



Discourse of Dalit Marginality in India: The Question of Power and Agency in Contemporary Dalit Literature

There are forms of oppression and domination which becomes invisible- the new normal.

- Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

Abstract:

India is a homo-hierarchicus land where different groups of people live with different ideologies and religious faiths. The diversification from outer appearance seems good as it presents a totem of cohesion and unity, but intrinsically it advocates praxis of discrimination among the people of the land. The institution of caste system, which governs the social mobility in Indian society, proclaims a number of privileges to the upper caste people but at the same time, relegates a mass of vulnerable people, mainly the Dalits to the margin. This paper is a reaction against marginalization and caste based discrimination, which hinders development of the underprivileged section of the society. The purpose of the study is look for definition, forms and few significant instances of Dalit marginalization in order to explore the mechanism of Dalit marginality prevalent in Indian society. Using the discursive analysis, the study will explore the discourse of power agency in contemporary Dalit literature and also attempt to illustrate how adroitly the tapestry of Hindu scriptures has been employed by the authority in order to domesticate the Dalit marginality and subjugate the ordinary Dalit subjects.

Keywords: Dalit Marginality, Discrimination, Dalit agony, Discourse, Power/Knowledge, Agency, Othering

Introduction: In the context of contemporary Indian society, the question of marginalization and social exclusion of the disadvantaged group or contemporary Dalits is not new. Here one can easily trace instances of Dalit marginalization through analysis of cultural differences extant among various caste groups in India and repeated discussions on the subject are rampant in contemporary literary academia. In the view of such complex notions, there is a need to be certain what Dalit marginalization is all about? What are different forms of it existing in contemporary society? Where does this practice of marginalization and *othering* spring from and finally, which agency is responsible for this uncouth practice against the socially disadvantaged group?

Amid so many complexities and varied notions on the subject, this paper intends to address the aforementioned questions and retrospect the power agency responsible for this caste based discrimination and stereotyping the Dalit marginality in India. At the same time the paper will also explore possibilities to establish a cohesive and inclusive society.

In India the institution of caste system has always been the regulating force for social mobility. According to Hindu tradition, historically Indian society was stratified into four major varnas viz., Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, which later on with course of development converted into existing caste system. There are a number of castes which further divided into multiple sub castes. This diversification from outer appearance seems to be good as it presents a totem of coherence and inclusivity, but the ignominy of this cohabitation is that it is divided into power hierarchy. This institution of caste does not only vouch for division of work responsibilities in Indian society, but it also institutes Dalit marginalization and discrimination in modern Indian society. On the one hand, where the caste institution proclaims plethora of privileges to the dominant upper caste people, but simultaneously on the other hand, relegates a mass of people, who accidentally born in lower castes more specifically in the Dalit community, at the margin of the society. How does this process of marginalization operates in contemporary society is significant and worth noticing, which will be explored in the following pages. Before launching on to the discussion of the process of marginalization it is imperative to define what the marginalization is all about and why it is so significant in the contemporary literary academia.

To begin with the definition of marginalization, “marginalization, according to *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, is a metaphor that refers to the processes by which individuals or groups are kept at or pushed beyond the edge of society” (2765). To elaborate, marginalization is a process whereby an individual or a group is relegated to the edge/periphery of a particular community or society by the dominant class of people. Those dominant class of people who are the center and behold all sorts power, consider the marginalized individuals or groups as outsiders and hence of lesser importance. This is predominantly a social phenomenon, by which a minority or a lower group is excluded from mainstream society. For example, Dalit community in India historically had been excluded from all kinds of Hindu social transactions by the Brahmin class, though due to plethora of affirmative actions taken by the Indian government and the Constitutional rights, the condition has been resuscitated and all kinds of discriminations against any class or community is legally banned now, but the practices of marginalization can still be traced out in the society. Nevertheless, marginalization is often appears to be synonym of the extreme poverty or of social exclusion. Karl Marx in his theorization of Marxism theory referred to these marginalized groups of people as the “reserve army of labour” who have been relegated to the margin of labour market.

The expression of marginalization appears to have been originated with Robert Park (1928), while analyzing his concept of ‘marginal man’, a term he coined to characterize the lots of impoverished minority ethnic immigrants to a predominantly white Anglo Saxon Protestants United State, which with the passage of time became popular concept having connotation of ‘backwardness’ not of immigrants in the developed countries but of people in the developing third world countries who fail or are prevented from participating in economic, political and cultural transition to the modernity (*Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* 2765). Howard S. Becker opines that the extremity of marginalization may take form of criminalization which occurs when an individual or groups are labeled as deviant (*Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*). This social phenomenon of marginalization in any society can be hazardous as terror of armed forces. Here it becomes imperative to understand the genesis, forms and the process of Dalit marginalization in contemporary society in order to establish a coherent and inclusive society where every member can partake equally in all kind of social responsibilities and transactions.

Before delving deep to the genesis of practice of marginalization, it is necessary here to spotlight few historical anecdotes in order to consolidate our understanding of Dalit marginalization and stereotyping and how much it can be precarious to the society in particular and humanity in larger scale. Here are two anecdotes from history worth noticing here as they are crucial in understanding the ongoing processes of marginalization in India. If you are acquainted with Malala Yousafzai but not with Surekha Bhotmange, you need to ponder over your extensive reading and the liberal ideology that you always boast for. Malala was only fifteen but had already committed several crimes. She lived in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, she was a BBC blogger, she was in a New York Time's video and she want to school. Malala wanted to be a doctor and her father wanted her to be a politician. She (and her father) did not heed of when Taliban declared that schools were not meant for girls and threatened to kill her if she did not stop speaking against them. On 9 October 2012, a gunman took off her school bus and shot a bullet through her head. Malala was flown to England, where after receiving the best possible medical care and she survived. It was a miracle (qtd. in *The Doctor and the Sant* 2).

The US President and the Secretary of the State sent messages of support and solidarity. Madonna dedicated a song to her. Angelina Jolie wrote an article about her. Malala was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize; she was on the cover of *Time*. Within days of the attempted assassination, Gordon Brown, former British Prime minister and the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, launched an 'I am Malala' petition that called on Pakistan Government to deliver education to every girl child. The US drone strikes in Pakistan continue with their feminist mission to take out misogynist, Islamist terrorists.

Contrary to the above anecdote, Surekha Bhotmange was a forty-year old woman from Maharashtra. She was a Dalit, formerly known as Untouchable woman. She was more educated than her husband, so she was the commanding director of the family. Baba Saheb Ambedkar was her role model. Her two sons, Sudhir and Roshan had been to college and her daughter Priyanka was of seventeen and had already completed her matriculation. Surekha (and her husband) had bought a little plot of land in the village of Khairlanji in the state of Maharashtra, which was surrounded by farms of upper caste people. As she was a Dalit woman, she had no right to aspire a good life. The village Panchayat did permit her to get an electricity connection and turn her thatched mud hut into a brick house. The upper caste villagers did not allow her to irrigate her farms with water

from the canal or draw water from public well. The villagers wanted to build a public road through her fields. They let their cattle loose to feed on her standing crops. Still Surekha did not back down. She complained in the police but in vain. They did not heed of. As a warning to her the villagers attacked a relative of hers and left him for almost dead. She filed another complaint. This time the police did some arrests but the accused were released on bail. At about six in the evening of the same day they were release (29 September 2006), about seventy incensed villagers, men and women arrived in a tractor and surrounded the Bhotmange's house. Her husband Bhaiyalal, who was out in the fields, heard the commotion and ran to home. He hid himself behind a bush and watched the mob attack. He ran to the nearest town Dusala, and through a relative managed to call the police who never came. The mob dragged Surekha, her two sons and her daughter Priyanka out the house and ordered the two sons to rape their mother and sister, when they refuse their genital were mutilated and eventually they were lynched. Surekha and Priyanka were gang raped and beaten to death. The four bodies were dumped in a nearby canal where they found the next day.

At first, the press reported it as a 'morality' murder, suggesting that the villagers were upset because Surekha was having an affair with a relative (the man who previously) had been assaulted). Mass protests by the Dalit organizations eventually prodded the legal system into taking cognizance of the crime. Citizens' fact-finding committees reported how evidences had been tampered with the fudged. When the lower court finally pronounced a judgment, it sentenced the main perpetrator to death but refused to invoke the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act. According to the judge the massacre was a crime spurred by a desire for revenge. There was no caste angle in the killing.

Since Surekha and her family belonged to the Dalit community, there was no 'I am Surekha' petition from United Nations to the Indian government, nor any fiats or message of outrage from heads of the State.

History is packed with such instances and anecdotes of Dalit marginalization and stereotyping. The expositions of practices of caste discrimination in Indian society can be seen in multitude. According to a research done by the *National Council of Applied Economic Research* in 2014, there are almost 27% (almost every fourth) of Indian people who still practice untouchability and they do not allow Dalits formerly known as untouchables

into their kitchen and to use their utensils. The practice was most prevalent among Hindu Brahmins (52%). Former Union minister and a well known academician Mr. Shashi Tharoor quoted the study in one of his article “Why Caste Won’t Disappear from India”. Social media and print media are replete with such instances. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report 2022 crimes against the Scheduled Castes in India have increased by 1.2 per cent (50,900 cases over 50, 291 cases in 2020) and against the Schedule Tribes by 6.4 per cent almost 8,802 cases in the year 2021 over 8,272 cases in 2020. This is the statistics of reported physical atrocities only. What about the non reported and psychological or notional atrocities sprouted from the uncouth practice of marginalization? This marginalization can be of any type, ranging from social, cultural, political, institutional or material marginality. Now, one can easily speculate how precarious and threatening can it be particularly to a developing country like India where a number of religious sects and castes groups co exist simultaneously with limited resources and to the humanity in larger scale. It can be as threatening as any contagious disease like plague or covid-19 in the 21st century.

Now coming to the question of the genesis and historiography of the uncouth practice of Dalit marginalization, it is imperative to look back to the history as the roots of this phenomenon are planted deep in the antiquity. The process of marginalization begins with the notion of *othering*. Every instance of marginalization across the globe that history marked, happened due religious or cultural difference among various communities. Take any example of Black v/s White, paganism v/s Christianity, Protestantism v/s Catholicism, Islam v/s Hinduism, Aryan v/s Dravidian, Dalit v/s non-Dalit or any other pair binary, marginalization took place among them due to the social, religious, cultural or political differences among them. here a question crops up as how one become superior and the other inferior and who determines the power hierarchy that work as an agency in propagating marginalization in the society? The answer is complex yet simple and can be explored with the help of Michel Foucault’s discourse of Power/Knowledge. According to Michel Foucault, every society there is organized around the chain of power relation or more precisely, power is immanent in all social relations and these social relations are manifestation of power relations (*The Archeology of Knowledge*). Power is not an object that can be possessed nor it can be applied through/on an individual by coercion, rather it is a system or a netlike organization through which this power is exercised by an authority

with the help of thoughtful discourses of knowledge to seek its intentional goal. And with the course of time every individual in the society works as agent towards seeking the preordained or predetermined goal of the authority even without realizing the actuality that s/he is hegemonized by it (power). The same case happened with Dalit community which had to submit its will under the pressing system of power discourse and undergo the tyranny of marginalization in the hands of mainstream Hindu society. With the invasion of Aryan in India the problem of Dalit community and its dalitization emerged. The Aryans, a Proto-Indo-Iranian community, came to India from central Asia during the Harappan Civilization in around 2000 to 1600 BCE and brought Hinduism and Vedic culture with them. Though there is controversy among scholars whether the Aryan invaded by coercion or they had consciously migrated into Indian subcontinent. According to some of Anthropologists the invasion of Aryan had never happened in the history, rather they had willingly migrated in India at one point of time in the history, while contrary to this wing, there is another pool of scholars and critics especially of Dalit and Race Studies, who firmly hold the view that Aryans invaded to the Indian subcontinent and took over the indigenous Dravidian culture and language. A genuine research is still needed to be carried out to affirm the reality. For the time being it is a well established fact that the Aryans were outsiders and came to India either through invasion or migration and taking over the indigenous Dravidian culture and language settled down in India. It is obvious here it was a time when the both groups were still nomadic and barbaric tribes, wandering here and there in search of food and shelter. Now when the intrusion of the Aryans took place in Indian subcontinent there must have been warfare between the both as has also been illustrated by Dr. Ambedkar in one of his books and in this warfare the aborigines of India defeated by the Aryan and broken into pieces who consequently became the modern Dalit (*The Untouchable: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchable* 26-34). According to Dr. Ambedkar's speculation, there might have been a mutual contract between the Aryans and the defeated, broken Dalits for the former needed a body of guards and watchmen who could guard and watch their wealth (Cattle and granary) and women from other nomadic tribes and invaders and the latter was in pressing need of food and shelter, so having no alternative both were agreed for the mutual contract and solved their problems by cooperating with each other. Now a major problem that must have been occurred between the two was the issue of inhabitation of these broken Dalits as being of different blood they could not live

altogether and it is a hard fact that no tribe or race could bear any foreign blood because all these tribes and races had strong notion of purity and pollution of blood and they always practiced the practice of *othering* and marginalization based on the blood distinction. So the Dalits had been sheltered strategically at the outskirts of Hindu villages and offered very small amount of or no transaction(s) with caste Hindus. This was perhaps the most significant instance of marginalization in the history of all the races across the globe. Even in the present day it is harsh reality the upper castes Brahmins, the successor of the Aryan race have a strong instinct of despising the Dalits and practice untouchability against them though on psychological level. Thus the history of marginalization is as old as the history of Dalits itself.

So far the researcher has attempted by investing his polemical faculty of reason and intellect to trace out primarily the genesis, forms and manifestation of the phenomenon of Dalit marginalization in the contemporary society. It is appropriate now to address a pertinent question pertaining to Dalit marginalization, that is the question if this uncouth practice is so perilous and precarious to the society in particular and to humanity in larger scale, why does it still exist and how does it manage its operation even in the present globalized world where people get easily tempted by representational practices without looking back to its genesis and meaning? To put it simply, how the process of Dalit marginalization does operate in the society? The question can be answered again with the support of Foucault's discourse of power and its interrelationship with knowledge. In today globalized world of information and cyberspace, the production of knowledge is not free as has always been considered from power discourse. "power" according to Foucault, "is not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength that we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society"(The Archaeology of Knowledge). So power has always been an intervening factor in every realm of the society especially in production of knowledge that works as a catalyst in creating the desired discourse. The same case had happened with the discourse of Dalit marginalization. In the course of history, amid uncanny vicissitude of politics, a particular agency, the Aryan came into power and very carefully and insidiously created the discourse of *dalitization*- that Dalits are uncouth, unsophisticated, poor, vulnerable and people sans self pride, having a hidden agenda of controlling and ruling over them (the Dalits). They have not only dalitized and problematized the Dalit identity but also codified this diminutive discourse

into religion, the pivotal structure for one's life, sometimes by altering the extant religious practices and sometimes creating entirely new scriptures. Multiple instances of this can be traced in the age of Manu. So many *Smritis* and *Nitishashtras* such as *Manusmriti*, *Naradsmriti*, *Yagyavalkya smriti*, et cetera have been created in order to propound certain ideologies. Religion is an agency, the sole purpose of which is to escalate fear among its subjects; it was though devised with the aim of improving the human lives but in present age humans (a herd of devotees) are engages to improve religion leaving all their social responsibilities aside. Seeking this rift in the indigenous people the authoritative Aryans have deployed a complex, multilayered bedrocks of power agency in the society where historians, political scientists, anthropologists, litterateurs and so many intellectual dignitaries are employed for perpetuating the same discourse using their power of intellect and knowledge. The discourse is so adroitly produced that even its subjects can not entail how they have been hegemonized and controlled by some other authority. In the history the great Hindu sage, Manu who perpetuated the illogical ideology that the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras were born out of the lord Bramha's mouth, shoulders, stomach and the feet respectively (*Rigveda* 10.90) and hierarchized the Hindu civilization into uneven power relations without noticing the horrific consequent. The question is that why he could not place the Shudra, or Vaishya or Kshatriya at the top rung of the hierarchy? He placed the Brahman at the top rung just because he himself was of the same community.

Following the ideology of Manu there emerged a pool of non-Dalit scholars and critics who were and are employed to perpetuate the same insubstantial ideology that Dalits marginality by representing them as helpless, uncouth and unsophisticated people in their literary writings who need to be cultured and nurtured. For example, a number of great religious and mythological epics such as *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharatha*, *The Bhagvadgeeta*, etc. have been composed in different time and place from the perspectives of these great leaders of upper castes and class where the non- Dalit especially the Brahman and the Kshatriyas have been represented as angel or hero while on the stern part the Shudras and Dalits as satans, devil or villain. In *The Ramayana* for example, Rama, the protagonist has been depicted in the form of Maryada Purushottma [the ideal human being] while contrary to this, Ravana and his kith and kin as being of satanic and villainous nature., in lieu of Ravana being the most learned and intellectual being. Rama beheaded an innocent Dalit saint Shambuka against a false

accusation of a Brahman that his son was died because Shambuka, an untouchable saint, has violated the normative rule of chanting mantras, praying and meditation. Rama did so in order to maintain his kingship and upheld the notional justice. Justice is a sort of luxury in today materialistic world; it is discursively produced and served to the materialistically affluent sect of the society. In the epic of *Mahabharatha*, Eklavya and Krana, the two noble men had to undergo the same agony of being of underprivileged community.

The exquisite philosophy of '*Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*' is discursively devised by the Hindu philosophers and insidiously imposed upon innocent ordinary men by codifying it into religious scripture in order to perpetuate the discourse of dalitizing the Dalits universally and democratise the brahmanic dominion over other underprivileged sects of the society. Sharankumar Limbale vehemently criticised this selfish philosophy? He asks what is the place of *satyam* in the lives of Dalits? Is this truth that the Brahman was born out the lord Brahma's mouth and the Shudra from his feet? Is this truth that one is born Shudra because of the sins s/he had committed in his/her past life? Since there is no veracity in any of these, *satyam* should really be *asatyam*, according to Limbale. Similarly, the conceptions of *shivam* [holy] and *sundaram* [beauty] are maliciously false in the context of Dalit lives. The Hindu scriptures and the upper castes Brahmans are deemed to be polluted by mere touch of a Dalit. What kind of shiva is this? There are certain communities like nomadic and criminal tribes existing even in contemporary age who have been labelled as criminals, beggars and untouchable (untouch-able) by their birth. There can't be anything more malicious and filthy than this. Hence, the *shivam* should be turned to *ashivam* [unholy] (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 20-21).

Dalit should live outside the village, take inauspicious names, possess dogs and donkeys only, wear clothes meant to wrap corpses and they should not learn Sanskrit or read Vedas. All of these notions are fabricated to maintain the brahmanic hegemony. This can't be *sundaram* (21).

In the contemporary age institution of literature itself could not refrain itself from the mechanism of Dalit subjugation and Brahminic dominion over the Dalit subjects, rather play an instrumental role in perpetuating the Dalit vulnerability and problematizing the Dalit identity by deploying the linguistic representational practices. In the present age of information and simulation, people easily get tempted by this

representational faculty of literature. The non-Dalit wing of contemporary Dalit literature follows impulsively the mechanism of Dalit marginalization and always represent the Dalit characters as vulnerable, fragile, poor, people sans self pride and as abominous entity who can't take their own decision and thus they imposed a filthy and questionable identity to the Dalits. For example, Mulk Raj Anand in his first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), made the protagonist Bakha, an untouchable eighteen year old boy of robust physique, always compromise with caste based exploitations and oppressions inflicted upon him and his kith and kin by the upper castes Hindus, even though his sister Sohini is molested by pundit Kalinath, a Brahman fellow. Bakha could have smash the dirty fellow within a minute but he was quietly underwent the agony and throughout his life Bakha suffers in the hands of upper caste Hindus. In fact no brother in social actual situation can silently undergo agony of his sister's humiliation and molestation.

Similarly, Munshi Premchand, a pioneer novelist of Hindi language, treats Dalit issues and characters with Hindu conformist point of view and demonstrates that Dalit lives and problems are vulnerable they are not able to aspire good life. His literary oeuvre is packed with such instances. He has written multiple stories and novel on Dalit issues. Here, one of his famous stories, *Kafan* (The Shroud, 1936) is worthy of discussion. The story is based two Dalit characters, Ghisu and Madhav, a father and son. Both of them are known to be the idlest workmen in the community. When the story begins the two are sitting outside their small hut eating roasted potatoes and trying hard to ignore the screams of Madhav's wife, Budhiya who is dying inside in childbirth. Neither of them goes inside to see her, rather each one has a kind of fear that other will gobbled down more than his share. Without an iota of shame they both sleep near the dying fire. Consequently, Budhiya and stillborn child died. Now Ghisu and Madhav have to ask for alms as they have nothing for the funeral. They earned five rupees and some wood after hard begging, but they balk on spending the money for the shroud that will only be burned with the corpse. Instead, they spent the money in drinking alcohol and sumptuous food and in the fit of intoxication they both appreciate Madhav's wife gift of abundance and bemoan of her pain and difficulties in lifetime. The story ends with Ghisu and Madhav drinking in a pub leaving the responsibility of performing the funeral (qtd. in "The Problem of Premchand"). A flock of critics have raised their voice against Premchand's conformist attitude towards the underprivileged section of the society. Prof. Sumanakshar,

president of BDSA, comments in a Hindi journal *Apeksha*, “in six lakh villages of the country you can go into any Dalit settlement and not find a single man with such lack of sympathy. On the contrary the members of their families show more love and compassion to one another than the upper caste families” (46). Besides this, there are other stories and novels such as *Sadgati*, *Dudh Ka Daam*, *Ghaswali*, *Poos Ki Raat*, *Rangbhumi*, *Godan*, etc. where Premchand has presented his Hindu conformist point of view regarding Dalit *chetna* [consciousness] and thus a marginalized identity has been labelled to the Dalit community.

U. R. Ananthamurthy is another writer in the same line who has under represented the Dalits in his literary oeuvre. His first classic novel *Samskara* (1965) is based on decay of Brahminism in contemporary materialist world where Ananthamurthy under the pretext of his Brahmin reformist point of view has domesticated the Dalit subjugation by representing a Dalit woman named Chandri as a concubine of a Brahmin narcissist Naranappa who has deviated completely from his Brahmin values. In the story this Dalit woman has been casted insidiously by the author as a promiscuous lady who approaches to Praneshacharya, the most learned man in the whole Brahmin agrahara and to whom the entire Brahmin community follows for his decency and scholarship, and have sex with him in the thick dark wood. The biggest irony is that the author has presented Praneshacharya innocence and helpless in the obnoxious act in order to reach his purpose but what about the pride and chastity of Chandri? The question needs to be reconsidered and evaluated. In his another novel *Bharathipura* the Dalit characters like Pilla and his friends have been represented as helpless, people without any action and self pride who can't take their own decision, hence need to be educated. Thus the author has adroitly a marginal and vulnerable identity imposed upon the voiceless Dalit community.

The selective reading of Dalit literature and critical analysis of few Hindu scriptures suggests that in the contemporary globalized world of information and cyberspace, it is exquisitely important to re-visit the history and literary canon in order to understand the complex patterns and power discourse of Dalit marginality that the upper caste Hindus have been using to control and hegemonize the Dalit subjects. Michel Foucault argues, “there are forms of oppression and domination which become invisible- the new normal” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*). It is possible only when the subjects are in a state of oblivion that had happened with the Dalit community in the beginning. The upper caste Hindus have followed the same diminutive politics of

manoeuvring the Dalit identity and pushed them back to the oblivion using the matrix of the power agency in order proliferate discourse of knowledge. They deployed this knowledge discourse so adroitly and democratize the idea that the Dalit subjects are unsophisticated and uncivilized and they need to be cultured and nurtured. Thus, there is urgent need to re-read and rewrite the literary history in order to explore the Brahminic discourse of power agency and better understand the diminutive politics of dalitizing the Dalit, so that Dalit also can partake equally in every social sphere and contribute to the wellbeing of the nation.

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