“Genealogy of Discrimination and Critique of Caste in the Select Indian Literary Representations”

-Santosh Govindrao Maholkar[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Abstract:**

 The purpose of this paper is to articulate the genealogy of discrimination and arbitrary caste-based inequality in the light of Indian literary and cultural (con)texts. Thus the paper problematizes the issue of the discrimination in Indian literary and cultural representations, right from the time of great Indian epic *The Mahabharta* (Eklavya, Karna, Barbarik/Belarsen and other life stories) through the medieval reformist *Bhakti* poetry to the modern time. In short the paper addresses the following research questions.

* In what ways do the study of literary explorations and cultural representations of discrimination based on race, *varna,* caste, class, gender, religion and age contribute in forming, reforming and transforming Indian society from ancient time to present?
* How have the ancient, medieval as well as modern representations of discrimination in form of Indian epics, *Bhakti* (Reformist) poetry, films and literature dealt with themes of *varna*-based discrimination, spiritual inequality, and caste-based injustice through untouchability, marriage, and law?
* How the issue of caste discrimination/inequality has systematically been addressed by Indian radical enlightenment thinkers like; Saint Tukaram, Kabir, Jotirao Phule, B. R. Ambedkar, and Aniket Jaaware through their *Abhangas, Dohe*, speeches and writings?
* Why can’t we do away with the practice of caste discrimination in India as being treated human beings without any labels? How long will there be *varna*/caste-based prejudices, discriminations and injustices in the Indian society?
* How can we (re)articulate an imagined workable future of India as a casteless society?

The issue of unequal treatment in the form of unjustified discrimination has been illustrated with reference to the stories from the great ancient text *The Mahabharata*. Secondly the idea that we all (as human beings) are one and same, and therefore discriminating on the basis of race, *varna,* caste, class, gender, religion is inauspicious (अमंगल) has been elaborated with medieval reformist Indian *Bhakti* poetry of Saint Kabir and Tukaram. And finally, the caste/caste-based discrimination (injustice) has been studied with new lens provided by Jyotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Annabhau Sathe and Aniket Jaaware.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, भेदभाव, Caste, Bhakti Poetry, Injustice, Varna, Chaturvarna

**Introduction:**

Perhaps the most cardinal aspect of Indian history and cultural life has often been the issue of discrimination (भेदभाव) and arbitrary practice of caste. The culturally rich and linguistically diverse Indian history is full of such incidents from the time of *The Mahabharata* to the present that intrinsically hints us to right the wrongs(in the form of unequal/prejudicial/inhuman/ill- treatments, injustices, nepotism, segregation on the basis of race, *varna,* caste, class, gender, sexuality, religion, sect and so on). However, Indian Literature in the form of *Bhakti* (Reformist) poetry, films, novels and theatre has tried its best to eradicate such evils and restore harmonious universal idiom of expression alive. The literary spirit of heterogeneity of discourses and diversity of contents attracts the globe towards Indian mini narratives. And while studying such mini-narratives, one gets confronted with the Meta-narratives of the Indian literary tradition where we come across great Indian epic *The Mahabharta* and the life stories of those unparalleled personas like Eklavya, Karna, Barbarik/Belarsen, Vidur and many others.

**Discrimination and Caste in Ancient Indian Narratives:**

Ancient Indian folktales and mythology project the inhuman and unjust practice of caste in the form of Chaturvarna, the famous narrative of *The Mahabharta*, where we come across the life stories of three invincible warriors Eklavya, Karna, and Barbarik/Belarsen who were victimized by this Chaturvarna system. As these extraordinary larger than life-figures were thought not to have been born in the so called *Kshatriya* or *Brahmin* clan or in any palace, they were systematically been marginalized in the meta-narratives of Indian civilization. So much so that most of us were unknown to the fact that there exists a character called Barbarik/Belarsen in the Indian mythology. The mainstream discourse in India often put the Shri-Krishna at the center of all narratives. And all meta-narratives are interpreted from Shri-Krishna’spoint of view. Only this version of narrative was made popular and valorized by the power-politics of ruling class/*varna* all the times in Indian history. The ruling ideologies make everything seems just and natural.

The clearest example of this is Eklavya, who belongs to the Nishada tribe [a shudra (sic)] but feels naturally inclined to be a warrior. He is not only rejected by Drona because of his caste, but he is also made to suffer the extreme consequence of aspiring to be a Kshatriya by cutting off and giving his right thumb to Drona, which deprives him of the ability to use a bow and arrow.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Most of the times we are being governed by the Meta-narratives, therefore we read and then forget that injustice happened to Eklavya. The bias Dronacharya had also humiliated Karna by giving him unfair treatment over Arjuna. The prejudiced minded Dronacharya declared Arjuna to be the greatest archer in the world. Karna’s entire life is a sum of discriminations and injustices right from his birth to his unjustified killing/death on the *Kurukshetra.* However the most wretched abuse of *varna*/caste system can be seen when Karna is being stigmatized by Draupadi at the time of *Swayamwara*, although he was successful in shooting the target of revolving fish on the roof by looking at the image reflecting into the water down, saying that she would never marry a Suta (the lowly caste)[[3]](#footnote-3)

And beholding the son of Suryya Kama of the Suta tribe like unto fire, or Soma, or Suryya himself, resolved to shoot the mark those foremost of bowmen the sons of Pandu regarded the mark as already shot and brought down upon the ground. But seeing Kama, Draupadi loudly said, 'I will not select a Suta for my lord! Then Kama, laughing in vexation and casting a glance at the Sun, threw aside the bow already drawn to a circle.

(Swayamvara Parva, Section CLXXXIX 425)

Vidhur is another important character, in all sense he was fit to be crowned as the king of Hastinapur but as he was born to a mother who was *Dasi*/serving woman from lower caste, the reigning hegemonic *varna* system ruled out his accession to the throne. Artificially the *varna*/caste-system of that time favoured the blind Dhrutrashtra as the King. And they called this improper decision of crowning unsuitable Dhrutrashtra, a destiny that lead to the ruin the entire *Bharatvarsh*.

 In his article[[4]](#footnote-4) Major Akhil Pratap stated that “Barbarik was the only warrior in the legend of Mahabharat, who was invincible enough to be abetted by Lord Krishna himself, to commit suicide so that he can be prevented from engaging in the war”. The point here is to be noted that even Shri-Krishna had realized *Barbarik/Belarsen* could have been a real treat to his existence; therefore he tried to keep this peerless warrior away from participating in the final *Kurukshetra* war, and therefore he cunningly chopped off his head with *Sudarshan Chakra* and made him a mute spectator to what happens there in war. All these details regarding Barbarik can be found in the *Skanda Purana, Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Puranas* (2001) by swami Parmeshwaranand p.155, Devdautt Pattnaik’s *Jaya: an Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata.*

So, all these discriminations and injustices to the above discussed invincible warriors Eklavya, Karna, Barbarik/Belarsen, and Vidur give us the idea about the genesis of this cruel practice of caste in the ancient times that continued century after century in the paradigm of universal Meta-narratives by maintaining discursive ideology and the interests of the savarna castes in India.

**Medieval Bhakti Poetry: A Critique of Caste and Inequality:**

Medieval *Bhakti*(reformist) poetry offers the most powerful critique of caste and inequality in the Indian society and culture. In fact, some Bhakti poets tried to defamiliarize the issue of discrimination and caste through their writings. The so called present trajectory on the issue of caste is not something that started only with Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar’s works. Both Saint Kabir and Tukaram through their rebellious writings attacks the rigid caste system and hegemony of the Brahmin in India. In one of his most famous *Doha* (couplet)Kabir says;

जाति न पूछो साधु की, पूछ लीजिये ज्ञान I

मोल करो तलवार को, पडा रहन दो म्यान II

(कबीर वाणी, दोहा १६२)

Do not ask the caste of a scholar, Rather focus on the wisdom he/she carries I

Look at sharpness that Sword carries, And not at the shield that covers II[[5]](#footnote-5)

(Kabir Wani, Doha 162)

Saint Tukaram firmly asserts in the lines of Abhang(something that will never *bhang/*ending, “Non-ending”, “uninterrupted, flawless, continuous process”)

विष्णुमय जग वैष्णवांचा धर्म I भेदाभेदभ्रम अमंगळ II१II

तुका म्हणे एका देहाचे अवयव I सुख दु:ख जीव भोगे पावे II२II

(संत तुकाराम संपूर्ण अभंग गाथा, अभंग क्र.२१)

The whole world is of Lord Vishnu (Almighty) and we share one bond/religion that we all belongs to that Almighty. (here Lord Vishnu) I Therefore discriminating (भेदभाव) each other would be inauspicious or ignominious II1 II

Tuka says we all are but the body parts of one cosmos/Superconsciousness.

And it’s soul that experiences pleasure and pain.[[6]](#footnote-6) II 2 II

(Saint Tukaram Sampurn Abhang Gatha, Abhang No. 21)

Through these Abhanga lines Saint Tukaram undermines the idea of discrimination (भेदाभेद), by explaining the nature of universe as a one and the same. We all are related to each other, in some way or other as human beings therefore; neither should we discriminate against nor differentiate each other.

**Theorizing Caste Phule and Ambedkar in the Modern Times:**

Jotirao Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. In particular, he courageously upheld the cause of the untouchables and look up the cudgels for the poorer peasants. He was a militant advocate of their right. The story of his stormy life is an inspiring saga of a continuous struggle which he waged relentlessly against the forces of reaction. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule's book ‘Gulamgiri' (Slavery) is considered one of the Pioneer books. It explores Brahminical supremacy and hegemonies in the social structure of Indian society. It critiques the institution of caste through a 16-part essay and four poetic compositions, and it is written in the form of a dialogue between Jotiba, and a character he calls Dhondiba. The ‘Gulamgiri' is a great articulation of Phule in which he also critically evaluated the Indian society with a logical argument.

Gulamgiri, according to Phule, is credited with anticipating modern ideas such as the interconnectedness of economic & cultural subordination. In order to make his point, Mahatma Phule takes it upon himself to destabilize certain Hindu myths. And he punctures them using logic. For instance, right at the beginning, he takes the story of the origin of the four castes from the *Purushsukta* hymn. According to this story, Brahmins were born from the head of Brahma, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet. Often peddled as a justification for the differential status enjoyed by different castes, this narrative is rendered absurd by Phule. He does this by posing a straightforward, but perhaps slightly provocative, question: Does this mean Brahma had four vaginas where he gave birth from? What is even more extraordinary about the text is that it tries to wrest a legitimate cultural space for the practices and beliefs of shudras and atishudras. Phule does this by trying to situate these practices within narratives of a glorious historical and cultural legacy. He re-narrated the story of Bali Raja. While talking on the genealogy of Brahmins, Jotirao says in the introduction of the book:

Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmins were not the aborigines of India. At some remote period of antiquity, probably more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin Race descended upon the plains of Hindoostan from regions lying beyond the Indus, the Hindoo Koosh, and other adjoining tracts. According to Dr. Pritchard, the Ethnologist, they were an off-shoot of the Great Indo-European race, from whom the Persians, Medes, and other Iranian nations in Asia and the principal nations in Europe like-wise are descended. The affinity existing between the Zend, the Persian and Sanskrit languages, as also between all the European languages, unmistakably points to a common source of origin. It appears also more than probable that the original cradle of this race being an arid, sandy and mountainous region, and one ill calculated to afford them the sustenance which their growing wants required, they branched off into colonies, East and West. The extreme fertility of the soil in India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of its people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favoured land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western nations, no doubt, attracted the Aryans, who came to India, not as simple emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors. They appear to have been a race imbued with very high notions of self, extremely cunning, arrogant and bigoted. Such self-gratulatory, pride-flattering epithets as 'arya' 'bhudev' etc., with which they designated themselves, confirm us in our opinion of their primitive character, which they have preserved up to the present time, with, perhaps, little change for the better. The aborigines whom the Aryans subjugated, or displaced, appear to have been a hardy and brave people from the determined front which they offered to these interlopers. Such opprobrious terms, as Sudra 'insignificant,' 'Mahari' - 'the great foe' atayanj, chandal etc. with which they designated them, undoubtedly show that originally they offered the greatest resistance in their power to their establishing themselves in the country, and hence the great aversion and hatred in which they are held. From many customs\* traditionally handed down to us, as well as from the mythological legends contained in the sacred books of the Brahmins it is evident that there had been a hard struggle for ascendancy between the two races. The wars of Dev and Daitya, or the Rakshas, about which so many fiction are found scattered over the sacred books of the Brahmins, have certainly a reference to this primeval struggle. The original inhabitants with whom these earthborn Gods, the Brahmins, fought, were not inappropriately termed Rakshas, that is the protectors of the land. The incredible and foolish legends regarding their form and shape are no doubt mere chimeras, the fact being that these people were of superior stature and hardy make. Under such leaders as Brahma, Purshram and others, the Brahmin waged very protracted wars against the original inhabitants. They eventually succeeded in establishing their supremacy and subjugating the aborigines to their entire control. Accounts of these conquests, enveloped with a mass of incredible fiction, are found in the books of the Brahmins. In some instances they were compelled to emigrate, and in other wholesale extermination was resorted to. The cruelties which the European settler practised on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world, had certainly their parallel in India on the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines. The cruelties and inhuman atrocities which Purshram committed on the Kshetrias, the people of this land, if we are to believe even one tenth of what the legends say regarding him, surpass our belief and show that he was more a fiend than a God. Perhaps in the whole range of history it is scarcely possible to meet with such another character as that of Purshram, so selfish, infamous, cruel and inhuman. The deeds of Nero, Alaric or Machiavelli sink into insignificance before the ferocity of Purshram. The myriads of men and defenseless children whom he butchered, simply with a view to the establishment of his co-religionists on a secure and permanent basis in this land, is a fact for which generations ought to execrate his name, rather than deify it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Despite Phule’s skepticism about the veracity of ancient myths, he dipped into them in order to plot their narratives in a different way. A better sense of this might be made by taking B.R. Ambedkar’s stands on the annihilation of not just a caste but the entire framework called Hinduism that exploits the lower castes/ *Shudra.*

B.R. Ambedkar, through a series questions to Hinduism and its ancient texts and scriptures, offers one of the solutions in the form of remedy to the marginalization and oppression of shudras and atishudras. In his most magnum opus, *Annihilation of Caste*, an undelivered speech written in 1936 highlighted the need to reconstruct Hindu/Indian society on the basis of liberty, equality and justice. He asserts that caste-system is arbitrary and one caste is not fit to rule another caste. This is the reason that caste system kept the Indian society divided. He pointed out that Vedas, Puranas, Manusmriti, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and all Hindu-Scriptures promote injustice. Hinduism is nothing but a collection of castes therefore we need to destroy everything that denies the dignity of human life must get annihilated.

**Conclusion: Towards a Casteless Indian Society**

 Through the subtle analysis of caste-based discrimination from the ancient time to the modern, we come to this conclusion that such inequality is not natural, rather this was artificially created and systematically being maintained by the Meta-narratives, the hegemonic discursively, mainstream ideologies and cultural base as well as superstructure of Indian society. One of the prominent Dalit writers, Annabhau Sathe in his most famous poem offers a solution to change the Indian society.

*“Take a Hammer to change the world-*

*So saying went Bhimrao!*

*Why is the elephant stuck sitting*

*In the mud of slavery?*

*Shake your body and come out,*

*Take a leap to the forefront !*

*The rich have exploited us without end,*

*The priests have tortured us……*

*Let us go forward*

*To break the chains of class and caste.” [[8]](#footnote-8)*

 It seems a little violent but Annabhau wanted to free us from this self-imposed slavery by undermining the structure of caste-based discrimination and breaking the chains of class and caste. Whereas Aniket Jaaware put it rhetorically by saying that god/s and religion are not responsible for the class/caste-based injustices. How and why do we have to resolve our own issues? How can we have a classless society with economic equality and opportunity in the form of egalitarian state? Jaaware talks about a workable future, as he asserts that ‘we are to help us, without god/s. We the people have to imagine the future as some state that we are going to reach by taking certain steps in the present, especially if we are attempting to imagine a future that is casteless, classless, and so on.’[[9]](#footnote-9) So, let’s all work towards a casteless Indian society. Perhaps, that would be the golden moment in the Indian history.

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5. This English Translation is carried out by me, S.G. Maholkar [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This English Translation is carried out by me, S.G. Maholkar [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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