
ARAVIND MALAGATTI'S GOVERNMENT BRAHMANA: A SEARCH FOR SELF

MADHULIKA NIRMAL

Abstract: Aravind Malagatti's *The Government Brahmana* (1994) is the first Dalit autobiography in Kannada. This text has been translated by Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich and N. Subramanya. The text portrays the collective consciousness of being a Dalit and the individual identity crisis. The autobiography, therefore, traces the individual identity among the collective community. The text is not a lamentation. This text scrutinizes the search for 'self' by an individual, which reflects the plight of the whole Dalit community's search for identity. Also, more than an autobiography, the text is a collective memoir of episodes which shapes the psyche and being of a Dalit individual. Undoubtedly, the autobiography outlines the lives of disparity, pain, marginality, rejection and oppression in the most acerbic manner. Every single chapter is written in an experiential way so as to allow the readers to clearly peep into the miseries of being a Dalit in India.

The paper will further discuss how power of violence and humiliation operates in the Indian society. Since caste is a systematic oppression of the Dalits, several psychological and social processes collectively work together to make this oppression sustainable. *Government Brahmana* is a narrative of self search and realisation of victimisation. Thus, autobiography of a Dalit is a narrative of personal as well as social lives. The Dalit writers follow a common pattern in their writings. There is rejection of certain traditions and customs, revolt against the common untouchability practices, and the strengthening of individual self through education and rationality. Sharamkumar Limbale considers Dalit writers as 'activists' who promote social, political and economical awareness among the untouchables and encourage them to stand for their rights.

Keywords: Autobiography, Dalit, Humiliation, Identity, Self, Temple entry movement.

Introduction: Caste issue in India is a debatable topic even after many decades of independence. We witness a very visible categorization when such debates come up in the public sphere for discussion. Scholars defending the system always argue that the system in its original form was not hereditary, but based on psychological foundations, the division of the society on the basis of occupational groups, 'Varnashramadharma', was in fact an exercise towards the recognition of the innate psychological inclinations of men. Many believed that such a system was just and the social immobility of the lower groups was acceptable because of the already prevailing rules. But, all writings on caste inequality failed to create any significant impact until the movement against the system emerged from the oppressed themselves.

Therefore, in the late 1960s and 70s, Dalit writings by the Dalit writers started making its mark in the world of literature in the form of poems, stories and articles. Their writings were smeared with retaliations, accounts of the atrocities inflicted by the caste Hindus and prejudiced Brahmanical Hinduism. The Dalits, who acquired education, began targeting the caste system and its hypocrisies through their

writings; the very tool that was denied to them by the four fold caste system. Soon Dalit writers started calling Dalit literature as "Hindu literature" as the literature stood against the hegemonic structure of the Brahmanic Hinduism. As Baburao Bagul says, "the established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. 'Dalit' is the name of total revolution; it is revolution incarnate." (Dangle 294). Thus Dalit writers believed in humanitarian freedom; recognition based on a person's worth and labor, rather than on the caste belonging.

Dalit literature is an attempt against humiliation and suppression suffered by the so called untouchables under the *Varna* system. The Dalit sensibility may seem rebellious since it seeks to bring about acceptable changes in the social consciousness, but such a sensibility can undeniably be noted as revolutionary and fundamentally optimistic. The Dalit sensibility is thus a deep study of the oppressive social reality and a desirable transformation. Dalit literature aims to promote social awareness. The Dalits are now aware of their being and are equipped to challenge the hegemony of upper castes and

classes. This is thus reflected in the recent emergence of Dalit Literature. We must learn that “the maintenance of a given symbolic order is always as problematic as it’s change” (Scott 23). Further, caste is a set of ideologies incorporated since centuries; it is unsaid that the purpose of such ideologies is to control and not just to convince. Such ideologies are aimed to control by convincing the weak that the oppression is the part of the centuries old social setup - something to be mutely followed, preserved and respected. Aravind Malagatti belongs to the Maali community, which according to the social hierarchical system, is a lower caste. *Government Brahmana* (1994) depicts how the people of the lower caste are addressed by the upper caste Hindus: they sharply address them by their caste names as ‘Maali’ or ‘Chuhra’. Such actions demean the fellow human beings and the so called upper caste men exhibit a degree of power while doing so. Malagatti at various points picks up such atrociously humiliating encounters where he is tortured and reminded of his lowly birth. In the first chapter “Coins on the Corpse and the Wedding Feast”, Malagatti describes how upper caste people throw lower denomination coins on the corpse, which are later collected by the Dalits, when somebody dies in their house. This is done as an act of redemption. Later, the narrator explains how such deaths are celebrated by his community as it gives them an opportunity to collect few paise. The very basic of humanity is questioned here. What kind of society are we living in where the death of one human being is celebrated because it gives other fellow human being a menial monetary help. The social division has made man into barbaric uncivilized scavengers. It’s the characteristic of animals like vultures and hyenas to hope for the world to die, so that they can feast over the dead bodies. It is problematic to see that the division of human beings on the basis of caste, class and sex, will soon result in a society where death will be hoped for and the very definition of ‘humanity’(1) will lose its meaning.

Schools are supposed to be the enlightening bodies and the teachers to be mediums through which the enlightening happens. But for Malagatti, his school was a living nightmare. In the third chapter “Tomorrows turn for sweeping: Mala Katti”, the writer describes how he and three other Dalit students were beaten up on and off by their school teacher for not sweeping the classrooms. The name of

the Dalit student whose turn was next to sweep the school was written on the blackboard in advance. The upper caste boys used to distort the names and that’s how Malagatti became ‘Mala Katti’ where ‘Katti’ means donkey or an ass. Additionally, these Dalit boys were made to sit on the floor, away from rest of the students. Such treatments are common through most of the other Dalit autobiographies as well. In Omprakash Valmiki’s experiences in *Joothan* with the society, which essentially include the school teachers, fellow students, colleagues and friends from Dehradun as well, convinced him that no matter how educated an untouchable may become, he would still remain a bhangi or a chamar. Valmiki’s primary education began quivering when he himself was subjected to the monstrosities of the school teachers and fellow students. The upper caste Tyagi teachers used to abuse, thrash and torture the Dalit students without any reason. Such students were not allowed to participate in the extracurricular activities and were instructed to broom and sweep the school. People from their past memory recalled that sitting mats and carpets were not for Dalit students. During the rainy season, the chamar or bhangi students were not allowed to share the shelter with the upper caste students. Thus they had to tolerate both, the physical as well as the mental tortures.

Throughout the autobiography, there were two very disturbing episodes which will definitely make the readers churn from within. First, Malagatti’s participation in his family occupation. The caste norms constitute what is called the Varna system. The term ‘Varna’ in Indian *Dharmashastras* means social class, hence this system was meant to frame a class division in Indian society. This system has a Divine sanction in India and it is generally believed that one is born in a particular Varna due to Divine will. Within this system, it is believed that each individual takes birth with peculiar leanings, temperament and abilities according to his past life actions or *karmas*. And the future birth is determined by the dedication that one shows in performing the duties attached to his own Varna. Therefore according to Hinduism, it becomes very important to follow the Varna system with sincerity.

The *Dharmashastras* have defined in detail the duties and responsibilities of different Varnas. For instance, according to the *Manusmriti*, the basic social ideal is the division of society into four sections, viz: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Their

origin too is said to be of divine nature. The Brahmins are said to be born out of the mouth of Brahma (supreme God in Hinduism), Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs, whereas Shudras are said to have originated from the feet of the Lord Brahma. The *Manusmriti* defines the basic duties each Varna has to perform in order to gain a livelihood. Thus, the Brahman occupies the highest position and the Shudras are assigned the lowest position as they are meant to perform the lowly tasks for the upper three orders. In 'The Dead Sheep and the Meat heaps', Malagatti explains how he assisted his family to de-skin the sheep and to sell the organs of the dead animal. With the utmost rawness of the language, the narrator explains the entire process of cleaning the insides of the sheep by pouring water from one opening and scrapping everything out that came in between. He says:

To pour water into those narrow intestines, to scrape with our fingers till the shit came out...Yuck! It is disgusting to even think of it now... When the shit was scraped out from one part of the intestine, it got collected in another, thus swelling up that part...The stretch of intestine near the sheep's arse-hole was a bit widen (It was called pemgalu or big intestine.) In order to remove its contents sometimes we pulled it with both hands, filling it with a mouthful of water, making a prr...prrr... sound. This was yet another way we squeezed the shit out of the intestines. (Government Brahmana 32-33).

The discussed episode compels us debate over the sanctioned *Varnashramadharm*. The understanding and practice of physical untouchability arises from the socially assigned occupations. Dalit is a caste rather than a class label; it applies to the members of those menial castes which have been borne the stigma of untouchability because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. Even in *Government Brahmana*, Malagatti's occupation of removing the shit and dirt from the animals' intestines made him physically repulsive for the society. Ironically, upper caste believes in this occupational disintegration of the society by simply stating that the division of labor is important for the smooth functioning of the society. But, this division of labor has not resulted in the division of laborers as well. The poor lowly borne are no longer seen as fellow humans but majorly as servants, who are impure and polluting. As justly noted, 'while varying from region to region, the

prejudice against the castes stigmatized as untouchables has remained so strong that there will be Dalits as long as the caste system and caste hierarchy remains.' (Bhatt 123).

Second episode from the autobiography is the act to enter the temple. Temples have always been institutes where the norms of purity and pollution function without any questions. Some of the abhorring practices include the banning of menstruating women from entering the temple premises and banishment of the Dalits from the temple. The presence of both is said to have defiling properties and interestingly, the God himself is vulnerable to such happenings. Malagatti once drew a painting of Lord Raghavendra, a popular South Indian saint, standing before Brindavan. Malagatti gifted the painting to the temple in order to be placed with the rest of the Gods and Goddesses. Since the temple priest was his friend's father, Malagatti was allowed to submit the painting to the temple. His happiness knew no bounds when a Dalit painter's painting stood amidst the elite caste participants. Malagatti was made to believe that caste doesn't operate in the temple. But the dreams are meant to be shattered. Just the very next day, the Dalit boy's painting went missing and every time he enquired about it, the temple authorities said, "It's been kept inside because the nail came loose and the picture fell down" (*Government Brahmana* 62). Thus, the painting never got back and Malagatti's belief in Lord Raghuvendra diminished. In another episode, Malagatti, along with his Brahman and non-Brahman friends went to 'Mantralaya' for the Prasad and stood in the queue meant for non-Dalits. The absence of the holy thread, 'Jeneyu', and white clothes made their appearance as non-Brahmans evident. The guard at the entrance hall enquired about their 'gotra' and humiliated Malagatti for being Dalit. Such incidents dent the daily lives of poor Dalits and further push them towards physical, mental and social margins.

One of the main arguments that founder the issues relating to caste is Power; the power to oppress or the lack of power to retaliate. Power can operate through various channels in the society: gender and caste and class. The poor are rarely in a position to imprint their views on the rich, while the rich have a social power to usually impose their vision of seemingly behavior on the poor (Scott 24). Foucault emphasizes that power is not discipline, rather discipline is

simply one way in which power can be exercised. He also uses the term 'disciplinary society' by differentiating it from 'disciplined society'.

Further, the power of violence becomes a very eminent part of Dalit personal narratives: the physical violence of a master, the brute force of thugs beating up Dalits on behalf of powerful men with political ambitions, or the violence encountered in police stations. It is interesting how the Dalits internalize the silent violence of the system of oppression and themselves testifies such a practice. We witness the violence of hunger and sickness which disables a Dalit to once think beyond starving and to lead a life without sickness, pus and fever. For example, for Malagatti's father, freedom meant drawing water from the well or to use all the amenities which are available to other human beings. As aptly noted:

This is the violence of words or of gestures, expressed in all possible shades of contempt, when upper caste landlords, government officers or simple peasants talk to Dalits, or talk about them; the violence of bondage, debt, economic dependence; the violence of fate of uncertainty; the violence of sex [...] Finally, it is the subdued, general, and permanent violence that sustains the daily practice of Untouchability; the

violence of tradition which gives no consideration to "Pariahs." (Telling Lives 267)

The systematic oppression that occurs in the name of caste and further be discussed through another powerful tool called Humiliation. Humiliation involves violating an individual's self-respect and demeaning or belittling her in her own and/or others' eyes. Organized or institutionalized humiliation exists when social institutions and practices embody disrespect for, and systematically violate the self-respect of groups of individuals.

Conclusion: In *Government Brahmana*, we noticed a concurrence that it does speak majorly about the society and the condition of the Dalits. Therefore, the personal experiences now become the social experiences of the entire community. "Though there may be internal differences among the different castes of Dalits, the notion of honor, shame and shared memories of marginalization are expressed in this literature foremost." (*Dalits and Religion* 106). These Dalit autobiographies can be seen as social documents as they represent the lives of just not one individual, but of the entire society which is oppressed by the powerful. These accounts give voices to the voiceless and thus empower the communities in its own way.

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17. According to OED, 'humanity' means to show or have compassion and benevolence.

Madhulika Nirmal/ English and Foreign Languages University/ Hyderabad.