

School - A central experience in life

School is a central experience in our life. It is a stage intermediate between childhood and greater social life. This experience of schooling lasts in our mind for ever. So it is natural for the Dalit autobiographical writers to include unavoidably the school and the experiences of the protagonists in their texts. It forms a vital part in the Dalit narratives of pain. But the question is what role the school or the academic institution plays in the formative stage of a Dalit child's life. An educational institution functions like a beacon light to a Dalit child. It gives him the hope of a way out from caste oppression in the society. For long ignorance has been a curse. It intensified his pain. The introduction of compulsory free education in the Post Independent era provided the Dalits an

opportunity to learn. Dr. Ambedkar, the great leader of the Dalits, exhorted them to 'Unite, Educate and Agitate', and this urged the Dalits too to go to school and get education. This access to education not only opens their eyes but also helps them get recognition and power.

But this salutary effect of mass education must not make one blind to the seamy side of the experience of the Dalit child at the academic institution. The cruelest experience is that of discrimination on the basis of untouchability and caste. If, on the one hand, the school has a role to empower with the light of education, it also has a role to dispel that power by caste oppression on the other. If the first is to build, the second is to crush. If the first is direct, the second is insidious and subtle. The second is generated by caste prejudice, class hatred and finally hunger for power over the poor untouchables. It is the disciplining in the Foucauldian sense to make the Dalits docile and useful.

School as one of the disciplinary institutions

The great twentieth century French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault considers school as a disciplinary institution. He puts it in the same frame with the institutions like the army, the monastery, the workshop, the hospital and the prison. The strict mechanism of control applied in these institutions also functions in the school. He explains their mechanism of power by using the architectural metaphor of Panopticon, a circular prison whose inmates could be seen constantly by a supervisor placed in a central tower. According to Roger Deacon 'Panopticon became the model for disciplinary institutions; it was a school, the 'pedagogical machine' of *ecole Militaria* which may have provided (Foucault) the inspiration for the Panopticon' (Deacon 181). Commenting on the effect the constant gaze of the observer produces on the inmates Foucault writes:

If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of plot, an attempt at collective escape...if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion, if they are madmen there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are school children, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents (Foucault 200-201).

The constant act of gaze makes them internalize the discipline and obey the norm. Though Foucault was characterizing the school in the wake of the Enlightenment in Europe, his observations are equally applicable to the modern institutions of learning in the present day India.

Role of school in perpetuating the power relations

The classroom as represented in Dalit literature is heterogeneous. It is constituted of students from different castes and communities. One major division is that of high caste students who are privileged and powerful, and the other is that of the low caste who are poor untouchables. The first forms the centre and the second forms the periphery as they do in the society outside the classroom. The school has a role to perpetuate the power relations of domination-subordination.

There are two techniques for perpetuating this relation of power. First is the mechanism of exclusion that admits the high caste within its periphery and excludes the low. It makes a division between the 'touchables' and the 'untouchables'. The other is the disciplinary techniques as put forward by Foucault and thereby attuning one to the ideology of the ruling caste. Like all other disciplinary institutions, the school too has a penal mechanism. It is place that gives what Foucault calls 'Normalizing judgment', a punishment for not conforming to the Norm or the standard as fixed by the power. Foucault continues:

The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micro-penalty of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks) of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behavior (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body (incorrect attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency). At the same time, by way of punishment, a whole series of procedures was used, from light physical punishment to minor deprivations and petty humiliations (Foucault 178).

And again as Foucault observes: 'The power of the Norm appears through disciplines...The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardized education...' (Foucault 184).

The framing of the curriculum is done keeping in mind the norm. It is related to the formation of a set of knowledge about a subject or what Foucault calls a 'discourse'. Here a selection is made from a vast reservoir of knowledge. Its aim is to provide one with that knowledge only which helps one get attuned to the ideology or the norm of the powerful. It is again related to Foucauldian concept of power and knowledge. The imparting of some knowledge and withholding the other are directly related to the establishment of power.

The hierarchy in the school machinery, surveillance and its effects

The school as a 'pedagogical machine' never exercises its power over the student in a single tier of its application. It does so by a hierarchical distribution of that power. One placed at the higher position observes the one inferior to him in rank. The master as the supervisor keeps surveillance over the behavior of the teacher, and the teacher in turn keeps an eye on the learners. The teacher does his duties perfectly because he is also spied on by the master. The inspector who makes intermittent visits and keeps an eye on how the master follows his instructions and serves the interest of the power: 'An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning' (Foucault 204).

Thus all the students in the heterogeneous classroom try to imbibe the desired knowledge as prescribed in the curriculum and attain the Norm. They end in becoming disciplined and suitable for the ruling class. But there is one additional problem for a Dalit child. The students from upper caste communities can identify themselves with the norms as they can relate them with their lived experiences at home and

outside home. But a Dalit who lives in a permanent segregation, isolated from the mainstream society, deprived of human rights and oppressed by all, cannot identify himself or herself with the thing he has to learn at the school. The things are alien and contrary to the lived experience. It involves his or her constant self sacrifice, burying his or her own ideas and feelings, and thus crushing of the identity as one from a different community. The protagonists of the Dalit autobiographies have to face the situation and they often rebel against this imposition.

Discrimination in school on the basis of caste

In the light of the above now I will proceed to discuss the portrayal of the school or the academic institution in the select Dalit autobiographies. Daya Pawar, the great Maratha Dalit poet and activist, stunned the literary circle of Maharashtra with his autobiography *Baluta* (1978). It was the first autobiography in the domain of Dalit literature. Beginning in the Pre-Independence era, it portrays the intolerably miserable life of the Dalit Mahars in the writer's village and in the suburbs of Bombay. Along with numerous incidents of suffering caused by caste division, the speaking persona tells Daya Pawar about his experience of the school and that of his uncle Tatya that he heard from elders. In those days Mahars were not allowed to enter the classroom. They were made to sit outside it and were hated and tortured by the Brahmin teacher. The persona continues:

In his (uncle Tatya's) day, the school was conducted in the Maruti temple. The Mahar children had to sit outside, on the steps. One day a Brahmin teacher had thrown a foot-rule at Tatya. Tatya had thrown it back. It hit the teacher and drew blood. Terrified Tatya fled to Maharwada. He never went back (Pawar 44).

But in his (Daya Pawar's) day even if the Mahar boys were made to sit inside, they were not allowed to sit with the upper caste students. They could not sit facing the teacher, were denied water and made to do unclean jobs:

I remember the early times. We were not allowed to sit with the Maratha children from the village. They faced the teacher and we sat at right angles to them, facing a different direction. If we were thirsty, there was no water for us at school... Once a week, we would have to plaster the school with cow dung (Pawar 45).

Thus the upper caste people formed the centre and the Mahars had to hang on the periphery, and the teacher just maintained the social relation of power that existed outside the classroom.

The teacher as Dronacharya

A teacher is an important figure in the education system. Much of education depends upon him. But the portrayal of the teacher of the village school in *Baluta* deconstructs the traditional image of the teacher as impartial, noble and just. Here the teacher is negligent, selfish, caste-minded and funny:

The Brahmin teacher would treat himself to a good nap in the afternoon... From time to time he would tell us to steal

sour limes or sweet limes from the orchard near the school for his use. When he was in school, we did not get the feeling that he discriminated on the basis of caste. But when went to his house, he underwent a radical transformation. He became 'pure' in the ritual sense of the word... The master we knew at school did not resemble the master in his lair. It was as if he had his caste consciousness hanging on a peg near the door and he could slip into or out of it, at will (Pawar 45).

The teacher in the most negative image is nowhere presented as in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*. Phool Singh Tyagi, a teacher of Physical Education, always took recourse to 'slaps and kicks' to maintain discipline in the class Valmiki attended. Being a Physical Education teacher, he taught a lesson to the aberrant students by thrashing them physically. His description of Ram Singh as 'Kalo Daroga' made the whole class laugh. In a fit of rage he fell on Surjan Singh and began to beat him mercilessly, and the victim fell on the ground. The whole class had laughed but his anger fell on him because his dress and his manners were not befitting to his low caste status, and they meant that he was assertive, and not submissive:

His manners and dress were not only different, they were superior. They all minded that. Teachers and class fellows, they all disliked him for that. How dared he be superior to them when he was born in a Chuhra home? (Valmiki 48)

Valmiki also shares us his experience of the chemistry teacher Brajpal Singh who kept him out of the chemistry lab on some pretext. The Principal remained inactive when he complained. When the results were announced, he saw that he had failed the lab test. This incident led him to a nadir of despair. His heart broke when he realized that Brajpal Sir had conspired to deny a low caste student access to education. Though different in manner, in spirit Brajpal Singh is same as the Headmaster of the Primary school who made Valmiki sweep the whole school compound instead of allowing him to study. So the description of the latter is equally applicable to him:

The headmaster had pounced on my back... As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground (Valmiki 5).

Like the headmaster he, too, believes in the caste roles of the Dalit boys and does not want them to come in the school premises and make progress. His heart is as fierce as that of the headmaster. So Valmiki's father protests saying: 'Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya...?' (Valmiki 7). In his opinion the headmaster and the teachers like him must be the faithful children of Dronacharya, the biased teacher in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* who asked for the Dalit archer Ekalabya's thumb for *Gurudakshina*. Ekalabya cut his thumb and gave it to Dronacharya as his tribute. The father looks upon this as the teacher's ploy that impaired the able Dalit student forever to compete Arjuna, his favourite Pandava prince. He was tricked into bringing his own defeat. Mukherjee's comment on this matter is revealing:

When Valmiki's father goes to the school and calls the headmaster a Dronacharya, he links the twentieth century caste relations to those that prevailed two thousand years ago (Mukherjee xxxii).

And again his description of the twentieth century teacher as Dronacharya deconstructs the high caste version of the same incident that presents Dronacharya as an example of skillful and famous teacher, and Ekalabya as the emblem of an obedient student.

The kind of teachers blinded by caste-culture is not confined to schools only. A few can also be found in the institutes of higher learning. Even a great intellectual illumination often fails to make them transcend the caste-prejudice. Kumud Pawde in her celebrated autobiography *Antasphot* gives us a testimony in this regard. The head of Sanskrit Department at the university she studied did not like her learning Sanskrit because she was from a low caste community, and he made it explicit, taunted her and derived a malicious delight in doing so. In the section named 'The Story of My Sanskrit' Pawde communicates her pain thus:

The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I had developed a terror of this great pundit...I could not understand why this great man with a doctorate, so renowned all over India, this man in his modern dress, who did not wear the traditional cap, who would so eloquently delineate the philosophy of Universal Being, and with such ease explain difficult concepts in simple terms, could not practise in real life the philosophy in the books he taught (Pawde 119-120).

The following remark made by Pawde sums up the effects the oppressive teachers produced on the Dalit protagonists: 'Days go by. You survive calamities; but the memory of them sets up its permanent abode in you. In the innermost recesses of your inner being' (Pawde 120).

The Bias in Curriculum

If the discriminatory actions of a few caste-minded teachers affected the Dalit learners directly and left an indelible mark on their consciousness, an indirect and more subtle way to condition and manipulate them rested in the designing of the curriculum of the human sciences, the set of knowledge they were to gain in Humanities. In *Joothan*, Valmiki is seen complaining about the exclusion or misrepresentation of what he calls 'excruciatingly painful' social reality faced by the poor Dalits in the village. He remembers the poem 'Ah, how beautiful is the village life' by Maithili Sharan Gupt which he was taught at school. The poem gives a description of village life which is totally unrelated to the actual living conditions of the poor. When he grew up '...each word of the poem had proved to be artificial and a lie' (Valmiki 39).

Valmiki is also irreverent to the portrayal of cultural heritage in the text books of History. He tells us about his reading of *Volga se Ganga*, a book by Rahul Sankrityayan that had shaken up his faith in India's past glory and had created in him a new awareness: 'The lie that the textbooks had been injecting in my veins in the name of cultural heritage had been shattered by *Volga se Ganga*' (Valmiki 121). The speaking

persona in *Baluta* had the same intellectual ferment when he read Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's '*Who were the Shurdas?* And when he read Sane Guruji's *Indian Culture* for the school essay competition, he could not find the story of their exploitation in it. He mocked Sane Guruji's concept of Indian Culture in his essay and it echoed Dr. Ambedkar's ideas. His Brahmin teacher accused him of hating his own country, and he (Daya Pawar's alter ego) argued with him vehemently.

Dalit child stands outside the door

In *Joothan* Valmiki repeatedly expresses his wonder that no Indian epic poet ever wrote a single word about the untouchables, that no one in his entire school life ever uttered before him the name of Dr. Ambedkar, the saviour of the Dalits and the maker of the Indian Constitution. This textual silence and the absence of the Dalit themes from the everyday discourse of the school, according to Valmiki, are intended to exclude the Dalits from important affairs of life, and they are motivated by the will to power. Valmiki introduces another incident that took place in Maharashtra in 1984. It was an incident that exposed the narrow mindedness of upper caste Hindus of the state, and it came to symbolize Dalit oppression in school and in society at large. Valmiki reports:

In a Marathi textbook meant for class seven, there was a lesson on Dr. Ambedkar. All the students ripped out the lesson on the orders of a Brahmin teacher. The class had some Mahar students and they had felt that ripping out the lesson was wrong (Valmiki 112).

Here the Brahmin teacher wants to withhold that knowledge from his students which is a threat to the superiority of his caste. Dr. Ambedkar symbolizes a relentless fight for human rights for Dalits, and he is an inspiration to all Dalit writers and activists. So Dr. Ambedkar creates in that teacher an anxiety about the security of the privilege he and his community enjoy. It is this anxiety that leads to this sort of behaviour. This incident also establishes that the mechanism of exclusion widely practiced since the time of the epic poets still holds sway and the same mechanism functions in the framing of the curriculum of the human sciences.

Mechanism of power exercised over a teacher

As shown by the writers above, the pride of caste in some teachers and the biased curriculum help in the process of making a student 'disciplined' or docile and useful for the ruling caste. But all the teachers are not caste-minded, and there are some who have dissenting voices and who deny conformity to the dominant ideology. So we see in *Baluta* that the experience of the writer at the school is not of unmitigated deprivation and violence. He has some positive experiences too. While the teacher in the village school was negligent and oppressive, the Brahmin teacher Samudra in the Taluka School loved him and gave him his due. He praised his achievement and inspired him. He even suggested the upper caste boys to follow his example. Kumud Pawde and Valmiki too confer great honour to such teachers in their autobiographies for their free and generous nature.

But how far can a teacher free of caste-bias go in alleviating the pain of a Dalit learner and do justice to him amid a strict

mechanism of control exercised over him? He is under the constant gaze of the authorities who form a hierarchy and make surveillance over all the activities and movements of his. Deacon puts the matter thus:

At the heart of practice of teaching, Foucault argued, is a defined and regulated relation of surveillance which acts to improve its efficacy... In fact, in many everyday educational situations, it is the teacher, performing under the critical gaze of others, over whom power is exercised (184).

This mechanism of power exercised over a teacher is perfectly illustrated by Bama in her celebrated autobiography *Karukku*. Born and brought up in a Tamil Dalit family that converted to Christianity, Bama has a harrowing experience at the convent school where she joined as a teacher. In spite of being a nun, she could not live up to the ideals of the Order in the conflict-ridden world of the convent. She is disillusioned to see the ideals preached and the reality that she had to encounter. She also writes about the oppressive mechanism of power used by the authority to compel obedience. The three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience (equivalent to the rules of discipline in state-run institutions) that the nuns were required to make served no other purpose than controlling and enslaving them. Bama clearly puts this in the following words:

They go on and on about the vows of 'obedience' and force us into submission so that we can scarcely lift up our heads. We are not even allowed to think for ourselves in a way that befits our years. They want to think for us, and instead of us. We are not allowed the independence and the rights that even small children are entitled to ...They insisted...I must only do as I was told (Bama 114).

During the training the would-be nuns were taught that each individual is different from others and that each is unique, but when it came to actual practice the authorities could not tolerate dissidence or difference in opinions. They left no stone unturned to homogenize the dissenting voices:

They expected us to behave as if we had all been made from the very same mould. Nobody was allowed to think differently or speak differently. We had to accept what our Superiors told us, as if it were God-given Scripture. If you did not accept it, or spoke differently, then that was the end of you (Bama 114).

Though living in comfort in the premises of the convent, Bama's experiences as a teacher produced in her a feeling of being imprisoned in a cage: 'We could go round and round, always within our luxurious cages, trapped in comfort' (Bama 113). Again when she left the convent she 'felt like a prisoner who had just escaped from a jail' (Bama 134). In the convent her experience was not unlike that of the prisoner who is confined in the Panopticon, who is under the constant gaze of his or her superiors, and whose actions and behaviours ultimately serve the interests of the ruling class. Very few can protest and break free like Bama.

Conclusion

Thus there is a sort of negativity in the representation of the academic institutions in the Dalit autobiographies. Here 'Education system is indicted as death dealing to the Dalits' (Mukherjee xxxiv) as it discriminates and humiliates the Dalit learners for their low birth, as it spreads the ideology of the ruling castes and help maintain the social relations of power in which hegemony of Brahminism reigns supreme and the Dalits are its powerless victims. The academic institution in this view is not impartial; it is the most potent institution through which the power of the ruling castes is purveyed. It is in tune with the Foucauldian concept that the establishment of Power is directly related to Knowledge, which is disseminated through the academic institutions and the curriculum. Political representation of the Dalits in the state machinery is the only remedy for all this. Literature has always been an instrument of politics. Dalit autobiographies that expose the inhumanity of the dominant upper caste Hindus and the pain of the writers resulting from that play a significant role in spreading the Dalit consciousness in the Dalits and the Non-Dalits alike and influence the Dalit political activities. It is this 'consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change (Valmiki 132). And the awareness of the academic institution as being biased and oppressive machinery that in a very subtle way help perpetuate Dalit oppression is obviously related to this politics. Keeping in view the political motivation behind such representation, Limbale is not far from truth when he observes:

The relationship of Dalits to the upper caste Hindu society is unparalleled. It is a relationship of domination-subordination...The literature that Dalit writers have created emerges from this relationship, and is an integral part of the political struggle to overturn it. In a profound sense, then, this literature engages with the Foucauldian Power/ Knowledge paradigm (Limbale 16).

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