



**Theory, Culture and
History of Dalits**

1

Block

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THEORY, CULTURE AND HISTORY OF DALITS

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The aim of this course is to sensitize the learners about issues and problems faced by a whole population of the marginalized in our country. With this in view, the course content has received focused critical attention in the various blocks prepared for the learners. The division of the argument into areas of culture, history, ideology and aesthetic concerns is particularly valuable in this regard. There is also an added significance of the course with respect to selection of texts under categories of fiction, poetry, drama and autobiography, not to mention aspects falling under critical thought, language, and socio-historical background. These are taken independently for exploration and analysis. The practice will go a long way in enhancing awareness about our country's diversity. The course will add to our appreciation of what has been termed difference. The selected area of interest will be dealt with in detail and its specificity will be examined in critical terms.

With the above in view, this course will introduce students to selected writings from the margins, which will include both Dalit and tribal narratives. Despite their obvious divergences (on the basis of ethnic, gender and regional variations), the selected texts will converge on the important point of struggling against the challenge of inequality and oppression. The course will also acquaint the reader with critical writings on Dalit and tribal literature that will focus upon ideas, concepts and opinions. In an essential sense, the historical framework will be evolved for doing justice to the values enshrined in literary trends and attitudes.

Keeping the divergences in mind the course comprises

- a) Dalit Discourse
- b) Tribal Discourse

A) Dalit Discourse has 4 Blocks in it, these are:

Block 1 – Theory, Culture and History of Dalits

Block 2 – Fiction and Autobiography Writings

Block 3 – Poetry

Block 4 – Drama and Short Fiction

B) Tribal Discourse includes:

Block 5 – Theory, Culture and History of Tribals

Block 6 – Oral Narratives

Block 7 – Fiction and Autobiography

Block 8 – Poetry, Drama and Short Fiction

BLOCK 1 BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Welcome dear learner!

In this block, you will be reading an account of theory, culture and history informing the Dalit experience. The assumption here is that episodes of struggle and evolution in a society bring to light certain patterns which give us a peep into its inner working. These belong to the domain of theory. You will find them further extended to cover ideas and concepts useful for gaining entry into the social structures where dalits are placed. The given discussion should equip you with skills to make sense of that which dalits face in their course of living.

The block consists of six units. The first unit titled **Historical Background** provides you with a link between the present formations among dalits in different parts of the country and the set up that working from behind influenced their day-to-day existence. The question addressed is of how particular phases of dalit experience were rooted in situations that evolved over a long span of time.

The second unit **The Dalit Canon** goes into the category of thought enshrined in the established tradition of a critical yardstick. The word “Canon” is discussed as an interpretive category and the principle is then explained to grasp its efficacy as a theoretical tool. With the help of the canon, one may grasp the preference we give to certain areas than others.

In the third unit **Dalit Discourse**, you will gain knowledge about the attitude that actually works in the act of description and analysis. This will throw light on how discussion shapes itself centering around chosen ideas. Thus, the best word to follow the implication of discourse is attitude.

The Fourth unit **Dalit Identity and Culture** distinguishes between the idea of dalit being unique in surroundings of dominance. Here, you will earn familiarity with the oppressive nature of economic and social control under which specific dalit individuals operate as suffering and resisting entities. Does a particular culture get generated in such a process? The unit will attempt an answer to this query.

The Fifth unit **Dalit Thought: Some Voices** will take you along the arguments of scholars selected to tell what caught their attention while studying the ways of life of dalits. It is our endeavour to let you know that different studies of dalit response by scholars present divergent views on the issues and bring out clash of ideas.

In the sixth unit **Dalit Thought Some Voices** you will read added points of the argument presented by the scholars in this area. Here, as in the previous unit, diversity is the key. But you may also bear in mind that all the views and approaches in these two units refer to layers and sub-layers of dalit existence and together they constitute a whole, a totality of outlook that defines meanwhile the integrated picture of suppression unleashed by the powerful in society.

Together, the units in this block offers a unified account of ideas, concepts and approaches meant to do justice to the study of dalit life and thought. They also offer in some cases an in-depth analysis of the selected poems, short stories and essays by scholars well-known in the area of study of the marginalized.

UNIT 1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Defining Two Terms : “The Oppressed” and “The Marginalized”
- 1.2 Origin of the ‘Social Division’: View of Ambedkar
- 1.3 ‘Social Division’: Facts from Ancient India
- 1.4 Position in Society: Medieval India
- 1.5 Movement Forward
- 1.6 Bhakti Poetry : Assertion of Lower Castes
- 1.7 ‘Marginality’ Today: Dalits in Contemporary India
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Questions
- 1.10 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall take up the issue of history with respect to ‘dalits’ or the ‘marginalized’. These sections of society have been categorized as dalits in modern India. They have lived as deprived and oppressed in the country since time immemorial. Isn’t it interesting that dalits were a part of the productive forces and made through labour a large number of goods, both luxury and of necessity, for use by the upper sections in society? Yet, they were not allowed to use the goods for their own benefit. The deprivation occurred because of the power the privileged sections wielded. This act on the part of the mighty would have made dalits feel that they were inherently inferior. The loss of face and self respect kept them perpetually in a state of helplessness. Still more, their sense of identity and selfhood stood compromised in effect. Indeed, it was their right to have a share in the produce. They also had a claim on respectability since they sustained the supposedly privileged through their labour.

The question may be addressed yet more specifically. Were dalits the population that worked on the fields, ploughed land, sowed seeds and raised crops? To this, the answer would be mixed. Another section called peasantry raised crops and produced grain, whereas a whole number of the oppressed sections such as dalits made agricultural tools, spun and wove cotton-thread to make cloth, cleaned up village streets, and took part occasionally in harvesting. They were perhaps close to what the modern-day work force signifies. But the social prejudice brought them down to the level of inferior living devoid of respect.

1.1 DEFINING TWO TERMS: “THE OPPRESSED” AND “THE MARGINALIZED”

Coming to oppression of dalits, let us note that dalits were denied opportunities of behaving as equals in a society controlled by the socially powerful. For this reason they would be always considered suspects in the eyes of the upper sections. Needless to say that being deprived for a long time would have caused unhappiness and

frustration among dalits. Keeping them under check physically and mentally had become imperative for the ones in society who managed and controlled its affairs.

The word 'marginalised' is suggestive of oppression and denial, it is a word that draws a line of demarcation between the center of control and a place that is ignored as non-existent. Take it as a metaphor and see that if you are in the middle of a territory you cannot see the whole scene around. Far flung spaces in the territory are not visible to the important group of people in the center and so much the better for the powerful. So far as they are concerned, out of sight out of mind, in the present case the margins are out of sight – this means that for the mind or attention of the rulers the dalits do not exist since stationed on the margins.

1.2 ORIGIN OF THE 'SOCIAL DIVISION': VIEW OF AMBEDKAR

Since we have begun with a reference to history, let us think of the time segment when the division of society into the upper sections and dalits may have come into being. The famous ancient Indian historian Ram Sharan Sharma, admits to their unmistakable presence in the Mauryan period and before. This means dalits had an effective presence in Indian history more than 2500 years before.

Tracing the history of origin of dalits, B.R. Ambedkar has drawn our attention to the partial acceptability of the Western historians who cite the Aryan invasion as the mark when dalits as a section of society with racial distinction came into being. Ambedkar has made a point wise assertion in this regard. To quote:

- 1) The people who created the Vedic literature belonged to the Aryan race.
- 2) This Aryan race came from outside India and invaded India.
- 3) The natives of India were known as Dasas and Dasyus who were racially different from the Aryans.
- 4) The Aryans were a white race. The Dasas and Dasyus were a dark race.
- 5) The Aryans conquered the Dasas and Dasyus.
- 6) The Dasas and Dasyus after they were conquered and enslaved were called Shudras.
- 7) The Aryans cherished colour prejudice and therefore formed the Chaturvarnya whereby they separated the white race from the black race such as the Dasas and the Dasyus.

Roughly stated a whole section of Indian population starts being termed dalit 3000 years ago from now, and this number coincides with that given by Ram Sharan Sharma. Another significant pointer common to both is that dalits had the existence of second class citizens ever since they gained this identity – they were descendents of India's original population called 'Dasas and Dasyus' in historical accounts. Ambedkar gives the Shudras the identity of the 'enslaved' – a population of free inhabitants in the country becoming conquered by a stronger tribe and subjected to social humiliation. The word 'Chaturvarna' indicates neat division of Indian society into four segments the last of which signifies dalits. There is a clear suggestion that dalit sections were targeted on the basis of their colour and that this assigned to them the lowest rank in the country.

Ambedkar is aware of the problem of a clear and acceptable evidence; for him concrete evidence is not fully available to support the above thesis in its entirety. And yet he gives reasons for accepting this version than its opposite grounded in the explanations of scholars from the brahminical formation. Ambedkar's preference for a version other than Brahminical is that the latter uses only broad surmises. To quote :

... this much must certainly be said about [the point when dalits enter the scene] that after reading the Brahmanic theories with their long and tedious explanations attempting to treat a social fact as a divine dispensation, one cannot but feel a certain amount of relief in having before oneself a theory, which proceeds to give a natural explanation of a social fact. (<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/38B2.%20Who%20were%20the%20Shudras%20PART%20I.htm>)

Ambedkar's methodology is that of a realist who will use the faculty of reason as an adequate tool to study an existing phenomenon. Brahmins didn't believe in studying a phenomena essentially—their job was to explain and preach. For this purpose gods came handy. You could hang any idea on them and make it acceptable to the large mass of people. “Natural explanation of a social fact” is important in the present case. The social fact is one that is the product of human behaviour. Why should we refer to a transcendental authority for shedding light on this. Instead we should take recourse to placing the occurrence of an incident in its natural setting – be it neighbourhood, widely accepted tradition or something that relates to morality or philosophy of the time. Ambedkar is providing in this quotation a sound basis for making sense of the emergence of dalit life. Assigning significance to human choices makes it imperative for the student to locate motives in history. There would be identifiable reasons indeed that can bring forward the truth of dalit experience in history.

1.3 ‘SOCIAL DIVISION’: FACTS FROM ANCIENT INDIA

What Ambedkar called “natural” has been interpreted as historical by R.S.Sharma. the evidence used by Sharma is enshrined in Kautiliya's Arthashastra, an ancient text. Its a book full of information about how life was sustained by efforts of all segments of society in the ancient period. For instance, recognition was enjoyed by individuals and groups for the role they played in social life. The role let them earn distinction accordingly that entailed a kind of privilege in many a case. RS Sharma points out the fact of life in ancient India. To quote :

Kautilya informs us that actors, players, singers, fishermen, hunters, herdsmen, wine distillers and vendors, and similar persons usually travel with their women. This was not the case with the women of the higher varnas, whose activities were limited to the sphere of home. The outside life of the women of the sudra varna was due to the necessity of working in the fields and pastures for the subsistence of their family. For Kautilya provides that wives of sharecroppers and herdsmen are responsible for the payment of debts incurred by their husbands.(169-170).

In this quotation the status of women belonging to the lower ranks comes out as stronger and more dynamic than was the case with women of the higher ranks. The

question is why. The reason clearly is that women of the lower ranks participate in the work outside home and are as such a component of what can be called social productivity. These women, unlike their upper class counterparts, worked in the fields and pastures and were of great help to the stability of the family. They also earned a peculiar social right. This came in the form of responsibility they would have to bear for debts incurred by the husbands. There is irony here. They paid for their husband's sins and earned the right. We learn from this account that within the parameters of marriage ancient women within the sudra section can partially free themselves from the entanglements of domesticity and enjoy equality of a sort. Was it worth the while? The answer would be that they worked hard to gain equality. Such an account may have been carried forward upto the present time when dalit woman stands tall in her own right, as is manifest in her representation in contemporary fiction.

There is a talk in Arthashastra of rituals of marriage as well as divisions in society along lines of profession and work. This is reading history from the angle of institutions such as marriage. Marriage was actually a phase in human life that ensured stability and dynamism of a peculiar kind. It joined human in bonds and also unified society within the rubric of customs. The latter would be preserved in general accounts of life as happened in the case of Arthashastra. Kautilya has talked of the practice of marriage and the associated rituals as follows :

Normally the castes were endogamous during this period. Arrian informs us that the husbandman could not take a wife from the artisan class and vice versa. But some marriages also took place between the members of the higher varnas and the sudras, as is evident from Kautilya's law of inheritance and his list of the mixed castes known as the antaralas. He repeats the Brahminical theory of the origin of the nisada, the parasava, the candala, the pulkasa, the svapaka, the ksatta, the ayogava, the kutaka, (kkutaka of the dharamsutras), the rathakara, the vainya, etc. Kautilya states that the function of the vainya and the rathakara are identical. He further declares that members of these mixed castes should marry within their own caste. The kind should see to it that they follow their respective avocation. He enjoins the king to recognise these orders and guide his subjects accordingly. It is also laid down that among all the mixed castes there will be equal shares of inheritance. According to him the mixed castes (antaralas) with the exception of the candalas, can live by the occupations of the sudras. Hence only the candalas are regarded as a despised caste, and the rathakaras, venas, pukkusas and nesadas of the Buddhist list are left out. (170 img 3-4).

The variety of life's ways in this quotation is useful. It equips us with the view that the dynamics of the different castes among the sudras would indicate movement than stasis. The coming in and out of a number of social formations through professions is one case. The king's duty to see that categories such as rathakaras should observe their avocations with interest and that he should give recognition to different orders to keep their identity intact. Among the sudras there would still be some sense of hierarchy under which candalas are made to stay at the bottom. It is clear that the placing of candalas is governed by the profession that they pursue. In this account of the life of sudras in the ancient period it becomes clear that they were gradually emerging as a cohesive group of workers in specific areas and that

within the sudra formation some freedom was granted. Initially in this quote there is also reference to marriages happening between the higher varnas and the sudras, but this is when antarala or the middle space is recognised as existing. The essential feature of these marriages would be the inheritance – that fact which takes the existing state of life to its previous phase or phases.

People get strategies to live in difficult circumstances.

Going back to the issue of shudras or dalits being originated in the Indian conditions we observe that the separation of the two sections, the privileged and the lower ranked was clear and unbridgeable. The enslaved and the conquered could not be accepted as an equal. The cultural and racial difference too negated the idea of ‘natural communication’. The range of separation involved getting the work done from a section already rejected, sending it back to the periphery of the village or the town, weaving myths of just behaviour on one side and the deserved treatment of the other, plus an overarching folklore that emphasized the features of ‘dasyu’ (meaning a rebel that cannot be adjusted in the upper hierarchies and is therefore a distortion), and finally the right of deciding superiority lying with the conqueror. This is the crux of the initial push of the dalits into a separate category that will remain so for all time to come. I have in mind the changes that occurred in the twentieth century with respect to the status of dalits even though these changes were confined to ideological debates and insertions in law. But it appears that from the initial incorporation of the conquered and defeated into the social fold as belonging to the margins to the early twentieth century. The placing of dalits at the bottom of the social scale stands frozen. In the discussion that follows we shall be taking up under separate sub headings, considerations about the mass of people under dalit category.

1.4 POSITION IN SOCIETY: MEDIEVAL INDIA

There exists the popular notion in India that Shudra as a category of social living has remained unchanged for centuries. Even as this maybe broadly acceptable, a number of crucial changes occurred in history that radically transformed the life and ways of the Shudras at certain points of time. We can understand this phenomenon better if we can relate the changes in society to the policies that different rulers adopted in the wake of certain necessities. From the point of view of the Shudras, such a change occurred in the post-Gupta period, necessitated perhaps by fast depleting resources consequent upon the outdated Gupta policies in a new situation. When such policies were adopted they brought with them upheavals of unknown kind. One such upheaval was the getting together of the Shudras and the Vaishyas in economic terms, benefitting both the varnas and helping them earn a new grammar of hierarchy and authority. The combination of these two varnas, economically and socially, empowered both and gave them political clout hitherto unheard. In particular, the development may have strengthened the position of the Shudras under the new political dispensation. Amar Farooqui has explained:

Significant economic and political changes took shape towards the History of Social Formations in India 57 end of the Gupta age (i.e. sixth century AD onwards; dates henceforth are AD). Two major developments were the decline of urban centres and paucity of money. We witness at the same time decline of trade and parcellization of power. A related development was the increase in the number of land grants

by the state, a phenomenon that became prominent in the Gupta period and very widespread in the post-Gupta period. The land grants carried with them various obligations to the overlord on the one hand and led, on the other hand, to the creation of a class with superior rights in land which extracted the surplus from producers either through rent or labour services. This class of landlords was delegated fiscal, judicial and military authority as well...Brahman priests were recipients of a large number of such grants—the purpose of these grants was both ideological and the extension of the agrarian frontier...It has been suggested that by the end of the Gupta age the shudras were losing their servile status (often through shudra resistance) and had, along with the vaishyas, become part of the huge class of subject peasants in the countryside. Surpluses were extracted by a superior class of landlords, who also had a high ritual status. There is a proliferation of jatis in this period, and varna loses its functional role. (The Marxist, XXVI 4, October–December 2010 AMAR FAROOQUI, History of Social Formations in India. <http://www.cpim.org/marxist/201004-social-formations-Farooqui.pdf>)

This quotation talks of the decline of the old order which was relatively speaking stable and had a sense of harmony about it. As time passed this order may not have kept pace with developments in agriculture, politics and society. A re-organization became imperative in view of the crisis that occurred in this period. There is a description here of the series of happenings that suggest weakening of the households organically existing, under which the servants are ousted from their place of preservation and protection to the unprotected world of the land away from the village. The servants of the household are turned into peasants who would now work day in and day out to provide resources to a new class of landlords to whom grants have been given by the new regime. Diversification of work on the land ensued because of which parts of physical endeavour were given to the working population who would then specialise in their respective areas. We are told that the shudras and vaishyas who worked together in society lose their identity at this time and become scattered along lines of divided work. This is meant by varna changing into smaller castes and shudras are subjected now to a new kind of oppression where one group will be segregated from another and all groups will be bound by the new norms associated with specialised labour. Jati or caste being the result of this phenomenon the new situation consisted of untold miseries, hardships and oppression. The time segment discussed in this quotation is the post Gupta period and the process continues till the occurrence of invasions in the beginning of the new millennium. People who came from outside to grab a share in the resources of India were benefitted by the lack of dynamism and will power among the country's inhabitants. From our point of view the shudras turning into jatis or castes got a new distinction under which they will be bound by hitherto unknown norms of living and suffering. It has been suggested by early medieval historians that most of these working castes in the new millennium lived on the periphery of villages and small towns and were not allowed to enter the fortified towns except when their services were needed to clean up the city before the sun rose. This is what Mohammad Habib has pointed out in his elaborations of the life situations that existed in twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

1.5 MOVEMENT FORWARD

Historical progress in the Indian context may have slowed down in the Post-Gupta period for reasons already given, yet the movement forward could not be completely stopped as other challenges visited the population. The work centered organization of sub-castes in India needed advanced skills – this demand was met by a new set of artisans who came along from other countries in the wake of change in the rulers and leaders in society. The interaction between artisans of the new kind and those others who had their roots in India became a part of what can be called catalysis – artisans from abroad gave a fillip to the work done by the Indian working population. The process was mutually inspiring as experimentation resulted from exchange and sharing of skills. From a stratified caste system a sharing of methods of work contributed to new mobility that led to increase in production, study and research. Irfan Habib has brought out the implications of coming together of two different sections of artisans and craftsmen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

...what strikes us is that craftsmen and artisans rubbed shoulders here with the devout and the learned among people whose arrival from Islamic lands made Delhi the cosmopolitan city it was. Clearly, the new techniques of paper manufacture, of making lime mortar and vaulted roof and, quite possibly, some weaving techniques (e.g. carpet making) could only have been established here through such immigrant craftsmen.

It is doubtful whether these techniques could have been immediately adopted by Indian artisans, organized in hereditary custom bound castes and familiar with quite different craft traditions...for certain new crafts, no professional caste would have existed. In course of time, there must have been adjustments within the caste system but in the short run, the lack of craft labour in specific spheres had to be overcome. One possible way that has been suggested is that of Indian artisans converting to Islam in order to live with freedom in the cities. But no evidence has been presented for this. The far more plausible process is its very opposite, namely, the enslavement of very large numbers of people so as to provide cheap reserves of labour from which new craftsmen could be created. (pg 7 Habib, Irfan. The Economic History of Medieval India : A survey. Delhi : Tulika, 2001)

Irfan Habib has introduced the idea of fertilization in the Pre-Mughal period that took place to increase the improvement of skills and study of new methods of production. The end result of such a fertilization bringing together the newly arrived craftsmen from outside and the Indian worker brought into being possibilities of moving forward in production of resources. The development was in the realm of material reality; it announced the coming of a new age where life would be guided by requirements of labour and production. That such a scenario redefined identities of social sections is something unique in the Pre-Mughal and Mughal periods when a sort of renaissance seems to be at work. The phenomenon is reflected in new perceptions in creativity and expression.

1.6 BHAKTI POETRY: ASSERTION OF LOWER CASTES

Habib's analysis given above opens to us a fascinating view of art and literature that came up in the wake of the Bhakti poetry which had a totally different take on life and philosophy. Most of the Bhakti poets, if not all, came from the lower rungs of society. They had roots in the shudras, the artisans and the supposedly lower castes. At the same time though, they carried the energy of a new outlook that questioned orthodoxy and established custom. A whole branch of Bhakti poetry in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries belong to the philosophical strain of what came to be known as Nirguna poetry – something that rejected the visible idol and focussed upon the essential idea. The latter was used to good effect by the bhakti poets for visualizing a God that was available equally to sections of different varnas. In fact the bhakti poets were sharply critical of the prevalent hierarchical system and put forward the notion of equality among human beings as never before. The positive viewpoint the bhakti poets such as Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, and Dadu Dayal rejected was pitched against the supposed superiority of the Brahmin or mullah. It brought them down from the high pedestal and made them look into the reality of their ordinary being. The bhakti poets found the upper castes bereft of any worthwhile quality and in fact lower down the scale of value and usefulness. They would be termed vain, arrogant and insensitive and subject of destruction at the hands of Yama. The other starting of Bhakti poetry categorized as Saguna also in fact complemented the Nirguna stream in one respect. Mystically the idol was turned into a living God resembling superior human being – kind, loving and playful. This also worked against the existing definition of the upper rung. The idol for instance would work with ease among the under-privileged and downtrodden. In the Saguna poetry, levelling was discernible between Krishna and Ram on one side and the worshipper on the other. Sometimes the worshipper would be a woman or a man will turn into a woman to woo God. This was entirely new to the mass of people who a few centuries ago would not think of divinity outside the place of worship. In the period of Bhakti poets idols left the place of worship and mingled with men and women as pals.

The strength and energy of Bhakti poetry in India had its source in the diverse forms of production and increase in skills witnessed at the time. The scene in the country was radically different from the one prevailing in the post-Gupta period. It gave a boost to the economy and to the quality of governance that went with it. The castes at the bottom of the social ladder once again looked up and became an integral part of prosperity that showed in the expansion of towns and cities that changed face to become new pictures of life's pattern. The word medieval is used only to show that nothing of the kind in fact existed. Medieval india historian, Satish Chandra emphasizes the centrality of the artisan class in the country as follows:

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, new social relations were developing in the country, especially in areas under *sultanate* rule. Towns and town life were expanding, as exemplified by the example of Delhi, "the biggest city of the Islamic east" according to Ibn Batuta. Other big cities in India included Daulatabad and Patan. The rise of new crafts based on the new technologies (spinning wheel, carders bow, paper, later the 'Persian wheel' etc.) and a new rural class which centralised in its hands a larger proportion of the rural surplus than ever before were also important factor in this process. These processes, and the

type of administrative centralization carried out by the Sultans, including the institution of some of the finest metallic currency then available in the world, aided the process of the growth of money economy in the country.(Chandra, Satish. *Essays on Medieval Indian History*. Fp 2003, 2012. Delhi : Oxford. Page 42)

What is meant here by new social relations is the changed position of the lower rungs. The well-known traveller Ibn Batuta bore witness to “the new technologies” that the ordinary mass of people used. The “new rural class” is that part of the population which owned large tracts of land in the countryside and produced surplus. The progress in the economic field became a basis for the affluence that would come India’s way in the Mughal period in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Here the reference to technology is significant because with this in tow the society forged ahead towards a new height of growth. Strengthening of money economy at this time meant a whole change in the vocabulary that inhabitants of the land used. Our mind once again goes back to the rich nuances in language exhibited by the Bhakti poets. Needless to say that people contributing to such a growth were the artisans who were active in the field of production and used new methods of production to hone their skills. In consonance with their efforts at producing wealth and knowledge this working section redefined the existing caste system that broke customs by the day, travelled from one village to another and from there to a town or a city enjoyed mobility and challenges.

1.7 ‘MARGINALITY’ TODAY: DALITS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

As we see the journey of the shudras through a caste system to the point where they earn the term ‘dalit’, we realise that this creator of wealth and knowledge in the country has ever remained historically exploited and oppressed. It never received its due, and even after the national movement and later it has remained unnoticed and in fact looked down upon. One cannot call it merely the tragedy of this section but still more the tragedy of society and the country where this great productive population was born and suffered. After the Bhakti movement and later at the end of the Mughal rule in the eighteenth century, dalits moved inexorably towards the margins. They never received education and learning came their way only through professional work. A large section of them with the passage of time became victims of difference at the hands of the rich and privileged. In the nineteenth century, dalits caught the attention of some great social reformers such as Jotiba Phule. Born in 1828, Jotirao Phule himself a dalit was able to attend school and did his matriculation in mid eighteenth century. He was a voracious reader and his early education in social thought was through his writing of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* which he read in 1847. G.P. Deshpande has spoken of Phule as “the first social activist who made agriculture and the production conditions therein, amongst the main subjects of his concern.”(Deshpande. Ed. *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*. New Delhi : Left World, 2002. Pg.14). Deshpande has also pointed out that “Phule did not think of women’s problems in terms of Brahmin or Shudratishudra. In his *Satya Dharma Pustak*, he talks of ‘sarva ekandar stree-purush’, all women and men together. Gail Omvedt has pointed out that Phule does not use the common word ‘manush’ (human being), but insists on using ‘stree-purush’, thus emphasizing gender differentiation, while pleading for equal and common human rights for women and men. He is the first to do so in India.” (Pande, 15).

1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you were introduced to the historical background of the Dalits. You were familiarised with the two terms “The Oppressed” and The Marginalised. You were informed in detail about the ‘Social Divisions’ of Ancient India, the position of society in Medieval India their assertion during the era of Bhakti Movement and the Dalits in Contemporary India.

1.9 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a note on the emergence of shudras in Ancient India.
- 2) Discuss Bhakti Poetry as an expression of new perceptions in creativity.
- 3) Consider Phule’s contribution to the cause of dalits in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 2 DALIT CANON

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Knowing What a Canon means
- 2.3 The Process of Canon Formation
- 2.4 Role of Historical Conditions in Canon Formation
- 2.5 How Social Ideas Operate?
- 2.6 Dalit Canon: Theoretical View
- 2.7 Distinctive Features of Dalit Canon
- 2.8 Three Different Categories of Dalit Writing
- 2.9 Aspect of Autobiography in Dalit Writing
- 2.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.11 Questions
- 2.12 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we aim to know and understand what the word ‘canon’ stands for in the study of Dalit experience, how the canon is formed in the process of historical living, and what we may identify as special features of the canon in our midst. With the help of such an endeavour, we shall form a category of thought capable of doing justice to various streams of experience that mark the uneven growth of privileges enjoyed by the higher social layers on one side and other people on the lower rungs to whom social rights are denied. It is suggested that ideas do not remain neutral to members in a society; they provide paths that lead to suppressing the majority in the name of social good.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The present unit attempts a theoretical explanation of how canons emerge in an evolutionary form. As society develops, new forms come up and begin guiding the flow of life. The process generates ideas and social experience is interpreted in their light. Under the discussion, we shall move from what a canon means and how it gets formed in a context. We may then witness complex aspects helping us make sense of the canon formation. Following this, we enter the field of theory that sheds light on what is good or positive and what is bad or negative in our society. Further, good is defined as that which promotes our interests and bad is explained in terms of that which works against the said interests. Who decides what is positive and acceptable and who determines what is harmful and therefore unacceptable? This is a question worth considering. In this unit we discuss implications of accepting or adopting as well as casting away a preference to meet specific requirements.

2.2 KNOWING WHAT A CANON MEANS

Let's turn towards literature while considering a canon. Firstly, what is a "canon"? Canon "usually refers to biblical writings accepted as authorized," and it "can also apply to an author's work as genuine" (Cuddon 116). The word may also refer to "a collection or list of sacred books, etc. accepted as genuine" (COD). In the domain of literature, when a certain kind of writing is attributed high stature, is acknowledged widely, and is deemed relevant by all, then this kind of writing can be said to have become a canon. This aura of significance constructed around a given aspect of literature has been manifest in literature all the time. In society, most people are seen reading canonical works and discussing them. This is so because these writings have earned some sort of a sanction. Works that are canonized are accepted by the academicians and scholars as carrying quality and wide appeal like none else. This legitimizes the need to put them on a pedestal for all to look up to and emulate. Not only do lay persons read and appreciate the canonized work, even those dealing with literature on the professional front, acknowledge the efficacy of such a category.

2.3 THE PROCESS OF CANON FORMATION

The literary canon can also be seen in context of the time when it operates and performs the function assigned to it. Since the context is the key, canons are constructed by a set of people to further their own ends. In the situation, bias is formed. Do we agree that society is a dynamic entity deriving its power from the clash it has with contending forces? This obviously appears to be the case. Society is nothing but a circumstance of struggle in which different sections participate to gain dominance as they plan to proceed on their course. If hurdles are seen on the way, they are removed. The section that formed the canon had an upper hand and wished to follow its own specific motives. That it suppressed another pattern of interests in the process did not bother it since with the passage of time its own canon had become solidified. But social action is an ongoing process. It follows an inner dynamics of society and when changes occur at its root, they might force their own view to emerge. This can briefly be termed the movement of society. What is the relationship between the social dynamic and the ideas that it generated? For us, this is the relevant question. To say it somewhat differently, as social forces move forward and require new paradigms in a changed scenario, they are bound to look critically at the existing canon and reformulate their standards of judgment. This is the moment when the formation of a new canon requires a reasoning that will augment the emerging forces of control.

2.4 ROLE OF HISTORICAL CONDITIONS IN CANON FORMATION

Significantly two points have emerged from explanation of the idea that canons are formed for meeting a historical need. The first is that the sections forming the canon are themselves carriers of a process of development and in the middle of this act they follow their own terms. The second is that makers of the canon are seldom in complete control and are indeed forced to take command from factors outside them. The concerned sections are privileged and, therefore, they elaborate their own view of history. The argument they form while elaborating their view understandably bears the stamp of their own conduct in society. For this reason, the

canon at any given time is restrictive and oppressive for those sections who did not play a part in its making.

Since we are considering the historical context, we might keep in mind its nature that changes from one time to another—the pursuance of a path unleashes energy affecting not just this or that section but the whole society. There being creativity taking shape in acts of men and women, many different paths might open that were hitherto unexpected. These make the leaders of society apprehensive who felt all along that circumstances will remain stable. On the other side of the spectrum, new groups take the hint that their role may increase in the unfolding drama. Thus, apprehensive on one side and inspiration to effect change on the other might be the result. The clash between the dominant section and the one that remained suppressed all this while may intensify and create a stalemate. This is what we may call the historical moment of change. In such a moment, old canons feel threatened.

The historical moment that created a canon may witness stasis, a lack of movement that stops growth from happening. It is a kind of blocking of the way. Such a stalemate shows us persistence of an old pattern fighting a critique of it. A most fascinating aspect of this phenomenon is the domain of feelings and emotions where new fantasies and dreams are forged in the middle of rigid conventions of behaviour. As things proceed from one point to another, new feelings and emotions might force writers to invent artistic forms suitable for the changed social mood.

2.5 HOW SOCIAL IDEAS OPERATE?

Let us begin with investigating the issue by discussing ideological clashes affecting social life at specific points in its evolution. These refer to day to day happenings in which disagreements come up and cause trouble. Pressure on the established canon in society builds up gradually till the realization of the problem occurs and questions of inadequacy or insufficiency get raised. One person says something and another one calls it wrong. It is noticed that the privileged sections always try to strengthen their ideas. This way they can keep a hold on the minds of the people around them. We normally see that the status quo continues till the need of change from some corner in society arises. On the other hand, unease with the existing ideas inspires certain individuals to invent new expressions. The job of the ruling elite is to tackle prevalent dissatisfaction and they are always active to meet such a requirement. When the mass of people become clear about their new role, movements are launched. This is the best moment for the basis of new canons emerging. What happens is that the demand of a new canon and a political demand to overturn the system happen simultaneously.

Think of this example. In the scenario around the 1980s in India, an unprecedented situation arose. The social upsurge was called *Mandalization* of politics. When this phenomenon emerged, a new canon called “Dalit canon” took shape. Reservation for the underprivileged was the political call of the time. Writers of the period changed their emphasis from commitment to truth and authenticity to voicing interests of the socially oppressed. Thus, the category of the poor was split into eye-catching names such as tribals, minorities, and ethnic as well as religious formations. The term “Dalit” suited some of them immensely. Earlier, caste category had been used to draw a neat social division. That got strengthened by the terms “Other Backward Castes”(OBCs) that put up the demand of preferential treatment for getting a job. Interestingly, literary and cultural theories were enlarged to include the canon

that would assume a whole new vocabulary. Mark how the two questions—the status quo and social change—were answered in theoretical terms.

Another question of making the new canon acceptable was raised at that time. We saw many writers sympathetic to the socially oppressed found it hard to grasp the truth of Dalit cause. They thought that uplifting the oppressed in economic terms was sufficient to give them social equality. I consider this to be the issue the writers had to interpret objectively. It was worth asking whether mere upliftment would ensure legitimacy of the Dalit canon. The marginalized in rural and semi-urban as well as the urban communities were largely untouched by the mass upsurge witnessed in the nineteen eighties. Ironically, the country recognized the Dalit category only in the 1980s and was yet to know the required measures in the situation. It is difficult to tell whether we have yet moved anywhere near resolution of the goal of abolishing the caste system. For instance, reservation was only a half-hearted measure in that direction. it did not address the question of the day.

The mobilization of cultural energy generated by social movements in 1980s was an essential requirement of defining the Dalit canon. At the social level, such a goal cannot be reached unless the formed caste structure is resisted socially and ideologically. An existing caste structure can be effectively ended by mass mobilization. Let us be clear about the need. The privileged sections organized behind caste system should be recognized as a factor responsible for inequality. Caste should be resisted because people of the higher castes are big beneficiaries of our social division. The caste structure is to be critically observed in such a manner that no excessive emphasis is laid on what has come to be known today as identity-based social behaviour.

A careful consideration of caste-based assertion would also involve identifying the biases created by hierarchies. Should it not be linked with gender discrimination among Dalits? Women among Dalits do not enjoy the right of equality. Women's participation in the social atmosphere and recognition of women as partners in the processes of labour will strengthen the Dalit canon as one which draws inspiration from human-social equality. The mainstay of Dalits has been their contribution to the social labour in the distant past. They enjoyed a meaningful presence in the days gone by. In our context, this will help them join with those others who are born in the upper castes and share their economic-social fate with Dalits.

2.6 DALIT CANON: THEORETICAL VIEW

Having viewed the question of formation of Dalit canon as one which assigns importance to the cause of resistance, we confront the question of grasping the new canon theoretically. The worth of an idea growing into a canon is complex and multifaceted. This is particularly true of the Dalit canon which has to cover a whole variety of sections and sub-sections in society. Each part of this variety is stationed at some point in the existing situation and has the right to define its importance accordingly. In some cases, the variants of the broader section may also find themselves in a position of clashing with one another.

The process of 'canon formation' has strong political overtones. What leads to the formation of a canon? Who has the say in such matters? What purpose does a canon serve in society? We observe that each clashing class in society has an opinion on canon. Each class interprets it differently. The set of ideas which are represented by

the canon are found to be convenient by some, while others may find them lacking in understanding of social requirements at a given time, and prejudiced since limited to one section and not being able to do justice to another. This difference or multiplicity of views regarding the same canon spells the scope of establishing an order other than that sanctioned or embodied by the canon. As such, the question may be asked: which is that standard that occupies the space outside of canon? Finally, is there some alternative canon that can replace the outdated canon at a given time?

If canon spells the mainstream, what is the nature of that field of life where roots of a new canon lie? In answer, one can say that the center or the mainstream is the opinion-shaper of a society. It enjoys a dominant position in social discourse. It also reflects the interests of those sections of society who hold sway in the goings on of social affairs. The other domain is that of the less privileged in the same social field where an idea has already gained supremacy.

It may so happen that violent treatment is meted out to the marginalized in the event of their refusal to accept the mainstream. The denial of basic human rights, for instance, can create a background in which seeds of an entirely new development might be sown. The need of the weaker sections is to walk out of the obstacles in their way—this can be achieved when they establish a credible alternative of their own. In culture and literature, this is the moment when forms crop up and fill the void that the old paradigm created by falling short of the expectation the time had from it. Writing is an important act of human endeavour—it helps one define prevailing parameters of thought and provide identity to those conditions that came up meanwhile in society. With respect to the domain of literature, the novelist Graham Greene has an important argument to give. He has said:

Writing is a form of therapy: sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation.

It suggests to us that we might see a kind of protest in words, a questioning of the unjust treatment meted out to self and also an attempt to search for alternate aesthetics documenting one's peculiar experience. This is borne out by the Dalit writing of our time. The ones occupying the sidelines in our time endeavour to find a voice by writing, and see the form writing has assumed in consequence.

2.7 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF DALIT CANON

This question brings us to the idea of the Dalit Canon. What does dalit canon look like? How is Dalit canon distinct from the canon of those exploited in society? What are the characteristics of such writing? Ideas of this nature let us enter the domain of constructing the Dalit Canon. For this purpose we may seek help from a view of Dalit writings that have come up in the last few years giving voice to dalit subjects and describing the conditions they face. We have been witness in the last few years to analyses of specific texts and forms to which the texts adhere that may give us clues about forming this canon. So far as forms of writing are concerned, our attention is drawn to the autobiography as a carrier of Dalit response. This is key to the perception of the Dalit subject, who, man or woman, has gone through the consciousness of being a subject bearing with social oppression and prejudice. The consciousness so forged gets registered in the autobiography form quite vividly

at the same time poetry too maybe partly influenced by the experience that the subject undergoes as a sufferer and an interpreter. Let us have a view of some attempts at theorization of a variety of Dalit writings under the gaze of interpretation in our time.

2.8 THREE DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF DALIT WRITING

We may identify three different categories of Dalit writing. First is the kind of literature which emerges when an individual author writes about the socially marginalized. The second is that in which the writer is born and brought up in surroundings of the marginalized and seen the social environment first hand. The third is where the Dalit individual turned writer has gone through the struggle involving clashes in the community and gained a heightened awareness.

Let us focus upon the first category. Here, the writer seeks to represent their issues, their experiences and give voice to their pressing concerns. Such writing may be effective in familiarizing reader with this yet unrepresented section of society. Even as this is achieved, a question may arise as to how such a representation would be authentic. An author without a first-hand experience of this part of society, it may be said, would lack the ability to capture the real essence of that experience causing distortion somewhere in the depiction. More than this, a clear misrepresentation of the chosen situation may occur in hands of such an individual author. We all know that authors have their likes and dislikes and they are usually driven by socially acquired prejudices. Thus, we come face to face with the question—can the author’s subjectivity interfere with her/his perception of the section one chose to represent? In this sense, while dealing with the area of life of the marginalized, we should be conscious about challenges that usually exist in an uneven society.

Let us look at another related issue in the context. We might assume that Dalit writing should normally be a conscious questioning of that which comes to define the mainstream. It is an issue of the writer remaining alert. Toral Jatin Gajarwala in his book *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* says that

“Dalit literature has been irrevocably shaped and indeed produced, by the critique of the very non-Dalit sphere it excoriates. These upper caste literary forms function as oppositional parameters, in dialectical fashion. Dalit literatures should therefore be read as constructing an anti-genealogy.” He talks about the need of “reading Dalit literature against a canon of literary texts in English and Hindi to reveal the range of...cultural refusals...”

Mark the word “canon” in the quote and consider how an alternative paradigm is visible in the background. Gajarwala has discussed Dalit literature as a category of writing that opposes the existing literary mode. It is as an alternate literary possibility. The relationship between the two kinds of writing is not merely of opposition; indeed it is “dialectical”. We may underline that even as there is opposition hidden in the link, it is also of those features which support each other. Dalit literature is defined against an existing body of writing which is sympathetic to the upper caste and strengthens its blind prejudices. However, there is a connect between the two contradictory approaches. Dalit literature as a category is not independent. It is

dependent on the Literature sympathetic to the upper castes, against which it finds itself posed.

Nevertheless, Dalit writing has its own inner dynamic making itself felt in the contemporary world. Such a position draws lines that put a question mark before the writing of people placed above others in the social hierarchy. Gajarwala is right when he says that experiences of the margins become with the passage of time strong enough to reject and oust from consideration those representations that work to the detriment of their cause. What I mean to say is that Dalit experience expressed through the eye of social awareness has an identity of its own under which a new logic asserts itself.

2.9 ASPECT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN DALIT WRITING

What remains at the centre of Dalit writing is the autobiographical mode where the social experience passes through the example of an individual's life. The Dalit subject right from the childhood is constrained to say things that meet the requirements of an outside agency than one's own real experience. For this reason, one is pressed hard to remain quiet or follow another person's dictates. In the process a journey begins within the person's self towards bitter realization of helplessness. When the realization increases along a series of repetitions the subject keeps wondering about the causes that work behind the phenomenon. Is it his/her own experience or does it in fact symbolize the experience of all those who are in the same social position, is the question that haunts everyone. The autobiography unravels a series of experiences caught in one frame. It enlightens the reader about the constraints that Dalit subject works under and grows more and more knowledgeable to finally reach a point sharp awareness.

This may not have been possible if the Dalit subject explored the realm of his experience through another mode, such as that of drama or fiction. It is significant that autobiography does not play such a role in the evolution of non-Dalit writing. Fiction or drama in the case of people placed among high castes are truly 'educative' and enhance the awareness of the reader through their portrayal of situations in the imaginative rendering. That is why perhaps that autobiography comes much later in life of a writer—we are witness to autobiographies of established non-Dalit writers getting written when they were senior enough to reflect on their world. This is the basic difference between the mode of autobiography in the case of a Dalit writer and of a non-Dalit writer coming from the privileged background. Mini Babu has pertinently commented on this view, saying that

“Autobiographies are generally written by eminent personalities towards the end of their lives and who have got much to evidence before the world, while Dalit autobiographies are penned at an early age when the author is neither distinguished nor eminent but noted for its depiction of a poignant past that has affected the history of a community. These autobiographies deal not only with the caste system as oppressive but also depict how economic deprivation and poverty are handmaids with caste discrimination.”

In addition to autobiography, fiction and poetry stand guard significantly to the presence of Dalit feeling and emotion. Fiction to a great extent joins hands with

autobiography in Dalit writing, not in the sense that the writer uses imagination and invents episodes but that autobiography depicts experience through a series of happenings. The narrative of the Dalit subject in autobiography bears a close resemblance to a fictional piece. The narratives in both the modes have a similarity that may not be missed. Much of the fictional piece coming from a Dalit writer may have indirect references to his own life.

In the case of Dalit literature the writer's attitude is expressed through a distinct poetic voice. We come across poems in such a case that pick up actual people, young or old, woman or man; they speak in their own individual voice about the issues of the time and cry out against injustices heaped on them by agencies of intolerance. If we put together a number of such poetic voices and spot in them a representative voice, we come across a fairly good view of the distance between the higher placed sections and the lower ones.

Let us meanwhile take the case of a Dalit subject that talks about his experiences and by extension of those who belong to his category. In the essay *The Dalit Vision and Voice: A Study of Sharan Kumar Limbale's Akkarmashi*, Mini Babu has said that Limbale "projects before the readers an objective and disinterested account of his life...carefully creating the image of his community in conflict with the contemporary social and cultural conditions. The narrator's self reflects his life in particular and the life of the community in general." The point made is that the self of the individual is in fact a characterization of the group to which the individual belongs.

Broadly acceptable, this observation raises the question of gap between the individual and his community. The former is of an evolved consciousness and, therefore, reflects perceptions of a high order. The same obviously is not the case of the community standing behind him. The mode of autobiography keeps such a distance between the writer and the people he is supposed to represent. The reader going through the account of the autobiography in such a case would lose out on the plight of ordinary members of that community. The impression would come across that miseries and pains of the Dalit community are different from the ones that in reality exist—the crudities of the actual kind may have been smoothed out by the educated narrator, the author who saw development from his position of higher learning.

Another factor may also come in, that of equation of the individual subject with persons of the higher castes. It might be assumed that the Dalit writer gained acceptance among the educated people in the higher castes and this changed his consciousness about the otherwise existing social divisions. He would not be able to see in true light the uneven nature of social layers in the world around him. His coloured mind would raise a wall between him and the poor ones of his own community. Social success does such a thing to an individual who may become a bridge between the contending groups. As a consequence, the autobiographical account may fail to show the violence witnessed by the weaker sections in society.

To reiterate, Dalit writing might try in vain to reach the stature of the literary canon. It could become a votary of the canon it was to observe critically. That is how established canons operate—they appeal to the individual writers from a point of strength since behind them stands the authority of a supposedly superior culture.

Let us bear in mind that literary forms always allow creative experimentation. Autobiography may expand in scope by running parallel to the poetic or the dramatic

modes. While sentiments may be common to all these forms, a blurring of boundaries might occur between the autobiographical narrative and a poetic piece. Conscious constructions have this tendency to mix and combine the personal poetic voice and the confessional autobiographical self. Interestingly, identity, torture and troubled history allow both the modes equally well.

Take the case of violence in language which is markedly present in works of Dalit poets like Namdeo Dhasal. One may notice a directness of expression that transcends mainstream understanding of culture and sophistication. There is also a use of common idiom and even cuss words in some cases. This finds mention in some discussions. Javed Ahmad Lone in his essay "*Meena Kandasamy: The Angry Dalit Voice*" talks about the unique treatment of language by Kandasamy in her poems. Ahmad has observed, "Kandasamy employs the African-American vocabulary to twist the norms of established language." Her poem "For Sale" deals with the story of a Dalit who entered the temple that was otherwise shut for Dalits. The language describing this fact is interesting. "He go to da temple, where / his po' ol' folks ain't allowed." One can immediately notice an African American word usage here. It opened scope for unity between two different sections living away from each other geographically.

Apart from peculiarity of language, the kind of reality that may emerge in Dalit expression is imbued with harshness of true reality, as it unleashes the real picture, bereft of any coverings or maneuvers. Javed Ahmad Lone says, "Kandasamy's poetry is rooted in reality; that is the reality of her Dalit self. The poet is in possession of numerous 'stories', some of which have got narrated and some have gone unreported. The atrocities of the past and present are transformed to the readers of the present to make them aware of the realities faced by the depressed people..." Talking of the directness of expression in Kandasamy's poetry and the detailing of a violent treatment meted out to the lower castes, Ahmed observes, "Kandasamy's poems portray such a dreadful picture of varied agonies experienced by Dalits that her poems seem as an encyclopedia of painful inventories." We note that untouchable turns into touchable for upper caste when it fits their selfish deeds and lusty demands. All of a sudden, pressures of money and privilege weigh heavy on social prejudice. As in the poem entitled "Narration" the lady narrates:

I'll weep to you about My landlord,
and with My mature gestures—
You will understand.
The torn sari, disheveled hair
Stifled cries and meek submission.
I was not an untouchable then.

Here we see a kind of double oppression at work here—on the lines of caste as well as gender. But what is more prominent here is the exposure of the hypocrisy of the upper castes. Another example may come in to prove it. When it serves to fulfill their sexual appetite, men make use of lower caste women's bodies, which otherwise are deemed 'impure' or 'untouchable'. And pointing to this duplicity, the speaker in the poem says, "I was not an untouchable then."

2.10 LET US SUM UP

The canon is formed by sections enjoying superiority in society. It reflects social prejudice. In times of increasing conflicts, the canon may be called to question and bear the brunt of criticism. In literature, the canon may bring to notice the irrational preference that notions of the right and wrong possess. Painful situations force writers to experiment with literary forms and experiment with them. The important form autobiography has opened scope of a new representation in Dalit writing. Its subject, working from the centre, asserted individuality as well as a general truth that he confronted in the outside world. In the process of expressing himself, he constructed situations that showed the society of the time in a new light. With the help of an evolving canon, the autobiographical mode took into its fold a number of established forms and moulded them into effective aspects of portrayal.

2.11 QUESTIONS

- 1) How would you define the canon in literary writing? Elaborate.
- 2) What is the role of historical conditions in the formation of a canon? Explain.
- 3) Write a critical note on the importance of autobiography in Dalit writing.

2.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 DALIT DISCOURSE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 By Way of an Introduction
- 3.2 Discourses as Expression of Rules and Norms
- 3.3 Narrator and Author
- 3.4 Defining ‘Discourse’
- 3.5 Balzac and the Issue of Discourse
- 3.6 Shakespeare and the Angle of Discourse
- 3.7 The Case of Dalit Discourse
- 3.8 Locating Dalit Discourse in a Literary Text
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Questions
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we plan to grasp the meaning of the word ‘discourse,’ keeping in view its usage in literary discussions today. This will help us know how Dalit discourse has emerged in the last few decades. It is also important to see the way in which a literary text gives itself to the demands the concept of discourse puts before it so we assess the efficacy of this new concept. There is no doubt that the use of discourse as a critical tool will give us new insights into the working of the text that is indeed forged by the collective effort of the author, the common reader and the critic. Discourse widens its ramifications during analyses of literary texts. When applied to great writers such as Shakespeare and Balzac, the concept may unravel new meanings that remained hidden beneath the surface of the text. In a specific sense, both Shakespeare and Balzac were instrumental in posing ideological hurdles in the way of the critic. The same may hold true for the contemporary Dalit writer who requires new terminology for the appreciation of his work.

3.1 BY WAY OF AN INTRODUCTION

Dalit discourse is difficult to identify in literary writing unless one has read a few works in which Dalit conditions are focused. The repetition of those conditions makes the reader think about the emphasis and how the effect of the work finally left its mark. Is it because the writer was consciously manipulating the attention of the reader? Or, conversely that the account had something inherently in it? Further, can the writing by a Dalit correspond to what is recognized as Dalit writing per se? This may not necessarily be the case since there are certain ideas in a Dalit writer which do not belong to him, which he/she may have imbibed from one’s elders or from the larger tradition that surrounded the writer. It can be argued that the writer in question would have an individual experience deeply rooted in one’s circumstance; this cannot be entirely negated. In a literary work circumstance is an important component since it has a logic of its own and is a part of what can be called the

given reality. In support of such an argument it can be said that Dalit circumstance creates its own understanding in a writing devoted to the Dalit cause. When we talk about the experience picked up by an author for depiction, we assume that the author participated in it and gave an orientation that ran in conflict with the circumstance. Be that as it may, it is certain that there is a problem with a Dalit writer claiming to further the Dalit cause. We observe that an emotion felt by a Dalit subject would not necessarily constitute typical Dalit experience. To be sure about the nature of the feeling or emotion at issue, one requires a theoretical tool called Dalit discourse.

3.2 DISCOURSE AS EXPRESSION OF RULES AND NORMS

Mark the word “expression” in the subtitle above. I have not said that rules and norms are observed by the author while writing. Instead, it is suggested that in a work of literature, certain things are embedded. From the point of their presence, they influence the path the work adopts or follows. To grasp this, consider the following passage:

Until the time that I was in the eighth class, I worked in my village in all these ways. All the time I went to work for the Naikers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do. They belonged to a higher caste. They had the money. We had to listen to what they said. However furious or resentful I felt in my heart I have stepped aside for them along with the other women of my community. (Kumar 93-94)

This is an excerpt from the novel *Karukku* by Bama translated into English from the original Tamil. See what the author intends to emphasize. You will note that “I went to work for the Naikers” tells us of the distance at which the subject “I” and the “Naikers” stand apart from each other. The observer “I” is the decisive factor here whereas the Naikers are presented as “them”, or the “other”. Mark the words “their goods”, “where they were”, and “their rules”. What does “their goods” signify—quite clearly it is the possession of goods by the Naikers which they own, control and define as theirs. There is a tinge of irony in “where they were” since the goods have been placed at a specific place under a plan that they formed. The point stands finally defined with “their” rules. It appears in the passage that the Naikers being where they are, and all other things associated with them are governed by the rules that Naikers themselves framed.

Here, we see a power structure at work. Interestingly, this power structure determines the course of the section of servants and yet it’s a sort of binding on those who control the situation. Can we not say that the writing of Bama with respect to this particular passage has in it a discourse of power that spreads its tentacles through ownership of goods, definition of selves and quoting of rules? Thus, the words picked up from the passage alert us to a kind of discourse operating there. Equally well, the writer has used a pattern through which to express a world of rules not open to change. The writer is using the discourse of power that is beyond individuals, she is creating an emotion which is of alienation, pain, and embarrassment.

We are face to face here with another discourse active in this passage—the discourse of resistance in the form of non-acceptance of roles. Hence there is the feeling of pain and shame. We realize in the process of reading this passage that there is discrepancy between unchanging rules and the dissatisfaction they arouse in the mind of the character “I”. The regular rise and fall of the working of the two discourses is quite effectively indicated through the sentence “but there was nothing that I could do.” Yet the same “I” feels “furious and resentful...in my heart.” Also, in the same sentence are brought in “other women of my community” that add a social dimension to the description. This will become later in the discussion.

3.3 NARRATOR AND AUTHOR

In the passage, we have mixed the narrator with the author Bama as if the two were inseparable. The question is whether they are united and inseparable or whether the “I” at a later stage would go in one direction and the author would look at an alternative in another direction. While commenting on the passage, we have kept in view the movement visible in the clashing discourses which can then be combined into a dialectical social discourse.

It may be noted that writers do not have control over the discourse active in their writing. The same holds true for Dalit writers. In the quoted passage, Bama presents the attitude of the narrator in realistic terms. Sharan Kumar Limbale makes a point regarding this aspect, as follows:

Dalit writers give priority to problems of society over the entertainment of readers. They express their feelings in their literature. They do not create literature with urbane readers in mind. Their effort is to transport the aesthete-readers to their own level of experience. Because Dalit writers are not focused on the aesthete-reader, traditional aesthetic values which are aesthete-reader centered, are not applicable to the evaluation of their literary productions. (Limbale 118-119)

The comment in this quotation is based on an existing trend—“give priority” suggests this. “Problems of society” pitched against “entertainment of readers” would take us to the significance of material social reality than things associated with entertainment. Also, creating literature for the “urbane” readers rejects urban readers as synonymous with the required sensitivity. “Aesthete reader” is substitute for entertainment-seeking readers. In a significant sense, Limbale also presents as unacceptable the evaluation of a norm. The question to be asked here is whether Limbale’s observation of the positive or the negative kind has something to do with Dalit discourse. Our response to such a question would be that the concern for the aesthetic is a part of the discourse. In that sense, discourse could be defined as the informing attitude inherent in the structure of a feeling or emotion as well as the shaping of a literary depiction. Not visible to the naked eye, discourse is a controlling agent that works from behind the text. It is also hidden in the understanding of the author. The question is, what precisely would the word “discourse” stand for?

3.4 DEFINING ‘DISCOURSE’

A set of idea-related assertions emerging in a literary work can together be called a discourse. Indeed, ideas are not disparate thoughts visible in a text. Instead, they are connected to each other by a common concern and form a coherent voice in

literary expression. The mention of common concern makes sense because it foregrounds an approach influencing literary depiction. In a work, we notice two distinct thoughts—of the author and another expressed yet more pointedly through the text than the author intended. To reiterate, the relation between an author's viewpoint and the independent discourse noticeable in the work is the key. Viewed thus, discourse may be a group of ideas with independent existence, distinct from the author's intention. J.A. Cuddon has explained discourse as follows:

In theory, at any rate, discourse might include any modes of utterance as a part of social practice. They are differentiated by their intention. Thus, discourse may be poetry or prose. It may be a poem, a philosophical essay, a political tract, a biblical commentary, a speech on the hustings, a funeral address, a polemic, a dialogue or an exercise in deconstructive criticism. It may be any number of things. (249)

An essential component of the complex interaction between the author and the discourse can be explained in the following manner. In a text, the writer may have conveyed in words what he/she intends to, yet the text may still assume dimensions that the author did not intend. How do such unintended meanings come into being? The writer has certain preferences and predilections but when he sits down to write, another set of preferences forces itself into the representation and begins driving the writer in a direction other than planned. In addition to this, a number of emphases emerge within the text owing to a different circumstance in which it is placed and gets interpreted.

We may go into the question of author-function as separate from the role that writing or writer might be playing. The point may be projected onto the future when roles and functions will be revisited in a different way than happens today. In the essay "What is an Author," Michel Foucault has commented:

All discourses, whatever their status, form, value and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed so long: 'Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?' Instead, there would be other questions, like these: 'What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subject? Who can assume these various subject-functions?' And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: 'What difference does it make who is speaking?' (Lodge 186-7)

3.5 BALZAC AND THE ISSUE OF DISCOURSE

Take an example. In the case of Balzac, the nineteenth century French writer working in the mode of realism, the phenomena of the discourse worked at the expense of his conscious choices in the political arena. In life, Balzac was a royalist—he was supporting the cause of the ancient regime which belonged to the pre-revolution period. He looked at the parliamentary form of governance with suspicion as the drama of bourgeois development unfolded in the nineteenth century France. Balzac's

contempt for the French bourgeoisie became clear on the basis of his impression that the new trader was a shallow individual never able to see beyond his petty profit. On the other hand, Balzac found as a citizen the presence of the remnants of royalty in the form of a repository of tradition. It would be expected, therefore, that such a writer would critique the petty trader in his fiction and place figures supporting the ancient regime on a pedestal. But did this happen in the case of Balzac? Did Balzac allow himself to address in his novels the supposed inferiority of the trader? And was he then guided by the logic of the narrative he had begun working on.

It was noticed that Balzac was different as a writer than he was as a citizen. We read in his novels a circumstance that is objectively depicted as Balzac goes along the flow of his narrative. This was in fact the aesthetic principle Balzac was proud of. He had said in one of his essays that he was not the writer of his fiction but a secretary of the history of the country that was represented in his writing. Ask yourself what “secretary” signified in the statement. In my view, Balzac did not choose to bring in his preference for or against a theme in his writing but presented that which he saw or experienced. This enabled Balzac to rise above his individual opinion to a level where he became an objective observer.

For this reason, we notice in Balzac’s fiction a series of happenings that get shaped by the historical circumstance and where different figures and situations assume their own role and function in the narrative. While looking at Balzac’s fiction, we face the question: is there a discourse of objectivity in Balzac on which he has no control because it is a part of the frame? This is the case and Balzac goes along with the logic of the flow he pursues. Clearly, this is a discourse.

3.6 SHAKESPEARE AND THE ANGLE OF DISCOURSE

Also, we might look at it as a term denoting what may be called after life. A text which gave out one message at the time of its initial composition starts yielding shades that appeal to the reader in an entirely different light sometime in future. This applies yet more clearly to the writings of Shakespeare who lived in England in the closing years of the sixteenth century and the opening years of the seventeenth. In that period, Shakespeare was a popular author providing entertainment to a whole population of middle rung citizens as well as the groundlings.

After Shakespeare’s death, his plays gained popularity in the eighteenth century. The audiences of the new period wished Shakespeare to give out a moralistic message and keep away from the tragic experience that he represented during his lifetime. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare had his reputation restored as a writer of tragedies. Is this change in appreciation a matter of a discourse? This may not appear to be the case. It can also be said that in a Shakespeare play, characters clash at the level of discourses more than they do at the level of individual figures. The question may then be raised whether a grand discourse is operative in Shakespeare’s play that tells a story of its own. It is difficult to answer such a question because no authoritative reading of Shakespeare has yet been attempted from such an angle.

Still, the concept of discourse may derive its clear strength from the reading of Shakespeare’s writing as a whole. At the onset of the twentieth century few would discuss Shakespeare from the point of view of the feminist discourse. But as the century progressed and trends moved beyond colonialism and imperialism, there

was a renewed interest in Shakespeare among those who raised the feminist issue. As a result of this, feminist interpretations stressed areas in Shakespeare where women's voices were provided space and their plights were focused upon to show impact of gender discrimination. The question is whether such a focus would have been given to the issue in Shakespeare's own time. How come that four hundred years later, women of the twentieth century would find their cause strongly taken up by a writer who lived in times of monarchy? The question is difficult to answer but one guess can be made—Shakespeare offered a view of society with a historical pattern representing an image of its past as well as potentialities ingrained in it of trends that would come up later. This became possible since Shakespeare held a mirror up to nature.

Let us try to understand the author-discourse relationship by asking a few more questions. Where does the reader locate a discourse? The answer can be given that it is in the text and not necessarily in the person. How does then the text come into being? Our response to this may be: the text comes into being because of the author who composed it; the text cannot be its own writer or composer. There has to be a human agency working to shape it, provide it with a beginning, a direction towards its growth and ending it at a certain point. That is how the author causes the discourse to happen in a text. Also, the writer does not write in a vacuum. S/he is an individual, who is a product of her/his times. S/he too, in the process of writing, grapples with reality, trying to understand it, raising genuine questions, while engaging with the real. We may further state that currents of the times may seep into the text through the author, thus either causing a discourse to take shape or contributing to a pre-existing discourse manifest in the social domain in which one lived.

Apart from the connection between 'discursive ideas' and the writer, at another level, the 'distinct-ness' of a discourse can be understood in terms that these thoughts stand for a particular context. A discourse then can be said to acquire a concrete structure as it represents the fact of comprehending the real from a specific stand point. It refers to a characteristic bent in an individual towards an aspect of social reality and manifest in sensitivity towards society. A social experience contains pointers to a central truth in the circumstance surrounding it.

3.7 THE CASE OF DALIT DISCOURSE

An engagement with dynamics of the socially exploited lays the foundation of Dalit Discourse. We may note that writings of this nature have a discourse inherent in them. Dalit discourse is supposed to be manifest within Dalit writing. There might yet be difficulties in getting at the fact of the discourse in this manner. Indeed, clashes exist between what a Dalit subject undergoes and what s/he feels about it. The Dalit subject lives in conditions of oppression and discrimination, but a voice carrying the weight of this pressure may be absent in the description given by it to the surrounding conditions. What happens ordinarily is that the experience bears the stamp of the Dalit social position and the opinion emanating from it to spread among the people. The servility found in Dalit behavior does not correspond to the extent of suffering the subject went through. As such, the formation of Dalit discourse would be an affair difficult to comprehend. Instead, the literary text is a better marker of Dalit discourse than the person who wrote it. The evidence of the nature of experience lies in its representation, not necessarily in its source. The representation is beside the author than directly linked with its producer. For this reason, the representation has its own life to live through its text, shaped as it is

again and again in the hands of readers. In the process, Discourse enters the domain of readings, portrayals and performances; there the scope is ever widened to cover a larger part of viewers than imagined.

For elucidating this point, let us look at the poem “Mother” written by Waman Nimbalkar:

Thin, dark body...my mother.
 Whole day she combs the forest for firewood.
 We await her return.
 When she brings no firewood to sell we go to bed hungry.
 One day something happens. How, we don't know.
 Mother comes home leg bandaged, bleeding.
 A large black snake bit her, say two women.
 He raises his hood. He struck her. He slithered away.
 Mother fell to the ground.
 We try charms. We try spells. The medicine man comes.
 The day begins. Her life ends. (Arjun Dangle. Ed. Poison Bread, 43)

The tone in these lines is matter-of-fact as if a statement were made. However, the details have a deliberate selection of harsh facets of life. The central figure of mother, an old woman, going to the forest to fetch dry wood speaks of poverty. It certainly is a society where minimum facilities exist. On the other hand, see the presenter of the scene using short sentences, knowing that what he says is going to make no difference to mother. Neither at home nor out in the forest is a chance to come help from for the old woman. The stark scene of misery reflects poorly on people of the upper caste because of whom misery has visited the people of the Dalit community. Mark also that conditions in the poem remain grim from beginning to end. This indeed is the discourse of social insensitivity in which there is little chance of a dignified and comfortable living.

For knowing what a discourse is, we may raise here the general query whether discourse can be located distinctively in a literary text. One of the characteristic features of a Dalit-sensitive system of ideas, so to say, will be an active exploration of the denials a section of society is subjected to. Voices delineating a violent past, and predicament of those subjected to injustice form one of its defining features. Shiv Visvanathan in his essay, *Durban and Dalit Discourse*, has mentioned Prakash Louis' views on Dalit discourse. Elaborating Louis' point, Visvanathan has said, “A sociology of atrocities is central to the Dalit discourse...one has to understand atrocity as a social fact. As an act of violence, an atrocity stands between torture of an individual and genocide involving the collective erasure of a people or a community.” Seen as such, Dalit discourse may be a set of ideas expressing various aspects of violence heaped on the marginalized. The phrase “collective erasure” seems important. It involves erasure of Dalit identity or even does away with their basic right to dignified living in society. In an extreme sense, the word could also imply an erasure of Dalits from the social mainstream. Such dynamics of the term are made evident in the Dalit discourse which emerges from within Dalit writing.

Additionally, many critics have referred to the writing from the margins as a voice of protest. This involves rejection of the unjust caste practices that cause violence to a section of society due to erratic sociological reasons. But protest becomes subject to the intensity the writer may have attained in writing. There is no way in

which the intensity can be factored in the making of the discourse. We may thus remind ourselves that the text itself is critical and in it is contained the discourse of rejection. The emotion as such might fail to influence the interpretation which is an act of a different category. The writer's intention, his/her response, or the considered view has connection with the discourse but they seldom define or constitute discourse.

The idea of a concrete discourse as identified in Dalit literature gives evidence of the fact that these individuals are aware of the wrong being done to them and hence they work for an active engagement with the issue for finding a voice of their own that can then be heard. Dalit discourse is a precedent of people's emerging out of silence into the domain of a vocal assertion of the rights and basic amenities which they deserve.

In the context, C.B. Bharti's claim may be thought over who has observed that "The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life" (*The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*). Bharti stresses the conscious decision the writer may take for opposing social sections curbing the Dalit subject. Injustice and inequality are issues meant to be identified and critiqued. The question, however, is whether this would ensure that an apt discourse has been formed in response to the threats recognized.

3.8 LOCATING DALIT DISCOURSE IN A LITERARY TEXT

Here, one may try locating Dalit discourse in a text. First, a few queries may be made: What are the kind of characters that are given maximum voice in the text? Whose experience is it that acquires more space in the narrative? What is the social-economic background of the individual who is the centre of the above-stated concerns? How is a reader made to feel about a particular character, instance or a circumstance in the text? Do we merely sympathize with the exploited or do the descriptions evoke a sense of long-term engagement in us? Answer to all these aspects may help one identify the kind of discourse present in a work of literature. Again, it is not just characters, voices, or issues in the text, but even the formal elements of a piece of writing (description, dialogue, lyricism, symbolism, to name a few) contribute to the construction of a discourse. Also, construction may not necessarily mean the conscious effort by the writer to say one or the other thing in the writing. In fact, construction in the case of writing may be as the end-product of the venture in which apart from the writer, others such as readers, interpreters, reviewers, editors, etc. also participate. The quality of the language used—violent or subdued, confrontational or fearful, the nature of images, symbols, deliberate silences, sentence structures also help in locating the sentiment that the work may be instrumental in conveying.

Vrushali Nagarale in her essay, "Discourse Analysis of African-American and Dalit Women's selected works / biographies : A Comparative Study", points to a distinction between 'discourse analysis' and 'textual analysis' and quotes Gabriele Griffin on the role that language plays in the construction of a discourse. Nagarale has said in her essay that "According to Gabriele Griffin, 'Discourse analysis is different from textual analysis. Language is not only used to make simple statements but rather

transmitting all communicative events' (Van Dijk 2001:98) whether there be, for instance, readings of novels, plays, poetry, a notice on a billboard, a conversation, or an interview—constitute the particular way of talking about and understanding the world / or an aspect of the world, both on the part of the producer, (the writer, the speaker) and on the part of the consumer (the reader, the audience). Through language one expresses the feelings and emotions of understanding the world.”

In this observation, attention is drawn to the significance of a particular kind of language, which is not merely a source of meaning-construction but, as pointed above by the critic, also a means to convey one's sentiments that form an integral part of one understands. Also, mark that in the comment, discourse becomes a comprehensive term as big as the text.

One may then say that it is the presence of this particular system of ideas and certain distinct elements of form that gives Dalit writing its particular character. Ideas integrated with all these in the literary work becomes discourse in the final analysis. This distinguishes discourse from other types of literary markers we come across while reading it. Discourse is a set of thoughts that emerges once the text is composed by the author and enters the domain of interpretation. When experience assumes a distinct shape in the hands of a writer and becomes visible unmistakably to the reader, it qualifies for being called discourse.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have considered various points concerning literature for reaching the crux of what may be called discourse. The issue is further extended to cover the category of Dalit writing that may have got its distinctive mark as discourse. The term has a link not as much with the writer, his biography or sensibility, but the act of writing and its end-result. Dalit discourse is an expression in writing of that stance that makes it different as well as antagonistic to the social hierarchy and caste structure prevalent in our midst today. At the same time, the discourse aspect of Dalit writing runs across the whole spectrum of resistance writing and shares common features across texts composed by writers in general.

3.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) What do we mean by discourse in literature and how it is different from the message contained in a text? Explain.
- 2) Clarify the distinction between the aim of writing and the discourse present in it.
- 3) Dalit discourse constitutes antagonism to social hierarchy and caste structure. Explain.

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Vrushali, Nagarale. *Discourse Analysis of African-American and Dalit Women's selected works / biographies : A Comparative Study*(Indian Streams Research Journal. Volume : I, Issue : VI, July – 2011)

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UNIT 4 DALIT IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Viewing Social Processes in Early Years of Independence
- 4.2 Defining the Terms “Culture” and “Identity”
- 4.3 Dalit Identity and Culture in the Specific Sense
- 4.4 A View of the Narrative of Dalit Culture and Literature
- 4.5 Raising the Issue at a Theoretical Level
- 4.6 The Implication of Ideas Turning into Experience
- 4.7 The Manifestation of Identity in Literary Writing
- 4.8 Identity, Selfhood and Individualism
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Questions
- 4.11 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, our purpose is to consider the process in which identity comes up as an issue. This requires awareness about the social circumstance of which we are a part. Further, the circumstance keeps changing and in this, too, we play some role. It becomes important, therefore, that we make effort to locate centers of identity or selfhood and look at them critically. I am sure that the young scholar will gain an insight into the working of culture and literature that is particularly associated with the marginalized.

4.1 VIEWING SOCIAL PROCESSES IN EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

The question of identity is uppermost in contemporary discussions about literature and culture. You would have noticed that ever since the 1980s the question of identity has cropped up in a big way in India’s political and social scene. We have with us examples of debates around women, socially oppressed sections placed lower down in caste hierarchy, regions, linguistic groups, ethnicities, and religious minorities. These categories of thought were not a palpable presence in India till the ‘1980s. In the decades following Independence, almost the entire attention was devoted to struggles around the rich and poor, the exploiters and exploited. That was the period of consolidation of India’s independence. Gradually however, many contentious issues raised their head. What became visible were factors of economic development that did not go ahead at the same pace and in the same intensity all through the country. One instance is that of economic backwardness in one part of country and development in another. This unevenness drew attention of the thinking citizen and the political activist, who were hitherto involved in questions such as the national language, an acceptable language formula and the role of English.

As disparities grew in the economy a number of groups in India realized that they had not been sufficiently benefitted by the economic expansion the country as a

whole had witnessed. Unevenness was pronounced in those areas where exploitation was fierce. We can think of a whole mass of people in the villages and small town who remained crushed by economic hardship and social prejudice. With the rising awareness the caste aspect of social reality received new focus. The political formations in the country either added to their misery by denying them rights to education, jobs and dignity or worked to their detriment callously and insensitively. The former put them to use for garnering votes to win elections and conveniently setting them aside till the next elections came. The latter however attacked them physically and kept them out of the social mainstream. The latter section practiced castism to the hilt and saw to it that this whole section, divided into innumerable groups and sub-group, remained outside the mainstream. Ostensibly the problem had the dimension of culture under which all people had to be respected as equals, irrespective of their standing in life. The upheavals in 1970s in India's politics made this huge chunk of population sensitive about their worth at their place and their identity in India's context. This brief introduction about identity and culture should help us define the two key words 'culture and identity.'

4.2 DEFINING THE TERMS "CULTURE" AND "IDENTITY"

Ordinarily speaking, culture may be understood as living together in harmony and having a set of commonly shared values. Firstly, culture is not entirely present-centered but has a sense of the past. It creates belonging and cements relationships. Culture comprises mutual respect and participatory celebration. A large segment of culture is made of aspirations and ideals that direct us towards progress. These appear to be abstract things but they have a direct bearing on the life of people. In India's context, it was incumbent on the privileged sections and the well-to-do to evolve harmony and understanding on the socio-political plane.

The question is if it happened, at the level of behavior and actions that citizens chose to do? The answer would be in the negative. Onset of the modern market and other institutions of capitalism that highlighted career and individual success eroded the sense of culture as we understand the term. This left the mass of people untouched—they never reaped the fruit of changes taking place on the ideological plane. On the other hand, the problem threw up possibilities of correcting the imbalance through new initiatives. If harmony and mutuality had been weakened, it became need of the hour to think of steps required for bringing back sanity in society. To repeat, all this comes under culture and has to be worked for in the area of thought and literature.

Raymond Williams has observed that culture "is a wide and general movement in thought and feeling... [it is] an abstraction and an absolute: an emergence which, in a very complex way, merges two general responses – first, the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society; second, the emphasis of these activities, as a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgment and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative." (Emphasis in the original. P.17). For Williams, culture means "a state or habit of the mind, or the body of intellectual and moral activities, it means now, also, a whole way of life." (18)

What we understand from Raymond Williams' viewpoint is that culture is an activity outside politics, as also society in a general sense. For him it acts as a reference

point for judging political actions. Broadly, it acts as a palliative for any assertive expression and, therefore, offers itself as an alternative to the required social change. Raymond Williams correctly warns us about the dangers that emphasis on culture might pose, since it can become the be all and end all of all social activity. To reiterate, culture is an important field of life and yet it should be handled with care for its possible approval of what exists in the social sphere.

So far as the word “identity” is concerned, let us say that it is the way a community visualizes itself. Visualizing goes much beyond its established parameters. Upto a point, visualization serves the purpose of uniting it around ideals it may pursue. What ideals are accepted for pursuing is a matter that can be separately dealt with later. A community, for instance may visualize that it is independent from the existing social structure. If that is the case, the door for complications would open. It may not then connect with other communities that share the status and standing of the community in question. If connection with other groups does not happen, selfhood of a community might stand compromised. Or else, it might consider itself to be superior to others surrounding it. For this reason, it may cease to be critical about its weaknesses and limitations, and decide to work at loggerheads with all others that apparently compete with it. Thirdly and more importantly, a sense of completeness in society may urge it to overlook the divisions and fissures in its own quarters. We refer here to the class divisions that exist in all communities- the division between the haves and the have-nots. The community’s visualization of itself should take care that it allows its have-nots to identify with the have-nots of other communities. If such a possibility is ruled out by a community, it is bound to lose on its strength and stability.

Firstly, identity characterizes an individual what he is and is supposed to be. It explains the position of an individual in society or unto himself. Further, it constitutes the choices one makes in one’s circumstances, one’s experiences which are indeed a result of the former. Through it is underlined the position of an individual in the backdrop of another individual or a group of individuals; this brings in the idea of distinctness, inherent in identity.

4.3 DALIT IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN SPECIFIC SENSE

As is well known, the oppressed caste groups are spread across the whole country. They live literally on the margins of society, cut off from the supposed higher castes in each geographical part. The ‘neat’ division of a habitation—be it a village, a small town or a city—is a curse that has remained with us since time immemorial. It can even be termed a malignancy our society has suffered from. Only in the mid-nineteenth century onwards, did we become aware that a vast section of humans equally productive, if not more, as the rest, has been kept out of bounds of facilities and rights meant to be shared on the principle of parity. The reform movements of the nineteenth century brought general attention to this void between societies and communities in our midst. The twentieth century was witness to an upheaval that caused a radical understanding of the issue and suggested that all humans be considered equal participants in social action—that alone would unite the masses of India and enable them to stand against the mighty British Empire. Gandhi’s stellar role in unification of this country, along these lines, cannot be forgotten. The thread from where Gandhiji left in this regard was carried forward by B.R. Ambedkar

who also crucially played an important role as the architect of India's constitution. Thus constitutionally, there is not supposed to be any distinction between man and man and man and woman, irrespective of caste, colour, race or creed.

However, the independent India has not kept pace with the egalitarian spirit of the constitution and fumbled on it disturbingly on many an occasion. It is the case that post-Independence, decades have come and gone and nothing has changed substantially in this regard.

The first big step forward for Dalits to assert themselves was taken by what came to be known as *Mandalisation* in the 1980s. Today, we look back to see that implementation of the Mandal commission recommendations created such a furor in the caste-ridden society of north India that in the wake of the beginning of its implementation, north India came to a total standstill for weeks together in the mid-1980s. Caste-Hindus who ruled the roost in business, trade, bureaucracy and academia, controlled all resources, including intellectual, to block the implementation of the policies of reservation that have been projected by a section of the regime through the 1980s. The developments of this period proved as a backdrop on which Dalit culture might have come to stand and secure a firm footing in the years to follow. Initially, Dalit culture was in the position of waiting for the equality miracle to happen.

4.4 A VIEW OF THE NARRATIVE OF DALIT CULTURE AND LITERATURE

The experience of Dalits from India's independence to 1970s was of a section that expected the prevailing social system to take care of their interests. Gradually, the Dalits realized that the state policies did not move beyond expressing intentions to promote Dalit interests as General Elections happened in the sequence and yet social prejudices remained. The poor and marginalized thought of forming themselves as a distinct group without going into the processes how this change happened. Let us say that the closing years of the 1970s and the period following it witnessed an awakening in a section of the Intelligentsia—writers, teachers, thinkers and political activists—regarding suppression of the poor on caste basis. The first signs of this occurrence were seen in writings in Marathi and Gujarati and soon the trend influenced other areas. Let us remind ourselves that the Dalit question had drawn attention in the southern region much before the occurrence in North India that we have talked about here. Malayalam and Tamil writing had specifically registered the reality of caste based division and the sense of protest the activists and writers expressed. The rise of Dalit consciousness in Marathi and Gujarati gained inspiration and strength from Malayalam and Tamil writing in the earlier era. Consequently, Punjabi and Hindi also showed signs of waking up to the caste division in society in ideological terms.

This coincided with *Mandalisation*. Poetic and fictional representations of Dalit experience became subject of interest in the academic centers and the 1990s saw publications of Dalit thought in a substantial sense. Our subject in this unit relates to this particular aspect. Dalit experience was of general awareness of things happening on the social plane. It could be manipulated and managed at the political level where rhetoric works strongly in a democratic regime. Let us go slightly deeper into this question.

At this point in our discussion, we notice that when the experience is theorized and discussed in the academic centers, then a different set of ideas strike roots. The combination of experience and thought is the decisive moment. In the context in view, many thinkers got involved in the theoretical-academic enterprise. The strategy of India's political formations, call them parties if you like, changed meanwhile and those who opposed recommendations of the Mandal commission on the concept of merit, did a U-turn. The happening only proved that varied responses in a society reflect the hidden clashes; there they are active in the deeper domain of economic interests.

4.5 RAISING THE ISSUE AT A THEORETICAL LEVEL

Let us comment on what we mean by Dalit identity and Dalit culture. When the word 'Dalit' is added to the terms 'identity' and 'culture', what difference in meaning does it make? For ease of understanding, let us accept that Dalit identity is the distinction that oppressed masses under the caste system acquire as they think along lines of marginalization. For instance, they are kept away from social discourse generally—none talks about them, none cares for them. Dalits are always told that they do not exist except as items of help. This distinction in society is a double-edged weapon. It keeps Dalits away from the non-Dalits and in the process Dalits begin looking towards themselves as different. It is mostly the case that when a section looks towards itself, the relatively more aware in the section begin raising questions about their specific living. If they are victims of the hierarchical system, they become aware that they are indeed victims. The word 'they' as victims indicates the seed of their identity. This kind of identity in their case becomes strengthened with the passage of time, particularly in times of turmoil and crisis. See the paradox. On the one side they are items of help, on the other they are essential part of the system to which they belong- without them the system cannot function smoothly. As a result, their weakness as 'help' becomes their strength. From here emerges the consciousness informed by their potential strength that affects writers and thinkers among Dalits. Imagine also that there is some commonality between the victims of caste system and those others in the higher castes who too are victims of economic inequality. In the context of identity, victims of other castes who are equipped intellectually begin siding with the targets of prejudice in the lower castes. This is a decisive moment of the seed growing into a full-fledged plant or tree, in the metaphorical sense. Thus identity emerges as that sense of distinction which would resist and fight the prevailing inequality, among castes.

As far as Dalit culture goes, it is an extension of Dalit identity in the social sense, which means that Dalits will look at them as a group that is integrated within themselves through values and experience, more than ideas and the view of the surrounding system. An example of this is that Dalits will see themselves as a community that can survive the onslaught of the higher caste only when together. At the same time, togetherness is hard to achieve even in times of crisis. But when identity has been realized to a certain extent, Dalit as a section adopt a stance against the oppression. It starts with questioning those who are not part of the community, and expands from thereon to oppose those they consider antagonists. When a whole formation is a victim and knowing that it is a victim, resistance becomes not just possible but desirable. The question is, why is so from the point of implications it may have hidden behind resistance? The answer would be that in

the new situation, a group will now be facing another group, a mightier one since well-entrenched, on the socio-cultural plane.

Thinking of marginalization of Dalits, the idea of dignity seems relevant. It is also an essential value inherent in the culture and practices associated with Dalits. For instance; we note that facing rejection socially, their sense of dignity stands compromised. Dignity comprises the way one views one's own self—this is linked intricately with the perception of the others around the individual, meaning thereby that the others may find their individuality as somewhat threatening. Dignity does not get shaped in a vacuum. Instead, it is formed by relationships of a person in a social setup. This might take us to include one's association with oneself. Personal and public come together to define the sense of dignity and this impacts the way these individuals conduct themselves in an unequal social scenario. In our case, it gets clearer by the day that unequal treatment in society is a constant threat to one's dignity.

4.6 THE IMPLICATION OF IDEAS TURNING INTO EXPERIENCE

This brings us to the question central to Dalit experience—the issue of equality. What is the implication of the term equality? For us it might point to the treatment of an individual or a group of individuals as being at par with fellow members inhabiting the social space. We have to assume that all members of society have a claim on the existing resources. Parity in the right to choose, express and conduct oneself, as well as equal opportunity are covered by the term equality. When any of these are denied, an experience of marginalization appears. Voices and concerns of a certain section take a backseat, resulting in a lopsided framework. This framework acquires legitimacy and approval in the setup. Here two things happen—one, outside experiences are demonized; two, they are pushed away into silent corners. Dalits counter this reality and take a step towards freedom. They wage a courageous battle against the paradigm of inequality. One may ask how this voice of protest may be put into practice. In response to this, we may state that the fountainhead of such a call for equality lies in the sentiment of anger.

Anger is an empowering aspect of Dalit culture. It makes the oppressed question the wrongs meted out to them and reject all those practices and that seek to trap them in a subordinate position. Let us bear in mind that literature is a cultural domain. Herein we trace anger as a strongly human sentiment. The oppressed sections prefer protest to observance of traditional norms. In the process they invent their own stance with which to counter the threat of dominance. The defiance may first come in the form of insolence. However as the rejection lasts for a while, it turns into a firm disapproval of the forces that sought to control the marginalized. Norms of acceptability are replaced by those of assertion along a counter discourse. Use of cuss words, violent and explicit imagery are some other ways of registering resentment with the caste consciousness of society.

Dalit identity has the community experience crystallized in identity and that is where the crystallization happens also at the level of Dalit individuals. In the journey from the first to the second can be found happening through certain stages. Let us think of this in terms of three stages—one, Dalits recognize themselves in terms of Dalit identity, their social selfhood. The second stage can be called that which possesses a dynamic propelling it forward to reach a certain goal. This will entail

some people from the Dalit community acquiring education and speaking for their community. The third stage may be that of specific individuals taking upon themselves the responsibility of expressing social anger and rejection. In this sense, the identity may journey from society and community to an individuality sharp enough to causing raising of eyebrows.

We may reiterate that individuality is not a separation from the community but its expression in crystallized terms—a Dalit writer-individual carries within himself/herself the totality of the community experience at the two opposite ends of which stand emotion and intellect. In the first stage, recognition is the central aspect of Dalits. They know where they stand and they accept it as the given. In acceptance lies their knowledge of the factors that compelled them to be in this stage and which happened to tell them as people placed in the socio-historical framework as subordinates. They realize that they are on the periphery and from there they look at the centre. This enables them to place the periphery and the centre on equal footing, indeed erase the distinction. In the second stage, this recognition inspires the individuals from the community to abstract the recognition and give it the form of dreaming, envisioning and moving forward.

To clarify, a few individuals might probe the existing situation imaginatively so that they can tell fellow members the direction to adopt. In such a case, Dalit community will look to them for guidance and will range behind them. This stage is of political evolution where Dalits take a stand on policies of the regime and make known to it their terms of participation in the political process. In our case, they effect their own political formation and be active in its midst. This stage is marked by the need to look back and forth—looking back would help them reinterpret their past and looking forward will enable them to project themselves as bearers of a precious experience.

The second stage brings forward individuality to the level of political activism under which Dalits mobilize, direct and move further on in the process. They are in touch with the toiling humanity in their midst and learn the wisdom and maturity acquired over time. This is the crucial stage, and one that would stand them in good stead. It will give them situation, characters and voices that embody the crux of participatory spirit in hard conditions. In effect, this stage gives individuals their locus standi that will keep them going against all odds.

The third stage takes the active political participants, all of them individuals to a still higher plane of culture and ideology. Ideology is a binding thread that separates them from entanglements of reigning doctrines of living such as casteism, morality, ethics and other codes that the upper layers of society formed to keep the minds of Dalits in control. In the third stage the control is meant to be explained in theoretical terms so that it can be broken and freedom can be ensured as a lived experience in culture. As said earlier, culture is a domain in which people come together and share values. It has also been highlighted above that for Dalits culture constitutes dignity, equality and anger and not necessarily harmony. Obviously, it does not mean that harmony is to be discarded and anarchy brought in, it only means that through culture Dalits attain an alternative harmony based on freedom and spontaneity without control of the upper caste and sections. Writers and thinkers being always individuals voicing social concerns Dalit identity in its highest form will show itself in the writing of individual dreamers and visionaries informed by freedom and assertion.

4.7 THE MANIFESTATION OF IDENTITY IN LITERARY WRITING

To carry on the previous point, if the experience of society is enriched by strongly felt emotions such as anger and passionate assertion, it soon may crystallize in literary writing. There would be specific individuals in midst of the common masses capable of giving words to the felt experience. Such becomes the case of locating and projecting a stance and view of what people feel and sense. In the words of the critic and thinker R.G. Jadhav, “It becomes necessary to study the works of art and know about the aesthetic form which social awareness achieves. Just as it is important to remember that Dalit literature has achieved this distinction as a separate entity mainly on the basis of its social content, it is equally important to bear in mind that this content takes a distinct form with the individual writer and with each of his separate works. Dalit literature has this double dimension and this aspect forms its special feature. The tradition of social awareness lends a quality of realism to Dalit literature.” (305)

Jadhav sums up well the literary-cultural role that Dalit writers perform. Rightly, this is done in various literary forms as carriers of imaginative energy that writers generated while expressing themselves. The aesthetic form mentioned in the quotation is the distinctive feature of a trend of writing. Form is always context-related, in the given situation it acquires directness necessary for intervening when the need is crucial. The noteworthy aspect is the “social content” that joins with the struggling people and lends value to the writing. Without the aesthetic, writing would remain a mere statement, a verbalization of what others feel and say without necessary focus. It is the job of a writer to earn skills of artistic projection through hard effort; s/he views the recent and distant history as a continuum as well as with breaks to make it a part of the contemporary spirit of forming an aesthetic front of emotions and ideas. The social content moves into the modes of writing that have been enriched by artistic feats of writers in the past. The specific part of such a venture is that Dalit view and attitude has a folklore of its own, with tales and myths that were suppressed incessantly by the mighty tradition of the haves. Such a folklore is to be dug out, preserved and redefined as art, as an aesthetic that supports change and consistency of resistance.

4.8 IDENTITY, SELFHOOD AND INDIVIDUALISM

As indicated above, a closer and yet more relevant concern of Identity is individualism. If it is looked at as part of literary expression, it would appear to central to the Dalit being in a poem, short story and autobiography. Let us view it in our context.

Till now we have discussed the idea of identity with respect to a community. We may add that a part of this interest also brings into fold the selfhood of an individual, who at the same time is part of a community. What is the relationship between an individual and his community? Does he represent a society alone or also has something in him which the community lacks? Think about this question and see what point it affords to us. Let us begin by accepting that it is possible that the individual may have taken influences from the books he studied and the people he met away from home. The scope of inspirations is large and transcends boundaries of neighbourhood.

It is also that people travel not in the outside world but also in the world inside their minds. This happens on the plane of memory. Suddenly an area of the mind may light up and make one conscious about possibilities of growth where none seemed to exist earlier. These processes and dimensions characterize a person's individual self. When thoughts and impressions clash within an individual they occasionally fall into an unexpected pattern that gets embedded in his sensibility. This initially is an issue of self-awareness but may later further grow to become a selfhood. Can we call it the distinct nature of a person that will direct him in his larger pursuits of chosen goals? Under such a scheme, selfhood or identity comes into being- the person is known by the characteristic features of his mental make-up. Such an individual learns much from his background and adds to his knowledge also from his own inner resources. Can we not say that such a person is a product of his community and is also one who makes it conscious about its actual and potential strengths. The person concerned can tell himself that he is a part of a section to which he belongs, yet he can get back to his section and raise questions never thought of before. What is being suggested is that the individual as a part of the section from where he emerged stood away and cast a critical glance at his origins. Identity thus is the mark of awareness. Not only that the individual knows himself but also that he is offering a discourse to his section that they too can become aware of their position and role. Setting apart does not therefore mean that awareness is an exclusive category under which the individual falls; it is only that the light of knowledge it earned can also be earned by those who lagged behind initially but can now attain it through struggle and inspired behaviour, since they have an example to emulate. At this stage this is sufficient to start the discussion about our subject.

So far, we have described the individual as 'he'. Do we not recognize that fifty percent of our society constitutes women? If we name the individual as he alone, we are overlooking the significance of women as individuals. For individuality to be recognized, women do not exist in our scheme of things. This points towards a deep-seated bias in our minds. We may have internalized such notions blindly and uncritically. Our job is to recognize our lapses, reflect on them and finally rectify the mistakes we commit frequently. Women are the centre of our society and support all those causes to which we as men are supposed to adhere to. They influence the minds of males from their childhood upto the time the males become grown up enough to move out of the home and are surrounded by a world which accepts blind biases we have talked of.

What we have generally done to the question of identity in the larger society can be seen in a more intense form elsewhere, in the domain of Dalits. In India, the number of Dalits would be more than half of the population. They fill up our villages, small towns and large cities. It is a failure of no mean proportion that Dalits are not as visible in our society as their number may suggest. Why is it that so many appear so few in our midst? The question should be seriously considered so that a healthy and viable solution is found to the problem haunting us. Literally the word Dalit means the socially oppressed, the section that bore the brunt of all hardships and life and yet never earned the right to live with dignity, let alone identity. Since here we discuss identity as our concern, we would say that this whole section lacks awareness of being Dalit.

As late as the 1980s, Dalit voices were not heard in the cultural atmosphere. It is ironical that even the word injustice reigned supreme most of the time in literary analysis and exchanges, it never seemed to directly pinpoint the existence of caste oppression and prejudice. There is no doubt that our human task and responsibility

is to ever be committed to removing injustice from the social scene and liberate the population from forces of exploitation. However, that is not enough. The effort should be accompanied by recognizing the bias existing against the Dalits. We seem to ignore the situation that caste bias heightens social injustice because of which we cannot tap for effecting changes the vital energies of Dalits. Yet a kind of cover was there to separate the oppressed from the exploited as if exploitation was a strong enough category to paint the scene realistically. It is true for instance that the caste division is so horrifying in our society that a big gap has long existed between the upper caste-oppressed and the lower caste-oppressed. The reason is clear. Caste oppression has remained outside the purview of fights and struggles waged against socio-economic injustice and exploitation.

4.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have explored the concept of identity and seen that a basic part of it is related to culture—what members of society create in their minds as they grapple issues of awareness and relationships. It is recognized that culture at one level is abstract, a notion that requires mental effort to make sense. At another level, however, its culture is steeped in conflicts that we watch in society from close quarters. There is a social sense, group sense and the idea of role—these set apart the ongoing struggle from what human beings plan for themselves as desirable and pleasure-giving. Expression of self, its hidden domain of aspirations and desires bring us finally to the realm of the writer as an individual, a self that peers into imagination, fantasy and day-dreaming. Indeed, both culture and identity take us in the direction of literary expression where the writer connects herself/himself with society on another scale.

4.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) What is culture? How is it different from social relations at the grassroots?
- 2) Define identity as expression of a social group asking for its space in a complex structure of relationships.
- 3) Is identity also selfhood that relies heavily on literary expression? Discuss.

4.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Jadhav, R.G. in *Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment*, Arjun Dangle. Ed. *Poisoned Bread*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009.

Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958. Rpt 1971.

UNIT 5 DALIT VIEWPOINTS AND VOICES-I

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Gail Omvedt's "The Logic of Dalit Politics"
- 5.2 The Situation in the Contemporary Period
- 5.3 Broadening of Dalit View
- 5.4 Likelihood of Growth in Dalit Thought as Action
- 5.5 Awareness of Dalit Thought in Society: Possibilities
- 5.6 Another Voice of Dalit Thought
- 5.7 Ideas in Raosaheb Kasbe's Essay "Social Issues before Dalit Literature"
- 5.8 Kasbe's View Regarding Link of Literature with Life
- 5.9 Dalit Writing and its Worldwide Ramifications
- 5.10 Kasbe's Valuable Concept of Politics
- 5.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.12 Questions
- 5.13 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with questions that emerge from experiences of Dalits in a class divided society. This will be done in relation with the literary writing of the modern period. The need of the hour is to see whether broader ideas are possible when clashes and conflicts are occurring around us influencing our thinking. The intellectual responses of two major thinkers will be presented in this unit and the young scholars will be expected to take serious note of them.

In previous units of this block, you have read about historical and social developments as the background of Dalit thought. It was shown there that the developments necessitate thoughts to emerge and play a role in bringing about change in the perception of existing concerns. In this unit an attempt is made to familiarize you with various perspectives on the issue of Dalits. Many critical books and articles have commented on Dalit movements that have taken shape in our midst. It will certainly be of interest to you to know which issues are worthy of adoption by us. In this unit, you will be reading a summary and a critique of two of the major Dalit theorists—Gail Omvedt and Raosaheb Kasbe. Our intention is to enhance your understanding of the subject. The discussions should enable you to evolve a perspective on social life. This can then be used for applying to Dalit writings—poetry, fiction, biography, autobiography, and reminiscences. You will also find this unit particularly rewarding since it contains well-articulated views about reasons why the issue of Dalits could not be addressed with focus and effective countering of injustices in our society.

5.1 GAIL OMVEDT'S "THE LOGIC OF DALIT POLITICS"

We begin with a view of Gail Omvedt's argument that tells us about the origin of Dalits as tribes in the distant past, roughly 3500 years ago. The focus of Omvedt's attention is on the last few decades of the twentieth century when Dalit experience and thought was asserted in written form.

Let us first think about the word "logic." It denotes a thread binding Dalit ideas into a cogent view. Dalit politics, however, is an area at once open and crucial. In this regard, Omvedt has said the following:

Numerous youth went to villages, new activists rose from the masses, social turmoil increased as economic and social pressures mounted, and new voices rose as other low-caste and oppressed sections joined Dalits in organizing. (81)

The passage talks about the important issue of social churning that took place in India after Independence. It suggests that Dalit thought is not just a weaving together of ideas flowing from a book preceding the phenomenon, but a real life-situation. When resentment amongst the exploited people mounted, it expressed itself in the form of collective actions to resolve issues behind the resentment. It was not a phenomenon arising out of any particular exploited community, but one that took into its fold all those who faced inequality within and beyond their own community.

As the phenomenon of unity to fight suppression is viewed, Gail Omvedt discusses the origin of caste politics. She mentions the conflict between the Aryans and Brahmins on the one hand and the non-Aryans and non-Hindus on the other. The former comprised the powerful section of society that subjugated other sections. The lower castes were not only treated badly, they were termed as 'rakshasas'. This happened a long time ago but was relevant to what common mass of people suffered also in the modern period. For Omvedt, this knowledge of history was utilized by people on the margins and it constructed a counter-discourse. It was not the case of mere exploitation but of active confrontation the commoners had with those who oppressed them. What were the reasons that caused this? We have an inkling of the answer to this question when we think of the figure of Rama as an ideal king in Hindu thought. Rama is a deity. But this same figure, from the Dalit standpoint, is rejected as a patriarchal ruler, one upholding caste hierarchy and control. This reference to origin of caste difference belongs to the period between the 6th century BC and the 5th century AD.

5.2 THE SITUATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Following the introductory comments about origins of Dalits, Omvedt discusses different socio-political movements from 1980 onwards. There is a reference to various movements taking place in India in the two decades preceding the twenty first century 1980s and 1990s. These movements had a link with resistance to religion and patriarchy by feminist writers in the 1970s. The opposition to Hindu thought was strong in that period. Rejection of *devis* or goddesses in the Indian tradition came at the hands of poets such as Kamla Bhasin. Rise in South India against

patriarchy and Brahminism under the leadership of National Federation of Dalit Women was a related happening. These together took cudgels against modern industrialism as a product of ‘western science and technology’. The critique of caste hierarchy and Brahminical thought was accompanied by the struggle that eco-feminists such as Vandana Shiva waged against it. Omvedt has commented with appreciation of Vandana Shiva’s eco-critical view. But she is still more with that part of eco-criticism that environmental mass movements organized on the strength of peasantry and low castes in Maharashtra. In Omvedt’s opinion, these and other movements sweeping across Maharashtra, Karnataka and the other states, became a growing phenomena voicing acceptance of Dalit politics. Under this umbrella, Omvedt places opposition to Hindu Brahminical thought coming in the Northeastern where “Arayan-Dravidian mainland”, as she calls it, could not spread its influence. In Omvedt, there is mention, too, of non-Hindu religious fundamentalism and sectarianism striking roots in Punjab and Kashmir. All these were manifestations of a Dalit consciousness that could not contain itself within bounds of rational humanism and supposed harmony among equals.

5.3 BROADENING OF DALIT VIEW

In Omvedt’s account of the politics of oppression, Dalits do not protest alone. Instead, Hindu hegemony is approached from a variety of angles. For Omvedt, it can be dealt with effectively if a wider emergence incorporated all other exploited sections of society. The focus of the essay is on the oppressed section of Dalits combining with the people elsewhere in resistance.

Omvedt’s purpose is to present a picture of the historical phenomena concerning Dalits. We receive from her a view of conflict covering three decades of intense struggles, and this is only a part of the picture she presents. The other and more comprehensive segment consists of contradictions that figure inside the Dalit movement. Rise of regional fundamentalism is one important side of the issue. It means that if there is a picture of bigger fundamentalism in the general caste-structure imposing upon regions spread over the vast country, there are shorter versions of fundamentalism within the regions and cultures. At one level, regional fundamentalisms are expressions of dissent and they assert their independent voice. But they are, nonetheless, fundamentalisms. With them in mind, we are compelled to think of answers that will take care of the poor within each regional fundamentalism. Omvedt makes sure to clarify that threat to the peace and harmony of society are all fundamentalisms in the theoretical sense. All of them together signify a locus of irrationality. Challenge from this can be met, says Omvedt, when people in all groups, sections and regions come together.

Omvedt does not spare religious minorities either. In particular, she cites two examples of religious fundamentalism—Sikh fundamentalism and Muslim fundamentalism. The base of the former was in Punjab and the base of the latter has been all along in Kashmir. She says: “In Punjab, opposition to Brahman-bania Delhi rule involved identification with Sikh religious traditions that at points turned into a strong fundamentalism, including efforts to regulate women’s attire and suppression of intellectual inquiry.”(p. 87). We may, thus, observe that the oppressed masses in case of both these minorities would have their future secure when they join the oppressed elsewhere in the country. It is expected that eventually, the smaller units of ethnicities would join with them.

5.4 LIKELIHOOD OF GROWTH IN DALIT THOUGHT AS ACTION

Omvedt points out three strands crucial to the understanding of Dalit politics. The first is described in the following term. In Omvedt's words, posing a challenge to "the very definition of Hinduism as the majority religion and the core of Indian tradition; an insistence that it was rather a brahmanic Hinduism that represented the hegemony of an elite over that tradition, and that this hegemony had to be overthrown" is the need of the hour. This is because Dalit politics has to locate certain areas of Hindu thought, particularly those that work to the detriment of Dalit cause. These may be interpreted in terms of the deep-seated prejudice against the whole section of working population. The mainstay of Hindu thought of this variety are the scriptures available in a language beyond the scope of the vast illiterate population. It is argued that the weight of the Brahmins' superiority came not from any visible social control but from hegemony—a common agreement spread in the population that Brahmins were superior because they were born as superiors. Such a thought had been kept alive in the social discourse for a long time till it became settled in the minds of all including Dalits. It also, meanwhile, got corroborated by the rituals in society that kept Dalits outside the purview of decision-making. The need is to historicize this phenomenon.

5.5 AWARENESS OF DALIT THOUGHT IN SOCIETY: POSSIBILITIES

The second point of importance in Dalit politics is, in Omvedt's words, "a spreading of this theme beyond Dalits themselves to involve all the sections of the oppressed, exploited and marginalized." Omvedt does not isolate Dalits from the rest of working population, but suggests that the role a formation would play is dependent on the number of people supporting it. Dalits are products of social prejudice and caste hierarchy. At the same time, they are co-sufferers with those others who are economically deprived. These exist in all castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. Misery and suffering that starvation and joblessness cause keeps this vast section away from benefits coming from resources; this compels them to live with a fate that Dalits share with them.

The inequality also is along gender lines. Even in homes of the economically privileged, women have little role to play in decision-making. All along the line, they remain confined to the domestic workplace—the kitchen. The literature of the ancient period as well as the writing of the medieval times makes it clear that women always found themselves at the periphery of literary depiction—speaking little and responding to issues as passive partners in the matrimonial structure. From the angle of deprivation, they would belong more to the deprived among the poor in all castes, and particularly women among Dalits. If literature kept an alert eye on all such sections together, it would gain immensely in humanist appeal. This is manifest in what Omvedt has said in her quotation.

The third idea regarding Dalit politics, as explained by Omvedt in the essay is that it is a "synthesis of a new economic and political direction with the cultural challenge." This is to be a part of practice in which persons committed to the Dalit cause think in long term, interpret available ideas of resistance and join them with the new situation. Cultural challenge is to be seen as an obstacle and worked out at

the level of values. For instance, experiences of the time gone by had an element of attitude. This may be separated and reviewed so that its core may be related to the experience of generations of a new era in a new and creative way. According to Omvedt, the new innovative practice is strengthened by the essence of productive economic activity.

5.6 ANOTHER VOICE OF DALIT THOUGHT

At this point, it will be useful to consider questions that Dalit authors face in their endeavour to explain and theorize. Their anxiety is that they have to draw boundaries around themselves. It is necessary for them to avoid biases that the upper castes and classes have with respect to literary worth and value. Most of the writers in our time are convinced, for instance, that writing is worth its name only when it is free from immediate reality and its pressures. For them art is a specific activity with its own inner logic. It is asserted time and again that art is not social science with an eye constantly on requirements of the day and who is reading it or how it is being received by the audiences. Nor should writing follow, according to current opinion, principles of message and purpose. Broadly speaking, writers are expected to stick to inner consistency of images and symbols that appeal to the well-read and culturally evolved in the modern circumstance. Clearly, this section is not oriented to see the emerging aesthetic of a deprived section operating in life in the raw.

What should then be the response of Dalit writers to this attitude informing literature? Understandably, the stance of Dalit writers will earn appreciation if it is at variance with the aesthetic emphasis found in the current writing. Dalit writers should know who they are and what their position is in the society they inhabit. With this in view, they may identify the precise concerns to address in their writing.

5.7 IDEAS IN RAOSAHEB KASBE'S ESSAY "SOCIAL ISSUES BEFORE DALIT LITERATURE"

The second essay to be discussed in this unit is "Some Issues Before Dalit Literature." It is written by Raosaheb Kasbe. As suggested by the title, the essay is topical in nature. It is concerned with the immediate problems faced by Dalit writing, particularly in Marathi language. In the opinion of a few critics, as anticipated, there is a need to define Dalit writing since it is newly emerged and has parameters not yet fully recognized and grasped. But we may ask: Is that the case? Do they not have enough awareness about the prejudices working against them and the reason why that has happened in the prevailing ethos? Interestingly, Kasbe does not think so, his reason being that even as

Dalit literature is somewhat new on the Marathi literary scene, the collective mind of the people reflected in it represents the life of millions of Indians. This life has not suddenly come upon them, it has been imposed upon them for thousands of years; it has a tradition spread over ages. (295)

See that Kasbe makes here a vital distinction between "Dalit literature" and "the life of millions of Indians" falling under Dalit category. He is right in saying that the tradition of oppression is not new but indeed has a history. To him, instead of defining the distinctive nature of Dalit writing, one should assume the responsibility

of knowing this history and tradition. Kasbe has suggested that we should critically assess a whole literary tradition of knowing where pains and sufferings of people are highlighted, where values of human resistance are shown to be active. That, in his opinion, will give us insight into the strategies that writers of a whole era in the past employed to assert their cause.

There is a further suggestion in the essay about how to be clear about our priorities in thought. For Kasbe, principles of criticism should emerge from creative writing of our time, not in abstract reasoning and theory. He opines that “quantity-wise the criticism of Dalit literature ... surpasses its literary creation,” and also that writers should “create more Dalit literature than attempt to establish its distinctiveness.” To quote:

Once we accept the inalienable relationship between literature and life we are compelled to consider the art of literature as one which grows, occasionally disappears, dies and is capable of rejuvenation. (296)

A point identifying genesis of fresh ideas, the statement takes us to the literary dimension of human experience. For Kasbe, the literary critic has to wait till the said experience has crystallized, and also that what is said is to be tentative and open-ended. The qualifying remark should be taken seriously—there is need to remain patient and wait for the moment when theorizing is demanded, that will make it easy to put together various developments in society and find the connecting thread.

5.8 KASBE’S VIEW REGARDING LINK OF LITERATURE WITH LIFE

Kasbe observes that the relationship between life and literature is integral in the sense that they are always together interacting with parts that are intertwined. For this reason, in his opinion, they cannot be separated unless consciously taken apart for understanding in isolation. Literature and life are indeed one and the same. Thus interpreted, literature’s sole existence is on the basis of its depiction of life. Conversely, life demands that it be presented in an organic form so that people draw appeal from it and learn to enjoy it. The point is taken further by Kasbe through the recognition of a movement that is inherent in literature. Even as this movement is inspired by life itself, literature is to be the focus for our purpose. He believes that movement in life is an actual movement with deviations that are as normal as problems in life. It may so happen that there is a phase of smoothness as well as a phase of unevenness at different points of time in literature. Let us keep in mind a time in history when celebrations are a natural occurrence. This happens when there is a successful resolution of issues faced previously. Also there are moments when worry, uncertainty and anxiety are expressed. The job of the writer is to interpret these variations in their historicity. It may also happen that literature of one phase will be powerful and inspiring and another with weakness and near inertia. Once recognized, we will take the nature of literature as a challenge, in the sense that such changes and differences in literature are subjects of consideration. The moments of uncertainty when confronted with rational enquiry offer clues to the possibility of success at a future date. Such possibilities enthuse the writer to go forward who in the act exemplifies “rejuvenation”. Kasbe takes particular care to stress the need of grasping the phenomena than defining the principles on which the dynamic of the phenomena may be based. There is another issue though that, in his opinion,

will take us to what he calls science, which according to him gives rise to a mechanical way of learning or interpreting. Literature is to keep itself away from the scientific logic and place itself in creation—expression of an experience in language that is exploratory and open-ended.

For Raosahab Kasbe, understanding of literature necessitates both conflict and assimilation, and also that conflict stands for a clash of views, and assimilation, on the other hand, for drawing a lesson of compromise when an understanding about the issues has been reached. It may be understood that normally, attitudes define a social experience without assimilation—they may fail to see implications of the experience in the first go. This may result in narrowing our vision. The writer's job, in such a case is to expand his/her range of interests and take the cultural scene forward in its entirety. Conflicts bear for us the logic of an inherently divided society which will remain so for some time. The writer then would choose one conflict in preference to another and make a logic of his decision. This may not help the cause of literature per se. The principle of assimilation, however, will help the writer visualize society as an integrated whole which will assist him in moving towards a valuable resolution of the existing frame of culture. Assimilation will bring the contending forces together along lines of independence, mutuality and consensus. In the second aspect, conflicts will be seen as assertions of independence, not as coexistence of the irreconcilables standing in opposition to one another. The writer's job is to identify the scope of togetherness and harmony to the extent possible. For explaining assimilation, Kasbe's formulation is truly enlightening. For him, the movement in literature towards a resolution is to be seen in terms of an ongoing process. His statement bears a warning as he says that, "Rather than loosen our serious hold on this movement, we should let the movement itself grow on all sides through continuous introspection." (p. 297)

5.9 DALIT WRITING AND ITS WORLDWIDE RAMIFICATIONS

A significant part of the essay is devoted to the discussion on the significance of Black literature and its relevance to Dalit writing. Social divisions are not India-specific, but are quite clearly visible in other countries and cultures. So far as Kasbe is concerned, there is a question of national culture, the philosophy of 'art for art's sake' and that of 'art for life's sake'. These are issues that Dalit writers should keep in mind while active in their respective domains. To elucidate, the idea of art for art's sake requires deeper understanding than as merely the remedy of taking pleasure away from it. In the same manner, it would not cause much difference if the didactic element was removed from the writing under requirements of 'arts for life's sake'. These are disputes that Dalit writers have to address with care and reach conclusions that help them in their specific contexts.

Kasbe's attitude impresses us by its emphasis on genuine investigation in each case and not on notions that are pre-conceived and thus to be mechanically applied. The question of Black writers as distinct from Black American writers may help Dalit writing understand the need of adopting thinkers favorably disposed to Dalit cause in different times and places. For him, useful insights can be gained from perspectives of Buddha, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Karl Marx. The three centers of thought shed light on the features of culture, nationality and politics. In each case of writing across the world, Kasbe goes deeper into the question of the man-made issue pains

and sufferings. The following statement may be a guide for creating a viewpoint of purposive writing:

Neither Buddha nor Jesus nor Marx has ever claimed that he could entirely free man from suffering. They have, however, promised to end the material sufferings that man has inflicted on man. The social, political, and cultural miseries of the Indian Dalits are man-made and therefore, they have plausible causes. We can also see clearly the way to end them. (p.298)

We observe that Kasbe has drawn a line of distinction between man-made suffering and that which nature produced. The first refers to conditions in India, and the second to conditions in Africa. Black suffering is that of being *born as a Black* (emphasis added) in an environment where the White man also exists. The two are deeply aware of their own characteristics and compulsions without knowing the answer to dichotomy. In India, however, sufferings are man-made, having their source in social divisions—divisions that are man-made. This can be removed through what Kasbe has called politics. As far as the Black suffering is concerned, Kasbe's statement is educative. To quote:

This suffering is going to last as long as there exists upon this earth the White and the Black. Men change, minds change and consequently the intensity of the problem becomes greater or lesser. It is an illusion to believe that this problem can be solved by modifying the concepts of superiority and inferiority between the White and Black colours. (P.299)

As is explained by Kasbe, the struggle of the blacks in America is of the structural kind where minor modifications in categories will have a limited significance. The point made is that culture alone will not take the community of Blacks far, in the same way that tinkering with social attitudes in the case of Dalits in India will fail to achieve justice for Dalit community. Jobs, share in economic production combined with a political movement pursuing equality and dignity may answer the issue more effectively than reformist measures of appealing to the higher castes for showing goodwill and sympathy to the suppressed population.

5.10 KASBE'S VALUABLE CONCEPT OF POLITICS

The concept of politics in Kasbe's essay is significant—it is inbuilt in society and culture. From its side, politics provides an impetus to culture and culture in return gives substance and life to politics. In our time in particular, politics has become a regular engagement—it gives a chance to people to assemble around a cause and press for policies that would promote the cause. It is a happy development. In Kasbe's opinion, Dalit writers should see themselves as agents of change through politics, this way they can attain betterment in facilities of education and social opportunities. The process of onward movement has already been active in the society of our time. There is hope in collective participation. The horizon of fulfillment appears to have come near the country's working population. The question is whether politics will be able to provide an answer to the problems of Dalit writers and their community. Kasbe's answer is as follows:

Never will this problem get solved, for the rise of socialist revolutionary philosophy and the increasing attraction of the people towards democracy will result in the intensification of this process. Political selfishness tends to suppress problems, not solve them. (p.299)

The point here is regarding sectional interests that democracy may promote which may encourage individuals to go astray and fritter away social energies that they themselves generated. Still, Kasbe has suggested that the problems are man-made. Also, democracy can take care of individual interests and socialist revolutionary philosophy can bind Dalit writers and activists in the common thread of solidarity. Is it not possible that the conflicts on the democratic plane might meet at some points of time with consensus that may emanate from revolutionary philosophy? It is indeed pertinent to pose such a question. We observe that Kasbe is an optimist and he is only raising questions. He has used the phrase “never will this problem get solved”. Considered differently, this phrase may be used by us as a necessary issue to be sorted out—the problem is man-made and, therefore, possible of resolution.

With respect to the predicament that Blacks face in America, a country of adoption and not origin, Kasbe introduces in the essay the problems Dalit writing faces vis a vis Hindu culture. The question he asks is: “Do we find Hindu culture and the values it has imposed on us, which we strongly oppose, as strange as the American Blacks find the American White culture?” Mark the word “strange”. It signifies not a usual difficulty but a task that cannot be performed within accepted parameters. Through “strange” is suggested something that does not connect with us since it is alien to social structure. Even though the answer to this question was attempted in the earlier part of the essay, here it is left unanswered. Kasbe seems to be saying that it requires a long historical analysis than that which is possible at the present moment. In the case of the present Hindu culture, no answer may be given straightforwardly. It is suggested that only with persistent effort at studying implications can one get an inkling of the way out of the problem.

Yet, Kasbe comes back to the important point of politics at the end of the essay. Here, politics occurs at the height of an evolutionary process that begins with human-social experience caught in literature. The argument is difficult to formulate but Kasbe responds to the challenge in a nuanced form. His observation runs thus:

There is a mutual relationship between literary creation and experience, experience and culture, culture and politics. Politics has the power to shape culture and bring about in it beneficial changes. Hence, though a writer may individually stand aloof from political activity to a certain extent, the literary movement cannot. We do not accept the entire communist philosophy concerning literature; but when we accept their life-oriented approach to literature, we cannot possibly stay aloof from politics as a means of bringing about social and cultural transformation. (p. 300)

It is a carefully constructed statement with many qualifiers. Mark words such as “beneficial changes”, “may individually stand aloof” and “cannot possibly stay aloof from”. Also consider that individual writers and the literary movement go in entirely different directions. For Kasbe, the decisive part belongs to the literature of the period and not the individual stance of the writer. For him, Dalit writing of the period has of necessity to adopt politics. The rest of the essay substantiated this point with the diversity of Dalit writing in the 1970s and later.

5.11 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have familiarized ourselves with two important perspectives on Dalit thought and writing. Whereas Gail Omvedt’s view emphasizes relevance of history to form an opinion on Dalit experience, Rao Sahib Kasbekar’s argument

problematizes the issue of literary representation of Dalit experience against the rich diversity of issues available with us. More opinions and views on this issue may enrich our understanding further. For this, we would extend our scope of consideration further in the next unit.

5.12 QUESTIONS

- 1) Comment on Gail Omvedt's view of problems Dalits and other marginalized groups face in India at the present time.
- 2) What according to Gail Omvedt are the contradictions Dalits face within their own social formation? Explain.
- 3) How does Raosaheb Kasbe expand the scope of Dalit cause to include suppression of the black population in America?

5.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

Omvedt, Gail. "The Logic of Dalit Politics." Pp. 181-191. *Dalit Visions*. F.P. 1995. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

Kasbe, Raosaheb. "Social Issues Before Dalit Literature". Pp. 295-303. Dangle, Arjun. Ed., *Poisoned Bread*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2009.



UNIT 6 DALIT VIEWPOINTS AND VOICES-II

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Dalit Narrative as a Category of Writing
- 6.2 Language as a Tool of Protest
- 6.3 Extended Boundaries of Experience
- 6.4 Nature and Role of Law in Social Life
- 6.5 The Essay “Alienation, Consciousness and Assertion: An Interpretation of Oriya Dalit Narrative”
- 6.6 The Aspect of ‘Consciousness-building’
- 6.7 Arrival of Activism in the Cultural Domain
- 6.8 Two Phases in Dalit Writing
- 6.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.10 Questions
- 6.11 Suggested Readings

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we take the point of Dalit thought further from where we left in the previous unit. Here, the discussion will centre around the nature of literary representation, by which we mean poetry, fiction, drama or biography/ autobiography. You will see that for people on the margins, accounts of life have special significance. These necessitate that writers focus upon events and incidents more than individual feelings. We cannot draw a clear line of distinction between life’s situations and individual emotions of a person since the two are interlinked. Yet, the former find greater mention in short and long fiction as well as biographical accounts. Therefore, we shall devote more attention to the forms that prefer details about general life. For this purpose, we shall consider questions raised by Ravi Kumar and Raj Kumar in their essays chosen for the course.

6.1 DALIT NARRATIVE AS A CATEGORY OF WRITING

Of the two essays taken up in this unit, the first one is titled, “Boundaries of Dalit Narrative” written by Ravikumar. Since the title has the word ‘narrative’, it will be about those episodes in Dalit life that find expression in a literary work. Before we take up the issues raised in the essay, let me tell you one basic thing about narrative. In a general sense, a narrative is a description of a situation or an event by a person who plays the role of a narrator – she/he uses a sequence and all details included in the description fall in the pattern of a time sequence to which the description may belong and where it derives meaning from that time sequence. Following this, let us have a look at the argument that Ravikumar shares with us in the essay.

Ravikumar’s essay begins with a quote from Julia Kristeva, an important feminist voice in contemporary western thought. The quote brings to our notice the prejudice with which a gender divided community treats them. Themes of women’s writing

work around considerations such as smell which in some cases is treated with approval and in others with horror. Such a prejudice is at the core of all marginalized across the world. It is our job to redefine our attitude in the case of the socially deprived and weak. The essay begins with this prejudice and takes it in the direction of all those sections in societies who are compelled to live on the margins. In the cases of these sections there are two kinds of narratives as on today. One, that since they have been on the margins throughout history, it is their fate and they should adhere to the pattern of a narrative that depicts them as inferior. Two, they should have a look at the history in which the idea of the margins was consciously constructed by the socially privileged. This realization occurs in different societies at different points in history. Yet one thing is common in all the cases that the realization begins in each case with a self-reflexive attempt. This may also be called the autobiographical impulse that makes one aware of one's experiences in life. It is interesting to note that when women started thinking of the prejudice concerning their body, they found that they were victims of a narrative that the powerful in their midst created for them to accept. It was also found that the new narrative of self-reflection was accompanied by a sense of guilt signifying that they were being untrue to themselves since they were transgressing boundaries accepted by all over a long period. This essay goes into these questions point wise and reaches the conclusion that marginalized comprising Blacks, women and Dalits have a commonality and thus a potential unity enabling them to stand up against the privileged everywhere. Let us see how Ravikumar defines conditions and narratives through which the conditions are represented.

6.2 LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF PROTEST

The first point put forth in the essay is about language as a tool of protest. There are two aspects to this. Ravikumar explains that, by the means of words the marginalized challenge the dominant ideas in society. These ideas place the weak in a subordinate position. Consider that the construction of language itself propagates a bias against the lower castes. Do you agree? In case you do then you will correctly think that certain words or phrases associated with the lower castes are often demeaning. It is also the case that through the written word the marginalized become capable of challenging these stereotypes. What exactly is a stereotype? It is a fixed notion about behaviour, practice, sometimes even decision making of an individual or a section of people. In the process the marginalized formulate a counter-discourse to the one that already exists. The existing one represents the victims of prejudice as those who lack importance. Explaining his view Ravikumar says, "Language becomes a site for contest between different social groups."(p.140) Under the head of language, the question of literacy amongst the lower castes emerges. If they are literate they will think of possible operations in a situation, if they are not, they will accept the prevailing condition as one they should bear with. You will agree that education has always been denied to the poor and the underprivileged. Before the Dalits received education, the thumb impression was the only means for them to let their identity be known. Gradually as they gained literacy, Ravikumar points out, the lower castes learnt to put signatures on paper and began to consider the narratives they confronted. They realized that education had the capability to empower them so that they could construct their own narrative with the passage of time. At this point, Ravikumar stretches the argument to say: "Dalit literature was first produced by a Brahmin saint. We are told that the pigmy Dalit discourse must first become a Tamil national discourse, then an Indian national one, before it can aspire to

universality.” (p.140). Have you grasped this argument in full? I believe you may not have as much as is required, since it’s a complex idea. See that it mentions four things. One pigmy Dalit discourse, two Tamil national discourse, three the Indian national discourse and four, the universalist discourse. Do you see a gradual ascending order in these four ending at the universalist? You would have seen that the initial Dalit literature was produced by a Brahmin with his own bias. For this reason, he gave Dalit writing a small stature or maybe no stature at all. The need, Kumar points out, is for writings by the Dalits to construct their narrative in simple terms so that they feel equal with others at the local region, in this case Tamil Nadu. This is not the end of the road. Once this is achieved, the next step is to be taken towards the national scale where they will join with people of the other regions. Even this is not sufficient. The fight of the Dalits can be strengthened further to join with other groups living elsewhere in the world. This will help them their range to the universal.

The essay deals with the point of experience in life after tackling the aspect of language. Indeed, experience is the key to strengthen language. The fight of Dalits occurs effectively on the social plain. Here, they come together as fellow citizens in a country, working under laws that are common to all of them. Experience of struggles also provides impetus to the narratives they built in their writings. We are told in the essay that within India, Dalits have a commonality with women—the two sections face discrimination of the same kind. Whereas the former lose out on rights vis-à-vis the upper castes, the latter have no role outside the home. Even at home, women find themselves at a disadvantage with no decision-making power—their status in home is equivalent to that of a slave. Coming back to the two sections we are dealing with—Dalits and women—we may say that they see themselves as subordinate to those placed higher in the hierarchical order. By the same logic, Dalits and women constitute the deprived section with a common fate.

6.3 EXTENDED BOUNDARIES OF EXPERIENCE

Commonalty of experience of the marginalized transcends national boundaries, explains Ravikumar. The questions confronting Dalits in India go parallel to those faced by the Blacks in America. Here it is the question of low birth and in America, the colour of skin decides where one stands in society.

Issues faced by the two groups living in different countries are quite close; this is reflected in the writings of the two social groups. Ravikumar sees resemblances in the two sets of writings—there, subjugation and suppression should be read separately from each other for knowing their specific bases in the surroundings. Not only that there is segregation in each case—the Indian Dalits and Blacks in America—there is within them also a stark sense of preference for the one who is placed superior. In Afro- American writing self-reflexive representation emerged in its early phase. Talking about oneself and authenticating it by reference to one’s own experiences, tells Ravikumar, became central to the writing in question. Interestingly, the same happened with Dalit writing in Tamil, too.

For Kumar, it was not merely a question of theory, but that a new narrative of experience demanded preservation and strengthening in what one went through. The Afro- American experience, because it was experience, was necessarily rooted in an account outside the dominant social experience. This version would not borrow from available narratives because those were products of a section enjoying social

power. A new narrative could be forged only within the experience that belonged outside the pale of existing narratives. Self-reflexivity or autobiography is the product of this unique nature of the experience of the Afro-American.

Also, since experience may sometimes disagree with the existing norms and may disturb the harmony the norms constitute, the territory of law is built to preserve an unequal system. We might say that as the essay suggests, that language and experience may at some stage in time become inadequate to carry on the business of life. To preserve stability, we take recourse to law where rules have been framed to guide the behaviour of people and infact their thought processes. In this sense, law is a different ball game with its rules sounding eternal, not susceptible to questioning.

6.4 NATURE AND ROLE OF LAW IN SOCIAL LIFE

The sense of right and wrong in life is determined, in Ravikumar's view, at the material level by the world of law. The law explains, interprets and judges as if it were a yardstick enjoying universal sanction. When we break the law, we are made to feel guilty, and for the commission of guilt we stand accused and are accordingly punished. Punishment puts a seal on the guilt and makes it acceptable as a norm. This point is explained in the essay to let us realize that law infact is a construct to help those who wish to rule as if that were important for ensuring harmony in society. Law is supposed to be neutral and objective. The point is, if that indeed were the case, so far as Ravikumar is concerned, "The narrative of the accused is determined by the place assigned to him or her in the judicial system."

The argument places the question of law under a scanner. For Ravikumar, unless we understand the nature of law, we will not be able to look at the plight of Dalits with full sympathy. As is obvious, in the representation of the argument, the section of society meant to be controlled is the Dalit section—this mass of people is to provide items of comfort as well as services, and for this reason they stand to lose everything under the existing legal frame. Ravikumar has elucidated quite clearly that law in the present frame is meant to harmonize a disharmonious society. The society, as it stands, is divided into two parts where one sustains itself at the cost of the other. The roles of the two vis-à-vis each other are such that one is inevitably bound to enjoy comforts and the other is bound to provide them at the cost of its own comforts.

Ravikumar has observed that it is unthinkable that such a society constituting antagonistic parts can be kept together peacefully unless the law controlling them is made to appear neutral and objective. It is, for instance, the law that has deep prejudice at its core, so deep, in fact, that the under-privileged, says Ravikumar, mould their narratives under the discipline of law.

Moving from here to the idea that law is a construct, we might realize that the construct is to be understood for what it is and subjected to critical examination. There is also a suggestion in the essay that law is nothing but the expression of social divisions in legal terms, meaning thereby that the social division has constructed the law following the will of the masters. If this were understood, a narrative of freedom by the oppressed would be possible only when the oppressed cease to be oppressed and gain equality with the supposed masters who are taken off the pedestal and brought on par with the rest.

6.5 THE ESSAY “ALIENATION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND ASSERTION: AN INTERPRETATION OF ORIYA DALIT NARRATIVE”

The other essay we focus upon is by Raj Kumar. Its title is given above. In it, we learn a state of distance that exists in Oriya society concerning Dalits. These are described by him as “downtrodden and oppressed,” as well as “rural and illiterate”. In fact, the first description is reinforced by the second one, whereas the second is explained by Dalits being downtrodden and oppressed. We will understand that “downtrodden” is an extremely violent term giving the graphic idea that a section is walked on and crushed under the feet of those who are cruel to them. This is literally the case and the downtrodden were restricted to their small territories that were alien to the upper castes. The scene changed only when the first sparks of protest by Dalits appeared in the 1970s. Raj Kumar has provided an example of a school in a village. The students from the upper caste sat inside the school whereas the lower caste children, including a man called Muli who was then a student, were made to sit outside. The enormity of the exclusion was such that as Muli is quoted to have said, “The two teachers, a Brahmin outsider and [a] temple servant refused to touch us, even with a stick. To beat us, they threw bamboo canes. The higher caste children threw mud at us. Fearing severe beatings, we dared not fight back.”

We understand that Dalits in Orissa faced alienation as they did not have access to public spaces frequented by the upper castes. Tells Kumar: this made them feel alienated from others and, therefore, away from the social mainstream. We draw from this that the experience of alienation has roots in the treatment of the subject by others. One feels alienated when one is treated in a certain way by those surrounding him/her. As is evident from the account by Muli, lower castes were made to feel strange by people who belonged to the upper castes. This violated their sense of dignity and reinforced a sense of ‘otherness’ in their mind. The upper castes were the ones accepted as vital to the society, and the lower castes were the others.

We learn from the essay that there were voices of dissent by Dalits in Orissa at one or other time in the past. These were, however, sporadic, only reminding that the oppressed had a feeling of unease all through their existence. Does it go parallel to the travails of Dalits elsewhere in India? This was not the case in a precise sense. It is observed, for instance, that Dalit voices in Maharashtra were stronger and were articulated effectively unlike those in Odisha. However, the instances of dissent in Odisha, did not mean that reality was less cruel there. The social circumstance, if we go deeper into the issue, was ranged against the ‘low-borns’, denying them basic values associated with humanity. This experience found little expression in works of literature. There is a mention also of the previous five hundred years in the region when some folktales registered the painful experiences of the subjugated. This was against the background of large-scale oppression Dalits suffered at the hands of the upper castes. To quote from *Dalit Personal Narratives* by Raj Kumar: “Variously known as ati-shudras, chandalas, panchamas, antyajias, depressed classes, harijans, and the Scheduled Castes in different periods in Indian history, the Dalits still suffer the stigma of untouchability, even after caste discrimination has been declared an offence under the law.” (115)

6.6 THE ASPECT OF 'CONSCIOUSNESS-BUILDING'

Later in the essay, the significance of 'consciousness-building' is introduced by Raj Kumar to make clear the meaning of Dalit politics. What does the phrase term signify? For us, as pointed out, it might mean an awareness about the ills prevalent in society that includes an understanding of the impact that caste- prejudices may have on life. Knowledge about the possible ways of countering them may come next in the process. When the Dalit subject is conscious of the biased reality, the idea of protest emerges. In return, protest would involve attacking ideas and practices of the day. The latter should be treated as challenges to be overcome. Thus, protest creates possibilities of achieving the desired goal. Discarding institutions and beliefs in this way enables us to grasp the way Dalits would apply themselves to the problem for resisting caste hierarchy.

As we see, the first among requirements is the generation of ideas through social struggles which is central. It alone creates conditions in which literature comes to acquire traits of a new kind. For instance, once the desired goal is witnessed and grasped in its political-ideological forms, it becomes incumbent on the writer and thinker-activist to translate the phenomenon into practice. Taking a perspective to the ordinary masses is a task that Dalit writing is yet to perform successfully. It is to be achieved both at the level of telling the reader directly as if writing were propaganda, and also involving the reader in the process of decision making and carrying out the mission. Particularly in the case of Dalit writing, the aim may be to promote generation and mobilization of social energies. There is a whole tradition in Dalit experience of moving to the masses and making them participate in the walk towards emancipation. A clear example that comes in this context is that of the folk song sung together by a group of people and in which dance may be built in. Caste hierarchy generally does not encourage celebration or togetherness in Dalit community, since subjugation has always been a dominant factor in Dalit behaviour. Yet for the purpose of consciousness building, the writer may sometimes take the step of composing a group song and take it to a gathering awaiting appeal and inspiration. From 1980 onwards, organization of rallies made such a situation possible in which a large number of people would be addressed by Dalit leaders of the day. The programme of such a rally might indeed begin with a folk song or a drama performance that would set the tone of the thinking Dalit readers would be sharing with the audience.

6.7 ARRIVAL OF ACTIVISM IN THE CULTURAL DOMAIN

The activist writing of the Dalit orientation is in the campaign mode and demands a response resulting from discontent. In it, there is an audience facing the poet and expecting stirring of the mind. But such an expression can be further strengthened by another and more subtle articulation that is in the written mode and is on the printed page. This second writing has an association with education that has gradually entered the social domain in the last few decades. Schools, colleges and universities have in their syllabi poems, short stories, plays and critical articles that appeal to the educated mind. There is a stress also on writing of the committed authors who have exhorted previously the poor and exploited to rise in revolt against imperialism

or the hierarchical structure nearer home. This non-Dalit committed writing is evolved and has experimented with various aspects of representation. This writing also has contended for gaining appeal with the literary works of those writers whose allegiance was to art per se.

How should a Dalit writer cope with such a presence of evolved art? The question has been debated widely in different Indian languages and literatures. On the one side, the regular critics and thinkers of literature look down upon Dalit writing for its supposed flatness and crudity. The charge would be that of the uni-linear approach adopted by Dalit authors. In the debate, Dalit writers and thinkers put up resistance to such a criticism in the name of authenticity—in their opinion non-Dalit writing was unauthentic since it was a product of the upper-caste attitude of complacency about an acceptance of existing artistic parameters. Yet a large number of literary works by committed authors carried a strong appeal to sections involved with resisting the value system of exploiters. It gradually dawned on the Dalit writers to identify areas of similarity between it and a writing of social criticism coming from committed authors. One example would suffice to make clear the point of consciousness building. If a discussion is presented among characters in a novel, it will generate interest in the reader since it's a discussion between people who disagree with one another. The dialogue form, call it dialogic if you like, would suit Dalit writing as much as the committed writing. It is inherent in the dialogue form to present a multi-layered description in which sides are supposed to be taken because they carry a partial point of view in their respective cases. To the category of the dialogue may also belong techniques like irony and paradox. If there are ironies and paradoxes in Dalit social experience the same have to be presented in writing, too. Our question is if this could be termed the process of consciousness-building and thus appreciated in its newly acquired nature.

6.8 TWO PHASES IN DALIT WRITING

In the essay by Raj Kumar under discussion, we gain useful acquaintance with two phases of Dalit movement that emerged in a sequence in the years following Independence. The first one showed Dalit consciousness as a part of the political movement generating acceptance and validation of the existing forces along with a vague attempt at bringing in modernity. This took place in the nineteen fifties and sixties. During this phase, Dalits had gained certain benefits constitutionally but all attempts at the assertion of Dalit identity stood blocked by the hegemonizing culture of a 'rising India'. Sooner or later, however, it was required that Dalit writing and the consciousness behind it should come forward on its own under conditions to which Dalits would contribute decisively. The process happened specifically in the nineteen seventies. Also, it had a somewhat subtle beginning. Bringing in the issue of the middle classes, Raj Kumar has observed:

Its only around the seventies and eighties that Dalits of Orissa began asserting themselves, if not organizationally atleast, individually through their writings which constitute "Dalit Literature" proper. This constitutes the third phase of protest, which takes its inspiration from the modern worldview underlining the central importance of freedom and equality. Writers of this new literature are few in numbers. Most of them are teachers, lawyers, doctors and other government employees constituting a small vanguard symbolizing the advanced consciousness of a very backward and divided people. The literary genres they have started

experimenting with, are limited to poetry, short stories, plays and critical essays. Novels, autobiographies and other forms of literature are rare. Given their background, Oriya Dalits are far from being a powerful presence and the literature they have been creating over the years is hardly documented for wider audience. However, a look at the whole spectrum of Oriya Dalit literature reveals that the vision of Oriya Dalit writers cannot be confined to any geographical boundary; they can be heard in any part of the world wherever man/woman fights for his/her liberation. (p. 121-122)

We see here the role that the educated middle class could perform in the making of values and norms. Indeed, teachers, lawyers as well as doctors and government employees are not merely instruments of services to be rendered. Instead they are carriers of ideas that society itself contains. Calling the educated section as a “small vanguard” also helps in assessing the important activity of joining masses in a strong cultural bond. Literature performs this function still more specifically than the educated sections; it brings to life ideas and concepts that became dormant in the process of ruling classes enjoying their hold on society. In writing, old concepts become energized in the company of aesthetic expressions- here they become friends with emotions of struggle waged long ago in history. Still more, old heroic figures emerge from social memory and receive a new dress in circumstances that Dalit struggles create in our own era. Lastly the question of vision raised by Raj Kumar transcends what he calls “geographical boundary”—the struggle of Dalits of one area reaches the efforts at resistance by Dalits in another area. And finally, as is said in the essay, the call “can be heard in any part of the world whenever man/woman fights for his/her liberation.”

Dalit aesthetics is another important point that the given essay addresses. The central idea here is that Dalit literature expresses their experience and sentiments in most faithful terms. Writers from this section of society are conscious about capturing the reality of their community directly. Raj Kumar points out the significance of “poignant and explosive words” in their writing. The explosive nature of words conveys the harshness of their circumstance. Poverty, inequality, and injustice are the aspects defining their social experience. Their expression projects anger in Dalits towards powers that be. Additionally, poignancy lends breadth of scope— it joins the helpless among Dalits with those in other sections. In the process Dalit writing earns consolidation of alternate aesthetics. Is the specific vocabulary of Dalit writing conducive to making a concrete aesthetic of its own? Even if that is the case there remain areas like standpoint, approach and treatment that come together to join the aesthetic. It is our task to evolve a form competent for capturing pains and traumas of Dalit life. Needless to say that the dominant forms of expression appear inadequate to carry the burden of Dalit experience.

Finally, Raj Kumar observes that Dalits, “protest is not against any individual or group but society as a whole.” (p.126). This statement raises more questions than it can answer. Here Raj Kumar inadequately comprehends the challenge from society. For him, the target of anger is whole society. This does not seem to be the case. The inequalities are indeed created by the upper castes who control everything including the energies that Dalit sections possess. A clear line of demarcation is to be drawn between those who perpetrate enormities and others who get crushed by them. Society as a whole gives a somewhat vague picture of this clearly demarcated phenomena. Only in one sense can it be accepted to mean an overhauling of the system as a whole in terms of justice and equality.

6.9 LET US SUM UP

Ravi Kumar's essay has made us aware about language as a tool of protest in the hands of the lower castes. In it we noted how the experience of Dalits coincides with that of the oppressed in other cultures. The essay explored the institution of law as one which may serve to perpetuate caste bias. Thereafter we learnt the three terms crucial to Dalit politics- alienation, consciousness and assertion. Explaining the significance of each of these terms, Raj Kumar in his essay notes that alienation is one of the primary factors defining Dalit experience. It is the circumstance when Dalits are made to feel strange and are cast away from the mainstream. Consciousness is the first step in the Dalit's struggle against such social prejudice. Once this is achieved, the idea of assertion becomes relevant when Dalits assert themselves through the written word.

Essential to the understanding of Dalit problematic, these essays give us a view of the focused writing capable of playing vital role in social change. The basic requirement of this writing is genuine experience that the victims of caste system undergo. Yet pain and suffering are not enough important thing is to understand the reasons working behind them so that a vision of an alternative path becomes clear. Here we notice a long journey from oppression in history moving inexorably towards resolution only when people among Dalits become active part in social process through protest, politics and ideas. Going beyond ideas, we might come face to face with Dalit creative writing, at once a joint venture in culture, the spirit to fight collectively and move towards celebration. The idea of knowing things together, and knowing here means being alert and conscious would see us through as we place caste oppression and social justice in context. The rise of consciousness in the Indian social scene is not very old. Amid turmoil it showed itself initially in the 1970s. The last thirty years of the previous century and the first fifteen of the present one add up to almost half a century, and this century is crystallized as a political scene in which the worst victims of caste system come up as never before in the form of courageous resistance. With the rise of Dalit writing and its sharpening as well as diversification happening on the heels of social passions emanating from class conflict we can certainly hope for an atmosphere of sympathy and tolerance. The two essays are unflinching in their resolve to fight oppression, even as a large mass of people among Dalits remain largely untouched by what is known as the cultural uprising. There is hope however, that soon enough; poetry, fiction, autobiography and drama will reach the people to whom they belong.

6.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) What is meant by Dalit narrative in the present context? What is the distinct form it has achieved? Explain.
- 2) How did the activist phase of Dalit writing emerge in the nineteen seventies and eighties? Did it have some link with the middle class? Explain and comment.

6.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

