

Exploring Dalit Culture in Select Dalit Autobiographical Narratives

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Abstract

The word 'culture' has its root in Latin word *cultura* that means cultivation. Culture is a big phenomenon and is as ancient as human being. Being multifaceted, it encompasses all human milieu- social, economical, political and other activities of human species. Every human species has its own culture. India is multicultural nation with its variety. Her major cultures include- Hindu culture, Muslim culture, Buddha culture, Sikh culture and Christian culture etc. Vedic foundation of Hindu culture maintained class structure based on occupations. This classical hierarchy pushed Dalits at the bottom of cultural pillar. Denial of their cultural existence led them towards their own culture i.e. Dalit culture. Parameters of any culture include language, way of living, food, customs, traditions, practices, festivals, arts, ethics and values. Consequently Dalit people tried to establish their culture using above components. To mark their cultural identity they touched their hands to literary forms especially autobiographies aiming the culture of equality, liberty and fraternity. In this paper research paper an attempt has been made to focus Dalit culture in the selected autobiographies of Siddalingaiah, K.A.Gunasekaran, Namdev Nimgade and Y.B.Satyanarayana.

Key Words: Dalit culture, way of living, language, Dalit Autobiographies

Introduction:

Culture is a complex phenomenon with its amalgamation of various patterns of human life. It is the outcome of transactions between two or more people. Culture being continuous process, is dynamic and vibrant which moves with time. The word 'culture' has its root in Latin word *cultura* that means cultivation and is defined by Taylor as "the complex collection of knowledge, folklore, language, rules, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, and customs". However, Raymond Williams clearly explains culture as;

- a) A particular way of life of a group in a particular period,
- b) A general process of intellectual spiritual and aesthetic development
- c) Works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, and finally
- d) The signifying systems through which necessarily a social order is communicated reproduced, experienced and explored (11-20).

Every human species has its own culture. India has been since long ago a 'bastion' for acceptance of plurality in terms of culture, religion etc. India is multicultural nation with its variety. Her major cultures include- Hindu culture, Muslim culture, Buddha culture, Sikh culture and Christian culture etc. Vast size and geo-physical reality has also played a great part in cultural variation in India. It is hub of culture that changes markedly from state to state and region to region.

Exploration of Dalit Culture:

The typical Hindu culture is based on '*Varna System*' which strictly follows caste practice. In the words of M.S. Rajpankhe, "it has gradation of four *Varnas* such as *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. For every grade, Manu- the maker of this system- maintains different rule and regulations of the ways of life" (Rajpankhe: 2007: 132). This classical hierarchy pushed Dalits at the bottom of cultural pillar. Denial of their cultural existence led them towards their own Dalit culture. Parameters of any culture include language, way of living, food, customs, traditions, practices, festivals, arts, ethics and values. Consequently, Dalit people tried to establish their culture using above components. Language is one of the markers of identity and culture. To mark their cultural identity, they touched their hands to literary forms especially autobiographies aiming-the culture of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Impressed by ideologies of Buddha, Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalits turned towards aesthetic weapon of literature. For this said purpose, they choose their own language as a tool of resistance against cultural and classical hegemony. Literature plays a prime role in any culture to mark its identity. Dalit writers touch their hands to poetry, novels, short stories and especially to autobiographies. Tracing the origin of Dalit autobiography, Ravikumar comments, "At the national level, Ambedkar and Rettaimalai

Srinivasanare are the precursors of the *Dalit* autobiographical form as per research indicators at present". (Ravikumar: 2009: X). With a motive of cultural politics, Dalit autobiographies aim "the emancipation of the oppressed and exploited people" (<http://dalitindia.in/2chapter1>). The prominent Dalit autobiographers are Daya Pawar, Laxman Mane, Sharankumar Nimbale, Baby Kamble, Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Siddalingaiah, K. A. Gunasekaran, Arvind Malgatti, Namdev Nimgade, Y. B. Satyanarayana, Balbir Mudhopuri etc.

The pollution purity matrix systematically shifted settlements of Dalits on the outskirts of village; as a result, separate settlements for caste people are present even today across India. The very beginning of Siddalingaiah's autobiography, *A Word With You World* mentions this fact in this way, "ours was the last house in the colony" (Siddalingaiah: 2003: 1). They have to live in small mud houses with leaked roofs. Gunasekaran also describes a perfect picture of such scenario, "there was a habitation called Rasoola Samudram. Only Parayars and Chakiliyars (Arundathiyar) lived here" (Gunasekaran: 2009:3).

Because of the profession or labor culture, the matrix based on *Varna System*, (division on basis of profession) leads Dalits towards untouchability. Dalits were 'bonded laborers'. Landless laborers do hard work till sweating and thus exploited for livelihood without concerning human rights (Labor laws are often broken in this respect). Nimgade pictures this account very candidly. He says, "My grandfather was a bonded landless laborer working for a high-caste landholder. His various tasks included removing animal waste, cleaning animal stalls, gathering and chopping firewood" (Nimgade: 2010:15). Due to lack of permanent job, Dalits have to do seasonal jobs to live their life. This is realistically narrated by Gunasekaran in his autobiography *The Scar*. He narrates, "During monsoon months she [mother] would cut grass and sell to the Muslim houses" (ibid: 10). Though literate, she would also collect firewood and issue cinema tickets. Like his mother he also earns his livelihood through seasonal work of selling mango and fish. Y. B. Satyanarayana's autobiography *My Father Baliah* records the labor culture of Chambar family and because of this very culture, how his great-grandfather was gifted by Nizam with a fertile land of fifty acres. Satyanarayana proudly expresses the honor thus, "Narsiah's father also called Narsiah, had presented the Nizam with a beautiful pair of shoes made from the hide of a young calf. Being of excellent craftsmanship, the shoes were soft as silk and fit the Nizam's feet very well. The Nizam was fascinated by the shoes; so happy was he... declared a gift of fifty acres of land to Narsiah (senior) (Satyanarayana: 2011:4). The tasks performed by Dalits are skill based and productive having their own significance, though upper caste psyche stratifies it as of low status. Comment Kancha Illiah in this regard, "The farmers (several shudra, chandala and Adivasi communities) perform the task of tilling have developed highly sophisticated knowledge. . . A Brahman pundit does not know how to measure the levels of rain—the tiller knows it in its all dimensions (*Post-Hindu India* 146).

Songs are 'Cultural ethos' of Dalits, which are sung to celebrate major events of life that include birth, naming ceremony, puberty, marriage and even death. It contains folklore, folksongs, dirge and lullaby. Nimgade in his autobiography, *In the Tiger's Shadow* records the culture of welcome of a new born baby thus, "According to the custom of the day, when the first child is born, village musicians appear to fete the family in return for money and food" (ibid: 5). Songs of Dalit women were expression of anger against exploitation by patriarchy be it upper caste or Dalit. They also sing to express gratitude to mother earth. To show the closeness with the nature they sang songs about their forefathers, mothers, the children and they abuse the landlords through their songs. Thus Songs played a vital part in Dalit mobilization and solidarity.

Food culture of Dalits is distinct. Living standard and economical status are basic tenets which shape food habits of any community. As regards, food most of the times Dalits have to live with empty stomachs because of dire poverty. As a result, leftover food from touchable people was a source of food for them. For the sake of hunger, exploitation and humiliation were nothing to them. Siddalingaiah observes this pitiable condition as, "people had to struggle even for a morsel of food" (ibid: 7). Food is cooked one time, especially at evening and served to many stomachs. However, as regards food pattern, one can notice Dalit's inclination towards non-vegetarian food than vegetarian. The mutton, beef, chicken, fish, rabbit meat were consumed by them. On occasion of festival and visit of guests, sweet dishes were made.

Food is offered in form of dowry. Perhaps it is the unique custom among Dalits to offer food in the form of dowry. Talking about this practice, Nimgade says, "the remaining meat was then sliced thin, doused with salt, and left in the harsh sunlight to dry and cure for later use. This was called *khandraya* or *chanya*. In those days, *khandraya* held the same status as gold and silver in *Mahar* families and even formed part of dowries" (ibid: 20).

Indian psyche is of worshipping idols and thus seeks spirituality. Like other communities, worshipping God and Goddesses is rampant in Dalits. They believe in god and goddesses idol, made of rocks. The very first chapter of Nimgade's autobiography opens with the account of "two pillars" in the prayer hut

where his grandfather prays thus, "oh! Lord! ...Please keep benevolent eye always on this family" (ibid: 3). Superstitions are inevitable part of any culture. Dalits believes in existence of ghosts, witches, spirits and even Yama. Possession of woman by evil spirit was common. Spread of disease of cholera was considered curse from god. Slaughtering buffalo and sheep was common under the pretext to please god and goddesses.

Festivals and rituals are the richest cultural markers and are celebrated with favor and fervent. They are the sources to break from hard toil of days and are meant for entertainment. On these occasion cinema, orchestra and songs are staged. Siddalingaiah talks about "a ritual called tanige shaastra" which used to identify the thief. The matrix behind festivals and rituals is best expressed by Bama thus, "...but to Dalit perspective festivals and rituals are the means by which they refresh themselves and feel happier..." (Bama: Karuku: 70).

Hunting is the primitive practice of human being. Being indigenous people, Dalits have followed this practice for the food. It includes rabbit, pig and rat-hunting. Gunasekaran writes about his own practice, "as soon as the corn was cut I would go rat-hunting with Yesiah, Maduraiveeran, Thangarasu, Balraj and Minardas with our spade, sticks" (ibid: 35).

Conclusion:

Culture is a complex phenomenon with its amalgamation of various, patterns of human life. Literature is a chain to connect past-via present-to future, in order to concrete culture. To mark their cultural identity dalits touched their hands to literary forms especially autobiographies aiming cultural renaissance and dalit autobiographies as 'community ethos' functions as a link between history(past) and culture(present). The dalit culture is best expressed through practices of food, dress, songs, marriages, festivals, ceremonies, labor, hunting, cooking etc. Language is one of the markers of identity and culture and the language in which they expressed their culture is cohesive to their behavioral patterns. This uniqueness of experience with their milieu is aptly described, in words of Rangaswamy, "...the language they (Dalits) speak, the habit of food they take, the tradition they practice and the way in which they live – are homogenous in the environment"(Rangaswamy: 303). To sum up, Baby Kamble's opinion is apt to evaluate role of Dalit autobiographers in sustaining Dalit culture when she says, "...We desperately tried to preserve whatever bit of culture we managed to lay our hands on"(Baby Kamble: 18).

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