



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2017; 1(15): 108-111

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www.sanskritarticle.com

Saritha K.V.

Assistant Professor of English,
Government Polytechnic College,
Kothamangalam, Ernakulam

Strategies of Dalit Resistance as Assertion

Saritha K.V.

Abstract

Dalits have experimented with a variety of resistance movements in order to overcome their humiliating experiences. They have a long history of unrelenting struggle to reclaim their identity through various means of resistance. Through their various means of resistance, they revolt against the oppressive social structures and hegemonic representations that have side-lined them from power centres for centuries. But today, Dalits, empowered by various resistance movements and strong leadership, stop being passive consumers of negative stereotypes created by dominant discourses and start asserting their rights.

Dalits have a long history of unrelenting struggle to reclaim their identity through various means of resistance. According to Joshua Samuel, an expert in interreligious engagement and theology, "The most significant assertive move in the history of Untouchables is the decision to call themselves Dalits" (4). He claims that in order to both accurately describe their predicament and to adamantly maintain their worth and dignity, Dalit activists and intellectuals adopted the name "Dalit," which derives from the Sanskrit/Marathi word dal, which meaning broken or crushed (4). In contrast to Gandhi's suggested term "Harijan," which was deemed to be patronising, the term "Dalit" provides the so-called "untouchable" castes with a fresh, dignified, and empowered identity.

Their assigned status is further resisted through the practice of writing and through it they challenge the practises of disempowerment and misrepresentation of Dalits as a stable category. The marginalisation of Dalits by a caste-dominated society is resisted in Dalit literature. A variety of Dalit authors who identify with the societal necessity for a transformative medium to create an alternative history for future generations have advanced the political imperative behind the genre of Dalit literature. Dalit experiences are documented in order to advance a Dalit consciousness and to provide an insight into Dalit history, which is purposely erased and misrepresented in all popular depictions. In order to reclaim their place in the shared cultural history from which they have been historically excluded for centuries, Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Baburao Bagul, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Bama, Basudev Sunani, P.Sivakami, Poomani, Narayan Surve, Annabhau Sathe, Omprakash Valmiki, and others work to raise Dalit consciousness. Their writings reflect their dissatisfaction and fight against many kinds of hegemony.

Correspondence:

Saritha K.V.

Assistant Professor of English,
Government Polytechnic College,
Kothamangalam, Ernakulam

In an effort to live a decent and dignified life, Dalits in India engage in religious conversions as another form of protest and resistance. Jasbir Jain notes that among Dalits, conversion is frequently a quest for identity, social acceptance, human dignity, and equality (104). He claims that widespread conversion is an effective form of protest that would make room for accommodation. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a pivotal turning point in Indian history, posing a direct challenge to Hinduism and giving Dalits a voice they had not previously had due to Hinduism's four-varna system. Ambedkar pointed out Hinduism as the underlying source of the caste system, which excludes Dalits as being dirty and contaminated (108). Ambedkar consequently made the decision to forsake Hinduism and adopt Buddhism in 1956, along with a number of other Dalit adherents. In southern India, many Dalits adopted Christianity and Islam, just as many Dalits in northern India accepted Buddhism. However, it resulted in their greater marginalisation, and the church was powerless to help them reclaim their honour and dignity. Anansha Borthakur, an assistant professor at Jagannath Barooah College in Assam, noted that while conversion to Christianity somewhat improved Dalits' material circumstances by granting them access to education and employment, it had little impact on the social status of Dalit communities because converts were still referred to by their caste rather than their religion (3). In addition to all of this, regular demonstrations have been occurring long before reform groups emerged and people converted to other faiths.

Dalit women have always been seen as ahistoric and are frequently silenced and rendered invisible. They gain visibility through Dalit discourse. When the oppressed or "othered" take control of definition and express their realities in opposition to the prevailing narratives, a counterculture is created. Sten Pultz Moslund, an associate professor of comparative literature and English studies, claims that these "Counter histories simply allow events, truths, and realities to exist by making them known and by calling them forth from the darkness and silence of repression and censorship" (16). They are taking an active role in a world that has been

degrading and disempowering them for generations by sharing their own tales.

The task of creating an alternate past is frequently seen by resistant narratives as a means of empowerment. Writings by Dalits fall into this category because they are grounded in a feeling of self-respect, which enables them to challenge Brahmanical canons including caste hierarchy, purity-pollution ideas, and caste-based ascriptions. As a result, educated lower caste groups developed a subjective consciousness that allowed them to see their potential and play a vital role in the development of a new Dalit narrative. According to Badri Narayan, Professor in the School of Social Sciences at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi:

They have not only tried to establish their own heroes, but also tried to dethrone the existing high-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives... Through these narratives they also want to prove that by capturing history, these traitors of the nation now appear as the most nationalist of communities and have become the most influential sections after independence. (101)

The political motivation behind each of these stories is to unseat the well-established protagonists of the dominant stories. By telling these stories from the past, they attempt to gain authority. He continues, "This process of remaking the past is based on their current, sociopolitical, and cultural experience of discrimination, which they encounter in their daily lives" (102). As a result, the new stories of Dalit politics begin to take the form of cultural narratives of self-respect and identity, protest against repressive beliefs, and expression in a language rich in cultural and social symbolism. The group becomes more politically aware as a result of the language's ability to evoke their collective memory and forge a new identity.

Because they disentangle their subject statuses in terms of race, caste, and gender, Dalit narratives are employed as resistance and representation methods by those who seek to confirm their identity. These dissident voices want to liberate oppressed people and give them access to significant spaces for learning and constructing their histories. More people

will become aware of Dalit culture when they are exposed to language that is laced with their myths, legends, and collective memories. Thus, literature is essential to Dalit activism and resistance because it gives them the chance to undermine the established significance of manufactured identities and mythologies. Laura R. Brueck, Associate Professor of South Asian Literature and Culture at North-Western University, Evanston, observes that Dalit literature,

...[p]roposes to open for them access not only to history, but also to a world of self and community awareness and the means to construct a shared identity. First they must deconstruct the identity, amassed over centuries, of the powerless, the lowly, the untouchable, then replace it with a new kind of self-expression that will transform not only the way they see themselves, but also the way society sees them. (351)

Dalit literature developed out of the need to quickly bring attention to their tragic situation, which has been hidden and ignored by mainstream literature.

Dalit writers, who take inspiration from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the great social reformer, feel it is their duty to convey through their writing the pain and sufferings of their brethren, thereby helping in some small way to bring attention to their harsh lives, which had previously gone unnoticed. They oppose cultural stereotypes because they believe that doing so will only continue to marginalise Dalits. Any effort by Dalit writers to transform the negative centrality inside the caste structure into a positive political content can be seen as a component of that endeavour. Even though Dalits are marginalised and prone to violence, they become politically visible and assume subject roles thanks to the creation of a unique political counterculture fostered by these artistic depictions.

According to Joseph Mundananikkal Thomas, Faculty Member, Arts Sociology, University of Mumbai, "the works of Dalit writers need to be read as negotiations on defining the contours of the counter public with the claims of authentic experiences of life that were hitherto largely represented by the non-Dalit writers" (166). Because

non-Dalit writers have never personally experienced caste persecution and are not eyewitnesses to Dalit injustice, their writings cannot be considered authentic. In contrast, Dalit narrations provide a vivid sense of the Dalit consciousness that results from the inhumane circumstances of helplessness, material existence, and ideological hegemony. They can reject imposed identities and express a new identity free of all hegemonic constructs by using representations as a means of resistance, which helps them gain acceptance as human beings.

In the late 1970s, Dalit rhetoric began to permeate Kerala's sociocultural environment, drawing inspiration from Dalit emancipation movements that had already started. Caste-based discrimination and social inequality were at their worst in Kerala and slavery was widespread. The treatment of Dalits in the state of Kerala was extremely appalling, with many people referring them as untouchables. In such a context, Ayyankali, the great social reformer, established the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangam (1907), a well-known outcaste movement that promoted Dalit emancipation and the right to education. Ayyankali took the initiative to accept Dalits into the school after realising the revolutionary potential of education. This caused a large-scale uprising, and the school was destroyed in the ensuing fight. His response was an organised agricultural labour strike, the region's first strike action by oppressed agricultural labourers. They withdrew from paddy fields owned by upper-castes until the government agreed to remove caste-based restrictions on education. During those times, Dalits were not permitted to wear proper clothing and were not permitted to enter a village's main street or ride a cart in front of the upper-castes. In order to inspire confidence and a will to fight against these injustices against Dalits, Ayyankali made the decision to oppose them. He bought two white bullocks and a cart, hung heavy brass bells around their necks, and rode along the public space, which is denied to them. Ayyankali's act of defiance and haughtiness astonished and frightened the upper castes.

Thus Caste organizations, campaigns, and struggles for constitutional reforms for educational and social equality formed some of the resistance

strategies followed by the Dalit leaders and other social reformers in Kerala during the beginning of the 20th century. As Vinayan M. C. has noted, it was under the guidance of these leaders, that the Dalits of Cochin realized the strength of organized resistance. As he observes, the lower castes were not allowed to use any place on land to make a gathering during that period of time. According to Vinayan, Kayal Sammelanam, a meeting organized by the Pulayas of the state in the backwaters of Cochin was the first kind of meeting organized in the water instead of on land. (29) It was an act of resistance that helped them form a consciousness about the need for unity among themselves. In many respects, Kayal Sammelanam marked the beginning of a formal Dalit movement in Kerala. In addition to uniting the untouchable and other underprivileged groups, Kayal Sammelanam laid the groundwork for a powerful Dalit movement that altered Kerala's socioeconomic and political landscape. Such revolutionary attempts sparked the interest of later Dalit writers, who brought forth the predicament of the long silenced and neglected Dalit community in Kerala.

Conclusion

Dalits are a group of marginalised subalterns who lack agency and access to social power, and several Dalit writers and social reformers attempt to deconstruct their past and challenge hegemonic narratives in order to reclaim their agency. Even when a complete transformation is a distant reality, steady progress is attained through their perpetual struggle and resistance.

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