

Marxian Perspectives to Literature vis-a-vis *Dalit* Literature



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Abstract

Marx visualises that the class that controls the means of production controls the means of mental production too. Ideology is a mental process as philosophy, religion, economics, history, law, politics, art and all kinds of literature are actually sum total of ideas, views and thoughts aroused in a socio-economic conflict. However, the free creative energy sometimes gives rise to loftiest individuals in the arena of art and literature who transcend the levels of ideology of the ruling elite. Their contributions symbolise real, free and innovative creation of human faculty.

Ambedkar was a towering personality committed to the emancipation of *Dalits* in particular and nation-building as well as social transformation in general. He is the moving spirit behind the *Dalit* movement. In the nucleus of *Dalit* literature are the communities that are deprived of their socio-economic and cultural rights. Marxism emphasises on class structure whereas *Dalit* consciousness negates the caste system. Sometimes overlapping of these two social differentiations takes place.

Keywords: Free Individuals, Caste System, Economic Conditions, Labour-Time, *Dalit* Consciousness

Introduction

For Marx, within any socio-economic formation the mode of production of the material means of life constitutes the real foundation. The materialistic conception of history starts with the fundamental principle that the economic conditions are at the roots of every social order. Literature, art, culture and ideology are thus conditioned by the productive forces as well as production or property relations; but at the same time, mental production, i.e., the creation or raising of ideas, conceptions and consciousness has some scope of their being self-determining to a certain extent. The oft-quoted famous statement of Marx and Engels from the *Communist Manifesto* stresses that "the history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles".¹ It does not mean that intellectuals, geniuses, creators and heroes play no decisive or significant role in social development or epoch-making. In this context, a few lines from Engel's letter to Joseph Bloch are worth quoting:

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is *ultimately* the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase.²

Aim of the Study

In this paper, an attempt has been made to critically examine Marxian perspectives to literature along with salient features of *Dalit* literature.

Free Social Individuals

Marx visualises the emancipation of all facets of human nature. The most important ingredient for such an emancipation is the saving of labour-time, i.e., the shortening of the working day so that one gets free time. The development of productive forces reaches an appropriately high level where the human beings need to devote a relatively small portion of their whole time to sustain themselves. Society sublimates into an association of free individuals. The saving of labour-time, i.e., the increase of free time should, in the ultimate analysis, culminate in the time for the full restructuring or the genuine emancipation of the individual so that the human qualities are universally unfolded. Marx proclaims:

The free development of individualities is needed, and therefore not the reduction of necessary labour-time in order to replace it with surplus labour, but the reduction altogether of the necessary labour of society to a minimum which would suffice to create the means for the artistic, scientific, etc., education of the individuals in the time which had become free for them all.³

There are two streams of literature. One is subservient to the existing society whereas the other challenges the limits of the prevailing system as well as further engages itself with the class struggles of that society. The march of society should be directed towards socialism where production is not an end in itself. Individuals should not be oppressed in their labour under any collectivist system of compulsion. When Marx dreams that with the advancement of socialism the 'withering away' of the state would take place, then he gives utmost priority to individuals over the system. He visualises the emergence of free social individuals.

Ambedkar's Rejection of Marx

Marx exhorts the proletarians to bring about the Communistic revolution by the forcible overthrow of all the existing social conditions prevailing under capitalism. But in the graded system of castes, according to Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the slogan of Karl Marx that 'working men of all countries, unite!' becomes quite useless. The caste system divides the human beings into numerous separate communities. Further these communities are in a graded order with one above the other in social status. According to Dr Ambedkar, the slogan which Marx used, therefore, cannot be applied to unite the Hindus against the caste system. Ambedkar declares:

To excite the proletariat to bring an economic revolution, Karl Marx told: "you have nothing to lose except your chains." But the artful way in which the social and religious rights are distributed among the different castes, where by some have more and some have less, makes the slogan of Karl Marx useless to excite the Hindus against the caste system. Castes form a graded system of sovereignties, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others do. You cannot, therefore, have a general mobilisation of the Hindus (to use a military expression) for an attack on the caste system.⁴

Literature

Literary expression is often viewed as mirror in which society is reflected. A great piece of literature, in form and content, not only confronts with the reality of life, society and culture in an easily communicable lucid language, but also does transcend its age. Its value or essence continues without interruption. But generally literature has two broad categories. In the first one, literary expression corresponds to existing material conditions or relations. Here literature is part of *status quo*. The other category of literature is meant for mass protest, social change and consciousness-raising. Here literature espouses the cause of all-round liberation, equality and humanity. Marxism and *Dalit* movement both are remarkable schools of thought and action,

i.e., simultaneously endowed with 'Theory' as well as 'Praxis' that are needed for complete overhauling of existing society and for creation of a new social order. They explicitly aim at radically restructuring the prevailing social relations and economic conditions.

***Dalit* Literature: Movement for a New Social Order**

Dalit literature is the most influential medium of assertion and expression of *Dalit* power, consciousness and voice. It is not a caste literature, but a pro-change powerful political literature. It is thoroughly anti-establishment and not 'elite' in form and content. In the real sense of the term it stands for an egalitarian, exploitation-free, just and participatory social order. Though it derives its inspiration from the Ambedkarite philosophy and ideology, yet it has deep roots in *Bhakti* movement or tradition. *Eknath* propounds that all are equal in the eyes of Almighty God :

"God baked pots with *Gora*,
drove cattle with *Chokha*,
cut grass with *Savata Mali*,
wore garments with *Kabir*,
coloured hide with *Ravidas*,
sold meat with butcher *Sajana*,
melted gold with *Narhari*,
carried cow-dung with *Janabai*,
and even become the *Mahar* messenger with

*Damaji*⁵"

Long leaps towards freedom, free will and a new social order begin with initial steps. There are two cardinal principles underlying behind *Dalit* literature. One is the dissolution of the caste system and the other being the abandonment of the Hindu religion. Ambedkar presents the rationale for the twin programmes:

1. "---the caste system has two aspects. In one of its aspects, it divides men into separate communities. In its second aspect, it places these communities in a graded order one above the other in social status. Each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of castes it is above some other caste. As an outward mark of this gradation, there is also a gradation of social and religious rights, technically spoken of *asthadhikaras* and *sanskaras*. The higher the grade of a caste, the greater the number of these rights ; and lower the grade, the lesser their number.⁶
2. That the social status of an individual by itself often becomes a source of power and authority, is made clear by the sway which the Mahatmas have held over the common man. Why do millionaires in India obey penniless sadhus and fakirs? Why do millions of paupers in India sell their trifling trinkets which constitute their only wealth, and go to Benaras and Mecca? That religion is the source of power is illustrated by the history of India, where the priest holds a sway over the common man.....?"⁷

Dalit literature or movement is not convinced with the socialist or communist viewpoint that the human being is universally an economic creature. In the Indian context, it does not hold good. In our society, property is not the original source of power, status or authority. One's privileges, aspirations or

identities are not ultimately guided or determined by economic conditions or factors alone. Socialist or leftists are under the false impression that if economic restructuring or equalisation takes place, it would automatically lead to social or political transformation. In our country, social inequalities are to be tackled first. It would simultaneously pave the way for egalitarianism in other spheres too.

Dalit literature, in the real sense of the term, is social and political literature. It is a misnomer to conceive of *Dalit* literature as caste literature. It focuses its attention on human dignity, social mobility, consciousness-raising, all-round equality, sense of fellow-feeling, integral socialisation and complete emancipation. *Dalit* literature negates the Hindu religion as it is inimical to humanism, sociability, tolerance, freedom and co-operation. On the one hand, it confronts with the stark reality of iniquity and on the other it gives a clarion call to *Dalits* for waging mass struggle to liberate themselves. Lal Chand Rahi writes:

1. "Only fifteen percent got
Sweetness of Independence
But eighty five percent
remain on margins
Revolution is yet to come
for
Equality and Dignity
for
The Right to live with Dignity for *Dalit*⁸
2. Breake the chains of traditions
Leave the rotten path (of the upper castes)
Because, breaking old prison of traditions
may lead to a significant endeavour
For *Dalits*, in form of
Education
Organisation, and
Agitation⁹"

Marx has a world-view and it gets reflected across the globe in literary expressions or creative writings penned under the influence of his critique of political economy. Likewise, Ambedkar, a beacon light for *Dalit* literature, has also a world-view as is evident from his declaration:

"Religion is for man; man is not for religion.
If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion.
If you want power, change your religion.
If you want equality, change your religion.
If you want independence, change your religion.
If you want to make the world in which you live, happy; change your religion."¹⁰

Political principles of *Dalit* literature are mainly derived from the thoughts, actions and agitations spearheaded by Ambedkar. Jai Prakash Kardam, in preface to his collection titled *Gunga Nahin Tha Main* of 25 poems, writes, "This is correct that *Dalit* literature is a literature of rejection (*nakaar*). But this is the rejection of those systems, beliefs and traditions, which are irrational and useless for the society and the nation. Since these are useless, they have no value. Equality, Independence and Fraternity are the most precious values for any society and nation and the *Dalit* literature accepts these values as

its core values."¹¹ In one of his poems, Kardam asks for equality in all spheres of life :

".....there has to be
Equality in all spheres of life
right from governance to administration
from the works of sweeping and cleaning
to leather works
Equality has to be ensured"¹²

Dalit literature aims at change and consciousness. It portrays the endeavours and movements that facilitate consolidation of *Dalit* identity and awakening of *Dalit* consciousness, i.e., assertion of self-image. "...question of identity becomes central to the *Dalit* discourse which means a dignified human life with equality, liberty and solidarity as the cherished principles with a visionary transformation of society towards egalitarian social system."¹³

Conclusion

Marxism and *Dalit* both are pro-change and anti-establishment in analysis, thought and action. Both stand for a new social order. Marxist interpretation of history and society are based on dialectical materialism whereas *Dalit* movement focuses on social conditions of inequalities. It is misnomer to say that Marxist literature is class literature where *Dalit* literature is caste literature. Both actually mean for consciousness-raising, epoch-making and a new individual in a new civilisation. The only difference is on emphasis. Marxism concentrates on economic factors first whereas *Dalit* literature basically centres round social conditions.

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