

## Dalit Consciousness and Autobiography: Reading Sushila Takbhore's Shikanje Ka Dard

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### Special Issue

**Dr Ashok Verma**

Associate Professor in the Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan (Haryana)

The basic postulation of Dalit writings has been to challenge and subvert the traditional *brahmanical* hegemony and seek a rightful position for those sections of society that have remained marginalized throughout history. There is no denying the fact that the Indian society has cherished and nourished the *varna* system and as a result, one section, down at the lowest rung, has been exploited thoroughly in the name of socio-religious practices. Using the rhetoric of propriety and superiority, the 'upper' castes have awarded sub-human treatment to the 'lower' castes that form "a quarter of the country's people" (Mukherjee, "Translator's Introduction" viii). In order to understand the dyadic relationship between the dalits and caste-Hindus, a diachronic study of history is required which explicitly shows that the relationship between history on one hand and society and culture on the other hand has never been unidirectional. It has been a two-way process. If history shapes and conditions the social cultural milieu, at the same time, it itself gets influenced and wrought by that particular milieu. That means the social, cultural, religious and economic factors do determine and constitute the concept of history. It should not come as a surprise then that history and the representation of various social groups has never been objective to the extent of being in seamless perfection.

The above postulation holds true in the Indian context where writing of history has always been the prerogative of the Brahmins—the so-called learned class. In fact, the *varna* (caste) system as mentioned in the scriptures provisions for four basic *varnas*—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra in the order of hierarchy. The Brahmins, being the learned ones, thus become the supreme. It is they who have got the power of knowledge. As such, their perspective, being the only perspective available, becomes valid and attains finality. In this set up, the *Shudra* being at the very bottom of the hierarchy, the first three *varnas* exercise the religious (or what they call the power of knowledge), political and money power respectively on those who are absolutely devoid of any power whatsoever. It is a vicious nexus that leaves no scope for the people at the lowest stratum to lead a respectable life. As such, the Dalits and Tribals have ever been denied a proper 'voice' in history.

Here it is important to note that the word "dalit" encompasses all such oppressed and powerless who have ever been denied share in power. It is an umbrella term encompassing

those who are oppressed at any of the levels i.e. class, caste or gender etc. No doubt, in the Indian society, certain castes have remained at the lowest rung according to the Varna system, and as such, they are Dalits, but to use it as a mere caste marker would be limiting its scope and denying access to power to those who are facing oppression at any level other than caste.

The oppression of the Dalits continues at various levels making their day-to-day life dreary and monotonous. Any attempt at breaking free from oppression and towards progression in terms of knowledge or material progress would be termed a breach against the prescription and thus would be viewed seriously and attract severe punishment from the 'custodians' of the social behaviour. That means the prevailing power structures would never allow a change and all loci of power would come together to deprive the have-nots of their just rights and to propagate the prevailing power structures.

With the growing consciousness, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, things have started changing for the better. Exhibiting the awareness that Dalits gained over the years through the persistent efforts made by reformers like Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar, they now want equal share in power. They reject the inhuman treatment on the basis of *varna* and seek to revisit history and redefine the social order in favour of the egalitarian principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. In this process, their 'radical' ideas are coming to be in clash with the age-old ideas that have been prevailing in the society for hundreds of years; hence the dichotomy as the present power structures would not accede to their demands in mere subservience.

Today, there is a whole corpus of vibrant Dalit literature challenging the stereotypical, upper caste mindset and its resultant practices. In fact, writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Suraj Pal Chauhan, Daya Pawar, Namdev Dhasal, to name a few, have potently challenged the brahmanical, caste-Hinduistic hegemony. The focal concern of these writers is assertion of their Dalit identity rather than feeling ashamed of it. This is a phase of political awareness and to use Mukherjee's words, it is a journey from "Erasure to Assertion". These authors successfully project Dalits as upper caste Hindu's other and reject the subservient place for the Dalits in the self-other binary.

Ambedkar, in his seminal essay, "Untouchability and Caste System" relates the plight of the untouchables with the institution of caste system and talks about three kinds of sanctions i.e. legal, religious and social which provide life force to any institution. While either of these sanctions can sustain an institution, the *varna* system has got all the three sanctions; religious—since religion promotes caste divisions thus making an average Hindu consider his caste sacred; social—as the society recognizes the caste and finally, up to some extent, legal—as the government has also made provisions in the Constitution for particular castes.

*Akkarmashi* fame Sharankumar Limbale, like Ambedkar, maintains that in the present system, Dalit subalternity is eternal, unalterable as against colonial subalternity. It's inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. Taking a historical view of dalit subalternity, Limbale exposes the inherent injustice meted out to dalits under the pretext of religious and social inferiority and impurity. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), he questions the concept of *satyam*, *shivam* and *sundaram* which forms the foundation of traditional Hindu aesthetics; and turns it, on its head in terms of its applicability to Dalit literature. He declares:

Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram—these are fabrications used to divide and exploit ordinary people. In fact, the aesthetic concept of satyam, shivam, sundaram is the selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society. It is necessary to replace this conception of aesthetics with one that is material and social. (21).

Limbale further goes a step forward to subvert the notion of *satyam*, *shivam*, *sundaram* and calls for the portrayal of the untruth, unholy, unbeauty by Dalit writers in their works. This subversion shows the intensity of the radical element in his work. He feels that it is highly inappropriate “to expect pleasure or beauty, instead of inspiration for social transformation, from a literature that has been written primarily to raise awareness” (21). To Limbale, Dalit literature must be seen from the socio-historical perspective rather than evaluating it from the ‘pure’, aesthetic lens. The rejection of the traditional, mainstream aesthetics is, in fact, one of the basic postulations of Dalit writings as it is inappropriate and insufficient for judging the ‘literary’ value of a Dalit text. Hence, the need for a “new and distinct aesthetic” that is “life affirming and realistic” (19).

This brings in the age-old debate as to what should be the parameters for judging literature. The famous Art for art sake school maintains that a work of art is primarily a work of art which has its own intrinsic, aesthetic beauty and therefore it should be judged from the aesthetic perspective only—devoid of any social, moral, cultural role that it may have to perform. On the other hand, there is a parallel school that believes that literature is the by-product of its social, cultural, ethnic and religious milieu. No literature is produced in vacuum. As such, literature has a role to perform. This approach is called Art of Society Sake. Obviously, Dalit literature falls strictly under the second category. Dalit authors cannot think of any other aesthetics beyond their sordid experiences. It is quite natural and understandable as well. To them, the concept of literary aesthetics is also drastically different from the traditional notion of literature and its role in society. Dalit writers maintain that because the genesis and the purpose of Dalit literature is different, it should not be judged on the yardsticks of mainstream aesthetics. Since Dalit literature comes as a reaction, it needs to be understood from an altogether different perspective. Some Dalit writers further believe that only writers who themselves are Dalits can express this perspective and simply reject writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand on the grounds that these upper-caste writers can at the most sympathize but never acquire a sensibility to feel the anguish and deprivation that are the essential ingredients of a Dalit experience.

In this struggle, autobiography has emerged as the specific genre to allow the emotional anguish of the Dalits to flow through the written word. In fact, autobiography forms the major chunk of the entire corpus of Dalit oeuvre. Autobiography becomes the natural choice of the Dalit authors to give vent to their pent-up emotions. They use autobiography as a potent medium for conveying to the mainstream their perspective—their anguish, their emotions, their helplessness, their haplessness, etc. which otherwise remain unexpressed and therefore, unrepresented. For mainstream people, it comes as something natural and as such they simply do not understand the trials and tribulations that the Dalits are doomed to experience. It appears that they have unwittingly internalized the ideologically promoted hegemonic image of caste hierarchy and continue to suffer.

Dalit autobiographies differ from the genre of autobiography as such. First and foremost, they are narratives of a life of pain and suffering—the wretched experiences of Dalits as pariahs and outcasts. Second, Dalit autobiographies serve as a potent medium of identity assertion for the author. Then, through that assertion and complete defiance of the mainstream structures of oppression, Dalit autobiographies help mobilize resistance at a broader level, thus paving the way for reconstruction of Dalit socio-cultural historiography. Raj Kumar, a noted Dalit scholar, while referring to the act rightly observes that “writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression” (5).

Sushila Takbhore's *Shikanje ka Dard* (2009) is another significant text in the now-not-so-new tradition of Dalit autobiographies. Written in Hindi by a Dalit woman who passes through the extremely challenging circumstances of her life to acquire a 'respectable' status in society, it underscores the pangs of Dalit life in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The way the text rips apart the veneer of social hypocrisy to expose the sordid reality in all its nakedness is what renders it a uniqueness of its own. The use of the word “Shikanja” itself speaks volumes of the suffocation and uneasiness of Dalit experience. The expression becomes all-the-more poignant when it deals with the life of a Dalit woman i.e. a multiply oppressed being—at the levels of caste, gender, class, etc. The author herself defines the term thus: “*Shikanja* means trap that leaves no scope for any movement. It means snare that won't allow an escape. According to dictionary, it means clasp. It also refers to rack—an old instrument of torture in which pain is inflicted by stretching the culprit's body....” (“Preface” 4). Clearly then, the title which literally means “Anguish of the Trap” has been used in multiplicity of shades to underscore the agony of being Dalit in a highly casteist society. The pain, the suffering, the humiliation at every step brings to the fore the essentially discriminatory Indian social order nourished by the age-old caste system.

Takbhore's description of her childhood experiences, the sub-human conditions that she lived in, the work conditions of her grandmother, the volatile ambience of the family largely due to non-fulfillment of basic needs—all have been portrayed with an authentic touch in consonance with Limbale's postulation. The day-to-day life experiences

have turned her grandmother and parents skeptical and dry. And yet, they cannot come out of the vicious circle of superstitions and rituals propagated by the casteist society. Takbhoure recounts the observation of rituals by her mother and grandmother despite their sordid living. It's only her father who exhibits some spine in rejecting the celebration of Diwali that again emanates from his own experiences: "These festivals are not meant for us. Do we have Lakshmi (money) that we should worship?" (36). This question clearly shows the redundancy of such festivals for the have-nots.

Takbhoure further narrates how her brother Shankar had to succumb to the octopus-like stranglehold of the oppressive forces and he had to leave college and discontinue his studies because he had beaten up some upper-caste boys who continuously teased him for his low caste. The irony-soaked observation of the author takes the incessant suffering of the Dalits to an altogether level: "It was normal to deprive a promising boy, born in a family of untouchables, of a better future" (75-76). Such accounts leave the reader in no doubt about the pitiable plight of the Dalits in Indian society.

The author stoically undergoes the suffering and it is only through her persistence and, up to a great extent, stubbornness, that she is able to continue her studies. She has come to imbibe her grandmother's advice that education is the key to counter the caste-based oppression. Ironically, however, despite being highly educated and qualified, Takbhoure is primarily known by her caste only. She is referred to as *jharuwali* and *jamadarni* by her neighbours who cannot see things beyond the lens of caste, religion, etc. She lets out her disgust through the following poem:

A PhD holder  
College Lecturer  
Is called *Jharuwali*  
In the name of her caste. (223)

This particular experience establishes that in Indian society, caste identity is permanent and impervious. It cannot be come over either through education or any other means. Apart from the direct, unhesitant expression of caste superiority displayed by the neighbouring women, Takbhoure experiences the affected behaviour of the so-called liberal, upper caste friends who would proclaim to be open-minded and preach equality but would practice exactly opposite of what they preach. By and by, the author comes to understand the duality of behaviour of her friends and writes: "I came to realize the bitterness beneath the sugarcoated geniality of the upper-caste Brahmins" (228).

Another rhetoric that Takbhoure encounters is the rhetoric of aestheticism. Now that she is already equally qualified and has become a writer, thus cannot be avoided, the 'custodians' of the mainstream literature try to convince her to join them in the name of the aesthetic function of literature. "Madam, whosoever you are by caste, we consider you a *brahmin*. Why do you talk of contestations on the pattern of the Ambedkarites? You create aesthetic literature, and be with us. We will bring you laurels. Leave this Dalit literature thing, paint on the bigger canvas" (226). By this time, however, Sushila Takbhoure has



grown mature enough to see through their manipulations and machinations and notes thus: "But I know these rhetorics do not emerge out of true compassion (226).

While Takbhore brings to the fore the hypocrisy of the upper caste people, she successfully highlights the ignorance and pigheadedness of her 'own' people who would not come out of their ignorance. To her, this is the biggest challenge to pull out the people from the darkness of ignorance as they have internalized their ideologically promoted hegemonic image and would resist any change in status-quo. Takbhore narrates an interesting account in this regard:

I always told my people: 'Stop running after religion, and try to understand the notion of social awareness and revolution. Embrace development and change. Maharishi Valmiki was a Brahmin; he is neither our forefather nor our preceptor. Dr Ambedkar is our only leader and well-wisher. Embrace his teachings and thought.' My own people then stopped inviting me to Valmiki Jayanti celebrations. (246)

Sushila Takbhore also questions the legitimacy of the Hindu scriptures by testing them on basic human parameters. "These Hindu scriptures preach *varnashram dharma* and uphold casteist society and still are venerable. They are the foundational texts for our oppression. At that time, it was difficult to think beyond them as the insight and perspective to analyse them and read them with logic was missing" (109).

Without mincing of words, Takbhore advocates resistance against oppression. "Now the problems must be addressed. The phase of questioning must be over. No more questions but answer—precise answers. The problem is centuries old. We have been suffering since. No more talks of suffering and pain, now we must talk of resistance and rebellion too....we will not succumb, we will force them down, caste must be eradicated—this is the new message to the society" (279).

Thus, Sushila Takbhore's autobiography is a saga: of suffering, pain and anguish; and at the same time, of struggle, perseverance and rebellion. Through this saga, she poses some disturbing questions to the mainstream Indian society and seeks unambiguous answers to them. Though some of the author's averments may sound radical, they are the by-products of her personal experiences and call for a solution using basic human parameters. As a Dalit woman—a being oppressed at multiple levels, she calls for her rights that any society based on egalitarian principles must accord to its members. The healthy amalgam of her views both as a dalit and a woman, is presented in a poised manner in the following lines: "The society moves in the right direction; fatalism and bigotry is eradicated, my people [dalits] get to know their constitutional rights and be able to get them through education and struggle, women get liberated from oppression and injustice and become really empowered, get respect and equality in the society—it should be the duty and aim of every enlightened being" (292).

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Hence, Takbhore envisions a social order that is founded on the humanitarian principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice; it's an order where there is no oppression on the basis of class, caste or gender. While addressing key Dalit issues, she successfully induces the reader to perspectivise Dalit experience in the right spirit rather than brushing it aside by terming it divisive and fatal for the Indian society. This is a significant contribution to Dalit cause. Rather than perceiving things from a narrow position—either that of a Dalit or a woman, she is essentially humanistic and liberal. Her understanding of the concept of woman emancipation and empowerment also holds testimony to this aspect of her writings:

Woman Emancipation and Empowerment actually mean that women do not remain confined to their home and hearth only; they should move ahead in every walk of life. They should get their rights along with their duties and attain a respectful life and personality. Only when the present generation and the generations to come understand this basic fact, the path of their growth and prosperity will open. Man and woman are two wheels of the chariot of life; both should get equal status and opportunities. (292)

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