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Subjugation, Caste Discrimination and Quest for Identity: A Critical Dalit Response to Laxman Babu Mane's Upara: *An Outsider*

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Abstract

Dalit literature is the literature of protest against the established system which is based on inequality and injustice. Laxman Babu Mane, a social activist and a Maratha writer, has occupied a distinct position in Indian Dalit Literature. His autobiography Upara: An Outcaste is considered as a mile stone in Maratha Dalit literature and he received Sahitya Academi Award in 1981 and Padma Shree in 2009 for this autobiography. Through this autobiography, he has presented the reflection of traumas and wounded psyche of Dalit people. In his life, he has faced extreme caste discrimination and experiences exploitation, humiliation and starvation of his community. He reveals that the Indian society is caste ridden where they are dehumanized, tortured and abhorred by the high caste Hindus. The present paper aims to show the wretched condition of Dalit people and at the same time it aims to emphasis on the changing condition of Dalit people and their changing point of view due to the impact of education on them. The Dalit academia that expanded vastly on the horizon of India after 1970s challenges the conventional views of caste, religion and god and radically questions the exclusions of Dalits from power, knowledge, culture and society.

Keywords: Caste Discrimination, Untouchability, Marginality and Quest for Identity, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature suggests the literature of downtrodden and marginalized backward people and this literature is generally autobiographical in nature. Through these autobiographies, Dalit Writers vividly describe about the conservative, traditional, superstitious, illogical and hypocritical nature of the high caste society and at the same time reveals the picture of subjugated condition, caste discrimination, exploitation, untouchability, suppression and gender violence. The primary aim of this literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and inequality. Through these autobiographies, Dalit writers also want to bring a revolutionary change and try to create a world which is dominated by liberty, equality and fraternity.



Analyzing some Dalit autobiographies, Arjun Dangle points out – ‘In these autobiographies we see varying facets of Dalit movement: the struggling of the survival; the emotional universe of a Dalit’s life; the man woman relationship; an existence crushed under the wheels of village life; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities, at times abject submission, at other times, rebellion’ (Dangle, 16).

Etymologically, the word Dalit is derived from Sanskrit word ‘dal’ which means ‘to break, crack or split’. Some scholars argue that the word Dalit comes from the word ‘Padadalit’ which suggests ‘slaves at one’s feet or under class’. Basically, the word dalit suggests downtrodden people who have been exploited and subjugated by the so called superior classes. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, called them as Harijans which means ‘Children of God’. Kishore Jugal Misra defines Dalit people as downtrodden people and he says – ‘Dalit is not a new word. Apparently it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of depressed classes, a term the British used for what are now called the scheduled castes. In 1970s the Dalit panther revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution’ (qtd in Singh 213).

Laxmane Babu Mane’s autobiography *Upara: An Outsider* is considered as a landmark in the history of Dalit literature. It depicts the life of the writer - a downtrodden man and at the same time shows the vicissitudes of the whole Kaikadi caste. Moreover, it gives a vivid account of the writer’s struggling from his childhood to youth. Through this autobiography *Upara: An Outsider*, he highlights all the sorrows and sufferings of his community. He is a Maratha writer and a renowned social activist from that state. His autobiography is published in 1980 and after publishing his autobiography, he becomes famous. He received Sahitya Academi Award in 1981 and Padma Shree in 2009 for his magnum opus *Upara: An outsider*. It was written in Maratha language but later it was translated into English by A. K. Kamat who added the sub title *An Outsider*. He is very appropriate in choosing the sub title as it suggests a person who is not a member of accepted group of people.

Like other Dalit autobiographies, Mane’s autobiography *Upara: An Outsider* has been influenced by social, political and economic issues. It has achieved a unique position for depicting the caste discrimination and exploitation of Kaikadi community to which he belongs. According to him, the people of Kaikadi community are ‘other’ or ‘subaltern’ which suggests that they have inferior rank. He explains that there are two reasons, firstly they are inferior to the high class people by nature and secondly they have been made inferior. In his autobiography, he reveals that their situation is distressingly worse where these lower caste people have no voice to protest against the tyrannies of the upper class.



Though India is a developing country, untouchability remains every sphere of life and it creates a stigma in Bapu Mane's life. They, after independence, face the evils of casteism in their daily life. He says that they are not permitted to attend any festival, auspicious ceremony and marriage. They are not allowed to speak and sit with the high caste people. The people of high class society consider the people of the Kaikadi community as abominable and untouchable. At the beginning of his autobiography, Mane explains how he is ill treated by a high caste woman. Once his donkey has ruined of her haystack and the woman reproaches him harshly by saying – 'You lazy bum! Your donkeys have ruined my haystack and you are busy pissing into your own mouth! Oh! You beggers! May you die! You are plague on our village!'(Mane18).

The people of Kaikadi community are considered as inauspicious by the high caste people. Mane reminds of Rousseau's famous speech- 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains'(Rousseau 2). He elaborates how untouchability and caste discrimination have made his life painful and intolerable. He describes a very pathetic incident of his life. Once he participates in a wedding ceremony and a man recognized him. That man vehemently insults him by saying – 'Son of a Kaikadi low caste! Have you taken leave of your senses? Get up and Get out!' (Mane107).

Even after Independence, the basic needs like food, cloth and shelter are dreams for the Dalit people. They are supposed to live away from the main part of the village. They are poverty stricken people and they have to compete with dogs and pigs to take their food. Himanginee Kaushik beautifully describes about Kaikadi - 'These people don't get proper food, clothes and even to place to live. The writer, Laxman Bapu Mane, also has to face all these problems and because of that so many questions rise in Laxman's mind like, why he is not able to eat good food and eat sweets, why is his parents do not have a good house and why he is not allowed to go school and get education like the children of high caste people. Later because of all these unsolved questions he is inspired to gain education and gets a reputed place like high class people' (qtd in Singh 36).

In his autobiography *Upara: An Outsider* Mane says that the people of his caste have no fixed income. After independence their economic condition remains same. As has already been noted that most of the days they remain hungry and they arrange food by begging from the villagers. Mane reminds how his father and mother move from village to village to sell the handmade baskets. His mother collects stale foods from the villagers and it was their routine meal – 'Mother had brought lots of bhakri. Three of these were given by the village chief's wife. She had also given the leftovers of the night before which she had packed in the loose end of her sari... Mother would sell some baskets in the village, mend the old ones and in exchange acquire all this food. We ate all it. This was our everyday meal' (Mane 3).



They move from one place to another place to lead their livelihood. They have lived totally on the sympathy of the villagers. When they would reach any village they have to inform the chief of the village of their arrival. Without his permission, they cannot enter inside the village. Mane points out – 'Jaisingea and father had gone to the village to inform the village chief of our arrival. It was obligatory for the nomadic tribes to inform the village chief on their arrival. Also they had to give him the details of the numbers of people, donkeys, fowls, dogs and so on'(Mane 32).

The condition of Dalit women is more painful and pathetic than Dalit men. They suffer from three fold oppressions and these are - caste, woman and untouchability. In an article titled 'Status of Dalit Women in India: Caste and Gender based Exclusion', P Ashalatha claims – 'Dalit women suffer from three folds oppression - on account of gender because of exiting patriarchy, on account of their caste 'the untouchable'. Finally on account of their class as they hail from the protest and most marginalized communities' (Ashalatha254).

Mane explains that the woman of Kaikadi caste survive by pleasing man of higher class sexually. They consider Dalit woman as a tool to enjoy them physically. If any Dalit woman is beautiful, her beauty invites molestation for her. That incident happens in Paru's life. As a result her husband has divorced her. Instead of punishing the culprits, Jat Panchayat humiliates her and compels her to live an exiled life. This case reminds us of Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* where his mother Masamai's life is destroyed by the Patils and they compel her to live a tortured life.

Though *Upara: An Outsider* vividly describes his humiliated and harassed life of Bapu Mane, it also reflects the true condition of the Dalit People. Most of the incidents of his past life haunt him and create a great trauma in his mind. Once a Brahmin girl has sends a love letter to Mane. He asks her for a marriage. But when she came to know about his real identity, she said – 'I had presumed that you might be at least be a Maratha...Now that I know your caste, I don't think I can marry you' (Mane 161).

Mane admits that their life is governed or regulated by different Panchayats, such as - Jat Panchayat, Thal Panchayat, Village Panchayat and Maddhi Panchayat. He reveals that Jat Panchayat played a vital role in their society. They argue that if Mane's father would admit his son into a school, they think that he would spoil the children of higher caste. Though his father assures them, they do not hear his speech and make fun of him. They do not help him and at the same time they refuse to admit Mane in school. In their society, the decision of Jat Panchayat is the final decision. If anyone disobeys their decision, it is termed as a great crime and the family which disobeys their order is treated as outcaste and they are separated from the main stream of the village. In an article named 'Dalit Autobiography: Narration of Pain', Girish Kausadiar claims that 'the role of Jat Panchayat in most Dalit Narration is negative as well as



destructive. Their verdicts are arbitrary and sometimes whimsical and crooked'(Kausadiar 106).

Like other limitations, Mane reveals that they are not allowed to love. Once he falls in love with a girl named Shashi who belongs to a higher caste- Marata Community. When the high caste society is informed about this matter, it threatens him not to carry the relationship with that girl. If he proceeds, it would create problems to him and his family members. But Mane tolerates all their torture and never agrees to leave the relationship. Through this, he wants to fight against the hypocritical nature of the society. As he keeps the relationship, his friends Ramdas, Maruti, Kalokhe, Bankar, Kumbkar also have broken their friendship with him. Finally with help of Prof. Patangaokar, Prof. Dhoble and Prof. Despande, Mane had married with Shashi and it was a revolutionary step.

To remove the critical situation of his life or for a better life, Laxman Mane seeks education. To achieve this aim, he has faced many obstacles. Though economic crisis is a vital hindrance in his education, caste discrimination causes a great problem in his life. His father has suffered a lot to admit Mane into a school. Though he is admitted into a school, he suffered a great humiliation from his classmates. The students of high caste society always neglect him and try to avoid him. Mane says - 'I don't mix with other students. They too were not prepared to approach me'(69). According to moral law, a teacher should be above from all types of casteism and caste discrimination. It is very disappointed that they suffer humiliation and animal like behavior not only from the students but also from the teachers. One of his teachers ordered him to sit only in veranda not in the classroom. Another teacher neglects him in saying -'You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? If they study who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing! You want to study, huh!' (Mane 36).

Though Mane is humiliated, tortured and insulted, he never feels depressed. Their subjugated condition and caste discrimination inspires him to fight for his rights and identity. He raised his voice for the oppressed people. He wrote - 'from our Panchayat point of view, the very writing of this book is crime and I am aware of the provision of the punishment or such wrong doing. I am prepared to face the consequence' (Mane 6). Like other Dalit writers, he is influenced by the Ambedkarite Movement and he becomes conscious of their identity and their rights. A new awakening inspires him to resist the evils of subjugation and caste discrimination. He promises and claims what Sharankumar Limbale utters in his poem 'White Paper' -

I'll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks

Burn like a city bus your lawless laws

...



My friends

My rights are rising like a sun

Will you deny this surprise?(Limbale 29-33).

Mane has done very odd jobs like selling newspaper, bread and butter and washing dishes in Karnya's hotel to continue his education. Finally he passed Matric and got admitted in Agriculture collage in Kolhapur. At that time he extremely hates a high caste representative named Shankaracharya who has come to Kholapur to lay foundation stone of temple and who believes in Chaturvarna or caste system. Mane determines to protest against him and becomes aware of the social movement. He keeps contact with Prof. Mangaonkar, Baburao Paritekar and Nanasaheb Mane who are the members of the Dalit Youth Association. To remove the social disparity and caste discrimination, he has founded a new association Dr. Ambedkar School of Thoughts. He is agitated for their wretched condition of life. According to him, Kaikadi community is a nomadic tribe and they have no bounds of sorrows and suffering. As a result, they were turned towards Buddhism to avoid the rules and regulations of high caste society.

In Dalit literature, quest or search for identity is one of the most vital issues and here the writer Mane always paves the way for the identity of the oppressed and marginalized people as the society does not consider or recognize their identity. It is very symbolic that the author not only speaks for his identity but for the whole Kaikadi community. Mane says - 'If the readers succeed in understanding the sufferings of the nomadic tribe, who have been moving from one place to the other place for generations leading their hearth and home on the back of donkeys, I would feel happy that Upara has achieved its goal'(Mane 5).

Laxmane Mane never dreams to be a writer and he never thought that he would write something. But circumstance compels him to write his autobiography and he thinks that his effort would successful if readers would realize sorrow and sufferings of his tribe. Though he is humiliated and has faced caste discrimination, he becomes successful and his successful life will encourage the other oppressed people. His unending suffering or struggle starts from his childhood and it reaches its peak after his inter caste marriage. Eminent scholar Archana Prashar says about this autobiography - 'this autobiography clearly indicates the writer's intellectual struggle and the social favour to bring to forefront the acute suffering of the oppressed class, their psychic disruption and their systematic strive to create space for themselves and their respective culture and communities' (qtd in Landage 33).



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