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Indian Dalit Literature: Through the Lens of Human Rights

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Received: 8 December 2017 Accepted: 2 January 2018 Published: 15 January 2018

Abstract

In their pioneering paper titled ?Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, The Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights?, Sophia A. McClennen and Joseph R. Slaughter assert, ?perhaps human rights offered a relatively safe framework for humanities scholars to analyze abuses of power and to consider the grievances of the despised and dispossessed? (McClennen, Slaughter, 2009, p.5). In my present explication, I shall make a humble attempt to use the ?safe framework? of human rights in order to uphold how Indian Dalit literature offers a window to look at the ?abuses of power? by the upper caste Hindus. I shall also try to uphold how Indian Dalit literature in general inscribes the life of the Dalits as ?the despised and dispossessed? in the face of caste-ridden Indian society. In other words, I shall concentrate to theorize upon the general tendency of Indian Dalit literature through the lens of Human rights. Indeed, in authentically representing the Indian Dalits as ?the despised and dispossessed? Indian Dalit literature is telling the truth to power and at the same time so doing the Indian Dalit writers are not only building a wall of resistance to the conventional codes of living and writing which upper caste Hindus and canonized writers respectively imposed on the Dalits in Indian society but demanding to have those Six Fundamental Human Rights which the honorable Constitution of India preaches to be realized by every human being in India as well.

Index terms— art/writing, morality, dalit, human rights, fundamental rights, resistance, liberation, empowerment, etc.

Indian Dalit Literature: Through the Lens of Human Rights

Dr. Subrata Sahoo hen the early humans led a life of huntergatherers during the Paleolithic period 1 (c.2.6 million to 14,000 years ago), they had an unworried life, as there was the idea of a community still to develop. They were born free and died free. But since the thought of the community got established during the Iron Age 2 (1200BCE-600BCE) and people started marking their territories, the authoritative human beings with newly invented iron weapons began occupying new places and rendering less powerful humans to serve them. Consequently, people began losing the rights they had with their birth. In other words, some groups of people started dominating over the other groups who began to lose their elementary rights after getting defeated in the race. Human civilization continued to develop till the end of the 1940s without any concern of the violation of the rights of a human being by other, and some people had enjoyed the illegal right to shamelessly exploit other and thereby deprived them of W having the rudimentary rights of life. Hence, there was the abiding need for structuring/framing the laws to secure the rights of the human beings. The United Nations Organization (UNO) laid down a common standard of achievements for all human beings with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on 10 December 1948. It has been a signpost article for setting out for the first time some codes of conduct that are fundamental to ensure human rights.

Since time immemorial, literature has also been playing an imperative role in shaping the society which in turn has been the chief source for the fictional and non-fictional works. Some scriptural texts are found to suggest a set of rules for governing the world, and those governing principles derived from the books have placed a section

of society in a privileged position, displacing the other from the center. And whenever human beings continue to suffer from the loss of the fundamental human rights, a writer's role becomes significant in inscribing those deprived individuals in their sad plight. S/he uses the same vehicle (writing) to authentically express and uphold the deplorable conditions of human beings who toil to live with human dignity. Writing, then, becomes vocal for such writers to render their ideas and thoughts discernible. At this point it would not be digressive if I quote a few lines of Robert G. Ingersoll form his essay, "Art and Morality": "Art is the highest form of expression, and exists for the sake of expression. Through art thoughts become visible. Back of the forms is the desire, the longing, the brooding, creative instinct, the maternity of mind, the passion that gives pose and swell, outline and color" **??**Ingersoll, 1888, p.318). Ingersoll's statement speaks volumes as it upholds the function of art in general. The "maternity of the mind" of an artist (=writer) helps him/her brood over the problems of the society at large and express them at their "highest form" to put forward a plea for correcting them. When we read such literature, we also become empathetic with the writer and ask for securing human rights for the individuals who are being exploited and denied the fundamental rights of life. So, literature has established an age-old bond with society.

Hence, writing did not merely remain as a medium of day to day communication, but gradually evolved itself as a powerful vehicle to carry forward one's emotions-joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains, anger and envies. Writing has always maintained an inseparable relation with human beings by evolving itself as an 'act' in 'man's continual fight against evil,' Sartre writes. Sartre even designates writing as 'weapon' 3 . Truly, Sartre's assertion about writing reminds us of the old proverb that reads 'the pen is mightier than the sword.'

Now, a pertinent question may arise in everyone's mind: what is the necessity of literature to act as 'weapon'? Whereas the leading proponents of the twentieth century Aesthetic movement uphold the notion of art for art's sake, wherein lies the significance of art that preaches morality and why should art preach morality? Indeed, after the United Nations Organization (UNO) laid down a common standard of achievements for all human beings in 1948, the newly independent Indian Govt. set out to form supreme laws. Accordingly, in 1949 the Constituent Assembly of India drafted the Indian Constitution which came into effect on 26 th January1950. The 'Preamble' of the Constitution of India reads as follows:

We, The People Of India, Having Solemnly Resolved To Constitute India Into A [Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic] and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the 2 [unity and integrity of the Nation]; IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty sixth day of November, 1949, do Hereby Adopt, Enact And G Ive To Ourselves This Constitution. **??**Chaturvedi, 2007, p. 1) The 'Preamble' speaks volumes of the-then fact that till 1949, even after the independence of India from the British bondage, Indian Govt. was striving to secure 'Justice', 'Liberty', 'Equality' and 'Fraternity' for its people the irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. And Dalits have been worst victims of injustice, dependence and inequality even decades after the Constitution of India came into effect. Though the Constitution determined six Fundamental Rights for all people, the Dalits are not allowed to have enjoyed those SIX rights they inherit with their birth in India: The afore-mentioned six Fundamental Rights are no doubt six Human Rights which every individual irrespective of his/her caste and class must realize. But the prevailing so-called class distinction of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras in Indian society has placed the Brahmins on the highest step of the casteladder. As such, Brahmins have enjoyed the sociopolitical privileges even only to mythically popularize the notion in their written text that the existing caste system with the Brahmins on the highest rung of the socioreligious ladder and the other on the lowest rung of it is God's creation. It has provided themselves sufficient pretext to marginalize those people belonging to scheduled tribes and deprive them of several basic needs of life. During dependent India, the 'Dalits had no space in society; they also had no formal education. But most significantly, a few writers such as Gopalbaba Valangkar, Kisan Phagoji Bansodet al. around 1920 began to write back in attacking the canonical Hindu texts that had been held responsible for the socioreligious exploitation of the Dalits. Only after independence, it was around 1950 that the first batch of the Dalit youths came to be graduated from the college, who immediately were moved to set up a literary body namely Siddhartha Sahitya Sangha to powerfully use writing as medium for revolution and change. Yes, those who cannot fight with swords may awaken the mass with their pens; hence, Dalit literature primarily aims at securing the human rights for the Dalits.

However, my objective in this paper is not to map out the terrain of the evolution of the Dalit literature. Rather, I attempt to reflect on how the Indian Dalit writers come to utilize writing as a vehicle of asserting their identity as human being. I shall bring into notice how the Dalit literature resists those oppressive conventional codes, determined by the upper caste Hindus for silencing and exploiting the Dalits in the name of religion and God. In other words, I shall concentrate to theorize upon the general tendency of Indian Dalit literature through the lens of Human rights, that in authentically representing the Indian Dalits as "the despised and dispossessed" is telling the truth to power and at the same time so doing the Indian Dalit writers are not only building a wall of resistance to the conventional codes of living and writing which upper caste Hindus and canonized writers respectively imposed on the Dalits in Indian society but demanding to have those Six Fundamental Human Rights which the honorable Constitution of India preaches to be realized by every human being in India as well. Essentially, the Indian Dalit writers use writing as their weapons, in which they not only assert their saltiness but through the assertion of their saltiness they are building a wall of resistance to the oppression and exploitation

the upper caste Hindus hitherto imposed on the Dalits. Indeed, the rise of the securing human rights by the Dalits and the present explication will look into that general motive which has been the driving force behind the development of the Dalit literature in India.

The caste Hindus of Mahad prevent the untouchables from drinking the water of the Chavadar Lake not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. Their reason for preventing the untouchables from drinking it is that they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that caste declared inferior by sacred tradition are infact their equals. ?We are not going to the Chavadar Lake merely to drink its water. We are going to the Lake to assert that we too are human beings like others. It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality. (Ambedkar, 2011, p. 259; emphasis added) Ambedkar's articulation makes us well understand of the far-reaching motive of the movement that though upper caste Hindus never wanted to treat the Dalits as 'their equals,' the movement aimed at achieving their status as equal 'human beings'. And this very motive of the Right to Equality runs like an undercurrent through Dalit literature. Said differently, Dalit literature since inception of its journey is predominantly oriented to have the equal Human Rights which the Dalits have been denied by 'sacred tradition' mentioned in the scriptural text, Manusmriti. Hence, the Dalits burnt Manusmriti at the outset of their protest against untouchability.

In India Dalits have hitherto been designated an inferior position; they are granted the lowest place in Hindu hierarchical social ladder; they are distanced from the mainstream of the so-called purity and cleanliness of the upper caste Hindus, both spatially and culturally. The upper caste Hindus have deprived the Dalits of their 'right to life, liberty, and security of person' 5 . Here it should be remembered what The United Nations Organization (UNO) inscribed to secure human rights. Article 1 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) reads: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood' 6 . And Article 2 records:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty. 7 The fourth fundamental right of the Constitution of India upholds the same notion, as stated earlier in this paper. In spite of all these declarations, Dalits are kept so silenced that they had almost no courage to either speak in their languages or even be assertive of their rights at its worst that a Dalit cannot even identify himself/herself as Dalit. Writers hailing from the upper caste Hindus remained reticent of this loss of human rights of the Dalits. They are, as M.N. Wankhade, a staunch Dalit writer from Maharashtra asserts, 'irresponsible' writers paying no attention to the sad plight of the Dalits in independent India (Wankhade, 2011, p.322). But Wankhade avers that Dalit literature is not the field for those writers. M. N. Wankhade, writes, "The pens of the Dalit writers are ready as levers to lift the people's democracy out of the mud of anarchy. Because in this mud the Dalits, only the Dalits, have been mired, half-dead, for centuries" (Wankhade, 2011, p.328). Indeed, Wankhade has upheld one of the crucial missions of Dalit literature, namely securing human rights of the Dalits by using pens as 'levers.'Wankhade continues:

Dalit literature has mostly derived from the motive of It cannot be denied that Dalit literature in India is a direct product of the Dalit movement of 1927 led by Dr. Ambedkar, who is, Dangle notes,'the enabling factor in Dalit literature because of his ideas, outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just' 4 (Dangle, 2011, p. xxiii). Though the primary aim of the agitation at Mahad was to have the right to draw water from the Chavadar Lake in Mahad, Maharashtra, it had a deepseated objective, as expressed by Ambedkar in his historic speech. Ambedkar articulates:

Writing and people are mutually interdependent, but because of this self-imposed isolation there developed a great gulf between people and writing. The aestheticians and proponents of art for art's sake are responsible for this. The writing that has come forward to forge friendship and harmony between people and literature is Dalit writing. (Wankhade, 2011, p.329; emphasis added) Wankhade's observation regarding the function of Dalit literature is no less significant because he thinks that when for centuries the Dalits have been deprived of their fundamental Human Rights, the only weapon that can help 'lift' them 'out of the mud of anarchy' is their writing. He has also concentrated on the interdependence of writing and people in general, and asserts aptly that Dalit writing is the only form of writing that 'forge[s] friendship and harmony between people and literature.'

The Preamble of the UHDR, 1948 reads:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal inalienable rights of the members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. Whereas it is essential, if man not be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law. 8 Though UHDR speaks about the protection of Human rights by law through the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal, inalienable rights of the members of the human family." The Constitution of India speaks about the Right to Equality and Right to Freedom, the Dalits in India have long been compelled to live in a sub-human status imposed on them. Bama (1958-), a Tamil Dalit writer and feminist also observes that "Dalits are the most economically oppressed, culturally ostracized and politically marginalized people in modern India" **??**Bama, 1999, p.97). The caste-ridden society rendered them so tongue-tied and panicstricken that they dare not claim for their human rights. They are either cold-bloodedly tortured

or cruelly burnt/beaten to death. And here, the only medium that grants them a voice is their literature. It is Dalit writing which gives the Dalits sufficient space to question and reject their sub-human status, imposed on them by the so-called sacred tradition of India. The Dalits writers using writing aim at the Human rights of the Dalit people in particular from their "economically oppressed, culturally ostracized and politically marginalized" status. Bama thus asserts:

The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest. **??**Bama, 1999, p.97) The quoted statement is a persuasive observation of Bama who concentrating on the "primary motive" of Dalit literature speaks about the far-reaching impact of it, "liberation of the oppressed in general."So far as the motive of Dalit literature is concerned, Bama does not even hesitate to equate it with the "liberation literature like black literature, the feminist literature, and the communist-socialist literature" **??**Bama, 1999, p.97). The types of literature quoted here oppose inequality: the blacks oppose the domination of the whites; the women oppose patriarchal domination, and the poor oppose the aristocracy of the rich. The first two are less directed to economic problems than the third which aim at economic inequality while the first two mainly aim at securing fundamental human rights. The Dalits, except a few, have certainly the economic problems. Nevertheless, the literature of the Dalits is less focused on it. Rather, the chief motive of the Dalits is on human rights. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book titled Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature tells Alok Mukherjee, the translator of his book:

But economic issues are not of import to us in isolation. Along with those, we have issues of our self-respect, our fundamental rights, our status. 'We are human beings': This language, this idea, is of even greater importance to us than economic issues. We will talk about money and food later. Before anything else, we are human beings-we will first talk about this. This is because we have not yet been recognized as human beings. (Limbale, 2004, p.140) Limbale thinks that the angle of Marxism cannot solve the economic problems. But securing "our fundamental rights, our status" needs a nonstop struggle, and writing is that domain that can pave the way for the Dalit movement.

Sharan Kumar Limbale has been a colossal figure in Dalit literature. Indeed, when I was the head of the department of the college I have been serving, I invited Prof. Limbale to our college on 31.03.2017. He responded in affirmative and delivered a Special Lecture on "Dalit Literature: Politics and Aesthetics" to grace our post-graduate students. In that lecture, Limbale after concentrating on the politics and aesthetics of Dalit literature also drew on a sociological motive of it. He referred to what he had earlier said to Alok Mukherjee: "The untouchables are fighting, and the writing is raising consciousness about human rights among them. This is the limited context in which we are waging our movement" **??**Limbale, 2004, p.137). Hence, Indian Dalit literature plays a crucial role in rendering the untouchables conscious about human rights. It is the very "form" of Dalit literature that it "inform[s] Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate[s] its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus," asserts Limbale **??**Limbale, 2004, p.19). The story of 'slavery,' 'pain' and 'suffering' is not the story of an individual. But this is the typical story of all the untouchables who have to live without their fundamental human rights for centuries in India. The Dalit literature authentically portrays the Dalit reality of 'slavery,' 'pain' and 'suffering' and has been fighting to "bring about chaos into the hierarchical relationships between the dominant and dominated," Bama thinks **??**Bama, 1999, p 98). But why do the untouchables bring about a "chaos"? The answer is in Limbale's assertion:

It is a fight to build a new society?We have to live with the upper caste; that is why we have to fight with them. If we don't coexist with them, there would be no question of a struggle. The struggle is for building a new inclusive society. We have to build a new social order in which the savarna, as well as the untouchable,will have changed. Both will become new. That is what the struggle is all about. **??**Limbale, 2004, p.145) Indian society is not all-inclusive. Though we are assertive of oneness in varieties in India, the untouchables are excluded by the savarna (=upper caste Hindu)from the mainstream of the society. The socalled touchable people have segregated them from the society: they live in places apart; they should not put on clean garments; they do not have names which are typical of the Dalits; they are not even expected to use good languages. They are, in a nutshell, are not granted the six Fundamental Rights, recorded in the Constitution of India. Hence, it has been the chief aim of the Dalit struggle that is inseparable from the Dalit literature to "build a new social order" in which the Dalits, equally with the upper caste Hindus, will have the status as human beings with the fundamental human rights.

In her essay entitled "Righting Wrongs" which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak originally presented as "Human Rights, Human Wrongs' 'in the Oxford Amnesty Lectures series, Spring 2001", Spivak writes: Thus "Human Rights" is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser ofthese rights. The idea of human rights, in other words, may carry within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism-the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the un fit -and the possibility of an alibi". **??**Spivak, 2004, pp.523-24) Spivak's statement is highly pertinent to our understanding of the Dalit literature. The literature by and about the Dalits upholds the sad plight of the Dalits in an uninhibited manner. In its presentation of the Dalits as "the unfit" individuals facing the "wrongs" imposed on them by the upper caste Hindus, the Dalit literature is not only claiming for "a set of rights" but is aiming for "righting wrongs of the unfit."Hence, the Dalit literature also carries "within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism" where the Dalit writers have been shouldering "the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit." James Dawes in his paper titled "Human Rights in Literary Studies" has highlighted how the art of "storytelling" helps an individual

come to his/her consciousness. He opines, "One of the tenets of literary studies is that storytelling is essential to how we come to be who we are. We make sense of ourselves and our lives, individually and collectively, by telling stories" **??**Dawes, 2009, p.395). This statement of Dawes is highly pertinent to Dalit literature which is the record of the lifestory of the Dalits, be it in the form of poetry, short story, or autobiography. The poets like L. S. Lokade, Anna Bhau Sathe, Damodar More, Arjun Kamble, Pralhad Chendwankar, Baharu Sonawane, et al, short story writers like Bandhumadhav, Waman Hoval, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, et al, the autobiographers such as Om Prakash Valmiki, Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Shantabai Kamble, Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, et al are not mere writing for the sake of art. Rather, their works are but "storytelling" that "make[s] sense of ourselves and our lives." All these Indian Dalit writers and others have concentrated on the primary issues about the "self" that, Dawes argues, "are fundamental to the work of human rights and humanitarianism" **??**Dawes, 2009, p.395).The Dalits through their writing have been speaking the truth to power. The Dalit writers of India affirm their native Indian life and identity in their literature. Limbale argues: "Dalit literature is life-affirming literature. All the strands of this literature are tied to life. It is the clear assumption of the Dalit writer that: 'My literature is my life, and I write for humanity" **??**Limbale, 2004, p.105). No doubt, the Dalit literature is inseparable from the Dalit reality, and the Dalit writers are authentic in their representation of the reality they have been experiencing in the hierarchical structure of the Indian caste system. To represent the Dalit reality is, indeed, a kind of powergame. As Sophia A. McClennen and Joseph R. Slaughter put it in the following words: "Speaking truth to power means staying one step ahead of appropriative power, since truth-speak tended to be absorbed by and converted into power" (McClennen, **??**laughter, 2009, p. 3). The observation of McClennen and Slaughter speaks volumes of the motive of the writers (here Indian Dalit) to resist exploitation and secure fundamental human rights through the vehicle of their writing that presents them as "despised and dispossessed" (McClennen, **??**laughter, 2009, p.5). Through narrating their personal stories in writing, they seem to complain against the misuses of power by the people in authority; in other words, they are, to use the words of Joseph R. Slaughter, "publicizing personal stories" to build resistance to their suffering in caste-ridden Indian society **??**Slaughter, 2012, p. xi). Thus, from the time the human beings learnt the art of communicating in written language, writing started playing its significant role in the change, evolution and development of the society; it has been playing no less an important role in bringing about an affirmative modification in human society; it has emerged out as a powerful medium of resistance to something what has been deconstructive for either the life of an individual or a boatload of people, leading ultimately to a cataclysmic transformation for the betterment of the society at large. Indeed, literature has always left an indelible effect on its readers; it makes us enable to have a look into the "lives of the different," claims Martha C. **??**ussbaum (Nussaubaum, 1998, p.88). Nussbaum also asserts that literature "cultivat [es] our humanity" (Nussaubaum, 1998, p.10). Literature makes us empathetic towards the downtrodden people irrespective of their class, race and gender. The evolution of Dalit writing in India is not an exception in this regard. Indian Dalit writing, especially the writing by an Indian Dalit writer with an uninhibited Dalit consciousness reflecting on the authentic details of the Dalit reality, renders the common people to brood over the conditions of the Dalits in Indian society. Herein lies the "vision" of the Dalit literature, and for this very "vision" Dalit literature is lively, Limbale avers **??**Limbale, 2004, p.133). He opines: "But literature requires vision. And that vision should be such that it makes the common masses forward, and makes them aware of their condition in today's context. Unless this happens, I worry that Dalit literature may become stagnant **??**Limbale, 2004, p.133). Truly, Indian Dalit literature is not "stagnant" because of its "vision" to move the "common masses forward," and to render them "aware of their condition in today's context."Herein lies the significance of the Dalit literature in carrying "within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism" **??**Spivak, 2004, p. 524). And in so doing, Indian Dalit literature becomes a potent vehicle to claim for and uphold the fundamental human rights of the Dalit people in India. The Dalit literature does not only empower the writer himself/herself individually but also creates a separate space for a new canon of Dalit writing and contributes to the socioeconomic liberation for the Dalit community in India at large.

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