



Refiguring the Other: A Critique on the Politics of Teaching Literatures of the Marginalised

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Abstract – Introduction of courses on literatures of the marginalised in colleges and universities is a significant step in the democratisation process of the country. These courses facilitate discussion on the socio-political conditions of the marginalised people in the country and enables learners to reflect on their own social position and the role of power in constructing hierarchies in the society. Following the insights of Paulo Freire, the study examines the effectiveness of the courses in developing a critical pedagogy in which a new social consciousness is formed. The study problematises the absence of texts of Ambedkar in the curriculum and argues that the education process has not developed an inclusive system and privileged groups control the decision making in the Universities. The study foregrounds the need of placing Ambedkar thoughts at the centre of a liberating education system.



Keywords – Literature of the marginalised, Dalit literature, critical pedagogy, university education, Dalit consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

The combined political activism of Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and B R Ambedkar (1891-1956) have shaped Dalit liberation movement in Maharashtra and Dalit literature is a literary manifestation of this thinking. The term 'Dalit' was first used by Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar reintroduced the term with new vigour fusing the oppressed state of Dalits with the rebellion against caste norms and values. Though there were literary works from the early 1960s, the publication of *When I Concealed My Caste* (1963) by Baburao Bagul stormed the Marathi literary world and there has been a steady flow of Dalit literary productions ever since. The emergence of the new literature challenged the established literary standards and sought to refigure a new aesthetics which would incorporate the values of the liberation movement. The English translation of *The Poisoned Bread* in 1992 offered a new dimension to the movement as it contributed in consolidating Dalit literary productions in other states of India including Tamil

Nadu and Kerala. The English translations of Dalit writings and their wide acceptance offered a new lease of life to vernacular literary productions which were not able to gain attention from the regional literary world. The presence of postcolonial discourses in the academy helped to recognise these literary productions as part of the democratisation and liberation of the oppressed groups and gradually they became a part of Indian academic programmes. At present, most of the universities in India offer core/optional courses on Dalit literature and they have brought the issues represented in these literary works a serious concern of academic discussions. This paper analyses how universities with their socio-political orientations have framed the curriculum and pedagogy of the courses and how the subjectivity of the learners influences the classroom transactions of the courses. Unlike other courses offered by India academy, these courses require introspection from the members of the academic community as it discusses issues internal Indian society and the political positions is reflected

in the framework of curriculum and pedagogy and the dynamics of classrooms where active participation of non-Dalit students is essential in the effective implementation of the curriculum.

II. THEORETICAL FORMULATIONS

Dalit writers and critics have foregrounded the need of a historical framework to understand the dynamics of Dalit literature. Since Dalit literature is written to bring about social transformation, these texts are to be understood in its historical/sociological context. In his definition of Dalit literature, Limbale underscores the role of Dalit consciousness in conceptualising literature.

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system recognising the human being as its focus. Ambedkar thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. (Limbale, 2004, p-54)

In this context, it is imperative that a theoretical formulation is required to understand the dynamics of Dalit writing. These literatures are written to expose the socio-political conditions of Dalits in India; subjugation, miseries and aspirations of a large group of people who are trapped in the old and new systems of discrimination. These new literatures require the curriculum designers to offer a comprehensive historical context within which they can be appreciated and a critical pedagogy which would consider the social experience of the learners. In addition, these courses needed to cater the aspirations of learners from different social backgrounds towards a democratic future. A review of the syllabus of the undergraduate and postgraduate courses of University of Calicut will illustrate some of the shortcomings in the curriculum and pedagogy of Dalit Literatures in India.

It is unfortunate to see that most of the courses on Dalit Literature do not offer any specific learning objectives and outcome. The syllabus of Dalit Literature of PG programme prepared by the University of Calicut in 2014 places Dalit Literature in the context of post structuralism. In the prose section of the syllabus, essays by Michel Foucault, Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, Raosaheb Kasbe and T M Yesudasan are included. Though the essays accommodate Dalit literature in the backdrop of critical theory in the academy, these texts do not address immediate social realities of the learners. No concerted attempts are

visible to offer the social and historical contexts of the literary productions.

The syllabus Dalit Literature in the undergraduate programme also does not include any specific objective or outcome. It is true that its selection of texts is much more politically sensitive but also does not offer any comprehensive socio, political and cultural context to the study of Dalit literature. Though literary works from various states of India have been incorporated into the syllabus, the everyday issues faced by Dalits in Kerala such as the issues do not come under the prescribed works.

The texts selected for Dalit Studies of postgraduate programme of the university (2017) includes texts by Sharan Kumar Limbale, Pradeepan Pampirikkunnu and Gopal Guru and offer insights on Dalit aesthetics, Dalit responses to the questions of nationality and modernity and the issue of Dalit women voices. These selections are largely drawn out of literary texts and responses to them but do not position the issue of caste at the centre of the syllabus.

In the 2019 revision of the undergraduate syllabus of the University of Calicut, Dalit studies is substituted by the Literatures of the Marginalised in which texts by writers who are marginalised in terms of class, caste, ethnicity and gender are included. This has effectively erased the presence of Dalit Literature from the undergraduate syllabus and the selections of texts present cultural distinctiveness of various social groups without exposing the dynamics of power relations and the construction of centre and marginality in cultural productions.

The syllabi prescribed above have offered various forms of Dalit writings such as prose, poetry, short story, novel and drama from different states of India. These texts discuss various aspects of Dalit life and are expected to prepare learners for a democratic and egalitarian future. Interestingly, studies conducted on students who have taken Dalit literature as part of university education often fail to imbibe the dynamics for socio-political transformation and often find reading them depressing. In a study conducted among the university students in Tamil Nadu, learners often complain that they do not read these texts because they reproduce their social inferiority. A Dalit postgraduate student from Chennai, Tamil Nadu is quoted saying “Reading Dalit literature has two effects. There might be people who change and there might be people who consider themselves superior because they are not Dalits. That thought made me feel that I was inferior.” (Geetha, 2011). In addition, a revamping of the pedagogy of dalit studies is also required. Dalit studies have been inducted to the curriculum of university education and Indian universities still maintain subtle forms of caste and creed as everyday

practices. This makes articulation of Dalit experiences difficult in the classroom and which eventually leads to the reproductions of existing caste relations. In his autoethnographic study on the pedagogy of Dalit studies, the researcher reports that students from Dalit communities do not find classroom interaction safe for them to narrate instances of discrimination.

While discussing the historical, social, economic and cultural aspects of caste, I

requested the students to reflect and analyse in their own way, the issues pertaining to

caste and what role, they thought, educational institutions played in such contexts. In

the introductory classes, I received very few responses. The next few classes, students

approached me personally and narrated incidents of discrimination. I asked for their

consent to anonymize and speak about these experiences to which they readily agreed

and suggested that they prefer this method instead of speaking out in class. (Das, 2023, p-7)

The results of these qualitative researches show that the curriculum and pedagogy of Dalit studies require restructuring as it often reproduces existing power relations and students from Dalit communities find it difficult to articulate discriminations, they are subject to in the universities as the non-Dalit members outrightly reject any possibility of practising caste-based discrimination.

III. CASTE AND AMBEDKAR THOUGHTS IN DALIT LITERATURE

Studies made among students as well as adults have shown that non-Dalits often refuse to admit any form of caste-based discrimination while subtle forms of discrimination do persist. The task of teaching Dalit literature is to create a situation where all participant learners feel safe to share their ideas. Unfortunately, discussion of Dalit experiences often create troubled moments in the classroom as Dalits fear being identified as inferior in the class. There are moments of admitting guilt and powerlessness to the educator as well as learners. In this context, the discussions are to be guided towards a democratic society in which all members enjoy liberty and fraternity. This requires a critical pedagogy which should systematically convince learners that caste is a reality and it is a system of discrimination which denies complete humanity to both the aggressor and the victim.

Dalit studies will serve its purpose only when caste is placed at the centre of Dalit pedagogy. This is to be

achieved by developing critical thoughts which recognise caste as a structure of oppression irrespective of the individuals performing it. In the context of anti-caste thoughts in India, Dr B R Ambedkar and his systematic criticism of caste is the most reliable resource. None of the syllabi discussed so far do not include any segment of Ambedkarite thought in it. It is ironic that while Dalit writers, critics and thinkers have acknowledged the role of Ambedkarite thought in the emergence of Dalit literature, curriculum designers of the university have kept his thought out of the syllabus.

The exclusion of texts by Ambedkar should be seen in the context of his contributions in Dalit articulations. A comprehensive review of modern dalit writings will testify the significance of Ambedkarite thought in evoking all forms of literary productions including autobiographies which were triggered by his ideological and political revolts. In the prefatory note to the path breaking text *Poisoned Bread*, Gail Omvedt observes "...it was Ambedkar's spirit of revolt, his modernism (identified in this speech with the French Revolution) and his rationalism which provided the philosophical context of the new Marathi Dalit literature" (Omvedt, 2014, p-x). In his introduction to the book, Arjun Dangle describes the role of Ambedkar as "Dr Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits" (p-xxiv). A cursory look at any anthology of Dalit writing would provide sufficient testimonies to understand the role of Ambedkar but most of the syllabi do not include his writings into the texts selected for study. This has seriously affected the development of a critical historical context against which most of these texts make meanings and serve its political purposes.

The integration of courses on Dalit writings into the structure of academic studies strengthens democratic processes and they prepare the younger generation to participate in affirmative actions required for the liberation of the oppressed. Universities are spaces of social interactions and the induction of socially relevant courses into the curriculum enables students' communities to empathise with the suffering of the marginalised communities and encourage them to stand for policy making towards a democratic future. At present, courses on Dalit literature/ literature of the marginalised are offered as optional courses and these need to be upgraded as core courses with a comprehensive socio-political framework.

IV. DESIGNING THE CURRICULUM AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Studies conducted among learners of Dalit literature have reported that the selection of texts prescribed

for study often do not address the social realities the participant learner faces in their life. Though the formation of national consciousness is significant, the pedagogy has to address the pressing demand of the learners. In the context of Kerala, Dalit studies often fail to select texts that have effectively problematised the issue of land ownership such as *Puliyathara* by Paul Chirakkilode and the subtle practices of caste discrimination such as “Ghost Speech” by C Ayyappan. Students are often alienated from the texts listed as they estrange them from non-Dalit members and the texts reproduce institutions of discrimination without any historical context.

The restructuring of the syllabus of Dalit Literature as Literature of the Marginalised also has adversely affected the pedagogy of the courses. This course includes works of art from various communities of the globe and provides various forms of marginalisation without providing any tools to reveal the mechanisms of marginality. Such conceptions often showcase marginalised representations as mere curiosities and positions marginalised communities as reproducing their own systems of marginalisation without offering any historical insights into the workings of systems of oppression. Such selections of texts do not strengthen the dialogues for the making of a democratic future. For example, the text “Annamma Teacher Ororomma” is selected to represent the exploitation of a female character by various institutions of power. Instead of revealing those institutions and their ideological underpinnings, the reader shares the male gaze of the narrator and presents the exploitation as an act without the involvement of gender connections. In a similar manner, many of the texts prescribed in the course place the marginalised community themselves as responsible for their own marginality. This effectively helps the dominating groups to conceal themselves and pose the victims responsible for their own exploitation.

V. CONCLUSION

Studies conducted among students of universities have reported that courses on Dalit Literature / Literature of the marginalised help them to understand the oppressed and enable them to play constructive roles in the planning and execution of affirmative actions but most of the syllabi fails to provide a comprehensive perspective to approach the works selected and the ideological priorities of academicians and educators spoil the designing of the curriculum and the execution of pedagogy in the classroom. In addition, the unwillingness of the universities to integrate the course into the core courses also create issues for the classroom transaction. A well-designed curriculum with

critical pedagogy can transform classrooms and lead towards a liberatory politics.

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