

Hegemony in Art and Aesthetics: Dalit Narratives of Sculpting Identity



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Abstract

The article proposes to throw light on the aspect of Hegemony in art by upper caste Hindus and the plight of Dalits in India. The paper also tries to show how this factor of hegemony was silently shattered by the deprived class of people in Indian society. Dalits ventured into the territory which was mystified and forbidden for them in the caste based orthodox Indian society. In order to trample the spirit of questioning among Dalits, the Upper caste Brahmins created the stories of lies in the name of Religion, Vedas, Upanishads etc. and consequently normalized discrimination, exploitation, and atrocities on the group of people who instantly lost their basic human rights. And they were made to believe that even the Gods want them to lead a wretched life. In fact the fine arts and crafts were the natural gifts equally bestowed on these brawny people by the Mother Nature. From time to time the Dalits were able to disprove the perpetrators who deprived them the pleasure of creativity and art. The fine arts were monopolised by dominant class of people in the Indian society.

Keywords: Hegemony In Art, Dalit Creativity, Identity Crisis, Atrocities, Wounded Psyche.

Introduction

“All men are intellectuals: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”

Antonio Gramsci

In 1930s an Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci coined and popularized the word ‘Hegemony’ with broader connotation. Antonio Gramsci studied the strange behaviour of predator and the prey in societal context with Marxist perspective. It was the study undertaken to know how the strategies were employed by the ruling class to impose their own sinister ideologies on the unsuspecting multitude. The plan was to convince the vulnerable people that the Rule of the Ruling class is in the greater interest of the ruled. The perpetrators succeeded in winning the confidence of their subjects. It was sheer shrewdness and vile intentions on part of the Ruling class in getting the consensual acceptance of the ruled.

Similarly, in India same kind of ploy was used from Vedic times. The same ploy is seen still existing even now. However, the difference was too distinct. In Europe the clash of interest was existed between Upper and Lower classes of people. They were referred as the Haves and Have Not’s. Apart from economical distinctions they were all one, belonging to same clan. They all followed almost same religion of that time. And the factor of caste was completely absent in the European society.

However, prevailing condition in India was in stark contrast with that of Europeans. For thousands of years social stratification divided the Indian society into fragments. People in the lower strata of society adapted themselves to unequal status and discrimination in the society. Stratification based on ‘Varnashrama’ clearly demonstrated that ‘all was definitely not well’ in the Utopian ‘BharatVarsha’. Varnashrama believed in the supremacy of upper caste. Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were the four hierarchical Varnashramas practised by the upper caste people. However, there was another group left out by Brahmanical system of social stratification. The fifth group outside Varnashrama remained untouchable for the practitioners of Varnashrama. And it was not considered as the group of people. This unfortunate group of people were not seen as the human beings and were not accorded any human status. They were treated less than the animals. However, in the same society the Animals were worshipped as Gods and Goddesses. The animals which were revered by caste Hindus include, Cow, Dog, Snake, Monkey, Elephant, Mouse, Pig, Turtle, Fish, Tiger, Lion, Crow, Peacock, Eagle, etc.

Almost, all the animals were seen as having the traits of divinity and were given more priority than the people whom they referred as the untouchables.

Aim of the Study

The aims and objectives of the paper is to understand the Hegemony in Art and its impact on the psyche of Dalit artists and sculptors and their constant struggle to break the shackles of hegemony and carve their own identity in the hostile society based on caste system.

Formation of Caste

"There is no caste in blood"

Edwin Arnold

According to Dr Ambedkar endogamy was the sole reason for the birth of caste system in India. He says, "*Endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste*". Dr Ambedkar meant that particular group of people (Brahmins) belonging to certain class in ancient India were averse to the idea of allowing others to mingle with them. They feared that their purity might be at stake. That is why for certain period of years they closed the doors on others. And rest of the classes especially Kshatriyas and Vaishyas followed them and found themselves as part of four unchanging and rigid Varnas and subsequently numerous castes within varnas. Shudras, the fourth and the last one in the varnashrama were left in the lurch without the option of interchanging their class with individual efforts. They remained Shudras without ever becoming Kshatriyas or Vaishyas. This strategy adopted by Brahmins lead to the rigid caste system in India. To be precise it was Brahmins who scripted and promoted the caste system in India. They strongly opposed other blood line to trespass their purity of lineage.

To begin with there was no caste what so ever in this world. With billions of species around us, human beings were just one group of species then. The Early man was a wanderer. He wandered from place to place in search of food and shelter. The idea of caste was completely unknown to him at that point of time. The species in question was called Homo sapiens. And the group of people probably in separate batches over a period of time migrated to every possible nook and corners of the earth. When they found the place to be self sufficient and secure they Thus giving rise to race and tribes. The idea of Caste was the product of dominance of some people over others. To begin with the people who were physically strong and powerful started dominating people who were not so strong. Eventually in India during Vedic times 'Varnashramas' were established to continue their exploitation over the naive and sober people. By arriving at this arrangement the Upper caste people in India started to live a life of privilege and bounty at the cost of Untouchables. Fortunately the natural elements like water, air, fire, earth etc were not divided into different castes by these upper caste people. Thankfully these natural phenomenon's like water, air, fire remain casteless so too art. Art was casteless. But later on the art too was painted with castes.

Origin of Art and Development of Aesthetics

'Nature is the art of God'.

Dante Alighieri

When the primordial man after years of wandering and uncertain habitation found a place for settling down that was rich with resources for his living. When he got his daily needs satisfied almost regularly then he got little time to relax in the cave that became his abode. The walls of the caves became his first experimental creative art work. The caves became his canvas to give expressions of his outlook of the world which was making some sense to his curious eyes now. The animals which he hunted for food and the adventurous hunting expeditions with his fellow beings found an expression in the form of crude line drawings on the walls of the caves. The tools which he used to draw consisted of sharp stones, burnt charcoal, and the rudimentary colours he found in the green leaves and from other natural resources. He used mud, wood, bone, ivory, stone and other readily available materials to make figurines of animals and human beings, toys and other interesting items.

Dalit Art

"Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."

Jackson Pollock

What is Dalit Art? Is it any different from other Art? Dalit Art is the manifestation of Traumatic experience of ghastly wounds inflicted on the psyche of the victim. The art assumes the identity of the artist who creates it. Fundamentally art is as natural as anything could be. But in a strange way gains the identity of the artists. It is like the signature of an individual distinct and unique. If we take the trouble of studying, understanding and analyzing the work done by a particular artist or a particular group of artists then we will be flooded with the ideas, thoughts and personal insights of the artists. The work of art contains the information regarding artists' aspirations, experience, knowledge, and their perspective about the subject of their art. It is all possible because the work of art is a great communicator with the world. The work of art bares the mind and the heart of the artists.

However, when we look at ancient Indian temples and sculpture for example, the temples at Belur and Halebidu, the art historians classify them as the art of Hoysalas. Because the temple was commissioned to be built by the Hoysala King Visnuvardhana in the 12th century so the credit was given to the ruler. The toil of the master sculptor Jakanacharya and countless sculptors, artisans, labourers did not come to public eye. They remained behind the tall shadows of the Rulers or Kings as mute as ever, unknown and unsung with very few exceptions like the master sculptor Jakanachari and his son Dankanachari.

But Dalit Panthers movement in 1970s paved the way for Dalit literature and Dalit art. Dalit art was marked by the depiction of the struggle of the downtrodden. Ajeet Mahale quotes artist Uttam Ghosh in The Hindu:

"Any form of artistic expression that depicts the struggles of the downtrodden and breaks away from the hegemony of mainstream art can come under Dalit art."

Folk Art

Folk art is the essence of indigenous people all over the world. It is part of their life and cannot be separated from them. Folk tradition and culture imbibe all the wisdom, experience, knowledge, beliefs, legends, myths and the aspirations of their forefathers. Folk art was born and evolved naturally with the symbiotic bond with the nature. Importantly, it is not the imitation of some alien culture. Without undergoing any sort of influence by the outer elements it blossomed within their domain as naturally as a wild flower in the woods.

Art is an attempt of communication. Folk art though, it was primitive in nature and crude in form was a very important tool for the rustic people. Through the practise of folklore they gave meaning to their culture and identity. The enterprise of higher caste was considered to be classical and the enterprise of indigenous people was snubbed and labelled as primitive art or folk art.

Hegemony in Art

"Victors do not investigate their own crimes, so that little is known about them..."

— Noam Chomsky

As expected, in the caste hierarchy prevailing in India, all the good things belonged to the upper caste people. Sudharak Olve says '*In India, art is about the higher classes, Dalit artists are ignored or their work is called 'activism'*'. Like in any other socially powerful positions like bureaucracy and corporate world even in the Fine arts too the upper Hindu castes control art activities in India. They have built business empires and control the Govt decisions. The scene in fine art too is not different. Be it Hindustani or Karnataki Music, Dance, Drama, Art, Painting and Sculpture etc. Dalits are kept outside as expected. We find only upper caste Hindus or Muslims in the industry. Muslims found the place because the Muslims ruled India for approximately seven hundred years. The great exponents of any of these fine arts are obviously the upper caste Hindus and others. Knowledge, wisdom, science and artistry was closely guarded by the Brahmins. Sanskrit chantings and shlokas were whispered in the ears of young Brahmin pupils. Knowledge was a closed door affair of Brahmins. They made rest of the people believe that their language Sanskrit is the language of Gods. If Shudras accidentally hear or utter a word in Sanskrit such person's ear would be filled with the molten lead and the tongue would be cut. Such was the resistance of Brahmins in sharing Knowledge with others. The punishment for Dalits who tried to break the Hegemony of Brahmins over Knowledge and Art was simply nightmarish, inhuman and devilish.

Breaking the Shackles of Hegemony:

'Suppressed grief suffocates, it rages within the breast, and is forced to multiply its strength.'

-Ovid

When we look back in to the pages of history we come across several attempts made by the Dalits

to break open the shackles of Hegemony. But the cruel hands that oppressed were ruthless in snubbing and stifling the spirit of fight. The atrocities take place on regular basis.

Even during India's mythological period we come across many instances where shudras were not allowed to lead the life of dignity. When a Shudra wanted to be blessed by God by doing penance he was brutally slain. In Valmiki's Ramayana Book 7, Uttarakanda, there is an instance of a Shudra ascetic Shambooka, who was doing penance in order to be blessed by the Lord Almighty God, then there comes to the court of king Rama an old Brahmin with a complaint that a Shudra is doing hard penance which is sinful. Because a Shudra is not supposed to do any penance, doing such things was considered to be the sole prerogative of the upper caste Brahmins. Heeding to the plea of a Brahmin Rama goes in search of Shambooka a Shudra ascetic and after finding him sitting in meditative posture takes out his shining brilliant sword and beheads Shambooka, who was still sitting lowering his head and doing penance says Pritchett and Hari Prasad Shastri. Similarly, Ekalavya a Dalit archer probably the greatest one in the world was made to offer his right hand thumb to Dronacharya as a token of gratitude for being the ghost teacher of Ekalavya. It is said that Ekalavya made a clay model of Dronacharya and kept it in a place in the forest where he used to practice archery. The young Dalit archer without any body's guidance for the art of archery thought of installing the statue of famous teacher Dronacharya for inspiration. But Dronacharya was completely unknown and blank about somebody called Ekalavya and his archery, was busy teaching the Princes of Hastinapura. But Dronacharya without being ashamed takes advantage of the noble character of Ekalavya and does the most heinous hegemonic casteist act and thus meting out great injustice to the archer for being Dalit.

But now the time seems to have improved by the Western phenomenon. The advent of British and their colonization refreshingly opened the doors of new thinking based on equality, liberty and fraternity. As a result the British's rule ushered host of social reformers. Dr Baba Saheb Bheem Rao Ambedkar became the saviour of the downtrodden. It opened a new chapter in the lives of all those who were victimized and exploited. Irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race and gender the Western education heralded a new dawn on the map of India which was in the grip of dark Vedic varnashrama system. Since then we have seen many instances where all the depressed class of people, marginalized and Dalits making their mark

When Mayawati became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh In 2007, it was remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, it was a Dalit Chief Minister and secondly, a Dalit Woman Chief Minister had come to the power in Indian states. The upper caste Hindus in a strange way aligned themselves with the new Dalit Chief Minister. At this point of time the doors of opportunities thrown open to the Dalits. Responding to the changing times, Amarnath Prajapati, a Dalit sculptor, got the opportunity to sculpt dozens of

Mayawati's statues. Many national leaders, social reformers, political leaders along with Buddhist statues and monuments were sculpted. Interestingly it is said that Dalit sculptor, Amarnath Prajapati, met the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath and offered to sculpt Lord Rama's one hundred and eight feet statue in Ayodhya. It is said by political analysts that political parties wanted to use this project submitted by Dalit sculptor to gain mileage politically.

Conclusion

"Through love, tribes have been intermixing colors to reveal a new rainbow world. And as more time passes, this racial and cultural blending will make it harder for humans to side with one race, nation or religion over another."

— Suzy Kassem

To sum up the paper we can say that with the globalization the scenario in India is also gradually changing. Before the British came to India the condition was gloomy and horrifying as far as Dalits were concerned. It is appropriate to use the title of V.S. Naipaul's book 'An Area of Darkness' to describe India and the conditions in it. Discriminative society guided by Varnashrama doctrine kept everything that was good for the privileged upper caste people and snatched the very human rights from the lower caste people, untouchables whom we now call as Dalits. But the spirit of creativity cannot be Hegemonized. Now Dalits are having better access to education and even to different forms of art. Today we find many instances where Dalits are also equally engaged in art forms like sculpture. Dhananjaya Shilpi, a Dalit sculptor, was adorned with "Jakanachari" award the highest in sculpture given by Government of Karnataka. It was a very long journey for Dalits to

come so far, but the road really doesn't come to an end. Still it's a long way home for humanity.

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