
DALIT DISCOURSE AND THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL STUDIES IN INDIA: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Emphasis on dalit discourse is self-limiting unless the issue of dalit readership and its contribution to the field of Cultural Studies in India are addressed afresh and located in the international debates on the issue. There is a need to extend the genesis and scope of the ideological vision and patterns basic philosophers of dalit discourse like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Dalit discourse has definite interconnections with other contemporary cultural discourse at the global level. The central postulates of Mahtama Phule and Dr Ambedkar are very close to Postmodern notions that read knowledge and culture as integral parts of the power discourse of a specific context or text. It is interesting to see how contemporary knowledge is marked by the increasing relevance and recognition of Interdisciplinary nature and Cultural Studies. The fundamental issues in dalit discourse skirt the areas of philosophy, religion, literature, education, economy and politics. The enormous writings of Mahtama Phule and Dr Ambedkar enter a special, though problematic relationship with Western philosophies of Cultural Studies and Marxism. This paper is an attempt to contextualize Dalit discourse in the present day intellectual climate. Taking broad outlines and specific examples of cultural critiques offered by dalit thinkers, this paper will mainly intends to establish that the ideological direction of Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar pre-dates what the Western metaphysics confronts in the ideas of Derrida, Focault and other Postmodern/feminist thinkers. The argument of the paper, it is hoped, is a major re-reading of the thinkers involved. The breakthrough attempted is in shifting the focus from dalit literature to dalit writings which inhere the birth of a new reader, especially non-Brahmanical outlook on Indian Culture, humanism, universalism and scriptures. Both, Phule and Ambedkar are primarily liberated readers of Indian culture, and hence unavoidably get linked with the unsettling objectives of Postmodernist framework of analysis in a limited way, though.

Keywords: Culture, Caste, Language, Power, and Postmodernism

Introduction: Dalit discourse is a major turn in Indian thought, especially the arena of 'culture' as a space of contestation in the evolution of Indian culture. This shift in Indian cultural discourse can be located in the ideological moorings of spiritual - social discourse reflected in the poetic manifestation of Kabir Das, Rai Das or the radical epistemology offered and practiced in Buddhist philosophy and way of life. Dalit discourse is distinct in its urges, commitments, anxieties and advances. It is primarily a voice of protest against a cultural system of exclusion and oppression. Its major source in terms of ideological origins goes back to the world-views of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Bhim Rao Ambedkar. But the mainstream emphasis in dalit literature and discourse is on social justice, inclusion and human dignity. These aspirations are legitimate basis for a real and emancipated space for all the marginalized and oppressed sections in any society. Within literary traditions, the main argument of locating dalit literature is that it is an extension of the progressive-realist trend in style and content. It means dalit literature is taken like literature of women merely as a radical extension of the literary realism. This paper is an attempt to view the ideological depth of dalit discourse with a focus on its ontological struggles and advances. Here it is also argued that the main

achievement of dalit discourse is to see Indian culture, its practiced system of *varna*, its celebrated tenets of Brhamism as travelling through myths, legends and constantly renewed life-styles as 'constructions' - as of human making, of making with definite stakes in pragmatics of social and economic power, and with a highly spitualized industry of 'knowledge construction'. Both, Mahtama Phule and Bhim Rao Ambedkar confront this closed space of politics of knowledge and draft a counter discourse. This pre-dates Postmodernism that in West purports to unsettle the oppressive presence of 'logocentrism' and 'phallocentrism'. Postmodernism is at least twin urged - an aspiration to historicize beyond 'modernism' and to do so with a definite radical challenging of the epistemological foundations. Dalit discourse is for gaining access to 'Post-Brahminsism' culture within and outside dalit experience. *Satysodhak Samaj* of Jyotiba Phule in contemporary context provides a sort of metaphorical depth and aptly links with the central ethos of *Archeology of Knowledge* by Focault. In order to contextualize Dalit discourse in the present day intellectual climate, it is necessary to discuss the ideological direction of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. And before that it seems relevant to have a look at the revolutionary pitch of dalit discourse that Kancha

Ilaiah builds. Following random quotes of Ilaiah are revealing : “Hinduism has destroyed all positive elements that normally exist in a human being. During the post-colonial period their energies were diverted to manipulate education, employment, production and development subtly. Their minds are poisoned with the notion that productive work is mean and that productive castes are inferior. No ruling class in the world is as dehumanized as the Indian brahminical castes. They can be re-humanized only by pushing them into productive work and by completely diverting their attention from the temple, the office, power-seeking, and so on ”. The dalit thinker says further :

Yes, I hate Hinduism. Hinduism is not ours, it is against us. If we have to become Hindus, the Brahmins will have to change the entire religious texts, our food habits, our gods and goddesses and images. I am angry at the Hindu gods. Look at the images of Hindu gods. They wield weapons. We read that Hindu gods killed our own ancestors. How can I worship the killers as divine? What kind of a religion is it? There are three major religions — Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. These major religions were constructed by prophets who sacrificed and struggled in life for people’s liberation. All these three religions never said that the larger sections of their people were born from the feet of God.Just as the Brahmins are shouting Hinduise India, we should shout Dalitise India. Shout that we hate Hinduism, we hate Brahmanism. Capture the Hindu temples by expelling the Brahmins from them. ... The hated must hate. They must become powerful and organized. I want to create anger. (<http://yquotes.com/quotes/kancha-ilaiah/> dated November 29, 2013)

It is interesting to refresh certain links between dalit discourse and contemporary trend of Postmodernism in Western thought. In Post-modern discourse, language, text, consciousness and power are entrenched. Without an adequate engagement with these trends, it is difficult to have a proper understanding of the changing notions of language, literature and the meaning of authorial presence or existence in a work of art. It is troublesome in many ways. The most problematized spot in this discourse is language and its historicity. Its inherent ability and quality to represent the ‘real’ or the extra-textual substance is under rigorous questioning. It is towards this shift that Ronald Barthes in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ makes a point, ‘ a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the

space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origins but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal : the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth : the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’ (232). The author as a subject is no more as the controlling agent of meaning or text or even the language he uses. The existence of author is permanently erased not merely ‘displaced’ in comparison to the reader. The reader who has become the new ‘centre’ is also nothing more than a prisoner in the system of ‘signs’. This change is basically radical and sweeping. Its consequences in literary studies have to be anticipated, understood and analyzed not as hurried conclusions on simplistic terms. Rather the inbuilt dangers and potential gains, if any, have to be looked into. The pressure of recognizing break from past is immense. Reinforcing the ideological pattern of Barthes, Jacques Derrida in his essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ argues on similar lines, ‘This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse - provided we can agree on this word - that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences’(151-152). Derrida and Barthes are primarily distancing themselves from the ‘transcendental signified’ in Western metaphysics. This is projected as a breakthrough in human thought. But the main problem with this ideological position is that it amounts to a fundamental repudiation of all ‘other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins’ (Barthes : 230).

Dalit discourse views Indian scriptures fundamentally generated by power politics in Indian culture. But this view on language, subjectivity and discourse or processes of knowledge has another side also. The overall emphasis as this discussion explains is simple : neither the author nor the human subject behind all forms of discourse is a product of some neutral signs, rather his/her making is entrenched in linguistic and cultural ‘signs’ that derive from the inexhaustible process of signification. It is at this juncture that Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar’s views on the ideological make-up of Indian society – ruling classes and depressed classes gain a special significance, “ What the Depressed Classes want is a religion, which will give them equality of social status. To prevent

any misunderstanding, I would like to elaborate the point by drawing a distinction between social evils which are the results of secular causes and social evils which are founded upon the doctrine of religion. Social evils can have no justification whatsoever in a civilized society. But nothing can be more odious and vile than that admitted social evils should be sought to be justified on the ground of religion. The Depressed Classes may not be able to overthrow inequities to which they are being subjected. But they have made up their mind not to tolerate a religion that will lend its support to the continuance of these inequities” (*Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* : 111).

Ambedkar continues his argument, following two excerpts from his writings are significant, “It is propounded by Western writers on Politics that all that is necessary for the realization of self-government is the existence among a people what Grote called constitutional morality. By constitutional morality is meant (Grote, history of Greece, Vol. 111, p.347) habits of ‘paramount reverence for the form of the constitution, enforcing obedience to the authorities acting under and within those forms, yet combined with the habit of open speech, of action subject only to definite legal control, and unrestrained censure of those very authorities as to all their public acts – combined, too, with a perfect confidence in the bosom of every citizen, admits the bitterness of party contest, that the forms of constitution will be not less sacred in the eyes of his opponents than in his own’. If in a populace these habits are present, then according to Western writers on Politics, self-government can be a reality and nothing further need be considered. Similarly, Western writers on democracy believe that what is necessary for the realization of the ideal of democracy, namely government by the people, of the people, and for the people, is the establishment of universal adult suffrage. Other means have been suggested such as recall, plebiscite and short parliaments and in some countries they have been brought into operation. But in a majority of countries nothing more than adult suffrage is deemed to be necessary” (*Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* : 202-203). The main thesis of Ambedkar is that the Western mode of thinking about Indian culture has inherent flaws and shortcomings which are equally shared by the mainstream culture of India, ancient as well as contemporary. With a sharp philosophical focus and force, the great dalit thinker opines :

These views of Western writers on politics regarding democracy and self-government are erroneous for very many reasons. In the first place, they omit to take into account the inconvertible fact that in every

country there is a governing class grown up by force of historical circumstances, which is destined to rule, which does rule and to whom adult suffrage and constitutional morality are no bar against reaching places of power and authority and to whom the servile classes, by reason of the fact that they regard the members of the governing classes as their natural leaders, volunteer to elect as rulers. Secondly, they fail to realize that the existence of a governing class retains its power to govern, it is wrong to say that democracy and self-government exist unless democracy and self-government are regarded as mere matters of form. Thirdly, they do not seem to be aware that self-government and democracy become real not when a constitution based on adult suffrage comes into existence but when the governing class loses its power to capture the power to govern. Fourthly, they seem to overlook the fact that while in some countries the servile classes may succeed in ousting the governing class from seat of authority with nothing more than adult suffrage, in other countries the governing class may be so well entrenched that the servile classes will need other safeguards besides adult suffrage to achieve the same end. Lastly, they seem to pay no heed to the fact that given the existence of the Governing class what matters most in the consideration of any scheme of democracy and self-government is the social outlook and social philosophy of the governing class, for so long as the governing class retains its means to capture power to govern, the freedom and well-being of the servile classes must depend upon the social outlook, the social conscience of the governing class and its philosophy of life. (*Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*: 203-204)

What Ambedkar means by ‘social outlook’ and ‘social conscience’ is actually the constructed reality of human consciousness. His writings have exposed the whole cultural foundation of *varna* system. He subverts Brahminical culture not as a cynical protest but through a deep philosophical examination of the interplay of language, knowledge, myths, power, state, economics and all the possible institutions at its service. From this perspective, Postmodernism as a method of enquiry carries substantial linkages with the method of analysis adopted by Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Michel Foucault is another major thinker who broadly falls in the category of Derrida and Roland Barthes. He extends this debate in a novel way. In the introduction of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault says :

To be brief, then, let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in

silence something other than what they actually say; in our time history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities. There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through a restitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (7)

Besides the Postmodern ideas on the questions of language, here a new perspective of new history is proposed. The subjectivity produced through such a historical discourse would seek a space for itself within the existing structures. This new attitude can be well understood in the way Lyotard tries to resolve the inter-connection of 'signs', desire and the libidinal: "There is the farce that words play with us, that intensities play with us and that our passion itself will play with us from one end to the other of this book: this fit of passion, reader, Unkind one, will reach you at *second hand*, reported, this sheet on which I write and which is in one moment, in bewilderment and impatience, a woman's skin caressed or the sheet of water in which I lovingly swim, this sheet, you receive it printed, the same thing repeated, reduplicated, you receive a recording sheet. Words burning the point of pen, whipped like an inert herd by this point, making them run and trapping the most noble, the fastest, the strongest amongst them, in flight, you receive them as lexicologist. (*Libidinal Economy* (1974 : 2005, 17)

The oppositional energy of such a subjectivity necessarily does not subside with an illusion of linguistic resistance against total incorporation and homogenization. The posture of active intervention or struggle in real terms also emerges as an authentic

possibility. This opens scope for several forms of innovations, change, dissent and revolt.

There is, in fact, a need to retain a skeptic attitude towards what post-structuralism and postmodernism claim about language. Literature derives its vibrancy primarily from the notion what Walter J. Ong., S. J. have to say in 'From Mimesis to Irony : The Distancing of Irony' - that no 'word or group of words has meaning apart from its insertion into existential, historical, lived context' (*The Horizon of Literature* : 39). So, despite all, it affirms the 'worldliness' of discourse. Dalit discourse and literature is essentially a product of the historical conditions of the times. Edward Said in his essay 'The Text, the World, the Critic' observes that 'as texts they place themselves - that is, one of their functions as texts is to place themselves -and they are themselves by acting in the world' (*The Horizon of Literature* : 139). Walter J. Ong., S. J. again make a most candid statement, "A fortiori, nothing in literature means anything apart from our lived lives and the good and evil in real life' (*The Horizon of Literature*, 1982 : 39). The vast canvas of dalit discourse and literature is a declaration of Post-Hinduism in the sense of epistemological break from the popular and philosophical discourse of mainstream Brahmanical-Hindu culture. The writings BR Ambedkar are unmistakably sharp, pointed and ideologically effective in exposing the ancient industry of cultural construction in India. His rational commitment to Buddhism had this very cognitive purpose - of deflating the human consciousness entrenched in differentiation, inequality and superstitious self-esteem of human subjectivity. Dalit biographies witness the rise of this liberated subjectivity always at task of deconstructing and reconstructing 'history' and one's own historical experience including the whole arena of Cultural Studies in India. Even, it makes remarkable departures from the classical Marxian - liberal encounters with Indian culture and literary studies

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