

LITERATURE AS A TRANSITIONAL FORCE IN UPLIFTING DALITS & OTHER MARGINALIZED CLASSES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

As we all know marginalized classes are those classes which have been considered as people of lesser importance by other groups those are in power or consider themselves superiors to them. When it comes to India then there are certain classes which are considered as marginalized i.e., Dalits, tribal. This list also includes, women and transgender. From time to time there have been debates on Dalits and other marginalized classes in the Indian social-political milieu and which keeps on going in the contemporary scenario as well. The word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit word dalita that means 'oppressed'. If we take account of the Indian socio-cultural context then we see that 'dalits' refers to the untouchables and people below the three castes: Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya and who have a long history of living. These people, who are called as Dalits in the Indian society have a history of being lived in subjugation under the high-classes of the Indian society. So they have been a marginalized, downtrodden and subaltern group from centuries. The fact is that if we discuss the term, 'marginalized classes' then India, being a patriarchal society then women also come in the category and they have been subjugated since centuries. One of the class which has very less discussed in history is the term 'transgender' which also need attention as it is also one of the most deprived one. In my paper, I am trying to discuss various writers and reformers who have given their lives for the noble cause of uplifting these marginalized classes in India.

Keywords: Writers & Reformers, Dalit, Marginalized classes, Women, Transgender.

Introduction

In the Indian social-political frame, there are certain groups, sects or genders which are believed to be marginalized i.e., Dalits, tribal, women, transgender etc. Marginalized or subaltern are those groups which are considered as inferior by other groups of the social-political milieu. Sometimes these subaltern groups are deprived of basic rights and amenities as compared to other so called superior groups. As it is in

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the case of Dalits who were made to feel inferior since the caste system came into force in India. By the upper classes they were forced to the periphery or the edge of the society. They were humiliated and were forced to live a life of pains and sufferings. But now things are different as the Constitution of India gives equal rights and opportunities to every citizens of the country. Our constitution strictly asks us to celebrate the diversity of our population and treats all its citizens as equals irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender. This transformation has not happened abruptly but it has taken long time. This drastic change is the efforts of many great reformers, writers as well as emperors who have stood firm against the rights of these subaltern group. But because of the efforts of many social reformers since medieval era till present times who fought against this evil practice being present in India that now we see a completely different society than it was in the olden days. There have been some institutionalized efforts made by many leaders, writers as well as some emperors for the liberation of these downtrodden classes.

People hardly know that in India, the Dalit reforms movement can be traced back from the age of Bhakti movement. The Bhakti cult was a secular movement in the history of India which was also believed in removing inequalities existing in the society on the basis of caste. Poets- Philosophers, Kabir and Raidas advocated equality among various section of the society. Even many of their followers followed their path believed in an uniform society.

During British rule, thinkers like Jyotiba Rao Phule, Periyar, B. R Ambedkar and freedom fighter like Mahatma Gandhi took the initiative and started Dalit movement. This got the spark from the Black Movement of contemporary America. Gandhiji has given them a name as "Harijans", mean people of God. Although, the Dalits have risen but still there many problems related to their existence in the present scenario.

Lots of factors had contributed to the rise of Dalits in India. One such factor is the power of pen. There are many research and studies relating Dalits in many regions of India on multifarious themes like social mobility, economic development, socio-economic and political status; atrocities; ideology and identity, and so on. Though lots of themes are being discussed but basically various Indian scholars have mainly focused on the process of social and economic mobility of the Scheduled Castes.

The focus of such studies range from their socio-economic status and mobility (Prakash, 1989; Selvanathan, 1989) to Dalit movements (Omvedt, 1994; Zelliott, 1993), to Dalit ideology (Gore, 1993) and identity (Shah, 1985; Oommen, 1968), and this include both during the pre-independence and post-independence period.

Recently there has been tremendous rise in Dalit literature across India. Now if we see Dalit literature, it is believed that one of the first Dalit writers in the history was Madara Chenniah, who was a cobbler saint in 11th century. He lived in the reign of Western Chalukya and was regarded by some scholars as the “father of Vachana Poetry”. There is another poet, who was Dalit by birth, Dohara Kakkaiah but his only six confessional poems are being able to survive.

Dalit literature, a literature by this particular ethnic group, came into use in the 20th century in 1958, with the commencement of Dalit Conferences. The First of this kind was held at Mumbai, known as *Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha* (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society), a movement driven by thinkers like Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar.

There are many writers belonging to this category but the pioneer of Dalit writing in Marathi is Baburao Bagul (1930-2008). He published his first collection of stories, *Jevha Mi Jat Charoli* (*When I had Concealed My Caste*) published in 1963. It is a passionate depiction of a crude society and created a stir in Marathi literature. It brought in new momentum to Dalit literature in Marathi. It is highly praised and now today, it is seen by many critics as the epic of the Dalits. It was even later adapted into a film by actor-director Vinay Apte. Writer, like Namdeo Dhasal, founded Dalit Panther.

There are many other Dalit Marathi writers like Arun Kamble, Shantabai, Krushna Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal, Annabhau Sathe, Bandhu Madhav, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Hari Narake, Sharankumar Limbale, Waman Nibalkar, Bhimsen Dethe, Bhau Panchbhai, Ambadas Shinde, Murlidhar Bansode, who have contributed a lot to Dalit writings.

Ka. Ayothi Dass Pandithar is the pioneer of the Dalit literature and Philosopher in India as well as south India. There are many other writers who have enriched Dalit literature and are still enriching it to a great extent.

The fact is that when we discuss the term, ‘marginalized classes’ then India, been a patriarchal society and women being subjugated since centuries so they also come in the category of downtrodden class. There are many reformers who have worked for the upliftment of status of women in India. During Mughal period, Emperor Akbar carried out many reforms which include women’s remarriage. In 1562, Akbar prohibited the age-long custom of enslaving the prisoners of war, selling their wives and children etc. He was against the child-marriage prevalent both among Hindus and Muslims in those days. He passed orders prohibiting marriage before the age of 12 and between cousins though permissible under Muslim law. Later the lowest age for marriage was raised to 16 for the boys and 14 for the girls. Consent of the parents of the boy and the girl to be

married and also their mutual consent were made obligatory before marriage was performed. He possessed a modern mind who allowed his Hindu wife, Heer Kunwar to follow her religion and all her religious rituals and practices. Some people also have the opinion that Aurangzeb banned the custom of 'Sati' in his reign.

Raja Ram Mohan is one such personality who is credited with abolishing the unjust practice of 'Sati' and child marriage in India. He was the precursor of Brahmo Samaj and also the trailblazer of socio-religious reform movement in the Indian sub-continent. He is considered as "Father of Indian renaissance" by many scholars and historians. He successfully campaigned against sati, the practice of burning widows after the death of their husbands. In this effort, Lord William Bentick, the first Governor General of India also helped him. He passed the Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829. They both also targeted other customs that offended Western sensibilities. They both worked together to end the superstitious practices like sati, caste rigidity, polygamy and child marriage. Lord Bentinck tried to enforce law on all these practices.

There is one another reformer in India who tried to reform the Muslim society of India, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who laid the foundation of Muslim education in India. He believed in Modern education for the Muslims and advocated Islam's rationalist tradition and a broader, radical reinterpretation of the Quran to make it compatible with science and modernity. This ideology is still influencing the global Islamic reformation. He once said:

Do not show the face of Islam to others; instead show your
face as the follower of true Islam representing character,
knowledge, tolerance and pity.

He established the MAO College in Aligarh which later developed into one of the finest University in India, Aligarh Muslim University. He firmly supported the education of Muslim women and was against the 'purdah' system existing in Muslim women. His educational institutions were for both men and women for which he was highly criticized. He also greatly differed from other Muslim scholars on question of divorce and women rights. He condemned the domestic violence against women in the strongest words. Sir Syed also did some scholarly legal work in the field of civil rights for women. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 (empowerment of women) could not have been passed without the legal scholarly help that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan extended to the bill. He was a visionary in terms of women emancipation and it is truth if we say that Aligarh Muslim University is a great effort of Sir Syed Ahmad's vision and efforts towards the education of women in India.

As there have been many male reformers who tried to work for women emancipation

in India so it is believed that in India the feminist movements have been laid down by men but there are many women reformers who have given their lives for the cause of raising the status of women.

Two great names are Savitri Bai Phule and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who were educators as well as writers. Though in the contemporary scenario, some more names of women activists/writers are of vital importance like Kamla Bhasin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. There are some feminist writers who brought revolution in the field of writing by their creation; they include Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Rashid Jahan, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das to name few.

Savitri Bai Phule an India social reformer, philanthropist, educationist and a prolific Marathi writer who is regarded as the pioneer of female education in India. Being the first female teacher, she along with her husband, Jyotiba Phule played an important role in improving women's rights in India during British rule. With her husband's support she founded the first Indian girls' school in Pune at Bhide wada in 1848. Throughout her life, she worked hard to abolish the discrimination on the basis of caste and gender in India. For her brave attempt, she is regarded as an important figure of the social reform movement in Maharashtra and in many places her birthday is celebrated as 'Teacher's Day' to commemorate her efforts for education in Maharashtra.

Recently there have been lots of works being carried out on a fiery feminist writer and educator who was neglected as she wrote in Bangla and most importantly because her birth city, Rangpur is now part of Bangladesh, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. She is a feminist icon who did an extraordinary deed in the field of gender equality. She is a trailblazer in the field of Muslim women education and emancipation in India. Being a prolific Bengali writer, she was social worker, educationist, a voice of gender equality, and the champion of women's liberation movement.

A champion of women liberation movement, she believed that through education women can acquire freedom and emancipation and even equal rights with men. A pioneer of feminism in Bengal, she founded a school in Kolkata in 1911 known as Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls which runs till now also. She began writing with the publication of *Pipasha (the Thirst)* in the *Nabaprabha* in 1902. Since then, she continues her writing in various dailies and magazines

Before the awakening of the feminist movement in the South Asian socio-cultural, and literary milieu, the images of women were distorted, subjugated and dictated by the patriarchal ideology. In *Sultana's Dream* (1905) Rokeya depicts women's position in her society:

We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs.
In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers
and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.

She raised her voice through her pen bringing revolution by raising female consciousness for public recognition. She focused on innovative education for women and other welfare activities. She brought women under one umbrella by organizing women of different races and religions in networks and alliances, such as the “All India Women’s Conference”, “The Bengal Women’s Educational Conference”, “Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam” (the Muslim women’s society), in the transnational British Indian Empire to further women’s emancipation.

((Her literary genius juxtaposed her organizational capabilities and movement for women’s education. She realized that nothing but education would emancipate and liberate Muslim women, and so she strived towards that end with the intellect of a teacher, zeal of a social reformer and conscience of a humanitarian. Rokeya’s novella *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) is considered to be a classic and timeless feminist utopian world in the global feminist movement.

To celebrate Rokeya’s contribution to women’s development and gender equality, many European universities included her novellas and essays in academic syllabus. Rokeya is a champion in the history of women’s emancipation in South Asia. She, who does not merely present the ills and ordeals of women but places them in power from margin to centre, differs from white feminist writers. A woman is truly liberated if she is educated and becomes economically independent. Rokeya underscored economic independence as the prerequisite for women’s liberation. She also observed the liberation of women affecting the whole society, not just Muslims or Hindus. That’s why she established schools for women’s education, and in turn, the “Muslim Women Training School”-an income generating vocational training workshop. To her, a rallying cry for women’s liberation cannot be the solution without economic emancipation.

She wrote against British colonial powers, early marriage, polygamy, unhealthy restrictions on women, and bleak cultural and traditional barriers on widow remarriage in traditional Hindu community, with a view to promoting affirmative action to develop a critical mass of women in leadership positions in South Asian region. Begum Rokeya, the precursor of women’s liberation movement and gender equality in the South Asia, heroically attempted to create a sense of self-confidence among the very vulnerable women, especially Bengali Muslim women.))

Kamla Bhasin is a diplomat who resigned her job at U. N. to work for the upliftment of Adivasi (Tribal) women and for this purpose she founded, 'Sangat- A Feminist Network'. She is a feminist activist, poet/author who is considered as social scientist. She has been working on gender, education, human development and media since 1970. Her famous poem, "Kyuki Main Ladki hoon, mujhe padhna hain" gained her wider attention and fame. In a Conference in 1995, she recited a reconstructed feminist version of the popular poem, *Azadi (Freedom)*. She is the author of some remarkable books like, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, *Laughing Matters* (2005), *Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia*, *Understanding Gender*.

One such feminist who has gained international recognition for her book, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* is Chandra Talpade Mohanty. She is a Distinguished Professor of Women's Studies, Sociology and the Cultural Foundations of Education and Dean's Professor of Humanities at Syracuse University, United States. She is the Co-editor of some famous books on feminism, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997), *Feminism and War: Confronting U. S. Imperialism* (2008) and *The Sage Handbook of Identities* (2010). She gained fame in 1986 with the publication of her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", in which she gives her views that:

The relationship between 'Woman' – a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic etc.) –and 'women' –real, material subjects of their collective histories –is one of the central questions of the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address.

This is a criticism of political projection of Western feminism because Talpade had different stand.

One of the classes which have been very less discussed in the history is the section; 'transgender' which also need attention as it is also one of the most deprived one. The unfortunate thing is that they have always been harassed and have been a subject of joke since their evolution. But times are changing and people are coming out and supporting the LGBT rights to the fullest. It was Ismat Chughtai who was the first writer in India who wrote a short story, *Lihaf (Quilt)* in which she portrayed the sensitivities of homosexuals. And if we see history we find that the famous Khajuraho Temples built in ancient times have many erotic sculptures of homosexuality. There are many mythical characters in Hinduism which were transgender or have changed their gender to third gender like Shikhandi in Mahabharata. Even Arjuna, one of the Pandavas

disguised himself to third gender for one year when he was in exile. During Mughal times transgender were kept to look after queens in the Harems. But the British Raj criminalized homosexuality and heterosexuality under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which entered into force in 1861. It was Shashi Tharoor, a Congressman who introduced a Bill for the repeal of Section 377 on 18th December 2015 but it was rejected by the vote 71-24. But due to the efforts of Shashi Tharoor and many other activists from all over India, the Supreme Court agreed to refer the question of Section 377's validity to a large bench in January 2018 and heard several petitions on 1st May 2018. So due to the collective efforts of many people, the Supreme Court issued the verdict on 6th September 2018. The Court unanimously ruled that Section 377 is unconstitutional as it infringed on the fundamental rights of autonomy, intimacy and identity thus legalizing homosexuality in India. This is a landmark victory for transgender. The success of Laxmi Narayan Tripathy, the Mahamandaleshwar of Kinnar Akhadha in Kumbh, Allahabad 2019 is one such fine example.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that all these marginalized classes whether, it is Dalit or women or transgender have struggled hard to reach a respectable position in the society. They are still striving hard to achieve the equal status with superior classes. Not only they but there are many Government as well as Non-Government Organizations who are working hard to eradicate this stigma of inequality and imbalance existing in our society. Hope one day; we will build a society which rests on the principles of equality and fraternity.

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