
SECULAR SELF AND THE FRAMING OF DALIT LITERATURE IN SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract: In this essay, I have tried to map a broad picture of the emergence of dalit literature as a major sociopolitical force in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh (which included today's Telangana State). Rather than providing the details of the individual authors and their works, I have tried to discuss the historical contexts and the theoretical issues that shaped dalit literature, especially in the second half of the twentieth century and after. Combined with my own observations and drawing from the work that is made available by other scholars, I have tried to explain how the dalit literature in Telugu is radically different from the literature produced by the upper caste writers, including the ones who are known as "progressive" writers, on the issue of caste.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Telugu literature, Dalit politics, Caste oppression, Dalit Christianity, Dalit liberation, Untouchable Spring.

This essay focuses on a specific strand of dalit literature in Telugu. Telugu is spoken in two of the five South Indian states, called Andhra Pradesh and Telangana State. Dalit literature in Telugu is huge and has a history of around hundred years, so one might need to spend a few hours or even days to get some clear picture of it. It will be ambitious on my part to try and present a comprehensive picture of it in this short essay. Instead, I will try to present a broad picture of the field of dalit literature in Telugu, and the ways in which it has evolved over the last century or so, and particularly in the last three decades, which has been the period of rapid changes in dalit literature and dalit politics in India.

Any initial account of any literature to a new audience tends to be descriptive. However, I will try to analyze some of the ideological and political aspects of dalit literature. I am particularly interested in the ways in which dalit literature in Telugu is *framed* not only by individual literary scholars, but also, more importantly, by various groups such as secularists, "progressive" associations, radical left, feminists, Gandhians, Ambedkarites, sub-caste groups, dalit feminists and so on. I would also share a few thoughts on the issue of translation, which is an important concern for the Telugu dalit writers.

Understanding the framing of dalit literature is important because it helps us to tease out the ideological differences and disagreements, cultural differences and power relations among the groups I have already mentioned. Such differences are often erased or lost in the mainstream historical accounts of dalit literature.

Politics of naming: Clarification of terms

It might be useful to know the different terms used to designate dalits and the political charge associated with these terms. Harijan is the term coined by Gandhi, and adopted by the Congress Party, to refer to the untouchables during the first half of the twentieth century. *Hari* means (Hindu) god and *jan* means people so together it means 'children of god.' Whereas Dr. BR. Ambedkar, the charismatic leader who has become the icon of dalit movement in India today, opposed the Gandhian term Harijan because he believed that Gandhi and the Congress Party were trying to appropriate dalits into the Hindu religious fold by designating them as harijans, as part of the nationalist mobilization of the Indian masses against the British rule. In an undelivered speech, which was later published as a book called *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that dalits would not be liberated as long as they were part of the Hindu religion. He thought, converting to Christianity was an option for dalits, including himself, but finally, towards the end of his life, he converted to Buddhism. Thus, the term 'harijan' was unacceptable to him and to the post-Ambedkarite dalits (Ambedkar, 1937). Instead, Ambedkar used the term "Depressed Classes" which was also used by the British government. The Indian state, after independence, has been using the term 'Scheduled Castes' to refer to the many casts among dalits. This is an administrative category rather than a political one although at times it gained some political charge, especially during the widespread anti-Mandal/anti-reservation (for OBCs) agitations in 1989 by the upper caste students. Terms such as 'outcaste' or 'pariah' can also be found in the writings of British scholars but are no longer in use. 'Weaker sections', 'backward classes', 'disadvantaged classes', are more inclusive terms.

The term dalit is a more recent innovation. Originally, it was supposed to have been used in the sense of 'broken people,' but it was subsequently redefined. In the 1970s, in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, a group of young dalits formed an organization called Dalit Panthers, under the leadership of Namdev Dhasal, who popularized the term dalit which signified militancy against the upper caste oppression. During 1980s and 90s, the term gained wide currency in the wake of a vibrant pan-Indian dalit movement. In the process, issues such as self-respect, dignity and assertion of the oppressed castes have come to be associated with the term dalit as against many other terms which portray dalits as mere victims or helpless people without any history and culture. Thus, unlike other terms, dalit is not a given name or a mere administrative or sociological category but is a self-assigned term which has come to signify the political charge of the revolt against caste oppression.

Defining dalit literature

Let me point out a few important aspects of the dominant mode of defining dalit literature. As you know, the term dalit is not the name of a single caste. It is an umbrella term used to refer to many castes which are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. There are differences among these castes in terms of culture and economic and political status. Ignoring such differences, many scholars—sociologists, anthropologists and literary critics—assume that the term dalit is a homogenous category that can sufficiently represent the “untouchables” of India. Therefore, it is also assumed that dalit literature too is a homogenous body of writing that deals with the “social evil” called the caste system, which is considered an ancient Indian/Hindu religious practice which is inhuman since it is associated with untouchability, victimization of dalits by the upper castes and so on. Dalit literature is also supposed to be about the miserable conditions in which dalits have been living for centuries i.e. they are the poorest of the Indian populations, they are scavengers, they clear the dead animals from the villages, they are denied many privileges which the upper castes enjoy such as education and entry into the Hindu temples. They are also denied social interaction such as inter dining with the upper castes, inter caste marriages and so on, and dalit literature is supposed to be all about eradicating these social evils. A lot of research done within the social sciences and humanities (within India and outside) is underwritten by this dominant mode of understanding.

However, it is important to note that the mainstream Telugu literature produced on the issue of caste as a social evil was authored by dalits themselves, but by the “secular” or “progressive” minded upper caste writers, particularly during the first half of twentieth century. This body of literature is very different from the dalit literature produced by dalits themselves. Within the Telugu public sphere, in the last two decades, there have been intense debates on, for example, what constitutes authentic dalit literature and who can represent whom and so on, and all the dalit scholars are almost unanimous on this issue that literature written by the upper caste writers cannot be called dalit literature because it either represents dalits in a very poor light, or it is incapable of representing the experience of dalits since the upper caste writers never experienced any caste discrimination. Some of the upper caste writers might have all the good intentions and might be sympathetic towards the suffering of dalits, but that is not enough. So the question of experience and representation are central to the recent dalit writing and these are very important new questions that dalit literature in Telugu has brought in from the 1990s.

In an essay called, ‘What is Dalit Literature?’, B.M. Puttiah, a dalit professor, writes that dalit literature ‘is the literature that captures the desire, dreams, belief, agony, suffering, violence, humiliation, impatience, dissatisfaction, rage and resistance of dalits.’ (K. Satyanarayana, 2013).

One example of the secular approach to the caste question could be seen in the Telugunovel *Malapalli* (*Village of Malas*—Mals are an untouchable caste in the Telugu

states), written in 1922 by the well-known writer Unnava Lakshminarayana, who believed in the conservative Gandhian ideals and the Bolshevnik revolution at the same time. He studied law in Ireland and was said to be influenced by Eamon De Valera. His novel *Malapalli* was banned by the Madras British government on the charge that it was anti-British and preached communism and instigated labourers against the landlords. According to one of the leading literary historians of Indian literature, Sisir Kumar Das, the novel, among other things, “was a faithful record of the life of a Harijan family and their unending suffering...” On the one hand, Das admits that the small literary community (read upper caste) to which the author of this novel, Unnava, belonged, was “motivated by a general humanitarianism rather than by any concrete ideas of bringing in real change in the caste hierarchy.” However, he praises the novel for its “broad humanism” and a “deep religiosity,” and goes on to argue that what it “did was to highlight the suffering of the people belonging to lower castes and of the untouchables which made the readers of the higher castes aware of the inhumanity of this ancient social tradition (Das, pp. 310-312).”

A much more familiar example of this kind of humanist literature on caste issue is the well-known Indian English novel *The Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, which is narrativized around the life of a young scavenger called Bakha, who cleans the dirt and filth of the dry public latrines used by the upper castes and the British. He was humiliated and abused by the upper castes while the British treated him humanely. Novels of this sort were produced in many Indian languages in the first half of twentieth century, which have been extolled as masterpieces, particularly for their secular ideals, modern and rational thinking and for championing the cause of the downtrodden. Often, in these novels, orthodox Brahmin pundits are juxtaposed with young upper caste men who are English-speaking, western educated, progressive-minded, and are opposed to obvious caste practices such as untouchability and inter caste marriages. As early as 1938, a Telugu film called *Malapilla* (Mala girl) was made based on a Telugu short story, which was a love story between a Brahmin boy and a *mala* girl. As the filmic narrative unfolds itself, the Brahmin boy emerges as the hero. However, such films or the humanist literature written by the upper caste writers with an agenda of caste reform have been challenged by dalit scholars.

The Historical Context

What is the context in which dalits reevaluated Telugu literature and how did dalit literature rise to the present status? Today, there are numerous dalit writers in Telugu, as well as in other Indian languages, and some of them are brilliant and extremely articulate unlike their predecessors whose voice was hardly heard. Also, one can see a marked difference between the contemporary dalit writers and their predecessors not only in terms of how they perceive caste discrimination but also the ways in which have they dealt with it. It is interesting to know the conditions or circumstances under which this shift has taken place.

Many dalitas well as non-dalit scholars claim that 1990s was a decisive point in the history of dalit movement and dalit literature. Although dalit literature in Telugu has a history of hundred years, the amount of dalit literature produced prior to the 1980s was very little. One of the main triggers for the rise of dalit literature in the 1990s was a series of massacres of dalits by the upper castes in the coastal Andhra region, in places such as Karamchedu, Nirukonda and Chundururu in the 1980s. Katti Padma Rao and Bojja Tarakam, who emerged as leaders and writers during this period, point out that literature became the political site of articulation for the dalit struggles and a series of agitations against the massacres. Upper caste people belonging to two major peasant castes in Andhra called the Kammas and Reddys, who gained political and economic power after independence, attacked dalits in the 1980s. They killed them, raped dalit women and burnt them. Unlike their predecessors, who employed mild forms of protests, dalits in the 1980s and 90s retaliated against the upper castes. Dalit literature was part of such a rebellion. (Satyanarayana, 2013).

It is also observed by scholars today that in the 1980s, there was a shift in the status of the dalits. With modernization process underway, dalits moved away from their traditional caste-based occupations. Also, state programmes of social welfare and opening up of modern public spaces such as transport, educational institutions, cinema halls etc, have weakened the authority of the dominant upper castes. In the process, dalits also became conscious of their self-respect and their rights. As Satyanarayana rightly points out, "...in the famous song 'Dalita Pululamma', Gaddar, a famous dalit revolutionary singer-performer, captures the essence of dalit assertion...":

Youngsters built like weight lifters
Well-versed in martial arts, as well as education;
Ask those who belittle and denigrate them
to mind their language.
They wear sparkling white clothes,
move in their hamlet like jasmines
'We may not own property,
but we have self-respect,' they say.
When we sip coffee sitting on a chair,
rich lords seethe with anger.
'We are not living off someone else's father;
we are spending our own money; it is our right,' they say.
(Satyanarayana, 2013. P.16)

Several scholars point out that it was during this time major ideological differences surfaced between the left ideologues and the dalit scholars. The communist parties and the Marxist–Leninist (ML) Parties, whose leadership primarily came from the upper castes, treated the massacres as an attack on agricultural labourers by the landlords, or a conflict between the

rich and the poor. They insisted that only 'class' but not 'caste' is the framework that can help us understand these conflicts. Subsequently, they dismissed caste as a legitimate category to understand Indian society and insisted that dalits should work towards revolution, which would automatically drive away caste. Disillusioned by such secular arguments, many dalit youth left the communist parties and joined several dalit organizations which emerged during this period. Dalit literature was constituted by these ideological battles and vice versa. Dalit activists and writers point out that significant change in the nature of literature that was produced after the Karamchedu and Chundururu massacres. They believe that the literature pertaining to caste produced before the massacres was reformist in nature, in its form and content whereas after the massacres, especially, the struggles gave birth nearly a hundred dalit writers (K. Satyanarayana, p.23).

There are other crucial factors which shaped dalit literature in Telugu. In 1986, the Indian government announced reservations (affirmative action) to the backward castes based on the Mandal Commission Report. It was opposed by the upper caste youth, including people associated with progressive organizations and political parties. This was seen by the dalits as the expression of blatant casteism by the upper castes of all denominations. Scholars today argue that this was a major historical turning point for the dalits because it provided them an opportunity to observe how the 'secular' minded upper caste people respond when they realized that reservations were a threat to their social and economic interests and privileges. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakening of Marxist thought all over the world also contributed to the emergence of the new dalit consciousness as the left parties could no longer make grand promises of revolution and liberation. Many dalit leaders and intellectuals who worked until then with the radical left organizations came out and joined the Ambedkarite dalit organizations and became important leaders of the dalit movement.

Discovery of dalit writers missing from the canons of Telugu and other literatures

As part of dalit assertion, dalits not only wrote about their past and culture but also searched the archives for any missing or lost dalit writers and discovered that dalit writers who were contemporaries of Unnava and Mulk Raj Anand, do not even figure in the authoritative literary histories scripted by the 'secular' upper caste historians. For example, two dalit writers namely Gurram Joshua and Kusuma Dharmanna, who were contemporaries of Unnava, do not appear in the history of Indian literature written by Sisir Kumar Das. Both Joshua and Dharmanna wrote epic poems with dalit characters as central figures. Joshua's *Gabbilam* (The Bat) and Kusuma Dharmanna's *MakoddiNalla Doratanam* (We don't want this Black Regime), although published in the 1930s, were little known until they rose to prominence in the 1990s.

There are very new novels written by dalits. Let me talk about one of them called *AntaraniVasantam*, translated as *Untouchable Spring*. The novel maps the life-struggles, the

artistic repertoire and the political economy of dalits belonging to two major castes—the malas and the madigas. Written after two decades of the dalit movement, this is the first major dalit novel in Telugu. It draws its ideas from local histories and author's own experiences as a dalit, dalit-Christian and dalit-revolutionary. The author captures the life of a community of six generations of dalits who appears in the novel as inheritors of a great history and culture.

The strength of the novel lies in establishing the fact that caste has sustained and reinvented itself through the ages of colonialism and that it is a presence in independent modern India. Thus caste is represented here not as a pre-modern socio-cultural phenomenon but as an everyday contemporary reality, pointing to the hard fact that, in modern India, caste is pervasive and operates as a powerful form of social control and oppressive power. As the author puts it:

In India, the air you breathe, the water you drink, the irrigation canal, the agricultural land, the school, the temple...the food you eat, the house you live in, the clothes you wear, the words you speak...literature, culture, the state, its law, its justice, its court...the dead body, the burial ground, god, devil—all have caste.

In *Antarani Vasantam* dalits do not see themselves as helpless victims of caste oppression whereas dalits in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, or the 'harijans' in *Malapalli* are represented as passive subjects. On the other hand, nor the dalits in *Antarani Vasantam* clamour for the cultural status of upper caste Hindus, a notion termed Sanskritization by the sociologists. Far from waiting to be 'uplifted,' they fight for land, water and self-respect with determination and rebel against upper caste oppression and violence.

In the upper caste brahminical literature, dalits appear as socially and culturally impoverished people, but in *Antarani Vasantam* they are the bearers of a great tradition and culture. They are celebrated dancers and artists. The novel brings in dalit performative traditions such as *Urumula Dance* of malas, *Chindu Bhagotam* of madigas, *Vidhi Bhagotam* of yanadis and the puppet shows of Yerragollas—all of which, the novelist terms as the "Untouchable Spring." Not surprisingly, these art forms do not figure in Telugu literary and cultural histories whose norms are set by the concerns of contemporary literary culture in Telugu. *Antarani Vasantam* has altered the terms of the literary discourses in Telugu.

The novel is not a simple documentation of dalit cultural life. It challenges the legitimacy of knowledge systems which were treated as authentic until then. It poses serious questions to the literary authorities. For instance, how did Nannaya, an orthodox brahmin become the first Telugu poet, and not the dalits who had produced great oral literature? How does the history of Telugu drama begin in the colonial period when dalits had a rich tradition of performing *Vidhi Bhagotam* even in precolonial times? "Why do we need Gidugu and Gurajada—the

modern icons of Telugu language and literature—to start a movement to rescue “people’s language” when dalits have always preserved the everyday-richness of their language?”

Amore significant aspect of the novel is its approach to the issue of conversion to Christianity in India. Based on historical evidence and the experiences of dalits recorded in missionary accounts, the novel gives us a well-researched account of why dalits converted *en mass* to Christianity in Andhra in the nineteenth century. The answer it provides us is that dalits converted to escape the oppression of the upper caste chautharys. During the famine, dalits discovered that hunger and labour too had caste at the site where the Buckingham Canal was dug. They were badly beaten up and chased away by the upper caste workers when they disclosed their Mala identity. Thus, dalits believed in Christ to get rid of untouchability and to fight against hunger. Dalits were treated as human beings by the missionaries, which was a great experience for the dalits. However, not all missionaries stood by the untouchables. Some missionaries even opened the Church gates to upper castes, who soon occupied positions of power in the British government offices.

The sub-caste Issue and the Dandora Movement

As I said already, dalits are not a homogenous category. Again, it was the 1990s that the madigas in Andhra Pradesh began realizing that all the benefits of reservations were going to mainly malas because they were economically well off and were aware of the benefits that the govt. was offering to dalits. Thus they demanded for categorization of sub-castes into ABCD groups and this in turn had an impact on the question of sub-caste identity and inequality within the dalits. A whole range of literature was produced around this issue which challenged the use of the term dalit as a homogenous category. There are also a plethora of issues raised by dalit feminists but that will require a separate essay.

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