



REVIEW ARTICLE

DALITS AS HOMINES SACRI: THE POLITICS OF INCLUSIVE EXCLUSION IN SELECT DALIT POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled “Dalits as Homines Sacri: The Politics of Inclusive Exclusion in Select Dalit Poetry” is an attempt to read select Dalit poetical texts from an Agambenian perspective and thereby exploring the political underpinnings of inclusive exclusion suffered by dalits. Homo sacer is a Roman outlaw who is included in the juridical order in the form of exclusion; a figure that questions the nature of law and power. Agamben considers politics as the space where you translate your bare life (zoe) to good life (bios). Dalit poetry can be regarded as a scathing remark on the vicious politics that constitutes their identity through an exclusion of bare life and they are concrete historical evidences of the production of a group of homines sacri which describe the transformation of their human life into “sacred”. Hence, dalits as a group, experience an inclusive exclusion and their poetry offers the key by which the codes of political power unveil their mysteries. By analysing the poetical texts, the paper thus tries to expose the decadence of the political realm that imprisons the dalits in a state of inclusive exclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Dalits are a group of people who were marginalised on various grounds and were denied even the basic rights like education. The idiom “Dalit” represents a political identity rather than just a caste name. The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root dal and means “broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed”. Those previously known as untouchables, depressed Classes and harijans are today increasingly adopting the term “Dalit” as a name for themselves. “Dalit” refers to one’s caste rather than class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have born the stigma of “untouchability” because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. In India, the untouchables were perceived as inferior on the basis of their birth in an ‘avarna’ caste which can be regarded as an intricate web of Karmic laws created to permanently subjugate them to the lower strata of society. Gandhi described untouchables as ‘harijan’. The term ‘harijan’ literally means children of God. Ambedkar rejected this name for being Hindu and for being patronizing and derogatory. Gandhi argued that untouchables are an inseparable part of Hindu society. The only aspect of the Varna order that he opposed was untouchability, which he looked at as ‘inhuman’ and ‘a blot’ on Hinduism. Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi and gave a call for the annihilation of caste. Dalits are indeed a part of the society who have been excluded from

many of their basic rights. A leading figure in Italian philosophy and political theory, Giorgio Agamben argues that there are still phenomena in our present, untouched by many current epistemological forays which demand a serious examination of the past in which they are deeply rooted. In investigating the current relation between human life and state power, Agamben finds many of the answers in the political writings of Aristotle and the legal theory of Rome. In his work *Homo Sacer*, he introduces the figure called homo sacer that questions the nature of law and power. Homo sacer is a Roman outlaw who is included in the juridical order in the form of exclusion. A homo sacer is banned or exiled as he has committed a crime and all his fundamental rights are taken off. Any Roman citizen can kill him but he cannot be sacrificed in a ritual. He is excluded from law, but he has to incur the effect of law. So a homo sacer becomes an ‘enigmatic double’ who is both inside and outside the law. Thus he is in a state of inclusive exclusion. Aristotle says that man is an animal born to life, but existing with regard to the good life which can be achieved through politics. In the introduction of the work *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life”. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: zoē, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. The bare life can be transformed into

good life through political participation. Thus politics becomes the space where one translates the bare life to good life. So we can understand that the state plays a pivotal role in providing its people the ways by which they can achieve a qualified life. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality- Volume I*, discusses the process by which natural life is included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power. "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question" (La Volonté 188). Foucault points out the concrete ways by which power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life. He shows the passage of state from a territorial state to a state of population. Thus there comes into being the exercise of sovereign power over the biological life of man. Therefore, sovereignty determines what and who to be incorporated into the political body and thus politics is turned into bio-politics. Agamben also draws the distinction between voice and language by arguing that man's acquisition of language is a result of letting his voice proper to his bare life been taken away. "There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 8). Homo sacer, who experiences such an inclusive exclusion, offers the key by which both the sacred texts of sovereignty and the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries. In the modern politics where exception becomes the norm, the realm of bare life which is originally situated at the margins of the political order, begins to coincide with the critical realm as its borders begin to be blurred and enter into a zone of indistinction. At once, bare life is thus excluded and captured within. The politicization of bare life constitutes the decisive moment of modernity. The history of Dalits in India can be regarded as the history of the production of hominess sacri. There were protests raised for literacy and they began to produce literature rooted in Dalit sensibility. Poetry became one of the pivotal weapons of their literary warfare. Much of the Dalit poetry can be considered as concrete historical evidences of the production of a group of hominess sacri which describe the transformation of their human life into "sacred".

Dalit poems are not significant for their style, aesthetic beauty, poetic embellishments etc. Even rhyme, meter and rhythm often do not find relevance in Dalit poetry. Dalit poetry exposed the harsh realities the dalits had to suffer as a marginalised community. Though they were the tillers and the real inhabitants of the land, they were denied their birth rights over their land. Dalit poetry also evokes a sense of rebellious spirit among the marginalised sections to retaliate against the oppression that they had to face over the centuries based on caste, colour, economic standards etc. Dalits have been demoralised to an extent that they took a long time to develop resistance to manipulation. Untouchability can be regarded as a condition of existence as well as a violent expression of power. To Dr B. R. Ambedkar, untouchability embodied the principle of 'graded inequality' and to E. V. Ramaswamy Periyar, untouchability was a norm that informed the caste system, at every level of its hierarchical existence. "Whatever its structural correlatives, untouchability is essentially an experience of wounding, of wilful hurt, through which the outcaste body becomes a stranger to itself, and is ever ready to fall off the edge, give into anomie and fragmentation" (Guru 97). This is a kind of cultural marginalisation and the Dalits are pushed away from the mainstream. Though they were a part of

the society, they were excluded from the main stream like hominess sacri. Many poetical texts stand out as ample testimony that proves this fact. The poem "About My Race" by Poikayil Appachan is a plain outcry against the perennial discrimination and acute marginalisation of his race. Even though they are included in the social order, they have not enjoyed the fruits of that inclusion. Their life and history are not even marked in the main stream. Appachan writes:

I see no alphabet about my race
I see histories
Of many races. (1-4)

He also argues that there was no one to write about the history of his race which indicates the problem of illiteracy and ignorance of the dalits who were marginalised from the main stream. Appachan questions the divine judgement and the legal system that side-lined them. For him, his race suffers an inclusive exclusion whereby the dalits were excluded from all the privileges enjoyed by the upper-class people of the society. The politics and the legal system that should have ensured them with their rights performed a vicious role by which the dalit identity has been mutilated over the centuries.

In the poem "Which Language should I Speak" by Arum Kamble, we can clearly distinguish the ways by which the language of the dalits being degraded as merely a voice which is an attribute of man's bare life. The poet presents the powerful figure of his grandfather who takes pride in his own tradition and language. The grandson who follows his grandfather's instructions has to face contempt from the high-class elites. For them, the language of the dalit boy is not something that fits to the social realm. The poet exposes the pathetic condition as:

Picking through the Vedas
His top-knot well-oiled with ghee,
my Brahmin teacher tells me,
'You idiot, use the language correctly!'
Now I ask you,
Which language should I speak? (8-13)

The poem becomes a scathing remark on the problem of linguistic identity. Language is a decisive factor that contributes to community consciousness, group identity and ethnicity. By pushing the language of the dalits to the margins, the high-class society is attempting to exclude even the language of the dalits from the social scenario. The state or those who rule, that has to ensure the survival of the language of the dalit community as part of shaping their life into good life, shuts the door and marginalises them. Politics failed to ascertain the dalits with an identity they had to acquire within the social order.

Meena Gajabhiye's poem "Light Melted in Darkness" is an attack on the power structures that suppress the attempts of the marginalised lot to find some light in the main stream. The poet establishes that his dalit identity melts in an empty space of darkness. The life of his people is nothing but a leafless bough that never blossoms. Even though this race tried to retaliate the structures of power entangled them in python-coils for ages. He weeps at the darkness enshrouded in their life as a part of the oppression by the ruling class. He concludes the poem:

Their venomous hiss
 turns my day into night
 And when I reach out for a sun-ray
 It recedes far away
 Like the end of a dream
 When the eyelid is opened. (12-17)

This poem indicates the pain that the dalits suffered as a part of the oppression by the upper class. The ruling power structure did not offer any token of relief for the downtrodden. The under-privileged sections of the society were yearning for their rights, but there were excluded from the public scenario. In a political set up, they became the unrepresented. Their outcry remained in doom as they were curtailed by those who had to satisfy them. Even the slightest attempt for a ray of hope became a mere dream that would happen in front of an opened eyelid. The tenacious dogmas of the power holding class blocked the dalits from entering into the state of population where they could find their rights and role. The failure of politics to bring about the good lined is well-marked by the poem.

Sunny Kavikkad is a poet who wants to write about dalits as the inheritors of the nation, as the means through which 'the nation can come alive'. His poem "Naked Truths" is an attempt to unveil the hypocrisy of the upper caste truths. In this truth, the dalits are excluded and are only passive acceptors of the hegemonic and hierarchical truths. The poem can be regarded as an invocation towards Gods or some supernatural beings to help in making the truth 'naked'. The dalits are in an exodus not a pilgrimage and the yearning is to include them in the truths of a world where they live in. The poem can be regarded as an ethnographic plea to resist the hegemony of the state that deprives a space for the representation of the dalits. While one section of the society enjoys plenitude, another section is marginalised to the contours of poverty and misery. The poet says that his clan is encountering a God-forsaken situation where there is no privacy and the people are forced to question the judgement of God. The poet asks whether the God is empathetic towards his clan and can feel their pains. He is enraged and asks the black gods who are not found in any legends to:

Rise up and speak the countless naked truths,
 Stop the sun a second time to
 Recast everything. (32-34)

Thus the poem calls for a truth that is devoid of hegemony and upper caste dogma. In a state where the power structures imprison the dalits in an inclusive exclusion, the poet struggles with his pen to find a space for dalit representation even in the basic truths of life. A condition where the dalits are deprived of such a minor right is pain-staking and horrible.

Bapurao Jagtap's poem "This Country is Broken" is an exemplification of the fragmented existence of dalits amidst unfavourable political circumstances. The qualified life that should be ensured through politics is far from their reach and they reveal that their country is broken into pieces. The poet outlines the bare fact that the screams of his people are only an attempt to write the chronicle of a country that is entrenched with a heartless religion. He establishes the fact that his race is denied of all their rights in a political dispensation that excludes them. His outcry to get rid of such a political milieu

that deprives his people their birth rights is evident in the concluding lines:

Let us go to some country, brother,
 Where, while you live, you will have
 A roof above your head
 And where, when you die, there will at least be,
 A cemetery to receive you. (16-20)

The poet even longs to be displaced from his homeland where he has no scope to mark his identity. Even though his group is included in the social set up, they are actually subjugated by a hegemonic status quo that includes them in the form of exclusion. The poem thereby acts as a mouthpiece to critique the detrimental politics that discard the scope of a qualified life for the marginalised sections of the society.

The poems analysed here, are only a few drops out of the ever simmering ocean of the dalit discontent and rebellion. The fuming spirit of revolt arising in the mind of the marginalised is indeed an offshoot of the suppression and humiliation they had to encounter through the ages. Their poetry does not demand an aesthetic appeal, but they stand out as palpating chronicles of generations who were brutalised and humiliated on the grounds of caste and colour. They are actually reduced to their bare life by the hegemonic class structure. Politics did not play a decisive role to elevate their status; it in turn became an oppressive tool that excluded them from the forefront. Even democracy turns out to totalitarianism where the bare life is subjected to deprivation. "Today, now that the great State structures have entered into a process of dissolution and the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule, the time is ripe to place the problem of the originary structure and limits of the form of the State in a new perspective" (Agamben 10). The politics actually constitutes itself by the exclusion of bare life. We can consider the poetic pieces as sample historical documents which mark the history of the production of hominessacri. The things portrayed by the poets are concrete instances which describe the transformation of the dalit life into 'sacred'; hence perishable life. A compulsive change from bios to zoe can never happen within the repressive state mechanism. We can see that the dalits are included in the hierarchical order in the form of exclusion. Even though they are a part of the social order, they are not given any privilege or even the basic rights. They who tilled and owned the land were pushed to the margins and became a group of dispossessed. This exclusion of bare life and the prevention of an entrance into qualified life is an aftermath of the vicious politics that overrides the fundamental rights. Dalits experience an inclusive exclusion and they offer the key by which both the sacred texts of sovereignty and the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries. The history of the dalit life as portrayed by the poets carve out the blatant fact that the dalits were trapped in a sacred life one of indistinction where the zoe and bios constitute each other in including and excluding each other. Dalit poetry thus embodies the spirit to expose the decadence of the political realm that imprisons the dalits in a state of inclusive exclusion.

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