

INTERROGATING CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY: A STUDY OF SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S *THE OUTCASTE: AKKARMASHI*

AJAY A. DHAWALE ¹

ABSTRACT

India is famous for its varied cultures and traditions, and yet it remains the most fragmented and divided society in the world. The structure of Indian society is unbelievably fractured; it is divided into thousands of castes and sub-castes. Shudras, now called Dalits, are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They are untouchables of India. They have been exploited socially, culturally, politically and economically. Caste system seems to have a history of more than 3000 years. Arjun Dangle says, "A unique feature of Indian society is its compositions on the basis of caste". Hindu law books such as *Manusmriti* and *Gautama Dharma Shatra* support caste system. Because Hindu society believes that God has created it; caste has a strong social and religious sanction.

This paper attempts to examine how the author Sharankumar Limbale challenges the unequal and discriminatory caste system in his autobiography. Inspired by the ideology of Dr. Ambedkar, he asks questions against untouchability. The word Akkarmashi, in the title of autobiography, is a Marathi word, which means bastard in English, a child born out of an illicit sexual relationship. Limbale is born to an untouchable mother and high caste father so the Hindu society treats him as a half-caste. Because caste is a very important phenomenon in India, nobody can live without it. In India, caste comes from the father, but Limbale's father disowns him and rejects to accept his son. Limbale is not even allowed inside the caste system, as his people too consider him impure. Limbale asks, 'Who am I?' 'I' in this question stands for the whole Dalit community. He and the society in which he lives do not have the answer to this question.

Sharankumar Limbale shatters the shackles of the caste system and revolts against the unjust society, which denies him the basic human rights like equality, fraternity and freedom. The caste-ridden society creates many questions among Dalits. Limbale asks many questions to Hindu society. His questions force the society to think about the plight of Dalits. The interrogative aspect of this autobiography makes it unique and distinctive from all other Dalit

¹ AJAY A. DHAWALE, T. C. College, Department of English, SPPU University, India



autobiographies. Limbale dares to go against an extremely powerful and rigid caste system and emerges as a revolutionary writer.

Key Words: Caste, Untouchable, Dalit, Exploitation, Revolt, Equality

INTRODUCTION

Caste is very important phenomena in India. It is a lived social experience. Caste is a notion, which is deeply carved on the sub-conscious mind of Hindu people. Nobody can live without caste. Caste in India comes from the father and not mother. All are identified with their caste and one has to live with his/her caste until the end of life and even after the death. Nobody can change the reality of caste and it remains the most challenging institution in India. Individual's caste determines the course of life. It is impossible for Indians to escape from the oppressive chains of caste.

It is essential to understand the social, religious and cultural background of India to understand the institution of caste. Indian society was Varna based which was divided into four Varnas. The most awful thing about the Varna system is that it is justified by Hindu religious scriptures and smritis. Hence, Hindu people in India think that God himself has created the Varna system and believe in it blindly. Dr. Narendra Jadhav describes the origin of the Varna system in his book *Outcaste: A Memoir*:

The sacred Rig-Veda, the earliest literary source of India, dating back to around 1000 BC, describes how human stratification came about: a cosmic giant, Purusha, sacrificed parts of his body to create mankind. His mouth became the Brahmin, the priestly class; his arms, the Kshatriya, the warriors and landowners; his thighs were made into Vaishya, the merchants and from his feet were born Shudras, the servants. This four-fold division of society is called the four varnas that is Chaturvarna. The untouchables have no place in the Chaturvarna and they were placed even below the lowest Shudra Varna. (Jadhav, 2003, p. 264)

Today, untouchables are called Dalits. But Dalit is not the official word for untouchables. The constitutional word for untouchable is Scheduled Caste. Through the Varna system, the caste system is born. Dr Ambedkar says, 'The superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste' (Ambedkar, 1945, p.12). Ancient Hindu books such as the *Manusmriti* and *Gautam Dharma Shatra* support caste system and preach inequality. These religious books have imposed social restraints on untouchables. The untouchables are divided into thousands of castes



and sub-castes. Once born in an untouchable family, he/she has to live with predestined fate. Untouchables are forced to live a degraded life, as all the religious and human rights are denied to them. They are rejected in all walk of life. They find themselves powerless to challenge the caste-based social order. They have been exploited and humiliated from thousands of years. Brahmanism is the basic root cause behind the enslavement of untouchables; they denied humanity to Dalits by creating the hellish structure of Indian society. Dr Ambedkar says:

The Hindu scriptures preach inequality in the form of Churvarna system, which divided society into four classes, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The four classes are not on the horizontal plane, but hierarchically organised, a system based on the division not only of labour but also of labourers. In the 'Manusmriti', the Brahmin is placed at the top of the rank below him is Kshatriya, below Kshatriya is the Vaishya and below Vaishya is Shudra. This order of precedence among the classes is sanctioned by the shatras, as spiritual and legal. The 'Manusmriti' puts the Shudra to all restrictions and disabilities. The Shudra were prohibited from accumulating any wealth, possessing arms and receiving an education. The Shudras occupation was to serve the upper classes and in reward, a Shudra was suppressed to be reborn in higher Varna.(Ambedkar, 1945, p. 24-25)

INTERROGATING CASTE AND UNTOUCHABILITY IN *THE OUTCASTE*:

AKKARMASHI

Interrogating caste system and untouchability was completely impossible for Dalits. However, rejection, age-old oppression and humiliation led Dalits towards the path of rebellion. They started realising that challenging this monstrous system is necessary which could then bring a change in their lives. The word Dalit originally comes from Sanskrit word, 'dal' means broken, downtrodden, crushed and oppressed. This word is preferred by Dalit thinkers and writers, they do not like the word 'Harijan' (children of God) used by Mahatama Gandhi.

Education brings change in human life and it is because of the British rule that education became accessible for Dalits. The great social reformer, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) established many schools for untouchables and girls. In this way, the doors of education opened for those who were illiterate for thousands of years. Education brought knowledge in Dalit community and knowledge made them think about their slavery. Dr. Ambedkar (1891-



1956), who was the chief architect of the Indian constitution, waged a war against the caste system. He started the movement of self-respect, which awakened Dalits from their slavery and gave them the message to educate, unite and agitate. His life long struggle for equality, fraternity and brotherhood, his works and his ideas changed the lives of millions of Dalits. Dalit consciousness gave Dalit courage to ask questions about their untouchability and this consciousness came from the ideology of Dr. Ambedkar. Dalits understood the fact that they are also human beings and must be treated with dignity. Thus social freedom became more important for them than political freedom.

Educated and awakened Dalit youth came together and started writing about their unique and distinct experiences. As it is said, only ash knows the experience of burning; only Dalit knows the experience of untouchability. The literature, they produced is called Dalit literature. The early Dalit literature mainly revolved around the pain and suffering of Dalits but later on, this literary movement expanded and rebelled against mainstream writing. They created a new canon of literature. Dalit writers believe that their writings can change the lives of Dalits. They take a firm stand against man-made Hindu religious structure and focus on human freedom and human dignity. They challenge the Brahminic literature, their language, culture, customs, traditions and religion. Dalit writers prefer to write the autobiography because this genre gives them a chance to write their experiences in a detailed manner, the experiences that are not found in any other literature before.

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* was originally published in Marathi in 1984. It is translated into many languages of the world and the English translation came in 2003. This is a story of an outcaste who is deprived of all the privileges and rights. Sharan, the narrator of this autobiography is born to Lingayat, an upper caste father and Mahar, an untouchable mother. Throughout the book, Limbale criticises the hypocrisy of the caste system. The interrogative aspect of this book is a revolt against the caste-ridden society. This book goes beyond the theme of pain and suffering and demands answers from upper castes for the wretched life of Dalits.

Akkarmashi means bastard in English. The narrator is Akkarmashi and is treated as impure by society because he is an illegitimate child, born out of an illicit sexual relationship. As his father rejects him as his son and the society reject him as a half-caste, he is doubly subjugated. He lives his life with a fractured identity. The anguish of not belonging to any caste



creates many questions in his mind. Limbale thinks that he is Lingayat because his father is of the same caste but also a Mahar, as his mother was Mahar. This confusion becomes even more complicated when he thinks about his grand parents. His grandmother Shantamai lives with Mahmood DasrgirJamdar, a Muslim man. Is he a Muslim too? This is a great turmoil in his mind, and it becomes difficult for him to decide who he is, to which caste he belongs to. Caste system makes him Akkarmashi, a half-caste. Being helpless, he asks:

Why did my mother say yes to the rape, which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered a whore? Did anyone distribute sweet to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Whose son am I really?(Limbale, 2003, p. 37)

Limbale demands answers to these questions from the society. However, there is nobody to listen to his plea. Who will answer his questions? These questions have no answers at all. The rigid caste system has taken Limbale's identity from him. Throughout his life, he is haunted by the question, "Who am I" (p. 2) 'I' in this autobiography stands for the whole Dalit community. Dalits cannot have another identity and they remain Dalits until the end of their life. Dr. Ambedkar says:

There is nothing which can make the untouchable pure. They are born impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of impure and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of permanent, hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse. (Ambedkar, 1948, p. 36)

Limbale does not only ask questions to the society but he also asks his mother about his father, his name, his place of living, his profession and the reason behind not meeting him. (Limbale, 2003, p. 60)

This story is different from all other Dalit autobiographies because the other Dalit autobiographies focus on the problems of Dalits as their narrators are Dalits. However, Limbale is half-caste. The pains and agonies of being a half-caste are greater than the pain of being a Dalit. Limbale does not only suffer from the upper caste but from his people also. Dalits too consider him impure. The stigma of being a half-caste remains with him throughout his life.

Limbale puts forth the harsh reality of Dalit life. He writes about how Dalits are forced to



eat the leftover food thrown away by upper caste. They have to drag the dead animals and eat the same. To get the best part of the meat of the dead animal, they have to fight with dogs and vultures. Untouchability leads Dalits to poverty and poverty leads them towards hunger. Though, there are many reasons for hunger, caste becomes the main reason. He says:

Bhakari is as large as a man. It is as vast as the sky and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is vaster than seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as bhakari and only big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger what would have happened to sin and virtue, heaven and hell, this creation of god? If there was no hunger how country, its borders, citizens, parliament, constitution come into being? (p. 50-51)

This autobiography is a perfect chemistry of pain, suffering, struggle and revolt. Limbale not only asserts his identity through his writings but his act of writing and interrogating caste system also becomes a revolt. His questions are radical which force the society to think about his agony.

He asks:

Why didn't my mother abort me when I was a foetus? Why did she not strangle me as soon as I was born? We may be children born out of caste but that does not mean we must be humiliated? What exactly is our fault? Why should a child suffer for the sin of its parent? (p. 64)

Many critics criticised this book as a saga of pain and suffering but it is in reality a revolt, a war against untouchability.

A temple is a holy place where the entry of a Dalit is strictly prohibited. As Dalits do menial jobs like cleaning and sweeping the society, dragging the dead animals, skinning them and eating them, they are considered as impure. Upper castes think that the sacred place of temple and god should not be defiled by Dalits. The notion of caste is connected with purity and impurity. In spite of such restrains, Limbale and his friend Prashya enter into the temple. This is a rebellious act against orthodox beliefs of Hindu people, rational Limbale is not ready to believe in Hindu gods and goddesses. He thinks that god cannot discriminate between Dalits and upper castes. He asks:



Why are we ostracized? Why are we kept away from other human beings? Why are we kept out of our own selves? Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all, isn't everybody's blood red?(p. 62)

Dalit women are triply exploited on the basis of class, caste and gender. Dalits are at the bottom of the society and below them are the Dalit women. Dalit women are exploited and humiliated inside and outside the home. Unlike other Dalit autobiographies, Limbale gives importance to his female characters. He focuses much on his mother and grandmother. He criticizes the hypocrisy of the caste system through female characters. Dalit women are commonly sexually exploited by landowners in Maharashtra. Upper caste society gives sanction to this violation of Dalit women. Masamai is one such victim of the caste system. To be beautiful is a curse in the Dalit community but unfortunately, Masamai is beautiful. Hanumanta Limbale, a landowner who lives in a mansion, takes advantage of her helplessness. He becomes successful in making Masamai his official property. Merely for the sake of hunger and shelter, she allows herself to become the victim of Hanumanta's lust. Hanumanta Limbale violates the rules of caste for his benefits. If Dalits are untouchables and impure and if the shadow of Dalit pollutes the upper caste, then how does that upper caste exploit Dalit women for their lust? Limbale criticises upper castes for being a hypocrites. Limbale's father is born in an upper caste family. Though he violates the rules of the caste system, he becomes Patil (surname meaning head of the village). He does not get any punishment from the society for his illegal activities. Limbale's mother is no adulteress, she merely does it for her survival. Limbale asks, 'Do we exist just for the sake of that hunger? Beyond hunger lies a vast life. There is a life beyond bread. And yet I had no experience of life beyond this getto' (p. 64). He wants to lead his life with respect but fears that the society will never accept him and his family as human beings and they will die blemished. Limbale demands for equality. He dreams for a casteless and classless society in which all will be free.

Some episodes of the book show the rebellious attitude of Limbale. One such incident is the incident of Shobhi (name of a upper caste girl). One day, Limbale and his friend Prashya come across Shobhi. The road is narrow, so Shobhi asks them to clear the road and let her go, but she uses harsh language. She says that Mahars have become very bold in these days. They dare to walk straight to upper caste(p.70). This is an insult of Limbale and Prashya. They become angry and decide to take revenge. But to take revenge on upper castes is a difficult task. No Dalit dares to ask questions to upper castes. Finally, Prashya grips her hand and asks why she calls



them Mahar, If she thinks that their touch pollutes her then why doesn't her colour change green or yellow? He threatens her that he will not allow her to go without answering these questions. (p.71) Though this is a small incident, such incidents give courage and confidence to Dalits to challenge the caste system. Here, Shobhi stands for all the upper castes but Limbale and Prashya want to revolt against them.

Limbale strongly opposes the horrible custom of Devdasi. A Devdasi is a girl who is offered to serve god or the temple for her whole life. Such customs are laid for Dalits only. She never gets married as she is already married to the god. A Devdasi can live with any man and have children. These children are considered impure by society and they have to lead a pathetic life. They finally become beggars. Limbale asks:

I have never come across a Potraj (worshipper of the goddess) among the Brahmins or a Waghya (dedicated boys to Khandoba, a deity) among the Lingayats, the high castes.

Why are such customs laid down for Mahar only? (p. 92-93)

In spite of many difficulties, Limbale educates himself. For him, the pen becomes an important weapon to attack the rituals and traditions of Hinduism. He somehow liberates himself from the wicked and monstrous tradition and inspires thousands of Dalit youth through his writings. Education sows the seeds of revolt in his mind. While studying in college, when he goes back to the village to enjoy his holidays, he comes to know that a tea shop owner in his village uses separate cups and sauces for Mahar and Mang (untouchables castes). He becomes angry and opposes this kind of separation. He says:

How long can we mutely suffer all this? How many times are we going to be born and live thus against our wish? Sometimes we ought to reject all this.(Limbale, 2003, p. 76)

This shows the indomitable spirit of Limbale. He is not ready to accept the village traditions and practices. It is education which brings a change in his personality. It creates self-consciousness and self-esteem in him. Though caste in Indian society come from father, Limbale rejects the high caste of his father and accepts the lower Mahar caste of his mother which is uncommon. He accepts the identity of his mother and identifies himself as a Dalit. While studying in college, he comes to know about the Dalit movement and its activities. He becomes an active member of the Dalit movement and participates in its activities. He becomes aware of human rights. Whenever he hears any atrocity on Dalits, he becomes angry and restless.



He cannot get a girl for marriage as he is half-caste but finally, he gets married to Kusum, a Mahar girl. Limbale takes a stand against the Hindu rituals and does the rituals of marriage according to Buddhist tradition. He says, 'I don't believe in Hindu rituals, we are going to be wedded according to Buddhist culture' (p.99).

CONCLUSION

Rejecting Hindu rituals and accepting Buddhism shows Limbale's revolt against the religious assumption of Hinduism. All the questions that he asks are scientific and radical. These questions are against caste-ridden society. The interrogative aspect of this autobiography makes it revolutionary and forces the society to think positively about the Dalit problems. His questions redefine what is revolt and what kind of revolutionary attitude is necessary to transform the mindset of society in the context of caste system.




Principal
Tuljaram Chaturchand College
Baramati

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Principal
Tuljaram Chaturchand College
Baramati