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Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future

The present article is an objective attempt to review the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra.

The Caste System in India

A unique feature of Indian society is its composition on the basis of caste. A number of Indian and foreign sociologists have put forward theories on the class and caste systems. While space does not permit me to discuss all these theories even briefly, it will be appropriate to present the views of Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the father of the Indian Constitution. A Dalit himself, he led a fierce struggle for his caste-fellows' rights.

According to the ancient *dharmashastras* (religious texts) of the Hindus, there were only four *varnas* (classes). The Brahmins were priests; the Kshatriyas, warriors; the Vaishyas, traders and the Shudras, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers doing menial work. This hierarchy is primarily a class system and the development of a society based on class is a world-wide phenomenon.

Dr Ambedkar has traced the development of the caste system in his works *Castes in India — Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *Who were the Shudras?* (1948). In his opinion, Hindu society in the early stages was divided on the basis of class, as had happened the world over.

Later, according to Dr Ambedkar, each of these classes became an enclosed unit, accessible only by birth; in other words, a caste. This development was unique to India. The first to enclose themselves were the priests or Brahmins; soon this exclusivity spread to the other classes too. Dr Ambedkar describes the process as the infection of imitation. He rejects the commonly held view that castes were created by God, or that the caste system evolved as the result of a special evolution of Indian society.

Many researchers have been tempted to credit the origin of the caste system to the sage Manu because *Manusmriti*, a religious text attributed to the sage, justifies the caste system. Commenting on this view, Dr Ambedkar states that castes existed even before Manu who was merely an ardent supporter who canonized the institution, and not the originator, of the system.

Dr Ambedkar realized that to understand the development of the caste system it is necessary to view it as a part of the conditions prevailing at the time and not associate it with religion. He writes: 'Preaching did not make the caste system nor will it unmake it.'

While the four castes — Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras — came to be developed following particular conditions, the caste system and later the class system were given religious sanction in the Hindu texts which were written by the Brahmins. The texts emphasized that the class system was God-made and not man-made. The Brahmins spread the theory that they themselves were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Hence the Brahmins were the most superior, next came the Kshatriyas, and so on. Theories such as this were put forth in the Rigveda which was again claimed to be God-made.

The social, political, economic and religious restrictions laid down by the Brahmins in their religious texts were implemented by the kings or the Kshatriyas. Thus, to follow the duties allotted to a particular caste in the texts became not only a religious obligation but also obedience to a royal order. In other words, religion and the State joined hands and bound the lowest class namely the Shudras into mental, cultural and social slavery and later into untouchability.

The living conditions of these untouchables were shameful. They had no land to till nor could they follow any profession. They did menial work ordered by the higher castes, come rain or shine. Treated like animals, they lived apart from the village, and had to accept leftovers from the higher caste people, in return for their endless toil. Their physical contact was said to 'pollute' the upper castes — even their shadow was said to have the same effect. Hindu religious texts forbade them to wear good clothes or ornaments or even footwear, and prescribed severe and humiliating punishment for violating these orders. Even for a basic necessity like water they were helplessly dependent on the higher castes' good will. The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the

untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.

The caste system in India was based on exploitation. An exploiting system always adheres to the philosophy or system which is most favourable to it, while other systems are either destroyed or corrupted. Social inequality and untouchability were convenient, indeed necessary for the earlier rulers, and were hence retained. Religious sanction was perpetuated and the cultural development and philosophy that supported the exploitation were encouraged to flourish. All revolts against untouchability or social inequality failed.

Thus the untouchables lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice, atrocities — practices totally against humanity. The only thing available to them in plenty was their wretchedness and this was so mingled with every drop of their blood that they forgot their own existence and could hardly dream of freedom or independence. This condition prevailed till the British came to India.

Arrival of the British

The arrival of the British and their establishment as rulers in India severely jolted the social system in India. The British brought with them new knowledge, technology and production processes which in turn led to industrialization. Most importantly, a new, codified legal system replaced the old one dominated by religious restrictions. With the introduction of English and its spread, a new class of literates began to grow.

Human relations began to be examined in the light of ethical values and by the touchstone of scientific enquiry. The work of social reconstruction gained momentum.

A generation of social reformers came into being during the early days of the British rule. However, their reforms were restricted to evils such as child marriage and superstition, that too among the higher classes of society, that is the Brahmins. While the restricted scope of their reforms was excusable in the early days of social awakening and social reconstruction, it cannot be denied that these reformers were intimidated by religion-based values and by those who

jealously guarded these values.

But even in such times there was born a man — Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1828-1890) — who was not intimidated but ruthlessly examined Hindu religion, fiercely attacked those who supported caste superiority and strongly maintained that the backward classes, untouchables and women in the country must be freed from slavery and be allowed to live a life of dignity.

The credit for taking the brilliant, aggressive ideology of Mahatma Phule one step further and rendering it even more brilliant goes to Dr Bheemrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).

Dr Ambedkar, Father of Dalit Literature

It is significant that Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. This explains the various aspects of serious thought in Dalit literature. This literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity. Studying Dalit literature or the role of this literature from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it. Dalit literature must be assessed in the sociological framework. This overall perspective has been conspicuously absent in the review of Dalit literature so far.

A number of researchers have attempted to trace the origins of the Dalit literary movement. Some trace it back to the Buddhist period. For some the originator is the saint-poet Chokhamela (14th C AD). Some give the credit to Mahatma Phule (1828-90) and some to Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957). The researchers maintain that though the term 'Dalit literature' did not exist during this period, concern for Dalits and about the injustice meted to them is first reflected in the writings of these authors and so they can be called pioneers of the Dalit literary movement.

These statements stretch logic too far. While both Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust class structure and while it is true their teachings and ideas are inspiring even today, a historical and objective examination of the situation reveals that it was Dr Ambedkar who was the enabling factor in Dalit literature because

of his ideas, outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just.

The history of Marathi literature indicates that the credit for any new literary stream is given to an author of imaginative literature. In that sense Dr Ambedkar has not done any creative writing. His writing in Marathi is limited to serious articles in some of his own Marathi periodicals like *Mukanayak*, *Bahishkrut*, *Janata* and *Prabudha Bharat*, though his major serious writing is in English.

However, through his struggle against untouchability and socio-economic inequality, he liberated the Dalits in India from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect. It is not possible here to trace the entire history of his struggle against social injustice, but the extent of his authority can be well estimated from the fact that his foes included both the British rulers and the Indian National Congress influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.

The Dalit literary movement has today reached various parts of India and the literature is now growing in almost all Indian languages. Yet it is no coincidence that its beginning took place in the Marathi language in Maharashtra. Dr Ambedkar was from Maharashtra and the Dalit multitudes there supported him fearlessly and loyally. Dr Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits, who can today hold their heads high thanks to him. The literary manifestation of this social awareness is Dalit literature.

The Development of Dalit Literature

A question that often arises is: if Dalit literature originated with Dr Ambedkar why did the Dalit literary movement flourish only after Dr Ambedkar's death? This is due to a number of reasons.

Before Dr Ambedkar, the untouchables led a life of poverty, ignorance and misery. Dr Ambedkar's call awakened the man in the Dalit and this common Dalit man joined the movement with all his strength. How could those who had just been awakened, who had never known life as normal human beings, who had no cultural or literary legacy, have any literary consciousness? In fact, even expecting it of them is unreasonable.

However, during this period, Dalit artists did participate in the movement by composing songs and writing ballads, and through

traditional folk arts such as *tamasha* and *jalsa*. The literary expression of Dr Ambedkar's philosophy and movement during his lifetime was more or less of this kind. However, it did not last long, as it was topical in nature and had a basis of propaganda.

Just as literature originated as a part of Dr Ambedkar's movement, even before this movement, around 1920, there were attempts by writers to represent the miserable conditions of the Dalits to the British government. These writers attacked the *Manusmriti* and the cruel practices of Hinduism. Among them were Gopalbaba Valangkar, Pandit Kondiram and Kisan Phagoji Bansod. Gopalbaba Valangkar, who wrote in English, was in the Indian army and tried to organize public opinion when the British stopped the military recruitment of untouchable youths. Though Kisan Phagoji Bansod opposed Dr Ambedkar when the latter announced his conversion to Buddhism at Yewle in north Maharashtra in 1935, his own poetry fiercely attacked Hinduism. Dalit literature, thus, was being written in a very small way before Dr Ambedkar's movement.

Dr Ambedkar was a far-sighted, constructive politician and sociologist. He founded the People's Education Society in Bombay in 1945 and started the Siddharth College in Bombay as he believed that education opens out new avenues and that Dalits should have access to them. His message, 'Unite, Educate and Agitate', was being followed by more and more people. A number of movements were being launched on political and social fronts.

Around 1950, when the first batch of Dalit youths graduated from college, Ghanashyam Talwatkar and others set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh. The Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was later formed from this body. In spite of the Dalit name, the literature of these people continued to show the influence of white-collar values. The major questions faced by them were: our life and problems are different from those of others. Can these be formulated into literature? Will such literature be accepted?

The literature of this period appeared chiefly in *Prabuddha Bharat*, the mouthpiece of the Republican Party of India (formerly the Scheduled Castes Federation) and in the Dalit magazines brought out at the time of Dr Ambedkar's birth anniversary. The Marathi literary scene during this period was dominated by Brahminical writers like V.S. Khandekar and N.S. Phadke, and Dalit literature was not exempt from their influence. Dalit literature did present problems or stories concerning Dalits, but this literature was still set in the mould

of Khandekar and Phadke.

In other words, some Dalits had 'Brahminized' themselves and attempted to speak, read and write like Brahmins. They wanted to forget the past. They did not have the courage to face reality. The Dalit literature of this period fell victim to the so-called cultural values of the time.

It would not be fair to hold these Dalit writers responsible for their slavish mentality, which was the natural reaction of a deprived life. A salient feature of this period was the honest desire of some writers to have a separate Dalit literature. They tried to shape this literature as much as they could.

This period also saw the rise of Anna Bhau Sathe (? – 1969). Influenced by Marxism and the writings of Maxim Gorky, he portrayed effectively the life of the Dalits and gave voice to their hopes and aspirations. Anna Bhau Sathe stands out prominently among progressive Marxist artists and writers who followed Marxism by the book. An outlook towards literature and life influenced by Marxism, his sense of belonging as a Dalit to Dr Ambedkar's movement, his deep understanding of society and literature and his firsthand experience of Dalit life enriched his writing.

Indifference of Progressive Writers

One finds there have been some major socially oriented streams in Marathi literature. Gandhian literature influenced by the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the progressive literature influenced by Marxism are two such examples. The Dalits however did not feel an affinity for the Marxist literature of dissent, though the latter was influenced by a philosophy which spoke for the exploited and the poor, and reflected the feelings of the lowest stratum of society. The Dalits did not consider this literature a part of their literary tradition.

Though Dr Ambedkar led an agitation with Comrade Dange against the 'Black Act' in 1938, this alliance gave a fillip to the labour movement but did not form an atmosphere for the origination of a social revolution. The upper caste leadership, inspired by the Russian Revolution, did not feel the need to revolt against casteism and eradicate the internal contradictions among the exploited classes. The progressive writers did not try to permeate to the lowest stratum.

There are many — political, social and cultural — reasons for this attitude of the Dalits. Why did the progressive literature of this period not portray the major events in Dr Ambedkar's life such as the Satyagraha at Mahad in 1927, or at Nashik in 1930? Or try to analyse why Dr Ambedkar who founded the Independent Labour Party in 1936 and chalked out a class-based programme, later dissolved it and set up the Scheduled Castes Federation whose basis was caste?

An author or an artist of this period could not detach himself from the influence of his traditional upbringing, whatever philosophy he professed to follow. This is true even today. The fault does not lie with his philosophy. The fault, if any, lies with his psychological and social weakness. These traditional influences are reflected not only in the lives of the writers but also in their works. To sum up, the progressive literature of this period was restricted only to the capitalist-labour conflict and this conflict was often portrayed unrealistically, being greatly influenced by romanticism. The movement of progressive literature received a setback and was revived only as late as 1960.

The First Dalit Literary Conference

The conversion of Dr Ambedkar along with innumerable followers from caste dominated Hinduism to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 was an event not only of religious significance but also of social and cultural importance. The Dalits now found a way to a new cultural life. Arising out of this was the need to have a separate conference of Dalit writers. The need for such a conference had been noted by Mahatma Phule about a hundred years ago when in his letter to the Marathi Granthakar Sabha (the annual assembly now called the Sahitya Sammelan) he remarked about non-Dalit writers: 'The feelings expressed in our meetings and books do not appear in books written by them or in their meetings. How will people with their heads in the clouds understand what adversities and troubles we have faced?' (*Mahatma Phule: Samagra Vangmaya* p. 300). The conference was actually scheduled for December 1956 under the presidentship of Dr Ambedkar but his untimely death on 6 December 1956 put off the conference. (*Prabuddha Bharat*, 18-1-58).

The first conference of Dalit writers was in the event organized in Bombay in 1958 by the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha.

'Bandhumadav' in his article in the *Prabuddha Bharat* of

15 February 1958 explains the necessity for such a conference and its aim. 'Just as the Russian writers helped the revolution by spreading Lenin's revolutionary ideas through their works, our writers should spread Dr Ambedkar's philosophy to the villages... Politics is just one way of attacking opposition. Unless we attack from all sides we cannot defeat those who have inflicted injustice on us for the last thousands of years.'

Many feel that the term 'Dalit literature' came to be used after a stormy discussion organized by the periodical *Marathwada* in its Diwali issue of 1969. It cannot be debated that the use of this term during the discussion added to the respectability of the term. But in fact, the 1958 conference discussed Dalit literature in detail and passed the following resolution: 'Resolution No. 5 — that the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as "Dalit literature" and realizing its cultural importance, the universities and literary organizations should give it its proper place.' (*Prabuddha Bharat*, 4-3-58).

The first conference of the Dalit writers went almost unnoticed. No daily or weekly or magazine except Acharya Atre's *Maratha* took any notice of it. The indifference of the established class towards the Dalits, their problems and their literature is reflected in this attitude.

The inaugural speech by Anna Bhau Sathe spelt out the purpose of Dalit literature but it failed to set into motion any literary activity. In fact, barring a few exceptions, there were no Dalit writers of calibre at that time.

Conditions After Dr Ambedkar's Death

There were several reasons why the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh did not become a platform for Dalit literature or Dalit writers. An important reason was the split in the Republican Party after the death of Dr Ambedkar. Hoping to build a strong opposition party to sustain democracy in the country, Dr Ambedkar wanted to bring together all those who believed in economic and social equality. He corresponded with prominent politicians of the time — Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, S.M. Joshi and Acharya Atre. He proposed to dissolve his caste-based party, the Scheduled Castes Federation, and set up a wider Republican Party. But he passed away before anything could take

shape.

Two years after Dr Ambedkar's death, his so-called political heirs set up the Republican Party of India. But personal rivalry afflicted the party. It joined the Samyukata Maharashtra Samiti which was formed for the struggle for a separate Maharashtra state. Some leaders with middle-class attitudes felt that the R.P. should not have ties with Communists.

As those associated with Dalit literature were part of the R.P., the result of the differences and factionalism were reflected in Dalit literature and the Dalit movement, and this stormy conflict continues even today.

Dr Ambedkar's life and philosophy are a source of inspiration to all Dalit writers. But there is one group of creative artists, thinkers and writers who feel that Ambedkarism and Marxism support each other. In other words, they want to fight on both class and caste levels. Another group considers Ambedkarism complete and does not want any other 'ism' to be grafted on to it. A third stream of thought is of those who want to have Buddhist literature rather than Dalit literature. This last was a weak stream of thought and did not develop systematically.

Baburao Bagul : The Writer who Gave Momentum to Dalit Literature

The sixties were an important decade for Marathi literature. A number of new streams appeared during this period. Narayan Surve's poetry which portrayed the problems of the workers came into being during this period. This period is also characterized by the Little Magazine movement and the emergence of the Angry Young Man in Marathi literature. Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat had been writing about the Dalits. But in the sixties were published some stories which gave great momentum to Dalit literature. These were by Baburao Bagul. His stories rebelled against the social system and gave it a jolt. His collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) took the entire Marathi literary world by storm. It was hailed by Marathi periodicals and reviewers. Some thought it resembled the jazz music of the Blacks, for some others it was the epic of the Dalits. Some regarded the ten stories in the collection as ten electric shocks. The collection of stories had not only the power to disturb but also raised several new questions in Marathi literature.

Before this, many had felt that their experiences, their life, their revolutionary views should be put into words and that these could be subjects of poetry or prose. But they were also confused by the question of how this should be done. The collection of short stories by Bagul helped to give them the strength to bear their scorching experiences and shape these experiences creatively. In this way Baburao helped to shape Dalit literature and by showing how to combine creativity with thought he inspired many writers to render more effective the feelings of suffering expressed by Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat.

The Little Magazine Movement

Besides Narayan Surve's poetry which was highly influenced by Marxism and which revived progressive literature and the literature by Dalit writers, a third stream of thought in the sixties was the movement by the Angry Young Men to publish Little Magazines. All the three streams were generally a revolt against the establishment and as such were sympathetic to one another. A number of Dalit writers wrote in the Little Magazines. In fact Baburao Bagul's rebellious poems were published in the Little Magazine *Fakta*.

Many people say that this movement was a literary fraud or humbug. But this was the view of the ivory-tower critics, and the movement was not as they portrayed it. Of course, some facetious acts took place in this movement, such as burning the literary magazine *Satyakatha* or holding poets' gatherings in running buses or in public urinals. While such things may be necessary in a movement, there has to be a discipline and a conceptual framework for such 'novel' acts. Such a discipline was lacking and thus these acts appeared to be only an empty display.

The Little Magazine movement could not take root. When we try to trace the reasons for this, we can also understand why the Dalit literary movement grew rapidly.

The publication of Little Magazines was a movement, and a movement implies action by a team. The first step is to identify the enemy of the movement. The proponents of the Little Magazine movement claimed they were fighting against the establishment. But as they wrongly identified a magazine like *Satyakatha* or a popular writer with the establishment, the movement became personalized

and person-oriented. The enemies of a movement are not individuals but systems and while fighting against a system, one has to think of an alternative one. Here, the struggle was mainly against an established technique of writing. The stand of the movement's members was: 'We shall write the way we feel; who are you to dictate to us?' Except that they used some words to denote the sexual organs and wrote to convey the depressed feeling: 'Ours is a ball-less generation', it is difficult to distinguish the literature of those Angry Young Men from that of the established writers.

If these men had any sociological imagination, they would not have called themselves 'ball-less'. They would have discussed the stagnation in Marathi literature and critically analysed the values and ideas resulting from the social system here. They would have expressed this literature in terms of new literary values. We see here how creativity is destroyed for lack of social orientation. Besides, running a Little Magazine is also an economically affordable activity. What happened in this case was that anybody at all with the help of some friends and a little money published a 'non-periodical'. Hence the initial awe or seriousness of this movement petered out. While fighting against the establishment some angry young men became part of it.

Though the movement did not become successful, it did have some literary advantages. Writers expressed themselves boldly. The equation that the elitist critics have the last word was challenged. Landmarks like *Kosala* by Bhalchandra Nemade appeared. Leading writers and poets like Satish Kalsekar, Tulsi Parab and Raja Dhale related their literature to the Dalit and toiling masses.

Whether in the field of literature or in the cultural or economic fields, rebellion separated from social relevance becomes meaningless and has no effect on an unjust system. People who believe in the autonomy of literature may find this difficult to accept, but I feel that the autonomy of a work of art does not mean separating it from life or society.

Progressive Literature

A review of the movement of progressive literature of this period shows that a large number of books were published. However, none of these had the power of Narayan Surve's poetry as seen in his two

anthologies: *Aisa Ga Mi Bramha* or *Majhe Vidyapeeth*. Poems in these anthologies have given a new direction to Marathi poetry and it is a matter of great regret that there was no writing or writer of this calibre in the movement during this period. My statement refers not to critical literature or the literature of ideas but to creative literary works. The reasons why the progressive movement did not get momentum are more or less the same as those explaining the conditions in the early phases of the movement.

The movement of progressive literature which grew under the influence of Marxism was not continuous but it forced Marathi critical thought to come out of the mysterious aura surrounding it. *Sahitya ani Samaj Jeevan*, a critical work by Lalji Pendse published in 1937, was certainly revolutionary in approach. The earlier approach that viewed ancient literature as divine changed and such literature was more objectively assessed. This brought a new meaning to examining a work of literature. Reviewing literature with the help of historical materialism could now explain why a particular type of literature was created during a particular period. Literature began to be related to the then existing social conditions, and began to be viewed from the sociological point of view. The critical theory of the progressive literary movement not only augmented the strength of criticism of social realism but also gave it a kind of respectability. Marxist critics like S.A. Dange, B.R. Sunthakar, G.B. Sardar, Sharatchandra Muktibodh and D.K. Bedekar or those critics who were influenced by this new form of criticism — V.S. Khandekar, G.T. Madkholkar, Kusumavati Deshpande — have together given us a different way of looking at Marathi literature.

The Centre of the Dalit Literary Movement

After reviewing the streams contemporary to the movement of Dalit literature, let us return to the movement. As a result of the setting up of Milind College by Dr Ambedkar in Aurangabad, Marathwada emerged as the centre of the movement. A majority of students in this college were from the rural areas and most of the staff members were Dalits. The non-Dalit staff members too were associated with the Dalit movement. Ideas about literary and cultural revolution were exchanged. The Dalits contributed to the college annual and the guidance came from Principal M.B. Chitnis. Principal M.N. Wankhade who had been to the U.S. for

his higher studies also returned about the same time to Aurangabad and brought with him the mordancy of Black literature, its feeling of revolt, the shocking experiences reflected in it, the forms in which it manifested itself. He made a comparative study of the Dalits and the Blacks.

1967 is an important year for the movement. The Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Parishad had held its conference in Bhusawal that year on 30 April. Speaking as the president of this conference, Dr M.N. Wankhade raised some fundamental questions. Reviewing the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the literature of the saints and modern Marathi literature, he noted that Dalit literature has no place in it. Like the Blacks, Dalit writers should revolt and produce their own literature through which they could present their problems.

Asmitadarsha: Quarterly with Literary Awe

The students and the staff of Milind College, Aurangabad wanted to have their own literary forum: so they established the Milind Sahitya Parishad. A fund was raised with the help of students and a new quarterly *Asmita* (now *Asmitadarsha*) was launched. In the very first issue, it included a discussion on the topic 'Cultural Conflict in Maharashtra and Literary Problems' which showed the direction in which Dalit literature was going. The magazine broke the feeling of suffocation which the Dalit writers faced. It encouraged the new generation of creative Dalit writers. The self-confidence which the Dalit writers gained helped them to take the movement still further. While established and socially conscious writers contributed regularly, a number of newcomers also joined them. Daya Pawar has traced the growth of this stream of authors in his article '*Upekshitanchya Navya Janeeva*' (New Concerns of the Neglected) in *Pratishthan* (July 69). The literary awe inspired by *Asmitadarsha* right from the beginning was not only because of Dalit writers and intellectuals but also because of progressive Marxist critics such as Sharatchandra Muktibodh, Waman Ingale, P.S. Nerurkar, Dr S.B. Karhade and Narayan Surve.

An Important Phase in the Movement

Yet another significant event in 1967 was the literary meet held in Bombay on behalf of the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. This

meet brought together people from various places like Bombay, Aurangabad, Solapur and Nashik who were involved in the literary movement. The discussions held during the course of the conference helped to answer questions related to the movement and many things in common were discovered. The first representative collection of poems by the Dalits, *Akar*, was published in this conference. *Akar* included poems by Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Prof. Yadavrao Gangurde, Bandhumadhav, Chokha Kamble, Hira Bansode, etc. While *Akar* brought together Dalit poems for the first time in book form, except Baburao Bagul and one or two other poets, the poets did not appear to have any social awareness. Their poetry revolved around traditional, white-collar experiences. As a result the anthology failed to gain any attention or respect.

Baburao Bagul's second collection of short stories *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Getting Cheaper) won the State award in 1968 — a landmark in the history of Marathi short stories — and hence became a topic of discussion. The white-collar writer of those days portrayed life in the slums 'artistically', from the white-collar point of view. Neither the readers with entertainment-oriented middle-class tastes nor the elitist reviewers appreciated these stories with a new content. Their appraisal did not go beyond the techniques of expression. This was quite natural since Marathi critics were brought up in an environment of middle-class values, with no sociological base and with white-collar experiences. Nothing more was expected of them. As noted by Arjun Dangle in the *Maharashtra Times* (15 October 1972): 'It is difficult to write about Baburao's stories. Their shrewd rusticity and their jolting experiences take his stories much beyond the normal limits of the short story. These stories cannot be set in the framework of traditional values of art. The rationale for separate standards of criticism for Dalit literature can be found here.'

In spite of these attitudes of the elitist critics of white-collar reviewers, this collection of Bagul's was well received and the only reason for this was that Bagul presented harsh reality for the first time in Marathi literature.

An interesting point here is that this portrayal of harsh reality presented in Dalit literature or in Bagul's short stories was regarded very highly until Baburao Bagul explained how this literature came to be created. The same critics felt that the best stories of Bagul were valueless and of a propagandist nature when Bagul explained that the roots of this creation could be traced to particular social conditions.

Their attitude changed when Bagul spoke for change, denied the tradition they upheld and held up revolt, negativism and loyalty to science as his values, and opposed the communal, reactionary philosophy. Later Namdeo Dhasal, the reputed Dalit poet, also went through a similar experience.

White-collar Attitudes among Dalits

After 1968, thinking critics from Dalit society started to put forth their views about Dalit literature and its role. A number of younger writers appeared in periodicals such as *Asmitadarsha*. The factionalism in the Republican Party, the inaction of its leaders, the fatigue which had set into the Dalit movement and literature as a result of this inaction and the harsh social reality arising out of contemporary issues provided a backdrop to their writing. Almost all young Dalit writers started with poetry and unfurled various aspects of experience on various planes in their language. The poets Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Umakant Randhir and J.V. Pawar, and short story writers Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram and Bhimrao Shirwale are a few who developed during this period.

The effective and sharp standpoint of Dalit literature is seen in a discussion in the Diwali 1969 issue of the *Marathwada*. In their articles, Dr Wankhade, Prof. Chitnis, Daya Pawar and Baburao Bagul rejected the mainstream literary tradition and revolted so strongly that even thinkers and reviewers who were proud of their tradition were shocked.

It will be wrong to state that the idea of Dalit literature was rejected by all white-collar or upper-caste reviewers. In fact, critics like W.L. Kulkarni, D.K. Bedekar, R.G. Jadhav and Sharatchandra Muktibodh upheld it and, though their approbation had different shades, it was honest. However, as seen from the various meetings, seminars and discussions, the treatment meted out by most upper-caste reviewers to Dalit literature was stepmotherly. This can be understood, but some educated people from amongst the Dalits too viewed Dalit literature very negatively. They wanted to forget their past, could not face the harsh social realities surrounding them and were filled with an inferiority complex. They took all the benefits of

the concessions resulting from Dr Ambedkar's movement, but the movement made no impact on them. They believed that with their individual prosperity society also had prospered.

These 'Dalit Brahmins' felt (and feel even today) that Dalit literature was something dirty which had tarnished the image of their society. They wanted to speak, write, and live like Brahmins and missed no opportunity to ridicule Dalit literature.

The propaganda against Baburao Bagul's novel *Paushya*, then being serialized in *Amhi*, and against *Athvaninche Pakshi*, an autobiographical serial by Prof. P.E. Sonkamble, was the result of this attitude of the 'Dalit Brahmins'. *Paushya* portrayed society before the Ambedkar movement. *Athvaninche Pakshi* was a heart-rending portrayal of the mind of an orphan Dalit child and youth.

When one examines the views of these 'Dalit Brahmins' who equate the depiction of the pitiable conditions of the Dalits with their derogation — in particular, their views about society or about the means to change the contemporary social system, about revolutionary movements and struggles — one gets an idea not only of their middle-class attitude but also of their mental impotence. Not all well-placed Dalits, however, share this view-point.

The point to be noted is that just as the non-Dalit upper classes viewed Dalit literature in a particular way, the Dalit elite also saw it from its own angle. What is interesting is that those who maintained earlier that Dalit literature glorifies Maharwadas or Mangwadas and was communal, later proudly called themselves 'Dalit writers'. This might have been due to their opportunism but one cannot deny that it was also caused by the advance of the movement.

The Dalit Literary Meet at Mahad

During the same tumultuous period, a literary meet was held at Mahad by the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. Mahad has a significant place in the history of the Dalit movement. Dr Ambedkar had begun his revolution here in 1927 with the Chavadar Tale Satyagraha and by making a bonfire of the *Manusmriti*.

Baburao Bagul presided over the literary meet and his presidential speech showed how well he deserved the honour. Emphasizing the necessity for a separate Dalit literature in view of the social, cultural and economic conditions in Maharashtra, he articulately defined Dalit

literature. The depth of his thoughts and reflections about Dalit literature was seen here and his meaningful approach was not only welcomed by Dalit writers and intellectuals but also by others. Hence it would not be an exaggeration to state that this meet was a revolutionary landmark in the Dalit literary movement. Various aspects of Dalit life and problems, so different from those of others, were discussed and developed scientifically and the philosophical foundation of Dalit literature in its relation to the social, cultural and political movement was highlighted so logically that many thought Bagul's speech was a manifesto of Dalit literature.

Rise of New Periodicals

The groping of Dalit writers was now over. They confidently expressed their feelings. *Asmitadarsha*, under the editorship of Prof. Gangadhar Pantavane, was an important platform for the Dalit literary movement. Contributions by Dalit writers also appeared in *Satyakatha*, *Pratishthan*, *Marathwada*, etc.

Dalit literature was proliferating rapidly and a quarterly like *Asmitadarsha* could not accommodate it all. Realizing the necessity for periodicals which would give Dalit writers their due place, Baburao Bagul launched *Amhi* with the help of his friends from all strata of society. *Amhi* was well received all over Maharashtra because of its wide-based standpoint. The publication however wound up within a year, for Baburao Bagul could not manage the practical business of running a periodical.

The vacuum so created was filled in to some extent by *Magova* — published first in April 1972 from Shahada (Dist. Dhule) — which got its strength from the Adivasi movement. Of all the periodicals run by non-Dalits, *Magova* took the most balanced view. The Dalits also felt a feeling of oneness with *Magova* as its views were based on sound sociological principles. Later *Magova* took an extreme leftist approach and was riddled with separatism. A number of friends including Dalit workers drifted away from the magazine owing to this separatism.

The Need for a New Point of View

Around the same time, that is, in 1972, another event occurred which shook the world of Marathi poetry and its traditional values: the

publication of *Golpitha*. In this collection of poems, the young poet Namdeo Dhasal aggressively expressed his experiences. While the critics were discussing another collection of Dalit poems, *Gaokusabheril Kavita* by Waman Nimbalkar, *Golpitha*, which portrayed the explosive expression of the acute pain of the Dalits, raised a number of questions about values in Marathi literature and language.

Golpitha contained a language unfamiliar to Marathi literature. Just as we need to establish new values to appreciate Dalit literature, we need a new dictionary to understand its language. *Athvaninche Pakshi* by Prof. P.E. Sonkamble illustrates this point. The author has narrated a number of poignant memories and critical events in his life, using the original language of the Mahars. Sonkamble effectively portrays how shameful and difficult the childhood of an untouchable is. *Doha* by Shrinivas Kulkarni is a much discussed work in Marathi, which explores the mind of a child. Various beautiful nuances of nature seen in *Doha* do not appear in Sonkamble's writings. For how could someone whose mind is involved in the harsh conflict of life get attracted to nature? If an ivory-tower reviewer does not have an idea of the conflict, or understand the nuances of language in these experiences, how can he attempt a review of such a work? If he cannot grasp even the nature of such a work of art, how can he know its rhythm, the inscape of its experience, its form, its capacity for development?

If those who attempt to study the 'foreign snow' in the poetry of Grace or the Greek mythology in Dilip Chitre's poetry also attempt to understand the social reality and the literary manifestation of what sprouts from our own soil, a number of misconceptions can be avoided.

An invisible wall appears to stand between *Doha* and *Athvaninche Pakshi*. Various strata — of experience, thought, social status, etc. — appear in this wall. This weakens the belief that art is unrestricted and beyond any class. Nobody would insist that Marathi critics should live through all these experiences before writing their review. But it is not unreasonable to expect them to study the Indian social system, the caste system, the internal contradictions, the economic and social picture of a village, Indian culture, current Indian politics and so on.

The Birth of the Dalit Panthers

The dominant Maratha caste has tightened its grip on important economic centres in rural agriculture — such as land development banks, marketing federations, district banks, sugar factories — in the name of the co-operative movement which is being controlled almost in a capitalist-monopolist manner. The movement has been backed by the State.

This changed economic picture brought further misery to the Dalits in the village. The rich farmers and the bureaucracy controlled by them initiated a series of atrocities on the Dalits. Untouchable, landless Dalit labour fell prey to these atrocities. So did the worker in the Dalit movement, who raised his voice against them.

In cities and towns, the numbers of unemployed youth were increasing in droves as a result of the capitalist system. With the spread of education in the rural areas, there began to develop a class of educated Dalit youth, who had hitherto been kept away from the local economic or political system. Their association with workers of the leftist movements in rural areas gave them the ability to understand the entire system.

In Bombay, Baburao Bagul and his young Dalit writer friends Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Umakant Randhir, Ramdas Sorte and Prahlad Chendwankar met and had discussions for hours. The young generation was influenced by Baburao Bagul who had personally participated in the movement of Dalit labourers and who expressed himself clearly and logically.

The inaction of all factions of the Republican Party against social injustice was conspicuous. Except for support by one or two from the party, the other leftist parties were indifferent.

Dalit writers began to realize more and more that there was no point in merely writing provocative poetry against this injustice. They had become familiar with the Black movement and literature in the U.S.A. and were greatly attracted to it.

The result was that youths Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar took the initiative and established the Dalit Panthers in Bombay on 9 July, 1972. The Panthers observed Independence Day that year, which incidentally was the silver jubilee of Independence, as Black Day and black-flag demonstrations were held at various places in Bombay. In the storm following Raja Dhale's article in the special issue of *Sadhana* in which he made strong comments about the Indian

national flag, the Panthers supported *Sadhana* and Raja Dhale. The Dalits of Maharashtra got acquainted with the Panthers and the discontent of several years began to explode.

I do not wish to discuss here the basis, points of differences of opinion or the future of the organization. The important point here is that the Dalit Panthers came to be established through the Dalit literary movement. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers. A wave of literature expressing one's experience in provocative language swept over Marathi literature. Maharashtra was again charged with discussions on Dalit literature and language. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active and led a movement.

Internal Conflict

The period between 1972 and 1978 can be regarded as the second stage in the Dalit literary movement. Several collections of short stories by Dalit writers were published and discussions on these were taking place. Like *Magova*, *Asmitadarsha* leaned towards the right. The split in the Dalit Panthers led to strife and an internal conflict about Marxism vis-a-vis Ambedkarism. This, I feel, was the handiwork of some who had vested personal interests.

Another non-literary group which was complementary to the Panthers was the one which believed in writing Buddhist literature instead of Dalit literature, as they were no longer Dalits, but neo-Buddhists. This group did not define Buddhist literature nor did they put forth their theoretical standpoint. The so-called Buddhist men of literature proved ineffectual because of lack of creativity and baseless propaganda.

During this period, Dalit literature had gained respectability. Several books, periodicals and special issues on Dalit literature were being published. But at the collective level the movement appeared stagnant. There were two reasons for this. One: the initial team spirit and action were being eroded and internal conflict substituted for these. Secondly, as some Dalit writers got recognition, new vested interests came to the fore.

The Period of Autobiographies

About the period between 1978 and 1986 nothing new need be said. A number of Dalit writers received State awards. Dalit literature came

to be included in school as well as university level textbooks. It was being translated into various Indian and foreign languages. New writers scattered all over cities, districts and villages shot into prominence and publishers were interested in the literary works of Dalits. The Dalit literary movement now spread to the other states and languages of India as well. Dalit literature no longer continued as a movement as there was no complementary social or political movement.

In other words, Dalit writers found it more necessary to maintain their own personal prestige than that of the movement. A number of Dalit literary works became well-known during this period which could well be said to be the period of autobiographies.

These autobiographies became famous for several reasons. An autobiography was not restricted to the life of a Dalit writer. It was a delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils. Written without glossing over any facts, these autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature but also exposed the many facets of the Indian social system and the social and economic injustice nurtured by it. *Baluta* (Daya Pawar), *Athvaninche Pakshi* (Prof. P.E. Sonkamble) and *Upara* (Laxman Mane) are some remarkable autobiographies, while those written by women writers like Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Mukta Sarvagod and Babytai Kamble are also noteworthy. The awards given by the Ford Foundation to *Baluta* and *Upara* are indicative of the responsibility shown by Dalit literature to raise Marathi literature to an international status. For, *Baluta* and *Upara* were the first Marathi books to win these awards.

In concluding the introduction to my *Dalit Sahitya — Ek Abhyas* I noted, 'The first to set their feet on the land of Dalit experiences were the Dalits themselves. Secondly, this literature of the Dalits is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented. The creation of Dalit literature is unavoidable and inevitable until the nature of this harsh social reality changes. I do not consider that all Dalit literature is great, nor do I insist that others should do so, but a major responsibility rests with Dalit writers in the event of the Ford Foundation awards.'

Problems facing Dalit Literature

After having made a rapid resume of the history of the Dalit literary movement, it is necessary, I feel, to discuss general points regarding the role of Dalit literature and its literary value. I wish to highlight mainly the following points:

1) Untouchability in the Indian social system and its cultural, social and economic effects.

2) Dr Ambedkar's movement and other movements in Maharashtra.

3) The acceptance of Buddhism by the Dalits.

4) Dalit literature vis-a-vis the tradition of Marathi literature.

5) The necessity for separate literary organizations, periodicals and literary meets in view of the separate nature and indispensability of Dalit literature.

6) Who are the Dalits?

7) New values of criticism and aesthetics.

8) A new mythology.

9) Repetition in the presentation of experiences.

10) Artistic neutrality.

11) Literature and social revolution.

12) Dalit and Black literatures.

13) Philosophies of Buddha, Marx and Ambedkar.

14) Dalit literature is not separatist.

Various aspects of these points have been and are being discussed. Dalit literature is the movement of creative artists and it is necessary that it grows in a healthy manner. I feel that to retain its momentum, it is necessary to keep in mind the above points.

Dalit writers should objectively examine themselves in the light of the following:

a) Very aggressive and crude language is used in the name of Dalit literature to write short stories on social injustice or atrocities. This is more so in the case of poetry.

b) Dalit literature is not restricted only to Buddhists (i.e. the Mahars of yesteryear).

c) One should not try to fit a short story or a poem forcibly into the framework of an 'ism'.

d) The portrayal of emotions in reaction to Dalit life should be done on various levels.

e) It is necessary to relate the revolutionary aspect of Dalit

literature with that of world literature.

f) Dalit writers should avoid striking the pose that a writer is different from others in society.

Society and literature are closely related. If we examine literature in the light of social change, we note that it is not the one and only medium to bring about that change. Each medium has its own in-built strength. It is inevitable that values of life are spread through literature, but if one does not have a correct estimate of the strength of this medium, one cannot use it effectively. It is an illusion to believe that literature alone can create a revolution. To bring about a revolution, one should have the necessary philosophy and a plan of action, and a group to implement them.

Of the points I have made above, it is necessary to discuss the second and the third points in detail. Just as these two points are related closely to the Dalit literary movement and its future, they are also associated with the political and social movements.

We shall emphasize only the literary aspect here. The scope of the Dalit literary movement should be widened and should not be restricted to the Buddhists. This question is not raised by writers; it also has political and social roots.

Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and the Struggle for Independence

A struggle to free untouchables took place in Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar. Of the untouchables, the Mahars who outnumbered the rest and were also more also more organized, loyally supported Dr Ambedkar. The other constituents of the untouchables — the Mangs, Chamars, Dhors, nomadic tribes etc. — did not participate in the movement as much as was expected of them. In fact they stayed away.

One reason for this separatist tendency was in the Freedom Movement and the campaigns for the upliftment of the untouchables, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Another reason may be found in the internal conflict caused amongst the untouchables by the social system.

The Mahars had no place in the rural economy. They had no traditional profession, no land to till, no means of production. They had to do any available work in the village and lived on left-over food doled out by the upper castes. On the other hand, the remaining

untouchable castes had their traditional means of livelihood. For instance, making ropes was the job of the Mangs. Secondly, the Mahars had a martial tradition and were well organized. Thirdly, Dr Ambedkar himself was a Mahar. All these factors contributed to their participation in Dr Ambedkar's movement.

There were strong differences of opinion between Dr Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi regarding the upliftment of Dalit society. It was not in the interest of Mahatma Gandhi or the Indian National Congress to allow the influence of Dr Ambedkar to extend to all untouchables, as Dr Ambedkar actively participated in politics and opposed the Congress. The Congress began to build up leadership at the national level from amongst other groups of Dalits to stop the advance of Dr Ambedkar, and this brought Babu Jagjivan Ram into prominence. Dr Ambedkar opined that the Congress was a handmaiden of the capitalists and the upper castes.

Internal Conflict among the Dalits

The Mahars who derived their energy from the movement led by Dr Ambedkar later began to shine in various fields. This started a cultural conflict which continues even today. Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was a revolutionary change in the life of the Dalits, which was conspicuous in their socio-cultural life and also in their mental make-up.

Therefore one should view this conversion to Buddhism not only as a religious event but also in its socio-cultural context. It is regrettable that not all untouchables became Buddhists. Barring a few, most Dalit writers and artists are Buddhists and hence Dalit literature today is not as wide-based as it should have been.

This width is not regarding the role of writers but with reference to experiences of other Dalits and their participation in the movement. The life and experiences of Chamars, Mangs, Dhors, Holars, Ramoshis, Bhils, nomadic tribes, Nandiwale, Adivasis etc. need to be portrayed. We find an educated class being formed in these groups. But there are not many writers. These groups neither accepted the revolutionary leadership of Dr Ambedkar nor did they as a group join leftist parties. Their leaders tried to compromise with the establishment and gain some profits for themselves. Thus the aggressive fearlessness found amongst the Buddhist youths is lacking

in them, but some signs of it have begun to appear now.

Buddhist Philosophy, Marxism and Dr Ambedkar

It is necessary to discuss the theoretical differences among the philosophies of Dr Ambedkar, Buddhism and Marxism. Some feel that Ambedkarism and Buddhism are diagonally opposite to Marxism. This conflict is important, as the splits in the Dalit movement at various times are over this issue. In 1958, the Republican Party split on the issue of co-operation with the Communists. In 1975, the Dalit Panthers broke up for the same reason. One sees two main streams in the Dalit literary movement: one of those who believe that the philosophies of Ambedkar and Buddha are complete in themselves and the other, of those who also wish to seek help from Communism and Socialism.

Dr Ambedkar was not a fierce opponent of Marxism. In the World Buddhist Conference held in Kathmandu in November 1956, when speaking on 'Buddhism and Communism' he maintained that the two were similar. The only difference between the two was that while Marxism does not reject violence to achieve power, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes non-violence, mercy, love, and so on.

Even earlier, on 28 October 1954, Dr Ambedkar, speaking at the Purandare Stadium in Bombay, had declared, 'Let others go where they will. We will follow the path of Jyotiba. We may or may not take Marx with us but we will certainly not abandon Jyotiba's philosophy.' This does not mean that Ambedkar supported Marxism; however, he was not blindly opposed to it. He had full faith in democracy. But to him it was not only a political system, but also a system for the establishment of egalitarian values in social and economic life. He fought for it throughout his life, fearing no one.

It will be useful to know why there is a debate regarding only Ambedkarism, Marxism and Buddhism in the context of Dalit literature. Why is there no parallel discussion about the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi, Golwalkar Guruji or Hitler?

The answer is quite simple. The source of inspiration for Dalit literature is the centre of Dr Ambedkar's movement — the common man, exploited on the economic, social and cultural fronts. Marxism centres around such exploitation and Buddhist philosophy too talks about the common man and his miseries. These philosophies reflect

the rebellious reactions against exploitation during the periods when these philosophies developed. Both these philosophies consider how to foster the development of man, and while, in place and time, they appear different, the core of the two philosophies is common, namely, freedom from exploitation. Dalit literature is also one such reaction against exploitation, expressed in words, and hence I believe that these three philosophies do not oppose but in fact complement one another. In stating this I have considered only the basic philosophy of Buddhism and Marxism and have not considered the practice of Buddhism at present or in other countries or the manner and the mental attitude of the Communist party workers in India.

In fact I believe that any philosophy or school of thought preaching against exploitation is complementary to Dalit literature. In case of philosophy in a creative work of art, it should be remembered that principles or details of philosophy are not enunciated as they are in a work of art. The philosophy or school of thought shapes the consciousness and attitudes of the artist, and arising out of this relation is the creation which has a personality of its own. The core of Ambedkarism is the rebellious reaction against exploitation and the call to free man. To judge the personality of a Dalit literary work against this core will do justice to the work. However, I firmly believe that an artist seeking change should not follow a philosophy blindly or with blinkers.

Dalit Literature and Traditional Criticism

The reins of cultural and literary movements were generally in the hands of the upper classes and castes and the tradition was (and still is) to accept the values set by them as standard. The ordinary man from the lower classes was out of the picture, and his life, experiences and feeling — looking at the history of Indian literature — were never the subject of art. Whenever such people have been portrayed, the portrayal has been distorted.

In recent times, the common man has become the hero in Indian literature but here again one sees the influence of traditional values cultivated by the establishment.

The reviewers and the method of review are also influenced in the same manner. For example, if we take plays like *Natasamrat*, *Udhvasta Dharmashala* and *Julus* or a film like *Samna*, we find that

reviewers have hailed *Natasamrat* and *Udhvasta Dharmashala* above the other two. The first two are works which portray the tragedy of the intellectual or the artist while the last two depict the tragedy of the common man. The first two are in a philosophical and mysterious language, so our reviewers are greatly impressed by them. Their feeling is that someone who speaks in this language alone has understood the meaning of life. Authors of works in the latter category are judged second-rate because they express their problems of daily life in their own words. The viewpoint of traditional criticism is that a work of art depicting the tragedy of an intellectual is great and that of the common man, mediocre.

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature. It is quite natural to feel that the image of Marathi literature — characterized by mysticism, philosophy and ethereal happiness — was tarnished by these 'unliterary' and down-to-earth subjects.

An author is first and foremost a social being. Few realize that he is capable of viewing and examining an event from different aspects. When Dalit writers look at the scorching social reality and respond to it in an aggressive, bitter manner, their writing is condemned as loud and propagandistic.

In other words, when a writer is oriented towards thinking in terms of social change, he is termed propagandist. Those who brand him thus themselves follow a certain philosophy by which they could be termed propagandists. All literature for that matter is propagandistic, the difference being that in some cases one insists on the so-called literary values and in others, on values of life.

Tradition and Dalit Literature

A question discussed quite often regarding Dalit literature is whether or not to accept tradition. The Dalit literary intellectuals totally reject tradition while the non-Dalits maintain that tradition cannot be rejected and only what is not required should be thrown out. Whenever Dalit intellectuals reject tradition, the point raised is that tradition has to be enriched, not rejected.

It is absolutely necessary to know what it means to maintain or

enrich tradition. A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful.

What exactly should the Dalit writers do to maintain or enrich tradition? Should they take Lord Vithoba to every household through their poetry, or should they busy themselves in describing the rajas and maharajas and their feasts and revelries, or be obsessed with stars, flowers, the sun and the wind and other natural phenomena? Or should they be lost in a false world of feeling or consider man a helpless puppet in the hands of the supernatural? Should they indulge in sexually explicit narrative in the name of psychoanalysis? If we consider the ideology, the negativism, the revolt, the scientific objectivity and the sociological basis of Dalit literature, we see that the traditions or streams kept alive in different phases of Marathi literature automatically collapse. If one stretches the chain of Dalit literary tradition back to the life of Keshavsut, the pioneer poet of modern Marathi, or of the novelist Hari Narayan Apte, both of whom wrote with the purpose of social awakening, there is a possibility that the links will snap.

The word 'tradition' here is deceptive. It takes the form of regression and shows signs of stagnation. Whenever new values, new thinking are put forth, the word 'tradition' is used as a shield. The Marathi literary tradition is about nine hundred years old while that of Dalit literature is hardly sixty to seventy years old.

When the machine age reached India, it was accompanied by new knowledge, science, revolutionary philosophy which led to the struggle for equality. The Dalits realized that they too had their traditions when their 'self' was awakened during some such movements. They began an attempt to accept new timeless values of life, society and culture.

The apparent desire of Dalit writers of cutting the umbilical cord from traditional Marathi literature may seem to some like a separatist step. But I feel that Dalit writers are not separatist; it is Marathi literature which is separatist. Has this literature, with its long tradition, given people from

the lowest stratum of society their proper due?

Marathi criticism lacks a theoretical or sociological base. That is why some reviewers blindly cite the traditions of Dnyaneshwar-Balkavi-Arati Prabhu or Tukaram-Keshavsut-Mardhekar. They see a superfluous similarity in diction when they speak of this tradition, but they hardly try to seek the common theoretical thread running through it.

Dalit Literature and Mythology

This approach of rejecting tradition also explains the need for new myths in Dalit literature. The problems facing Marathi literature and criticism are basically different from those of Dalit literature and criticism. As Marathi writers and reviewers have cut off literature from life, Marathi criticism does not go beyond *Dnyaneshwari*, *Smritichitre*, *Ranangan* or *Kosala*. If writers examine life in its social and physical aspects, the problems of life, their intensity, the struggle against them will all be portrayed in their work. The artist is a part of society and he should not hold society in contempt.

In saying that Marathi literature is cut off from reality what is meant is that this literature portrays the life of a handful of people or paints a romantic picture. Most Marathi writers belong to the middle class and the middle class too is facing problems in the present economic condition. The collapsing joint family system, eroding values, insults, humiliation and conflict are some of the major problems confronting the middle class. How many of these middle-class conditions and problems are reflected in Marathi literature? Many youths are today involved in revolutionary struggles or work amongst Dalits, Adivasis and landless labourers. How many Marathi writers have written about them?

The point is that most Marathi literature is not parallel to life. On the other hand Dalit literature looks at reality with open eyes. It views history objectively and from a sociological point of view. It is more parallel to life, and this poses a number of problems and the question of 'myths' stated above.

Dalit literature opposes exploitation and atrocities. Dalit writers cannot accept the social values of an exploiting system, and those who accept these values cannot be their ideals.

Dalits cannot accept Rama, who deserted Sita and killed Shambuka, as their ideal. One could cite a number of such examples

where myths accepted by traditional Marathi literature cannot be accepted by Dalit literature and its ideology.

There is a point of view that Dalit writers should seek myths in Buddhism. Dr Ambedkar had accepted Buddhism after analysing it critically, objectively, with a scientific approach. In *Buddha and his Dhamma* he relates Buddhism to the values of the modern age. Does all Buddhist literature discuss Buddha's philosophy, atheism, his theory of causality? Dr Ambedkar distinguishes between the preaching of Buddha and the Buddhism of a later period. Neither Dr Ambedkar nor Dalit writers can accept the literature developed during the period after Buddha, in which immorality and ritualism held sway.

Besides, the tradition and culture of ancient India does not contain anything which a Dalit can own with pride. Dalit writers can accept some myths from the Puranas, history or Buddhist literature. But if myths are to be really discovered, they have to be found by the Dalit writers in their own tradition which is not more than eight decades old. To me, it will be more useful and practical to study the history of those periods when the Dalits' struggle for freedom took place or when new revolutionary philosophies were preached and revolutionaries were born, than to study the Puranas or religious literature. One finds such Dalit myths being used in Dalit poetry.

New Connotations of the Word 'Dalit'

When Dalit literature began to be talked about, a number of doubts were raised as to its nature. While some believed that any such new avenue could not be opened, some others considered it communal. Some observed timidity in this unity. None of these doubts exists today. Initially the discussion centred around Buddhist (or Mahar) youths as they led the movement. Later on it was realized that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers and intellectuals had clearly stated that it was not the literature of a particular caste. Their stand from the beginning is broad-based and well-developed.

Let us now see what is Dalit literature and who are Dalit writers. Is Dalit literature the literature of those born in Dalit caste?

Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those

in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.

As a result of this realization, experiences are not simply stated but their meaning is also explained. It is out of this realization that the Dalits consider works such as the poetry of Narayan Surve, *Ek Gav Ek Parvatha* by Baba Adhav or *Jevha Manus Jaga Hoto* by Godavari Parulekar as their own. They also feel one with the Samantar literary movement in Hindi. On the other hand the works of some Dalit writers are seen as being suffocated by white-collar or traditional values.

The difference between the works of the two kinds of writers is not just because of their castes but also due to differing experiences and their ways of interpreting them. Thus, though caste is at the root of most Dalit literature, as its literary manifestation is based on its experiences, the horizons of Dalit literature are expanding. But the non-Dalit writers do not like to call themselves Dalits. They feel that to do so is below their dignity. As a result the process of expansion of art is retarded. To use Marxist jargon, many authors avoid joining the 'D' class. This is not only true of non-Dalits but also of the educated and the secure among the Dalits themselves.

The reason for this, I feel, is that the word 'Dalit' traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. Hence the term has become derogatory. The non-Dalits therefore pose the question: why should we call ourselves Dalits? But with reference to the Dalit literary movement, we have not used the traditional meaning of the term but have added a new dimension and content to it.

'Dalit' means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country.

The Future of Dalit Literature

Poetry and autobiographical writing are amply found in Dalit literature and have been tackled efficiently. Differing contentwise, experiences have been expressed on various planes. But short stories, novels and drama have been the neglected areas. In case of short stories and novels, one hears names such as Baburao Bagul, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat. However, there is not a single

worthwhile name in connection with Dalit drama. The more effectively these forms are handled, the more powerful will Dalit literature be in future.

While considering the future of Dalit literature we should not restrict ourselves only to a discussion on how many forms have been handled by Dalit literature. Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. It is a movement.

Today, most Dalit writers have forgotten that Dalit literature is a movement. Dalit literature and writers are becoming part of the establishment. They are busy calculating how they can get all honours from the establishment. A calm, similar to one after a storm, today prevails in the Dalit literary movement.

Yet I am not worried about the future of Dalit literature. Dalit literature revolts against oppression and exploitation and demands social and economic justice. Today politics is based on religion. Conditions are extremely fluid and Dalit writers cannot be silent and neutral witnesses to such events in the social system. The values of democracy, secularism and socialism are being eroded.

The mix-up of politics and religion in our country is the beginning of a long struggle. Various parties of the Dalits and the exploited will fight on the political plane in their own way. But Dalit writers will have to participate boldly in the struggle. The participation of Dalit writers is unavoidable and inevitable. The point is to see to what extent will the writers and literature which is moving towards establishment, participate in it. Even if they don't, the new generation of Dalit writers will join the movement in full strength as the struggle and Dalit literature cannot be separated. The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society changes and as long as exploitation exists. The new generation will join in more aggressively and maturely. To remain close to the struggle and the masses, they will have to handle various forms of literature and one can see signs of these changes. Though they will not receive the grand welcome and appreciation accorded to Dalit writers of the early period, the path of literature will show powerful traces of their passage through it. The future of Dalit literature may not be glamorous, but it is certainly dazzling.

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