

From Untouchables to Dalits

Dr. Yeshwant Madhav Radhakisan

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, S. S. G. M. College, Kopargaon, (M.S) India

Abstract

Untouchables were deprived from social privileges, economic progress and political participation in the traditional village set up. Moreover, the Karma Philosophy diverted them from any kind of rationale. Thus, the untouchables had accepted defeat of their body. Consequently, all their revolts up to 19th century were subsided rather turned radical in religious rituals. Unlike the Brahmins, they had neither political interest nor ideological base of social emancipation in British India. Social reformers came out with different arguments, literature as well as solid actions against dehumanized condition of the untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar paved the way to untouchables to be the proud Dalit in Independent India. The Dalit autobiographies deal with how the untouchables replaced majority's cultural structures with virtuous life, selfless services and spotless sacrifices. The Dalit autobiographies deal with the process of 'Becoming Dalit'. This process is similar to Gilles Deleuze's theory of 'Becoming'.

Key Words :- Untouchables, Ambedkar, Autobiography, Becoming, Deleuze

Traditionally, a village was typically based on *Karu* and *Naru* i.e. *Alutedar* and *balutedar* castes in Maharashtra. (Kathare, 2008, p. 238) In this age old set up, certain castes had social, cultural, economic and political privileges whereas untouchable castes were deprived from all these advantages who were dwelling on east side out of a village. (Aleksander, 1991, p. 23) The untouchable castes- *Chambhar*, *Dhor*, *Mahar*, and *Mang* had to clean the village from every kind of dirt. They had to settle down unclaimed dead bodies/carcasses by the orders of the Headman. Such impure work assured them stale food, shroud in return to their services. Besides, their impurity was indicated through different signs and symbols. They had to wear a black thread around their neck or wrist. The untouchable women had to wear iron or

copper ornaments and saris in typical style. They had to walk on road during afternoon when shadows were at feet. It could save other to be polluted by their shadows. They had to sit down when upper caste persons were crossing them so that their shadows would not pollute the latter. (Khanolkar, 1971, p. 144) They could not spit on the ground so they had to tie earthen spittoons around their neck to spit in, and tight thorny bush around their waists to sweep off their footprints on the road. (Deshmukh, 1973, p. 182) There were unwritten rules to greet, to stand, to walk, to speak and to respect caste hegemony. In short, the untouchables were restricted from social privileges, economic progress and political participation besides projecting them culturally savage. Moreover, the Karma Philosophy diverted them from any kind of rationale. According

to it, one's birth in the present caste is the result of his merit and sin of previous life; so that to be born in the upper caste one has to earn merit by being loyal to the duties of present caste identity. Chokhamela, one of untouchable saints from Varkari sect in 13th century, was fascinated by abstract concepts of equality in metaphysical world. Similarly, Amrutnak, a 15th century Mahar soldier, boosted his caste identity to get reward from the king. The untouchables were unaware about their dehumanized condition. The contemporary scenario is described as follows.

Socio-religious disabilities have dehumanized the untouchables. The untouchables are so socialized as never to complain their own estate...The exact description of the treatment cannot be attempted. The word untouchable is an epitome of their ills and sufferings. Not only has untouchability arrested the growth of their personality but it comes in the way of their material well-being. It has also deprived them of certain civil rights... The principal modes of acquiring wealth are trade, industry or service. The untouchables can engage in none of these because of their untouchability.¹

Thus, the untouchables had accepted defeat of their body and not tried to bring the change either in themselves or outside the world. Consequently, all their revolts up to 19th century were subsided rather turned radical in religious rituals. The East India

¹ Evidence taken before the Reform Committee (Franchise), Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Government of India, 1919), pp. 729-39

Company had scrutinized the untouchables in their infantry due to their loyalty and chivalry. Unlike the Brahmins, they had neither political interest nor ideological base of social emancipation. Social reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Gopalbuva Krishna Walangkar, Kisan Phaguji Bansode, Shivram Janaba Kamble and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar came out with different arguments, literature as well as solid actions against dehumanized condition of the untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar asked for political representation for untouchables in the Round Table Conference in 1932. He defined freedom.

A person has freedom to behave as per its birth right. If it is limited then it should be to the extent to give the space for another person to enjoy its same birth right. Law does not mean the bindings by certain class. The whole subject or its representatives should have the right to decide the function of law. The law whether protective or government should be applicable equally to all; and as the social system has to build on the base of equality. The caste should not come in between personal virtues, not by birth.²

He asked the untouchables to cast off signs and symbols of their caste identities. He not only asked them to shift to cities but to participate in modern technologies. He illustrated religious conversion by his conversion to Buddhism. He invented Dalit literary tradition. Thus he paved the way to

² Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Bahishkrit Bharat. 25th December 1927

untouchables to be the proud Dalit in Independent India. Dr. M.N. Wankhede, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul took effort to establish Dalit literary tradition in Maharashtra. Most of the literary works have been composed in autobiographical tone. The Dalit autobiographies are also remarkable in this sense. The Dalit literature, particularly the Dalit autobiographies deal with the process of 'Becoming Dalit'. In this paper I would like to argue that how the process is similar to Gilles Deleuze's³ theory of 'Becoming' with the example of Dr. Narendra Jadhav's autobiography 'Outcaste: A Memoire'.

'Becoming' is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to lead back to, 'appearing', 'being', 'equaling' or 'producing'. Becoming is not about dominance, but it is about becoming non-dominant. The subject of 'Becoming' is minority first, and then it can become something specific. Gilles Deleuze says 'All becomings are minoritarian'. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996, p. 291) The minority is surviving on the margins in any society i.e. marginality has always a space for minority. When marginalized people question majority (power system), they are framed as minority. Minority is always located at the lowest rank in the cultural hierarchy. It is a kind of 'de-evaluation' of minority. The position of the dominant majority can be gained only when the oppressed minority lowers itself in front of the former. The dominant majority is not transformative but stagnant for security. This fantasy of security fails to adopt changing nature for

the majority. Moreover, it does not accept new and strange connections. On the contrary, 'Becoming' destabilizes minority's conscious awareness and forces it for genuinely creative response. It accepts multi-plateaued model of the rhizome in the process of 'Becoming'. Consequently, the minority changes in nature. It expands its connections to configure terrains of power. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996, p. 8) It does not have conflict between thought and matter. It revolts against social exclusion. It rejects cultural structures of access and power. Subsequently, it relives itself from the previous negative identity of marginality. To frame new identity of power, it immediately applies certain political ideology as like as feminist or anti-racist. Thus, 'Becoming' is something that passes between the primary and the later points- a pure effect. Becoming is unique composition. It is the permanent change in the subject, rather a commitment. It is not half-and-half position which lost significance in the absence of its part. It is something like becoming a coal of a fuel wood. 'Becoming' comes up through the middle of these points. The coal cannot be changed into wood again. Similarly, the untouchables-the marginalized minority have undergone a process of 'Becoming' where they become unique composition-Dalit. This process of 'Becoming' has been reflected in Dalit autobiographies. The autobiographies start with untouchable status of the protagonist's ancestors in a typical village. They deal with protagonist's struggle to abandon his untouchable dogma and how he becomes Dalit. Most of the autobiographies contain trajectory of three

³ Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) was a French philosopher

generations to undergo the process of 'Becoming'.

In his autobiography 'Outcaste: A Memoire', Dr. Narendra Jadhav has described how his ancestors from grandparents Runjaji and Rahibai to himself witness a drastic change from their untouchable status to the identity of Dalit scholar. Besides, the next generation i.e. his daughter Apoorva acknowledges her universal citizenship.

No one reminds me that I am Dalit.
...Now, I think who I am. I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion or caste. (Jadhav, 2003, pp. 262, 263)

Thus, this autobiography deals with the process of 'Becoming'.

Dominant Majority and Marginalized Minority

While projecting his ancestors, particularly his parents Damodhar and Sonubai as untouchables in a village structure, Dr. Jadhav has described their memories about segregating treatment by the society. Little Damodhar- Damu was living with his parents in Ozar village near Nashik. One day Damu was accompanying his father Runjaji, who was on his duty to chop wood for the villagers. On their way back home, Damu was thirsty. He did not understand why his father was not able to get some water from a vat kept in shadow under a tree. Both of them had to wait somebody who poured water in their cupped hands from above. Damu observed his father's reverent greeting style '*Johar Maay-baap*'. He wanted to know Runjaji's behavior in all this affair. Runjaji told him about their caste

identity and untouchability. Similarly, Sonubai also understood it in her very childhood. Sonubai- Sonu was called along with other untouchable girls to serve household chores in a wedding ceremony at some landlord's house. She had to participate compulsory in all household chores like- pesting the floor with cow dung, collecting twigs and dry branches for firewood and grinding wheat on the stone wheel. However, when she went to help some girl of her age to carry platters of sweet and to distribute it among the guests, Herabai the landlady shouted at Sonu. Herabai hurled the plate saying that Sonu had defiled the food. And it was not fit for eating. Thus, Dr. Narendra Jadhav's parents were known to their marginalized minority position in the dominant society. In short, the Dalit autobiography argues about untouchable minority was surviving on village periphery. They were inferior village servants, who had to maintain village hygiene at the cost of inhumanistic treatment.

Minority and Its Revolt:

The marginalized untouchables severely understood their minority status but they could not question power system of the dominant majority. The untouchables had to perform their *yeskar*⁴ duties. It was assigned to the head of the family. The *yeskar* had to hold staff with bell in his hand and put

⁴ The arbitrator in boundary disputes, guardian of village, death messenger. He had to bring fuel to cremation ground, mend the village walls, summon landowners in the *Chavadi* to pay revenue, escort the government treasury, sweep the village roads, serve the government officers, track thieves, remove the unclaimed dead bodies as well as carcasses from village.

blanket on his shoulder. The bell announced his arrival and the blanket was useful to collect leftover foods. The *yeskar* was segregated at public place like *Chavadi* in lower rank from where he had to greet everybody with his head touched his knees and palms joined saying, '*Johar Maay-baap*'. (Kamble, 2009, p. 78) His devaluation at public place indicated how the untouchables were located at the lowest cultural hierarchy. Damodhar was assigned *yeskar* duties at Ozar in 1930s. A pregnant Brahman widow committed suicide in a well outside the village. Damodhar guarded the well for the whole night. On the next day morning when the Fauzdar asked him to bring the dead body out of the well, he denied the same, saying that he could not touch the dead body of a Brahman woman. The Fauzdar tortured him in every possible way. At last Damodhar decided to leave the village in the same night. (Jadhav, 2003, p. 8) The spirit of revolt again reflected through Dr. Narendra Jadhav when he confronted his supervisor in America regarding his racial identification. Thus, minority revolts against dominant majority.

Minority's Dimensions:

After the Mutiny of 1857, the British had banned untouchables' recruitment in the army. It had destabilized their conscious awareness. The untouchables distanced themselves from the dominant majority, and they argued for their Non-Aryan identity. The newspapers like *Somwanshiya Mitra* (1909) argued for untouchables' Kshatriya inheritance⁵ parallel to the theory of son of

soil- *ahiraniche put*. Gopalbuva Walangkar⁶ wrote a petition in 1894 requesting their recruitment in British army and civil administrations. Beside, his *Anarya Dosh Pariharkam Mandal* followed different programmes to abolish their untouchable status. Thus, the Petition, *Mandal*, and the newspapers indicated their genuinely creative response for their minority status. The untouchables wanted to expand their connections to configure terrains of power. Dr. Narendra Jadhav's autobiography confirms such change in his father's life. Damodhar Jadhav abandoned Ozar and came to Mumbai along with his mother Rahibai and sister Najuka. Initially, the family sheltered at Ghatkopar. The notion of untouchability was gone away in commuters' crowd on railway platform. He developed his connections with Gangaram to sell newspaper and again with a British Railway Officer to get some domestic duties at his house. Damodhar used to entertain his daughter, escorted her to school. He helped the Officer in his drunkard state, bet on horse races, entertain his guests, served him in hunting etc. Subsequently, he promoted Damodhar to get work opportunities at Great India Peninsula Railway and the Mumbai Port Trust Railways in Mumbai. Similarly, the minority untouchables were getting jobs in railways, mills, factories. They were butlers, drivers and servants of the British people to multiply their connections. Besides, they explored their creative, artistic, ethical and aesthetic dimensions through Ambedkar Movement.

⁵ The untouchables belonged to Moon Race

⁶ a retired Kokani military man who established *Anarya Dosh Pariharkam Mandal*, writer of *Vitalvidhavasana*

Formation of New Identity:

The untouchables participated in Ambedkar Movement. Dr. Ambedkar exposed their devaluation in religious, political, social and economic discourses. He told them how religious practices like- tulsi beads, songs of Rama and pilgrimage to Pandharpur were useless for their real life problems. They used to gather every year at Jejuri after an arduous journey to celebrate God Khandoba's fair on *Chaitrapornima*⁷. Dr. Ambedkar asked them,

What good has this god ever done to you? Your people have served the villages, the upper caste communities, for ages. You clean all their filth. And what do they do for you? They feed you with their dead animals. Even then this god does not take pity on you. Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return from this god? (Kamble, 2009, p. 64)

The untouchables like Damodhar had participated in Ambedkar Movement and imbibed humanistic attitude in their lives. Once Damodhar was leading a group of workers who were digging a pit on a hard ground. When all of them were exhausted their strength, he served them a treat according their different tastes. He offered liquor to the old men, toddy to the young ones and sweet *jalebis* to the women, so that they could do the work much faster. At

another occasion Damodhar was working with his co-workers between Dombivali and Kalyan. All of them were suddenly caught in heavy rain. In this situation they were served with hot tea and solid food by an unknown woman living nearby. Damodhar addressed the woman as his sister. After a few days he affectionately offered her a beautiful sari. Sonubai, his wife used to sell vegetables and fruits in their locality. Both of them used to offer fresh vegetables to their children's teachers as a token of respect towards them. The family not only abandoned the inhumanistic habits but also inculcated good habits. Damodhar's younger child Chotu (the protagonist) used to bring his tiffin to the office in railway department. He developed a bad habit to steal money of ticket for the snacks. When Damodhar noticed the thing he mended it properly, so that Chotu dared not to speak lie to him ever.

Damodhar and Sonubai had participated in the Kala Ram Temple Entry Campaign at Nashik when they were on their way to Mumbai. The untouchables were denied entry in the temple because the trustee claimed the temple their private property. But it was a public property as it was receiving annual government grant of a thousand rupees. The couple was not interested to enter into the temple as religious obligation, but both of them agreed to the political argument,

We will not die if we aren't allowed into temple, nor are we going to be immortalized by gaining entry. We are fighting for equal rights as human beings, and we are not going to accept anything less. (Jadhav, 2003, p. 128)

⁷The fifteenth day of Chaitra month in Hindu Calendar

In due course of time Damodhar told his wife that they had to go to Nagpur for their conversion to Buddhism. Sonubai knew that being a Hindu wife she had to follow her husband without argument. However, the rational atmosphere in the family was developed to the extent that she could fairly counter her husband. Thus, the untouchables had witnessed such irrevocable change in their lives when they became Dalit.

Conclusion:

Thus, the untouchables rejected majority's cultural structures. They structured their culture of virtuous life, selfless services and spotless sacrifices. They became rational

References:

- Alexander, R. (1991). *Maharlok*. (S. B. Bhikshu, Trans.) Vaishalinagar: Sugat Prakashan.
- Craig, L. (2012). *History and Becoming: Deleuze's Philosophy of Creativity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari. (1996). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (B. Massumi, Trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deshmukh, S. (1973). *Shivkalin va Peshwekalin Stree Jivan*. Pune: Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeet.
- Grosz, E. (2005). *Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming*. Parallax 11.2 4-13.
- Jadhav, D. (2003). *Outcaste: A Memoir*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books India.
- Kamble, B. (2009). *The Prisons We Broke*. (M. Pandit, Trans.) New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited.
- Kathare, D. (2008). *Shivkal va Peshwekalatil Maharancha Etahas (1630 te 1818)*. Vardha: Sudhir Prakashan.
- Khairmode, C. B. (1992). *Asprushancha lashkari Peshha*. Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya va Sanskriti Mandal.
- Khanolkar, G. D. (1971). *Pune Varnan* (2 ed.). (N. V. Joshi, Ed.) Mumbai: Sahitya Sangraha.
- Pelagia, G. (1999). *A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to Do with Deleuze and Guattari* (Vol. 2). Hyptia: Spring.
- Phadake, Y. D. (2000). *Ambedkari Chalwal*. Pune: Sri Vidya Prakashan.
- Zelliot, E. (2010). *From Untouchable to Dalit Essays on Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: MANOHAR.

human beings. Subsequently, it relived them from all the previous negative identities. They framed 'Dalit' as their new identity through different events and signs. Ambedkar Movement was the process of 'Becoming' which brought such irrevocable change in their lives. It was the pure effect when they passed between the primary identity of untouchables to the later identity of Dalit. 'Becoming' comes up through the middle of these points. It is unique composition. It is the permanent change in the untouchables, rather a commitment. It is not half-and-half position which lost significance in the absence of its part.