

# Caste Narratives in Socio-cultural Perspectives

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## Abstract

Understanding Caste in the historical perspective can be broadly analysed as division of people on the basis of their ethnic and economic skill-based divisions. This leads us to develop a deeper understanding of the need for creating caste divisions, that could not sustain their original roots and gradually developed to make these divisions as permanent categorisation based on the birth of an individual into a particular caste. This research will analyse various perspectives that allowed an understanding of various discourses born out of narratives that open this discourse further and create an opportunity to build neo-dalit perspectives towards Dalit identities. Dalit narratives are strong arguments that emphasise the need for bringing these narratives in to mainstream literary canon. Reading Ambedkar to Yagati Chinna Rao to Bama in detail, this paper will build a discussion around Dalit identities from a critical perspective.

**Keywords:** *Caste, Dalit narratives, Discourse, Neo-dalit, Dalit intellectuals*

## Caste and Anthropological History

Social and ethnographical history of India has created enough scope for detailed analysis and research on Indian social classification. The society has been through major divisions and sub-divisions of people into their ethnic identities based on skill oriented economic divisions creating class and caste orders. Reading Indian history and anthropological studies help us to understand the complex system of division of people into different communities, constructing various class based castes in India. The complexity lies around diverse theories and arguments that have been derived from the scriptures and historical

arguments to decipher evolution of the Indian caste system.

Studying the genesis of various castes reveals that division of people was on the basis of their occupational or economical division. Either on the basis of skill that they used to earn their living or their earnings that they would make from that skill. These were not considered as castes in the beginning, but were considered as classified divisions that were skill based and could easily help people to be separated into communities and later divide them into various occupation-based sections of the society. The divisions were easy at first because people made their earnings through one or another skill. Gradually, there were multiple aspects that started affecting these divisions.

Reading Ambekar's arguments on caste and its roots in Valerian Rodriguez's *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar (2002)* and Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread (2009)*, the question of origin of castes and the moral legislative that were responsible for the proper functioning of castes in Indian society is highlighted in detail. Caste has been justified as caste legislations and traditional practices. These traditions usually demolish the reformatory justifications that challenged caste hierarchy or the movements that protested against the caste system. Analysing the roots of caste system leads to further details. The social dimensions were important for any caste to function within its role and power and the same could not be interfered with or transferred to any other castes during any circumstances. Castes were endogamous and the intersection of castes was limited to a certain extent and only between the castes which were considered higher in position and conduct. Historically, there was no specific era that gives any specific time when *jatis* started getting treated as castes. These *jatis* functioned like religious systems and traditions based on purity or impurity of people within *varnas*. These systems functioned in all social and political platforms. Practices which were born out of division of occupations were publicly accepted and performed as genuine authentic traditions. These traditions were never changed from the days of Buddha to Phule to the days of Ambedkar. All these historical reformers understood that caste system cannot be rectified or cannot be restructured, the only way to remove the caste practises was to stop practicing caste altogether.

Ambedkar in his extensive research in *Who were the Shudras?* (1946) questions the historical and religious scriptures. His in-depth study and the final outcome

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of this book, was to establish the fact that the *varnas* were races who fought with each other. And they were divided into varnas only through the scriptures written by the castes that considered themselves superior and pure but were not the natives.

The caste practices were sifted otherwise but were religiously practised through social and traditional customs to strengthen the caste identities. These identities were practised and followed strictly and were visible to all occupants who came to India during the colonial days. The colonizers could see how these castes functioned and the dominating castes were empowered in all forms to practice the religious legislatures from the days of history. The efforts to make inclusive policies failed at all fronts and even in the post-independence era there were not many changes in the caste practices and its evil traditions. Hierarchical caste practices became more active as evil practices of discrimination and untouchability at the social framework. It cannot be denied that after the saint poets in the history, Ambedkar was considered an educated leader, who earned his respect with his radical reformative movements and continuous efforts to bring an end to the caste discrimination, in many ways, was responsible for provoking the oppressed communities of Dalits to raise their voice. His writings like *Who were the Shudras* (1946) dig deep into the history and origin of the *varna* system and his undelivered speech of 1936, *Annihilation of Caste* (2022), were his strong efforts to let people understand how caste can be removed from the Indian social structure to build a nation with the removal of evil practice of untouchability with people who belonged to the same nation. His valid arguments gave reason to Dalits to speak and fight for their rights.

In *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Rodrigues describes, 'Basic Features of Indian Constitution' as laid down by Ambedkar. Along with other arguments, he also describes that Ambedkar from the beginning saw it as a major opposition against the democratic society and suggested, "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic" (p. 485). For Ambedkar, discrimination and exclusion on the basis of caste, ethnicity, gender and religion were the basis of exclusion of oppressed communities, hence, this oppression could be stopped only through inclusive policies.

Despite all these writings and reformative movements, he finally moved into the phase of reformation against evil caste practices like untouchability, and in *Annihilation of Caste* (2022), he strongly advocated the removal of caste system as the only solution to end this evil practice. He finally considered that moving out of the caste system was the only way to save lower castes from their victimization and suffering. And his final protest was his conversion to Buddhism as the only solution to end caste discrimination in his life. This path of conversion was religiously adopted by his followers.

### **Caste Identities and literature**

Caste identities were dynamic and never saw any re-structured system after the end of colonial rule. The agenda to eradicate untouchability and caste discrimination was though done on paper, by putting an end to it in the Indian Constitution, but never became a practice in the real social world. Caste structure never draws parallel lines but forces caste-based communities to accept dominance of the upper castes. In Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak's *Dalit Literatures in India*, G. N. Devy describes in "Caste Differently" that there must have been some reasons or rationale that justifies bestowing these powers to certain castes. He writes,

The eighth to the eighteenth century is the period when the principle of *jati* became the main principle for social segregation in India. The *jatis* had no clear metaphysical basis. They were more an expression of difference in terms of language, region, occupation, cultivation practices, food habits and skills. But these differences, once accepted, lead to a particular *jati* formation, with its identity being invariably expressed in terms of the specific practice of worship. (2016, p. 21)

Narratives were strong modes of establishing the self and individual in a larger context. Literature that was written within the framework of narratives was further strengthened with the context around it. In every narrative the writer was in an assertive mode to describe his or her own experience as the reliable source of information for the readers. It refuses to be questioned as the writing has its own argument and experience in the whole narrative. These narratives were read with the certificate of authentication that the writers attached with it by calling it an 'autobiographical journey'. Usual descriptions and incidents in the narratives were always woven on the basis of the lived experiences of the

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writer. The writers in such writings were aware of the effect that their writings will make.

Why Dalit literature remains a literature of negativity? It has been accepted as a literature full of expressions that deals with the victimisation and sadness of people in these narratives. It always demonstrates the society that was responsible for inflicting pain and suffering in the life of excluded sections of society who belong to the margins of these castes. Dominant castes never allowed merging or any kind of connection with the people of dominated castes and they were usually not included in the main caste structure, were pushed to remain in the peripheries, marginalised, hence, were the victim of exclusion, deprivation and discrimination at the level of individual or the whole community. Social customs and traditions were deeply rooted and would easily manage life of people by keeping them into separate divisions. There were religious legislations that were set up by certain religious preachings delivered by certain texts. But their validity was always searched and researched in centuries.

In Devy's words, "The why, the wherefore and the how of *varna* and *jati* in Indian civilization need to be opened again and again, since they are like festering and mortal wounds that need to be cured and healed, or surgically removed" (2016, p. 16).

The caste narratives were basically constructing a literature to claim their identity as oppressed castes standing at the periphery of the caste system and voicing their sufferings in the literary world. These narratives in the postcolonial era have become not only a literature that challenges the within and outside of caste system but have also created a gaze that looks from outside to the inside of the caste system. The critics have analysed their voice as the voice of new identity, voice of 'Others'. The challenge for the narratives of oppressed communities was to construct a 'counter narrative' to the well accepted usual autobiographies defined as authentic text written by the someone who has been through the journey of his life and was finally writing about his experiences. This helped in building a new perspective to view the caste system as a system that discriminated historically with the marginalized castes. Theories on these narratives also created a postcolonial perspective where the social discourse was challenged as the culture that created an argument against the democratic set up in the social system and the society based on myth. These perspectives

were built to understand how socio-cultural values could destroy the social justice that remains non inclusive for certain castes. Zecchini in the article “No Name is Yours Until You Speak It” (2016), writes,

One of the relevant premises of postcolonial theory is to rethink the ‘center’ from the peripheries; the West from the perspective of the non-West; nationalism from those that nationalism has rendered homeless or stateless; disciplines, modernity, history and other so-called universal or global categories from non-Western locations and narrations. (p. 58)

Discussing further, as per this theory, Dalit literature seems to be reclaiming their relevance in the suffering brought during their subjugation. This brings us to understand how these Dalit narratives were constructing a subjective theory around oppression to make their voice heard. These discourses were also voicing the rebuilding of caste structures by giving voice to the castes who were denied to speak for centuries. Zecchini argues,

It represents the power that tears bodies away from their ‘natural’ destination, from ascribed places and functions. By giving names, inventing singularities and subjects, making visible and audible what was previously invisible, inaudible or ‘unsayable’, and challenging the exclusive system of repartition between what is ‘same’ and ‘other’, proper and improper, noble and vile, but also what, ‘counts’ and what does not, this literature is intimately linked to the political. (p. 59)

## **Dynamics of Dalit Literature**

Arguing Dalit literature to be political, establishes it as a literature of firm arguments. These arguments were based on the experiences and narratives that were challenging the empowered castes and were constructing a new strength for the weak and deprived castes. The political nature of this literature was bringing in theories which were essential for reclaiming the identity of the deprived and the downtrodden castes as the castes that were revolting against the subjugation and were building their arguments through their narratives of lived realities filled with their traumatic experiences.

Dalit narratives were claiming their identity through expressions that were not polished or sophisticated but were as raw and real as they could be. The cultural deprivation of these castes was more connected with the kind of vocabulary

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used for them. The language which was full of the abuses and the language that degraded Dalits further to the level that was lower than the level of being treated as humans. Improper way of addressing or use of caste names as abuse could be seen in the narratives of Om Prakash Valmiki and of Sharankumar Limbale. Their autobiographies were translated from Hindi and Marathi, respectively, to English to make it possible for the global readers to know about their life as Dalits and how their narratives could be read as the traumatic sufferings or the suffering of their communities. The language in these two autobiographies was harsh and full of caste names which were used to insult them. Valmiki in *Joothan* (2008) argues to find an emancipatory change in his own life through empowerment he got by acquiring education but he could not end caste discrimination in the real social world. We saw a similar radical approach in *Akkarmashi* (2003), where Limbale post education finds himself empowered enough to raise philosophical questions on the humanitarian ground. He could not find answers but felt slightly relieved with his right to expression.

The experiences shared by Bama in her autobiographical writings *Sangati* (2005) and *Karukku* (2012) were strong articulations of her sufferings and victimization. She has been the representative of her community. Her narrative begins with her childhood days when she witnessed the atrocities on her own family and other people of her caste. She could easily feel caste around her. She as a small girl could see how women around her suffered caste discrimination and were deprived of access to many facilities around them. She describes how difficult it was for her to understand that the people of her family and her community were barred to enter the upper caste lanes. She witnessed how women of her community were assaulted and how men of their locality were tortured because of the caste conflict. She soon realised that there was a clear-cut demarcation of caste boundaries between the localities and people from the lower castes were barred from entering into the lanes of upper caste localities. These boundaries were not physical but were directed in the form of caste legislatures that lower castes could not enter the upper caste lanes. Bama being a girl, could feel the caste discrimination as a little girl but she understood it better as a harsh reality when she grew up to understand suffering of her own people.

Bama's narratives have also raised a strong question around caste being a transcending socio- cultural norm. Rules made for castes were supposed to



be strictly followed. She grew as a Dalit but at the same time she was also a Christian. She attended the prayers in the Church with her family and knew that caste will not enter these boundaries because Church belongs to God. Gradually, she started facing discrimination inside the Church, as the Indian-Christian communities carried caste burdens with them and change of religion had no influence on the evil practices like untouchability in the Indian caste system.

Dalits were asserting on voicing the discrimination and atrocities they had to face for centuries but no one from the literate section thought of writing their history. Denial of their rightful space in history and literature later became the reason for voicing their painful experiences and for writing a parallel history. In *Dalit Writings: Emerging Perspectives*, Raj Kumar writes in “The ‘Other’ Indians Reading Dalit Discourse in Joseph Macwan’s *Angaliyat*” (2022) how caste as a social institution discriminates and functions in the society around us. He writes,

Untouchability and atrocity are the by-products of the caste society. Both are evil in nature and heinous in their practices. While the practices of untouchability make Dalits the virtual slaves of caste society, atrocities bring further untold miseries in their lives, sometimes killing them. We have read news of atrocities allegedly perpetrated on Dalits by the upper castes. Cases of uprooting Dalits from their homes, depriving them of their lands, denial of the use of public wells, tanks, bathing ghats and burial grounds, forbidding them from entering into shops, hotels, restaurants and temples, refusal of police and medical help, refusal of services by barbers and washer men and even preventing them from ‘growing moustaches upwards’, ‘riding bicycles’, etc., are very often reported. (p. 23)

These instances were based on various incidents recorded through writings that were visible in the literary world in the post-colonial era. Literature is about expressions that are made through any form of writing and Dalits did not want to wait for the time when they will be given the right to express. Raj Kumar argues that Dalit literature is not a literature which has simply been born but is the outcome of the cultural conflict. Gradually, radical reformative movements started by Ambedkar encouraged Dalits to write about their untold sufferings and the cruel impact of caste legislatures on the lower castes. The term ‘Dalit’



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works as an umbrella that covers all people who were oppressed but it has now become a caste. Common phrases using 'Dalit' as a caste was not justified. Dalits were not any caste in the varna system but the historical oppression of the people in the hierarchical *varna* system contextualised these people as the 'oppressed' in the caste system.

Formation of identities within caste system have been denied to lower castes. Their identities demanded their proof of existence and provides them certain ownership within the caste system, but they never existed within the caste structure. It can be said that they were not allowed to be visible in the main system but were very much part of the 'denied' castes. Devy describes that these castes were not addressed as castes but were the varnas which were basically communities. These communities were either the 'dominating communities' or 'dominated communities.' And then these communities were addressed as castes during the colonial days. These castes followed strict social religious traditions and breaking these traditions was punishable offence as per the moral legislatures.

### Forming the New Canon

The literature coming from Dalits was the new literature. But autobiographies were not given much of importance in the initial stages. G. N. Devy in the introduction of *The Outcaste* (2003) by Limbale, describes that Dalit literature had no model to look at. He writes,

They were not autobiographies of person at the fag-end of their lives, looking back on life with cool composure. They were not even the life stories of persons who had already become accomplished writers. Writing the autobiographies made many of them (except Daya Pawar and Shankar Rao Kharat) writers. In this sense they were not even 'autobiographies'. They can best be described as 'social epiphanies', expressions of a never before mentioned intensity. (p. xxii)

In an article in Bhosle's book *Sociology of Dalit Literature* (2015), Milind Awad in his chapter, "Epistemic Foundation of Dalit Writing" writes,

It is important to note here that, the term Dalit is not an already given construct; it is a discourse in the making. Each novel, poem, and political speech simultaneously articulates the particular concerns of the writer,

poet, or social activist and also creates the shared space of what it means to be a Dalit. (p. 15)

Another essential characteristic of Dalit writing is that, it is not originally and essentially a literary exercise. They are the same social phenomenon which are more than a literary event, a socio-cultural action in the form of a literary performance.(pp. 15-16)

In the face of identities, economic identity has seen a lot of change. Margins can be merged and people may shift from one economic identity to another one with the new postcolonial global Indian shift in commerce and new opportunities. But the caste identities seem to remain intact and strongly embedded in the social hierarchical structure. They never changed with the development, change in education system or any other progress that the country was making otherwise.

Marxist division separates the castes into classes and should have allowed people from one class to go to another class only if attains social and economic equality. But this was not happening for the people who were from the oppressed communities because of multi layered oppression that they saw in the Indian caste system. These issues have been strongly argued in poetic expressions by Dalit poets. It is visible in the poetries of Namdeo Dhasal *Golpitha* (1972) where he describes the oppression of Dalit and tribal women who were pushed in the world of prostitution very easily. Castes were not dynamic but were exclusively granted at the time of birth to the individuals. Dalit narratives voice the oppression that they faced and they tried to enter into the literary world through their expressions in their own language.

Language plays a major role in describing Dalit writings as the writings of the oppressed castes where they did not exit the raw and harsh language to make their writings more literary. Instead they started including these local words into their writings and giving them space in the literature of literates. The essence of these narratives lay in their rural and caste languages where mostly caste names have been used as abuses. As much as we see this in the narrative of Limbale, these caste abuses have been retained by Valmiki in *Joothan*. An autobiography that was written later, Valmiki's narrative was another painful description of atrocities and discrimination that his community faced in his village. The stench of his surrounding and the filth that he had to cross stayed with him despite the better living conditions that he acquired after attaining

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education. Denial of access to the usual human needs like water, house and food created a historical sense of deprivation in the oppressed castes and this led to their belief in creating their own world. These were constructed through their writings and the space that allowed them to express the historical victimization. Caste cultures questioned their identities and this led to create the counter culture that was their own. These counter cultures are also considered as the culture of 'other' that has its own language and its own effort to create a new culture that allows the oppressed communities to express their trauma.

All the narratives by the oppressed communities have raised questions on denial of their human rights for centuries. The purpose of these narratives was not to increase the corpus of literature but these expressions worked in two ways - one was to make themselves heard as the representatives of the oppressed communities and second was to bring radical changes in the social, political and economic fronts on the grounds of possible human moral values. They were assessing the rigid caste structure and were advocating the necessary changes that could bring an end to the historical discrimination against the lower castes. They raised questions and gave answers through the philosophical reasoning and through their understanding of Indian socio-cultural history. We can see Limbale doing that through the questions he raised in *Akkarmashi* and his efforts to find answers in the etymological Indian history.

Dalit narratives are not destroying the positive but are creating a neo-Dalit identity through their strong recommendation of a culture which has to be rational. Ambedkar argues the same through his immense knowledge of culture and its under currents. He suggested a nation that should be divided into states on the basis of language in his book *Thoughts on Linguistic States*. (1955) This was suggested as a solution to create equality and fraternity in the socio-cultural spheres. As described by Yagati Chinna Rao,

Ambedkar argued that the creation of states should be based on equal distribution of population, and their capitals should be centrally located in those states... In fact, he noted that one language can unite people and two languages are sure to divide them. Culture is conserved by language.' (2022, p. 37)

Baby Kamble in *The Prison we Broke* (2009) finds solution to bring an end to the trauma and suffering of Dalits by offering the option of educating their

children. And the same was advocated by Valmiki where he tries to find some relief with access to education. Zecchini writes, “The right to name one’s self, to take control of one’s representation, is an act of power. Dalits have named themselves ‘Dalits’. This has implied discarding other official paternalist or complacent terms like untouchables, pariahs...” (p. 67).

The answers are not so simple. Dalits have used this term to indicate their oppression but not their identity. Dalit word has its own negative connotation and in the coming years, Dalits will find their identity in the names like Empowered, *Baraabar* or *Sammaanit*. These identities will create a new discourse to understand values and traditions based on equality and humanity. The philosophies in all the narratives are strongly creating a sense of literate world for future generations. Caste discrimination stays and is still existing around along with many traditions that need reformation. Dalits are moving towards constructing a history which was denied to them for centuries. They have used the word ‘Dalit’ to indicate the oppressed section of society, but they must deny to wear it as their identity. Dalit cannot be a name but it can be a literary discourse that will challenge the immoral treatment of oppressed communities and re-establish more humane culture which should become the Indian identity in the future years.

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