

COUNTERING UNTOUCHABILITY AND CASTE-BASED EXCLUSION THROUGH EDUCATION: A STUDY OF Y.B. SATYANARAYANA'S *MY FATHER BALIAH*

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Abstract:

This article underscores how, Dalits have come to be the mute victims of inhuman suffering perpetuated by the discriminatory social practices under the caste eco-system on the gigantic scale, which have forced them to suffer the traumatizing agonies of discrimination and resultant exclusion due to denial and deprivation in the stratum of education. Such caste-linked exclusion of a large segment of population has seriously undermined the cognitive and intellectual potentials of these oppressed communities, and in other words, it has created an unbridgeable gap in the holistic development of the country. In this regard, much criticism has been hurled against the social structures of the Hindu society based on the graded inequalities of caste, which barred a large segment of population from the various points of access to education and subsequent employment. The introduction of western education in India by the Christian missionaries opened up a new escape-route to Dalit communities, who insisted upon walking away from the stigmatized and degrading existence; but surprisingly, the western powers, at the outset, seemed to be very much ambivalent, on the question of offering education to the low caste people of the country. The opportunities were tiny and the motives were considered to be altogether different, yet these deprived people utilised these avenues of assertion and empowerment to escape the discriminatory social practices, and to fight untouchability imposed upon them by the caste hierarchies. Question of having an emancipatory identity and dignified life is very much linked to the perpetual struggle of Dalits for access to education, as it provided the sole outlet for their slim hope to transcend the humiliating and stigmatized existence under the unequal caste order in the Hindu society. This paper is an attempt to examine the role of caste in stigmatizing and depriving the lives of Dalit people, and how Dalit lives have been discriminated and transformed into a perpetual fight against indignity and inequality, and the subsequent discovery of a fatal weapon called education to fight such ignominies, discrimination, and indignities. Here an attempt is made to trace the ambivalent role of the colonial powers towards educating Dalit people, and their eventual recruitment of the untouchables in the railways, and in the army to make a delicate balancing act between the economic viability and the social equilibrium. The article clearly confirms the fact that, the road to emancipation for such deprived communities passes through availing the educational opportunities made possible by the certain policies of the colonial powers, and subsequently by the successive governments after the independence. The role of education in uplifting these communities from the jaws of poverty and disempowerment has been scrutinised to establish its potential role in bettering the standards of Dalit lives, and ultimately preparing them for eventual struggles against injustice and denial legitimised by the normative attributes of caste hierarchies.

Key Word: Dalit, Caste hierarchies, caste-linked exclusion, deprived communities.

Introduction:

The emergence of Dalit autobiographies since 1970s has unsettled the collective psyche of the wider reader community and offered an alternative worldview, so far remained unrepresented in the mainstream literary productions. This genre of literature produced in the margins extensively dealt with the cosmos of Dalit communities, and their suffering and seclusion in the different walk of society due to their locations in the lowest position of the Hindu society. Dalits (formerly known as the untouchables) constitute the most historically oppressed and dispossessed section of the Hindu society in India, and the Indian history does bear innumerable testimonies to the fact that, the question of Dalit uplift and emancipation through education remained neglected for centuries, and none tried to pull them out of these dehumanising social conditions. It was only in the 19th century, when the colonial powers established their grip over the entire Indian society and administration, and made concerted attempts were made by different Missionaries in their 'civilizing missions', there came up certain institutions of modern knowledge productions and opportunity structures. These brought about some definite socio-economic transformations to a sizeable section of the Hindu society belonging to the upper caste dominated 'native elite.' A small section of the untouchable communities quite surprisingly, became unintended beneficiaries of the said opportunity structures, and utilized them in uplifting themselves from the pathetic existences, and in destigmatizing their social identities by making some concrete material transformations in their impoverished lives. In this article, attempts have been made to find out how, Dalits utilized these strategies of emancipation to combat the caste-based inequalities, resulting in their 'civic and political seclusion', and how they attempted to rewrite an alternative history based on the ideals of egalitarianism that challenges the caste hierarchy by rejecting the caste-based oppression and humiliation. In this regard, the role of western education, initiated by the colonial powers and some missionaries will be analysed to understand, how Dalits have used education as an effective tool to engage with the symbolic and material deprivation of the untouchable communities, and to challenge the Brahmanical pedagogies that kept these communities under the systematic subjugation and exploitation for centuries in the Hindu society. Education has a great equalizing role in our life, and Dalits are seized of the matter and therefore they try every possible way to transform their 'weakness into strength.' Dalits attempt to ensure the fact that, their potentials are channelized and distributed equally, as to dismantle hegemonic structures, and to erode the caste inequalities produced by the systematic exclusion of Dalits on the multiple fronts, due to their stigmatised identity. The instrumentality of Dalit personal narratives is an established fact, and it is directed against the caste inequalities based on caste identities, towards assertions of their self-designated identity which is evocative of collective pride, equality, freedom and human dignity. The manifestations of intense urge of Dalit people towards establishment of a dignified and emancipatory identity have grown manifolds in the later

years of 19th century and beginning of 20th century. This transformative scenario was made possible by the radical initiatives undertaken by a number of anti-caste leaders and intellectuals such as Phule and Dr Ambedkar. Phule was the first person to open schools for the children of these depressed communities and some upper caste progressive figures had helped him in this regard. This tradition continued and Dr Ambedkar made it much successful and he drew support from some prominent progressive royal figures in the implementations of this educational policy.

The emergence and the continual proliferations of Dalit autobiographies, in both the vernacular and translated languages, have created a radical shift in the interpretation of Indian society and history, deconstructing a great deal of myths surrounding our understandings of , what constitutes historical narratives , and the role of education in their legitimisation. The upper caste people, especially Brahmins used the domain of intellectual production to sustain and validate their claims of superiority and purity over the other caste communities. It was nothing, but the establishment of monopolies and hegemony over the centres of knowledge productions. The dominant upper caste people utilised the various tools of education as 'cultural capital' and attempted to perpetuate the supremacy of the caste hierarchies, and to deprive the stigmatised communities of these tools. As a result, Dalits could not cultivate their potentialities to the level of lethality that in turn could be used to dismantle and overturn the caste hierarchies leading toward an emancipatory identity.

The attempts made by the Dalit communities in the 19th and 20th century to avail the opportunity models introduced by the British through the structure of education not only displayed the great amount of desire of Dalits to carve out a better society, and an inclusive future for them, but also registered their open castigation of the Gandhian concept of development through 'Ram Rajya', which was paradoxical in attributes. In this sense, the introduction and dissemination of modern form of education by the British had resulted in the transformation of the Indian society in general and the untouchables in particular, who utilized it, to some extent, as a route to the establishment of human dignity and equality in the unequal Hindu society. The introduction of the colonial railway had open up avenues of employments to the untouchables, and some of them grabbed these opportunities to evade the curse of caste society, and to start afresh in life on the basis of self-respect and economic self-reliance. The characters of this memoir, *My Father Baliah* jumped into the opportunities offered by the colonial rule, and attempted to chart a new lease of life with human dignity. And they succeeded, to some extent, in neutralizing the curse of caste stigma and bringing down the burden of grinding poverty in the collective journey of untouchables.

Humiliation and oppression:

The shared feeling of humiliation and being oppressed under the unequal Hindu social order constitutes the dominant feature in this narrative , and S.R. Sankaran in his *Forward* has , in a blunt manner , pointed out the scale and intensity of existential struggle of the characters depicted in this memoir:

The narrative becomes a history of the relentless struggle for an untouchable community against social and economic discrimination, against oppressive caste hierarchy, against feudal conditions, and against ridicule and humiliation (Satyanarayana, xi, 2018).

One important aspect of this autobiography is that it presents us a long span of events covering three generations, and the socio-economic transformations experienced by an untouchable family, and their upward trajectory from the den of ignorance to the alleys of the higher educational institutes. It has simply been a remarkable journey, which uncovers both the underbelly of casteist Hindu society, as well as the waning away of such discriminations through the inter-caste marriages. Whenever one talks about Dalits, the first thing that strikes him is that he is untouchable, who is the outside of the ambit of the caste order denoting the personified image of dirt and pollution. The ritual and symbolic impurity attributed to Dalit people has taken off their human values and social recognition and the upper caste people consider them as non-existent subjects. The images of Dalit people create a sense of strong repulsion and hatred in the minds of the upper caste groups, and they intentionally or unintentionally discriminate Dalit groups in the social relations. Dalit communities get victimised by the upper caste people in many ways, and their subjectivity is forcibly taken away by the dominant sections of the society who enjoy impunity in the caste-laden Hindu society. In the caste-marked definitions, the birth-based identity of Hindus determines one's entire life, and there has been no way-out to come out of it. Any act of transgression is crushed vehemently, and by doing so, the upper caste groups send strong messages to other groups to fall in the line, as dictated by the champions of caste hierarchies. In the caste-based parlance, Dalits have no rights and equality or self-respect, and their lives are worthy of only serving the interests of the upper caste communities. The operation of caste system has resulted in the automatic exclusion of Dalit communities from all the sources of material benefits and power structures, which in turn becomes the dominant source of all kinds of caste-based violence and exploitation committed on them by the upper caste. Exclusion of these stigmatised people from all the avenues of empowerment and prosperity, is directly linked to the level and intensity of experiential reality of humiliation and discrimination. The caste supremacist forces leave no stone unturned to perpetuate its privileged status and dominant position, which systematically monitor and enforce the caste-based inequalities in the societal relation.

Images of the caste-based segregation of human settlements and roads are a reality in the villages of India, where the notion of untouchability finds its uninterrupted operations and enforcements. The spatial isolation of Dalit communities from the main area of villages is indicative of the expanse of the caste-based oppression and discrimination. The father of Narish, a Madiga belonging to the chamar caste, had got fifty acres of agricultural land as gift by then Nawab Mir Tahaniat Ali Khan Afzalud Daulah, the Nizam of the Deccan, but he failed to transfer the land to his name, due to the strong reluctance of Dora, a feudal lord in the regions of the south India. He threatened the father of Narish with serious consequences for his non-compliance of his order. Succumbing to the whims of Dora, Narish allowed him

to illegally take control of the entire land except two acres, which had been returned to Narisha in the subsequent times. Narisha was very much terrified of the physical threat of the Dora and could not execute his formula. It is interesting to cite this case as an example of how the caste supremacy is perpetuated over Dalit communities, and how the material deprivations have crippled the entire life of these deprived communities. Narish's apparent meek nature has emboldened Dora, and he continued to exploit or manipulate the anti-Dalit rhetoric to strengthen his position, and he failed miserably to put up a formidable challenge to Dora, a feudal lord. The social operation of caste is congenial to the perpetuation of the feudalistic structure of society, with the feudal lord occupying the most privileged and powerful positions in the normative structure of power.

Life of a Dalit has been reduced to a saga of relentless existential struggle, and dreams of Dalits are nipped in the bud by the vicious cycle of caste system, that sanctions the segregation of the Hindu subjects into different varnas or jatis. Access to the places of public utilities has been severely curtailed, and each movement of the untouchables are randomly monitored by the caste hierarchy. Dalits have nothing to do, other than accepting the subjugation and oppression under the caste hegemony. The vulnerabilities of Dalit communities, caused by the spatial and societal allocations of Dalit communities multiply the forms of exploitation and marginalization by the caste structures. As consequences of such discrimination and exploitation, the untouchable groups continued to remain as untouchables and in the state of being disempowered under the oppressive Hindu society. The tricksters of the caste hegemony deceive these social groups overtly and covertly and create a sense of perpetual disability in the mind of these stigmatised subjects. But one thing that they gradually came to know was that, it is the only education that can lift them out of such ignominious life and perpetual state of victimhood. The role of education was recognised and the grandfathers of the second-generation Dalits realized the importance of educating their grandsons and daughters in schools to taste the life of liberty, equality and human dignity. The author has shown how his ancestors inspired their grandchildren in getting education in schools, and to enable the cultivation of intellectual capacities to be successful in the competitive job markets.

Education and Dalit emancipation:

Since the inception of the anti-caste movements across the country in the later part of 19th century, the question of freedom and human dignity of Dalit communities has occupied the focal point in the public discussions. The emergence of various reformist movements led by the upper caste leaders in the 19th and 20th paid almost no heed to the needs of improvement of the socio-economic conditions of Dalit communities through education. 'The pedagogy of the oppressed' came to be the driving force behind their call for an end to the caste-based hierarchies and discrimination in the segmented Hindu society. In this context, one has to recall the slogan of Dr Ambedkar- 'Educate, Agitate and Organise'- to combat the socio-economic backwardness of these social groups through education. It is learned that time and again, he raised his voice against the exclusionary policy of the

colonial powers in the field of education, and he himself established some schools for education of the boys belonging to these stigmatised communities. He was seized of the importance of the role of education in the ignorant and hapless lives of untouchable communities. His much stress on the inclusive policy of education is related to his dream of annihilation of caste and social barriers, which could ultimately result in the mental integration of citizenry irrespective of caste-based inequalities and establishment of an egalitarian society based on the ideals of freedom, equality and liberty, which is a Buddhist vision. His analysis of caste and social exclusion of these stigmatised subjects clearly spells out the fact that, the emancipation of Dalits can only be achieved, when these social groups develop a strong inclination towards the field of education.

Author recounts his school days and the rampant discriminations, and how Dalit students faced discrimination in the school premises on the daily basis; students of Dalit communities had been forced to sit outside the classroom in schools, as the social stigma of being a Dalit does not permit them to sit freely with other students inside the classrooms. The holy centres of educational institutes turned into the nurturing ground for those, who got engaged in openly practising caste-based slurs and dehumanizing behaviours against the students belonging to the stigmatised communities. Even after the independence of our country, the situation remains almost in the same place, with students learning nothing except irrationality and societal prejudices and teachers polluting the young minds with their caste hatred and derogatory remarks against the stigmatized communities and their mode of living. The author mentions:

India has just become independent, but schools in the rural areas were as stubborn as they had always been (Satynarayana 83).

The question of untouchability is endemic to every sphere of social and cultural life, and the birth-ascriptive identities of untouchable groups are seen as the 'fatal accident' for Dalits. It continuously nags them and evokes the feeling of being crushed everywhere. But these social groups, slowly but steadily, came to realize the potential role of education in the uplift of Dalit lives and gradually a consciousness grew among them, which drew them towards the realm of education to solve the puzzles and complexities of life, marked by poverty, rampant exploitation and discrimination. The character of Baliah in this autobiography does harbour the same kind of belief that:

Pursuing their education was, he maintained, the only way out of their miser (Satyanarayana 84).

As mentioned above, the introduction of the railway has opened up new avenues of opportunities to Dalits and they utilized this opportunity structure to find out employment possibilities for them, and their hard work and determination met fruition. Officer Franklin has been mentioned several times in this memoir, who played an instrumental role in appointing the family members of the Madiga family into the railway. There has been no divergence of opinions in relation to the importance of education, and how it can play an accelerating role in

the lives of Dalits. The characters like Narsiah, Baliah and Satyanarayana had been able to get jobs in the colonial railway, and other professions due to their emphasis on the enabling role of education; they left no stone unturned to educate the members of their families. The rise in the educational levels not only filled Dalits with a sense of self-confidence, but also enabled them to fight against the caste-based barriers and economic impoverishment. The employments of Dalits in the railway offered a kind of freedom to these groups from the experiential reality of ghettoization of the untouchable communities in the villages; additionally, it ensured the minimum material independence, which is indispensable for maintaining the basic necessities of a dignified life. In this respect, the atmosphere in the railway did help these poor groups in nurturing the dreams of sending their children to schools, and in getting educated, so that they could perform better in future. A concern for a dignified and egalitarian society pervaded the collective concerns of the untouchables, and their employments in the railway seemed to have carried catalytic effects on their intentions to achieve the much-sought goal of emancipation and dignified life. The untouchables started to experience the values of a liberated life, which democratized the public places like the railway colonies. As Baliah said:

Cantonment and railway colonies were 'free zones' for untouchables, where they could aspire better social lives, and earn their livelihoods like caste Hindus. The economic opportunities were similar for both the touchable and the untouchables. Although the caste Hindus might have practised untouchability privately, they could not impose it at the workplace (Satyanarayana 67-68).

The role of education as an enabling factor in achieving the social and economic mobility has been emphasized upon in this memoir, and almost all the characters do express their identical opinions on the importance of education. A scrutiny of the plot structure of the novel would reveal to all of us that how much importance the characters like Baliah, Balraj, Satyanarayana and Abbasayulu attach to the transformative role of education in compensating their unfortunate lots, and giving them a ray of hope. As Jangam said:

And access to public employment, even though at the lowest rungs of the clutches of caste-bound professions and their consequences, such as unpaid labor and a humiliating experience.

The advancement that Dalits have made so far, due to the combined effects of their sheer determination and the introduction of liberal western education and employment opportunities to the untouchables by the colonial power, was really praiseworthy. The gates of education, that remained closed to the untouchables, were opened by the British to Dalits, and this itself was a revolution of sort. The caste hegemony, which degraded and demoralized Dalits for centuries, began to erode, and Dalits started to get some minimal access to education and to the other avenues of community developments. This is a topic, which has been extensively studied and interpreted by the sociologist like Anupama Rao and Shramila Rege, who also showed the benefits Dalits reaped from the liberal principles of

western education. What is striking the most here, is the utmost importance that Dalits like Baliah attribute to the educational development of their children, that they think to be helped them in establishing an egalitarian society based on human dignity and self-respect. The entire history of the anti-caste movements led by the social reformers like Jyotibha Phule and Dr Ambedkar in the 19th and 20th century revolved around the uplift of the untouchable communities through education. Education is a powerful medium, which was often used to transform a society, to destroy the social hierarchies, and to establish equality and human identity among Dalits, who have been excommunicated and pushed to the margin in the Hindu society. The motives of Baliah were clear and straightforward, which aimed at destabilising the existing power structures, and the modes of dominations monopolised by the upper caste, and creating alternative spaces for Dalit articulations and emancipation. It is clear that, Dalits have already become conscious of the significance of education as a means to emancipation, which was vigorously pursued by Dr Ambedkar in the 1st half of the 20th century. Baliah comments:

Our job is to give our children a good education, which will take care of the other things in life. (Satyanarayana 113).

This memoir is not only valuable in terms of the portrayal of a Dalit family and its journey from the ghettos of the outcaste settlements to the positions of high ranking officers, but also reflects the transformations that were taking place in India in the latter half of 19th century with the gradual expansion of the British colonial powers along with the emergence of various anti-caste movements. It is also to be noted that, the colonial power was not a benevolent force, but was not so much prejudiced like the upper castes of India and therefore Dalits bequeathed some of the indirect benefits from the colonial policy. The question of caste inequality and prejudiced inferiorization of Dalits got a serious rebuttal, when Dalits began to educate themselves. The testimony describes the cases of inter-caste marriages between the educated Dalit men and the upper caste Brahmin women, which indicated the gradual collapse of social hierarchies and caste restrictions, and the enabling factor, in this regard, is the education of Dalit subjects. So the breaking down of the social chains only can be possible, when educated Dalits achieve upward mobility in the society through education and position themselves in the higher rungs of intellectual productivity, though it has certain limitations.

Question of self-uplift was the principal concern for Dalits, and they utilized all the available resources and opportunities to uplift themselves from the den of ignorance to the levels of educated citizens. But as usual, they faced the dampening reactions within Dalit in the outset, and the old members of Dalit communities expressed a strong conservatism and suspected their attempts to change the tragic situations. The self-defeating nature could be seen in the enunciations of the elder Dalits, as they mocked the excessive attention that Baliah paid to the extensive reading of books and commented quite sarcastically:

It was sin for untouchables to read and write! (Satyanarayana 64)

This very utterances show the fact that, Dalits have internalised the sense of caste inferiority, and they could not come out of the casteist interpretations of the universe offered by the upper caste people. It proves the fact that, they are not inclined to recognise differences being created between the two segments of the same society in the name of caste identity. As the consequences of these conflicts, these stigmatised social groups were denied access to the major avenues of subsistence, which left a crippling impact on the lives of the said groups. It indicates Dalits' servile attitude to the upper caste, and their utter lack of the understanding of history. This very attitude on the part of the elder members of Dalits establishes the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony by consent'. But Baliah, the father of Satyanarayana appeared to be non-conformist, and opposed such inhuman practices that justified the oppression and subjugation of Dalits by the dominant caste structures in the Hindu society. The untouchables gradually started to realize that, the only alternative they had before them, was to battle against the caste inequalities, and to defeat such caste-based restrictions and discrimination; the motive was to educate themselves, and the more they educate themselves, the more chance they will have to prosper in the unequal Hindu society. The role of education as a transformative force has been recognized, and attempts have been made to spread it down, the generations of Dalit communities. In a sense, the social hierarchies and the shastric restrictions that severely curtail the rights and freedom of Dalits began to lose its grip over the Hindu society because of the gradual expansion of western education among Dalits. Dalits who were earlier pushed to the margin of the Hindu society, began to feel some sort of breathing space and freedom of choice, that they sought for so long. With the expansion of educational level among Dalits and their sequential upgradation in the material reality of the Hindu society, Dalits began to articulate themselves. Here too, one can sense the prophetic visions of Dr Ambedkar, who once commented that Dalit could find salvation only through education, agitation and organization. Dr Ambedkar strongly emphasised on the economic revolution of the Hindu society along with the social and political revolution of the same to annihilate the root cause of untouchability and caste system. And the transformation of a society is only possible through the proper education of its subjects. Dr Ambedkar knew it, and therefore stressed much on the role of education in uplifting the ignorant souls of Dalits and therefore, he opined that nothing is possible without education and education is the only way through which, Dalits can overthrow the mental slavery, which is the source of all evils for a Dalit. His utterances seemed to be correct in the context of the narrative of this testimony, where a Dalit family over the three generations has been able to withstand the adversity that they have been facing under the caste-inflicted Hindu society and created a noticeable sign of upward mobility in the ladder of Hindu society.

Conclusion:

Through this subversive memoir, the author has justifiably come down heavily upon the Hindu caste system for being the prime spoiler in the lot of the marginalised communities, and highlighted the link between the social backwardness of these groups and the historic denial of equality and access to education of the said groups. He has, in course

of the narrative, scrutinised the different aspects of social relations and the centres of power structure, and established the positive relation between access to education, and social mobility and dignified life. He seems to have been carrying an adulatory attitude to the colonial power because they, for the first time, opened up the gates of school and jobs to these stigmatised communities transcending the social barriers. The entire narrative of Dalit emancipation revolves around the western education introduced by the colonial powers, which offered some of the Dalit communities like the Madigas of the south India a string of opportunities to survive, and to independently chart the trajectory of a dignified life. The role of western liberal education launched by the colonial powers, though hesitantly, had a definite role in constructing the collective future of these untouchable communities. The spread of education among Dalits catapulted them to a land of opportunities, from where they could confront and challenge the social hierarchies, and reduce material inequalities pervasive in the caste-ridden Hindu social order. In the end of the narrative, based on the new-found social mobility and economic independence, Dalits could be seen to be entering into matrimonial alliances with the Brahmin families, which signalled the further erosion of the social barriers (read caste), and the bridging of emotional and economic disparities in the upcoming times, though on a smaller scale. This testimonial narrative affirms the role of education as a transformative force and a great equalizer, with the benevolence of the colonial policies being duly acknowledged, as it infused the erstwhile stigmatized (Dalit) communities with a new ray of hope to reverse the centuries old caste oppression and subjugation in the Hindu society. At the outset, the colonial powers seemed to be hesitant in their approach, since they carried certain biases in favour of the upper caste 'native elite.' Yet they eventually bowed to the demands of anti-caste leaders such as Dr Ambedkar, Periyar and Phule, and facilitated the extension of education and recruitment to these dispossessed communities. In the face of anti-caste social movements launched by the anti-caste champions of the historically deprived communities, the colonial powers made modifications in the post- Wood's Dispatch scenario and hesitantly reoriented their policies to the needs of the mass of the country, and started recruiting them in the army, and in the railway, which played a defining role in bringing about some definitive changes in the socio-economic fabric of the caste-laden Hindu society, which provided much leeway for the development of these stigmatized communities. The dream of establishing a casteless, equal society based on human dignity, as envisioned by the Bhakti saints such as Ravidas and Chokhamela, seemed to have got a positive response in the introduction and subsequent extension of western education to these social and educationally backward communities.

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