

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

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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 Mahabharata* (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

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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 Mahabharata* 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 Mahabharata*, 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's point 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

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

² Quoted from Arora Nayak, Meena's Research article on *On Evil in the Mahabharata*. 24 June, 2018. <https://theprint.in/pageturner/afterword/evil-in-the-mahabharata-deserves-a-book-this-one-is-not-it/74249/> Accessed on 14 February, 2022. 5:00 pm IST.

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

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 Dhrutrashttra as the King. And they called this improper decision of crowning unsuitable Dhrutrashttra, a destiny that lead to the ruin the entire *Bharatvarsh*.

In his article⁴ 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, Devdatt 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:

³ Indrani Singh, Rai. *Delving Deep into Karna: Search of Self of a Divine Solitude*. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, ISSN: 2249-2496, Vol. 7 Issue 12, December 2017, pp.713.

⁴ Pratap, Akhil. *Barbaric (A story of India)* an article published in The Times of India’s *The Soldier and The Storyteller*, April 10, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/the-soldier-and-the-storyteller/barbaric-a-story-of-india/> Accessed on 17 February, 2022.6:00 pm IST.

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;

जाती न पूछो साधू की, पूछ लीजिये ज्ञान

मोल करो तलवार को, पड़ा रहने दो म्यान

(कबीर वाणी, दोहा १६२)

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

Look at sharpness that Sword carries, And not at the shield that covers ||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 । भेदाभेदभ्रम अमंगळ ॥१॥

तुका म्हणे एका देहाचे अवयव । सुख दुःख जीव भोगे पावे ॥२॥

(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) | Therefore discriminating (भेदभाव) each other would be inauspicious or ignominious ||1 ||

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

And it's soul that experiences pleasure and pain.⁶ || 2 ||

(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

⁵ This English Translation is carried out by me, S.G. Maholkar

⁶ This English Translation is carried out by me, S.G. Maholkar

other, in some way or other as human beings therefore; neither should we discriminate against nor differentiate each other.

Annihilating the Caste: Phule and Ambedkar in the Modern Times

Indian modernism began in the writings of Jotirao Phule, in true sense. Jotirao Phule single-handedly revolted against the unjust treatment given to the lower-caste people in India. Through his undermining writings in the form of *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*, *Shetkaryacha Aasud (Cultivator's whipcord)*, *On Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood*, *Satsa*, etc., Jotirao Phule has transformed the mindsets of Indian society in the late 19th century. By using the dialogic narrative in most of his texts, Phule questioned the authority and hegemony of the Brahmin/ *Savarna*. He stated boldly that to whom it was considered and labeled as the Sudra were actually the original inhabitants of India. How the unjust laws prepared systematically to protect the Brahmanical supremacy is the very fact that show how the practice of caste is absurd: e.g.

The Brahmins were styled and projected in the scriptures from the ancient times as the Lord of the Universe, even equal to the Almighty, they are to be worshiped, served and respected by all. A Brahmin can do anything. Even if he (a Brahmin) commits the most heinous crime, he would be spared whereas a negligible crime of the Sudra would be punished with severity. If a Sudra sleeps with a Brahmin adultress, his life is to be taken but if a Brahmin rapes the lawful wife of a Sudra he is exempted.

Such narratives according to Jotirao Phule are false and do not carry any truths in them. Therefore, Phule came up with the *Satyashodhak Samaj* like Plato's ideal *Republic*. One of the importance differences between Plato and Phule is the fact that Phule is talking about day-to-day realities whereas Plato about the Metaphysical realities beyond human world. The kind of methodologies Phule's works and writings implemented were simply astonishing that somewhere in the early 20th century inspired B.R. Ambedkar. In his most famous texts; *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, *Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar reconstructs the Indian society on the basis of equality, liberty and justice. Ambedkar asserted that the Caste system is arbitrary and one caste is not fit to rule the another. Institution of caste is something that kept the Indian society divided. Caste in India is not just division of labour but also division of labourer. He opined that the Hinduism is nothing but a collection of Castes. Destruction of scriptures, Vedas as well as inter-caste marriages/dinning would be the solution to Caste based discriminations. In fact, B. R. Ambedkar himself was tortured, humiliated and harassed on different occasions by the practice of Caste in India. This was the reason that why he upheld strongly the issue of discrimination and caste in the Indian Constitutions where advocated us to destroy everything that denies the dignity of human beings.

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. ⁷

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.’⁸ 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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⁷ These lines have been quoted from the poem, “Take a Hammer to Change the world” written by Anna Bhau Sathe, translated into English by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar, published in an Anthology, Dangle, Arjun. (ed.), *Poisoned Bread: Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. pp.05.

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