

THE SUBALTERN EXPRESSIONS IN DALIT LITERATURE: A STUDY OF ARJUN DANGLE'S *POISONED BREAD*

-Poorwa R. Naik

Introduction

'Subaltern' is a term that encompasses in itself the tragedy of the past, present and future of the human world. It is the very inevitable facet of every human relationship that populations world over have been witnessing and none may have been an exception to creating a 'subaltern' or becoming one within their own societies. As a concept, scholars may have popularised it in the post-colonial studies, but as a 'lived-reality' it has been a taken-for-granted part of life by innumerable 'subaltern' communities across the world. It is a complex term but for simplicity sake if we take recourse in *A Handbook of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams to define the term 'subaltern', it would be "a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse; "subaltern" is a British word for someone of inferior military rank, and combines the Latin terms for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter)" (Abrams, 238).

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist intellectual, coined the term 'subaltern' to refer to the populations that were treated as the "other", the "alter" which would not be allowed to occupy a place of power in a cultural hegemony. His leanings towards Marxism may have led to a debate that he meant to employ this term purely to the proletariat (i.e. the working class) and not to the 'culturally marginalised' in general; however it cannot be denied that the power-relations that are born out of the economic order of any state go a long way in determining who would eventually define the centre-margin paradigm in that society. It is certainly the economically and intellectually empowered class that becomes the centre and frames the socio-cultural framework in such a manner that it would conveniently leave out the ones that do not fit into its criteria of being 'cultured' and 'civilised'. Though the Eurocentric concept of 'subaltern'

came to be directly applied to the study of non-European populations, its application will vary for each of them as one will have to take into account the changes that the socio-cultural framework of each of them has undergone from the pre-colonial era to the post-colonial era.

This paper is an attempt to take a close look at the oppressive socio-cultural framework that has gripped the Indian society since time immemorial in the form of the caste system. In the Indian context, the word “subaltern” hasn’t merely denoted the coloniser-colonised dichotomy but an indigenous phenomenon of oppression that was faced by a section of Indian populace formally classified as the ‘Dalits’ at the hands of the so-called upper caste Indians. In this paper, the concept of ‘subaltern’ will be deconstructed by analysing the anthology *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle which is a repository of the ‘Marathi Dalit experience’. Dalits were meted out with inhuman treatment in the form social-exclusion, oppression, humiliation, and deprivation. Dalit literature first appeared on the literary scene of India in the Marathi language and then found its way in other languages. Hence, considering it as the expression of first-hand experience of a ‘Dalit’ life, this paper has chosen an anthology that compiles works by Marathi writers originally written in Marathi and translated into English for its study.

The anthology *Poisoned Bread* is divided into four parts: Poetry, Autobiographical Extracts, Short Stories and Essays and Speeches. The paper will focus on the non-fictional content of the anthology i.e. particularly the autobiographical extracts and then proceed to explore the themes as evident in the poetry and one short story. Autobiographical extracts in the anthology have a touch of authenticity to them because they are the lived realities penned down by the authors. However, it would be difficult to say that the translation really does justice to what was originally written in their mother tongue i.e. Marathi. The expressions that were potent with the note of dissent wouldn’t find exact equivalents in the translated versions. Nevertheless, it wouldn’t be a futile exercise to understand the essence and tone of the writings that says a lot about the Dalit experience.

I. Analysis of autobiographical extracts

i) A Corpse in the Well: This extract taken from ‘Taral-Antaral’ written by Shankarrao Kharat and translated by Priya Adarkar speaks of how the writer’s father Anna had to guard a corpse in the abandoned well of the village by

staying up all night. He had to do this as a customary duty as the Mahar of the village. When the day dawns, the boy comes looking out for his father as he assumes that his duty must be over, but he is informed by his Anna that he would have to wait till the head constable arrives. Seeing his father ignore his hunger owing to his duty, the naive boy retorts, “Anna! The constable will come after his meal. The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can’t you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?” The reply he receives to this speaks of the inequality that the Mahars suffered. Anna replies, “Oh, they are officers! How can they work without food?” and he adds further, “That’s what village duty is, my boy! Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?” (Dangle, 86)

Caste-system does not provide any vertical mobility. The kind of odd-jobs they would perform were a matter of duties they inherited by birth and no other jobs would be an alternative to them. But as can be observed to be true is that creating a “subaltern” is a matter of convenience and religious scriptures could well be manipulated by the higher castes to use them conveniently. This is evident in the story as despite the taboo of “untouchability” that was associated with the Dalits; Anna is compelled to remove the corpse from the well. He is reluctant to do so as the family of the corpse may hold a grudge against him for touching the body of their kinsman.

Eventually, he succumbs to the oppressive demands of the constable and does as asked to. This was only a matter of convenience to avoid getting into the well where the risk of snake-bites and getting dirty couldn’t be pushed on anyone other than the Mahar. As meekly as Anna accepted the constable’s orders, the son chose to openly retaliate. But he was humiliated for being rebellious and painfully true as it may be that the father too stopped him from speaking anything further. Whether this was out of fear or a sheer acceptance of being treated badly as a legitimate act is an ambiguity. Nevertheless, the author in the closing lines of the extract expresses how he found the hereditary right to Mahar ‘vatan’ share for which the Mahars fought litigation in the High Court to be a worthless right. It again makes one ponder upon this idea that so as to why the Mahars accepted their subservience to the upper castes as a legitimate inheritance.

2) ‘Son, Eat your Fill’: This extract taken from Daya Pawar’s ‘Baluta’ speaks of the kind of conditions that the writer’s family and the rest of the Mahar community lived in. They were living in a congested area of a ten-by-twelve room, with an indoor tap, a common latrine, three or four sub-tenants with

partitions in between made of packing-case wood. The sources of livelihood of the women were limited to odd jobs such as collecting rags, papers, broken glass, iron and bottles in the street and selling them. They would even gather paper swept out of the cloth shops and it would lead to fierce quarrels among them over who should collect the rubbish. They would also wash the saris of the prostitutes in the nearby brothels.

The author narrates how he would accompany his Aji i.e. his grandmother at the dogs' dispensary where she worked. He adds further that "the dogs of the gentry" would come there for treatment and that despite his wanting to hug the puppies he didn't dare to touch them for the fear of what the sahib would say to him. This may sound obnoxious but caste boundaries and untouchability may not have ceased to exist even if a low-caste Mahar boy would want to cuddle a dog that belonged to the high-caste owners. The author also mentions that his family would not be allowed to stay in a flat in a building because their trade was that of gathering the rubbish of the whole of Bombay. The odd jobs that the grandmother had to perform also included calling out the village proclamations as a widow, guarding the village gate, helping in carrying the carcasses of dead animals. In case anyone died, they would have to go from village to village giving the news. This autobiographical extract speaks volumes of how the subaltern clan of Mahars would be compelled to take up odd jobs to sustain themselves.

3) 'We are Kings': This extract is also from Daya Pawar's 'Baluta'. It speaks of Mahar-dom as in the 'kingdom' of Mahars and the legends about the fifty-two rights that their ancestors were given as a deed of gift. The irony of this so-called Mahar-dom was that they were tied to forced labour. They would have to be slaves of the work all twenty-four hours. Their traditional jobs included taking the taxes of the whole village to the taluka town; running in front of the horses of the big people who came to the village; looking after their animals, and giving them fodder and water; carrying news from village to village, making proclamations; dragging away dead animals; chopping wood; beating the drum for village festivals; doing aarati to bridegrooms at the entrance of the village. They would perform all these only for a share in the harvest i.e. Baluta and this was their only payment. This indicates the utter exploitation of the Mahars as they would not be paid for the work done. When they would go to claim their share of harvest, the farmers would grumble and say "You Mahars,

you lazy sons of bitches, you're always first to ask for your share. Think it's your father's grain, do you?" (Dangle, 100).

Despite all the secondary treatment meted out to the Mahars, they would not be allowed to leave the village. The author narrates how due to a fall out with the villagers regarding the share of harvest, the Mahars had set out to leave for ever. But the villagers stopped them from leaving out of a fear that if they left, a calamity would befall upon the village. It was believed that they would earn good karma by feeding Mahars and hence they were like the 'ornaments' of the village. But on the other hand was an instance when the villagers cribbed over feeding them and an outcry arose that 'The Mahars are growing fat on our labour' (Dangle, 102).

When Mahar women's shadow falls on the idol of Lord Maruti on their way to and from the well, the god was considered to be polluted and the road was closed for them. This underlines the hypocrisy of the villagers targeted at the Mahars. Eventually when a legal battle was fought to have access to that road, the village chief and the others had to tender a written apology that they would not trouble the Mahars again. Another interesting thing the writer mentions in the extract is that the Mamlatdar who had to resolve the issue was a former Mahar who had converted himself and embraced Christianity. The curse of untouchability had thus evaded him as now he belonged to a different religion and hence did not pollute anyone in any way. This just shows how completely irrational was the basis of isolating Mahars simply under the pretext of religious pollution.

4) Naja Goes to School- and Doesn't: This extract from 'Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha' by Shantabai Kamble speaks of what difficulties came her way when she wanted to go to school. As obvious as it may be, she was the only girl in the fifth class. Later, Shaku, the Brahmin's daughter joins her. Once when she doesn't come to school, Shantabai was sent to Shaku's place by her teacher to enquire about her. Seeing her at her doorstep, Shaku's mother insultingly remarks, "You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You'll trample the rangolis." (Dangle, 107). The saddest part of the story is when Naja has to stop schooling when Headmaster Kadam advises her to join girls' school in Pandharpur which her Appa cannot afford. He dejectedly tells her that they don't have food to eat and sending her to school was not within his reach.

The second part of the extract narrates how the writer's akka's daughter Gomi had to return to her mother's place because her husband would make her work like an animal and never gave her enough to eat. The dire poverty of the Mahar community leading them to starvation and deprivation of necessities of life to them is the major theme of this extract.

5) The Story of My 'Sanskrit': This is one of the most powerful extracts one would read in this anthology. It is from *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawde. Language is one of the key parameters to determine one's cultural context. Sanskrit in India was always a guarded territory of the upper castes and hence it gradually fell out of significance simply for the lack of its usage. It was considered to be a sacred language that should be restricted to the religious scriptures of the upper-caste Hindus. This extract speaks of the writer's journey from being a doubly-marginalised woman belonging to the lowest of the low caste to becoming a Professor of Sanskrit language in a Government College. The people in the academic circles cannot digest her proficiency in the language as they associate it with her caste. The tone she senses in one among the many remarks she receives includes: "In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit even from you? All our sacred scriptures have been polluted" (Dangle, 111).

The author says that it is impossible for her to forget her caste as she remembers an expression: "What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by death-that is caste" (Dangle, 112). Telling about her journey, she reveals how so many had dissuaded her from learning Sanskrit under various pretexts such as difficulty of the language. She mentions that she was made to think that the traditional books had forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras. She would remember her childhood memories of humiliation when mothers of other Brahmin girls would warn their daughters to stay away from her. She noticed that she had been a lot cleaner than those girls but yet they would treat her as the untouchable. When she stands outside a pandal listening intently to the chanting of Gayatri Mantra at a thread ceremony, she is driven away by a Brahmin woman from that household. She narrates how her school too supported Brahminical prejudices. The only person who encouraged her education in Sanskrit language was her teacher Gokhale Guruji.

After she completed her M.A. in Sanskrit, she was not employed for years. She would always be rejected on silly grounds. The real reason however was her caste. She had probably been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. Yet, she was jobless. Meeting the Chief Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan did not make things any better for her. Later when she had an inter-caste marriage and her surname changed from Somkuwar to Pawde, she finally got a job in a reputed college. Thus, she credits her higher caste status for her job as a professor and maintains that her maiden status still remains deprived.

6) The Bone Merchant: This is an extract from Shankarrao Kharat's Taral-Antaral. This again sheds light on the strange sources of income that the communities of Mahar and Mangs would follow for their sustenance. The writer narrates that the Mahars had stopped eating meat from carcasses as that had been the practice always. But their reason to be excited was the arrival of the bone merchant who would buy the bones stocked by these Mahars and thus they would earn some money. The writer in the greed to earn some extra money had excavated human-bones from the cemetery. This extract reiterates the poverty – stricken plight of the Mahars.

7) The Bastard: This extract by Sharankumar Limbale from Akkarmashi speaks of hunger, poverty, attraction, sexual exploitation of Mahar women at the hands of the upper caste wealthy Patils and the illegitimate children born out of such exploitative relationships. When Mahars had less food, they would survive on large gulps of water. When Sharankumar was attracted to Shevanta, his grandmother Santamai warns him not to as the Maharwada would be after him for his blood if he marries her. He further narrates how he would help his grandmother in making liquor and how the men who drank liquor at their hut were hypocrites. They would down their liquor, but not touch water offered by them. They could touch a Mahar woman, but not eat food cooked by her.

The following paragraph of the extract is one of the most potent expressions of a subaltern i.e. Dalit in this case:

“Those who have been given power by religion on account of their high caste and money inherited from ancestors have deemed it their birth-right to abuse Dalit honour. Every village Patil and Zamindar has slept with the wives of his land labourers. Used them like whores. As soon as she came of age, a girl from

a poor family fell victim to their lust. You'll find the progeny of the Patil's promiscuity in some houses of the village. These households live solely at the mercy of the Patil. The whole village calls this the Patil's mistress's house and the children, the Patil's whore's brood. His benevolence, his visits, are all that matter for this household's happiness" (Dangle, 141).

Probing into the dilemma of his own identity, the author's extract concludes with the following lines:

"Am I a caste-Hindu? But my mother is an untouchable. Am I an untouchable? But my father is a caste-Hindu. I have been tossed apart like Jarasandha- half within society and half outside. Who am I? To whom does my umbilical cord join me?" (Dangle, 142).

8) The Stragglers: As the title of this extract by Dadasaheb More from his work 'Gabal' suggests, it speaks of the kind of life the tribe led as wanderers. They would always keep changing their places. Living in poverty, trying to find better places to live with their families they would walk distances and without footwear. They would be hungry, thirsty and drained. They chiefly gathered food by begging for alms. He says they "didn't even count as members of society." They would always live with a sense of displacement as they didn't belong anywhere, constantly uprooting themselves from one place and taking roots in another. Uncertainty of their lives was the only certainty they believed in. In the extract, one sees the sad reality of the writer's life as he cannot continue with his schooling as he has to keep moving from place to place and is sent by his father to beg for alms so he can at least learn to earn his livelihood. Their jobs included begging for alms and repetition of Pingala to the people between cock-crow and sunrise. They would tell people that they will be blessed with prosperity and thus led them to believe that they had special powers to understand what the Pingala- a kind of an owl, spoke.

9) This Too Shall Pass: The extract from 'Athavaninche Pakshi' by P.E. Sonkamble is the writer's narration of how he had to quit his education due to his poverty and had to support his sister's family due to a tragedy that occurred to her. One peculiar character that is of interest to this study is his brother-in-law Kishan who tried to ape the culture of high caste Hindus as he would avoid eating meat and wear the sacred thread round his neck. He would chant *bharuds* wherever he went. He was in good books with the high caste Hindus. It gave

him a great sense of pride that they were friendly to him. The writer would work hard and even curtail his hunger whenever he could. But his desire to pursue education remains unfulfilled. He lives on hoping that ‘this too shall pass’.

The autobiographical extracts cover a spectrum of subaltern themes such as:

- i) Poverty
- ii) Deprivation of basic necessities
- iii) Lack of access to resources
- iv) Lack of scope for vertical mobility
- v) Public Humiliation
- vi) Double-marginalisation among low-caste women
- vii) Sexual exploitation
- viii) Acceptance of subservience as legitimate
- ix) Untouchability
- x) Social exclusion and dilemma of identity in case of inter-caste unions

II. Analysis of Poetry

The poetry in this anthology is replete with strong emotions of the exploited subaltern population: the Dalits. The summary of select ten poems is as follows:

(i) L.S. Rokade’s *To be or Not to be Born* expresses his dilemma of whether he should be born or not as the land where he will be born is full of poverty. The poet talks to his mother asking her so as to why she should shed blood and struggle for handful of water when the land is full of rivers and lakes brimming with water. He wishes to spit on the civilization as he cannot be fake and sing glory of such a land which deprives his mother. He cannot call the land his because he doesn’t feel any sense of belongingness to it.

(ii) *Take a Hammer to Change the World* by Anna Bhau Sathe is a note of dissent as he opens the line drawing inspiration from Bhimrao. He asserts that ‘enough is enough’ and he addresses his fellow men and women to rise above the slavery. The rich exploited them endlessly and the priests tortured them. He wants all to sit on the chariot of unity and break the chains of class and caste.

(iii) *That Single Arm* by Tryambak Sapkale narrates how his son Raja looked at a picture where a rich man was beating a poor man and decided to cut the arm

of the attacker from the book with a razor blade. The act is symbolic as it expresses the pent-up anger and the final solution to the problem as seen by the little boy lies in attacking the rich man. He says that this will serve as a warning to anyone who tries to commit the same atrocity again in future.

(iv) *Send My Boy to School* by Waman Kardak speaks of a father's wish to send his boy to school as he does not want his legacy of pain and suffering of poverty to be passed on to his son. The father is pleading to his lord and master that he would do everything for him but he should just let his son study in a school so he can become a lawyer one day. He doesn't care for famines or if his clothes are torn. He just wants his son to be so educated that no one can ever fool him.

(v) *Caves* by Jyoti Lanjewar speaks of how inhuman atrocities have carved caves in the rock of the poet's heart. He says that protests have begun to spark now and that he will fan the flames of human rights. He says that the land where they lived had never been a mother to them. They did not even have the bare minimum respect as cats and dogs would have. He says he keeps the unpardonable sins in his mind and that he will now become a rebel.

(vi) *Exhalation* by Narendra Patil speaks of how exhausted a Dalit is and that a mere exhalation of a Dalit will make the walls of the society tremble. He asserts that a Dalit won't be like a bird caged in a dungeon and that his suffocation will now end as he chooses to exhale what he held inside him all this while.

(vii) *No Entry for the New Sun* by Vilas Rashinkar speaks of how they i.e. the upper caste people have treated scriptures as commandments engraved on stone and made the lower caste people suffer. They have been too rigid about the scriptures. He sees no hope for the entry of the new sun and that there is no likelihood of any change their in lives to take place in the near future.

(viii) *Wall* by D.S. Dudhalkar reminds you of the poem *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost; but only as an antithesis. It speaks of the futility of having walls to guard the nations. He asks why we need to have such hardened walls to protect human beings. The poet's job is to break the walls: literally and metaphorically.

(ix) *This Country is Broken* by Bapurao Jagtap says that the country is broken into pieces due to its cities, religion and castes. Even the minds of the people are fragmented. He calls the country “a naked country with its heartless religion.” He condemns the people as he says that the people of this country rejoice in their black laws and even deny the existence of the Dalits. He closes on a note of rebellion as he says to his brother that they should go to some other country where there will be a roof above their head and when they die there will be a cemetery to receive them.

(x) *Which Language should I Speak?* by Arun Kamble is a short poem that sums up the dilemma of little boy who is caught up between what his grandpa says and what his Brahmin teacher well-versed in Vedas says to him. The grandpa says, ‘You whore-son, talk like we do. Talk, I tell you!’ and the teacher says: ‘You idiot, use the language correctly!’ So he asks, which language should I speak?

These ten poems speak for the humiliation, suffocation, denial of freedom and respect suffered by the subalterns. They also leave the reader feeling optimistic as many end of a note of dissent and hold a promise of rebellion within them. Poetry was significant as a mode of expression as Kalpesh J. Parmar says, “The Dalit literature like the Black literature gives words to the old pains, agonies and sufferings of the Dalits. In the field of literature, the form used first to reveal the inhuman conditions of the Dalit is poetry.” (Mahida, 184)

In the section of short stories, the first story that one encounters is the one from which this anthology gets its title i.e. *The Poisoned Bread* authored by Bandhumadhav. The story revolves around Mhadeva who accompanies his grandfather Anna to Bapu Patil’s house. Anna begs for his share of corn from the threshing and says “I am your begging Mahar and feel proud to be so” (Dangle, 168). The Patil taunts him by saying, “Don’t give me that line, you’re no longer the Mahar-Mangs of the good old days, to beg for your share of the corn. You are now Harijans.” This story can be contextualised in the mid-twentieth century as a reference to the word “Harijans” indicates that Dalits had begun to formally raise a rebellion against the caste-system under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Mhadeva in the story has passed his L.L.B. though he was a Mahar. Patil takes a revenge on his grandfather as Mhadeva retaliates against the wrong doings of Patil and denies corn to him. He eats old stale

crumbs of bread and dies. His last words become central to the story: “The poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man...” (Dangle, 175)

Conclusion:

An analysis of the anthology *Poisoned Bread* brings one closer to the experience of the subaltern in India. Their sufferings and their ways and means to cope with their secondary status in the society are revealed through the autobiographical writings, poetry and short stories. Often a comparison has been drawn between the plight of Dalits in India and African-Americans in the western context. The Dalit Panther movement in India was inspired by the Black Panther Party in America. Their experiences are comparable with each other to a considerable extent.

What is striking about the characters and their experiences is while some chose to rebel against the atrocities, there are those who accept the inequality as a legitimate act. They take pride in serving the upper castes and would do anything to guard their ego. This acceptance of the superiority of the upper castes reminds you of what the Nobel prize-winning Afro-American writer said in her Foreword to her novel *The Bluest Eye*: “When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident.” (Morrison, IX)

One can however feel optimistic about the kind of growth that Dalit literature has shown from being nowhere to having substantially made a mark on the literary scene of India. It has traversed across languages building a rebellion throughout the country by way of its uninhibited expressions. And these expressions have not been submissive but remarkably rebellious. Dalits, the subalterns of India, have thus managed to shape a culture that can be characterised by self-respect and determination to be the change they wish to see. In the words of P.G. Jogdand, “human creates culture and culture shapes the human. The same principle is applicable to Dalits also.” (Bhosale, 49)

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