

The Reverberations of Identity in Telugu Dalit Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The defining feature of dalit poetry is Dalit Consciousness. The bulwarks of Dalit Consciousness are Dalit Identity and Dalit Experience based on Ambedkarism. The present paper explores Dalit Identity in terms of self-respect and the dalits being the original inhabitants of India. Examples galore are provided from Telugu Dalit Poetry to illustrate Telugu Dalit Identity.

KEYWORDS

Dalit Consciousness; Dalit Identity; Dalit Experience; Ambedkarism.

Introduction

The major Telugu dalit poets include Gurram Joshua, Boyi Beemanna, Gaddala, Joshseph, Bhupati Narayan Murthy, Surepalli Manohar, Boya Jangaih, Yendluri SudhKAR, Katti Padma Rao, Satish Chander and Sambasiva Rao. Most of the Telugu dalit poets are highly educated and occupy high professional positions. All the poets owe their inspiration to Dr Ambedkar though some of them were also influenced by Marxism and Christianity. The theme of their poems is Ambedkarism.

Whenever we talk of dalit poetry, we talk of Dalit consciousness which includes dalit identity and dalit experience. The present paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the concept of identity with reference to dalit literature and the second part illustrates various Telugu dalit poets' expression of this identity in their poems. The last part presents conclusions.

Dalit Identity

Dalit Identity is an important component of Dalit consciousness. Telugu Dalit identity is defined just like Marathi

Dalit identity by Ambedkar's ideology and Buddhism and ideas of Basava, Narayanguru, Phule and Periyar Ramaswami. The difference between Telugu and Marathi Dalit identity lies in the fact that Basava, Narayanguru and Periyar Ramaswami do not impact Marathi Dalit Identity. Further, Dalit Identity in Telugu literature was also defined in terms of anticaste theories of the combination of later Marxism and Ambedkarism unlike Marathi Dalit Literature as advocated by The Marxist Leninist Centre (a revolutionary group) formed by K.G. Satyamurthy (Siva Sagar) and U. Sambasiva Rao.

Another political movement that added another dimension to Dalit identity/Dalitism is the emergence of the Maoists and Dalit Associations as a Pro Mandal front which advocated the unification of SCs and OBCs.

An important component of Dalit identity is self-respect and dignity. The evidence of the demand for self-respect comes from the carnage of Dalits in Chundururu. In this incident, eight Dalits were massacred and their corpses were

packed in gunny bags. To oppose this, Dalits from all over Andhra Pradesh gathered under the leadership of Katti Padma Rao, the chief secretary of The Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha. The Dalits refused to meet the then Chief Minister Dr. N.T. Rama Rao, who came to console the victims. The Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha strengthened the struggle by giving the slogan “Not welfare but self respect” (Bharathi 99).

Another defining feature of Dalit Identity in Telugu Dalit literature/ poetry is the establishment of Dalits as the original inhabitants of the land. Athota Ratnam (1909 – 1999) traces the origin of Dalits to Matanga Maharshi and their race as the best race in the early period. Gaddala Joseph (1908 – 1970) in his work *Bharatiyudu* (1956) declares that they are the original inhabitants of the nation.

Dalit Identity Illustrated

As said earlier, Dalits identify themselves socially, culturally and politically with the emancipatory ideology of Ambedkar and Phule. It was Ambedkar’s motto to emancipate the Dalits from oppression and suppression; he wanted to establish a casteless society; he is hailed as a social revolutionary. Surepalli Manohar in his poem “Reformation” expresses the contribution of Ambedkar in the establishment of Dalit Identity in the following words:

You’re a pride into the nation
 You waged a war against the fanatic
 religious presumptions
 And the conceits of caste pride
 You operated on the
 cancerous/cankerous tumour of
 untouchability
 Fought unto death for the
 upliftment of the Dalit
 Ambedkar, you’re my country’s
 pride;
 Emancipation of the oppressed was
 your motto.

Establishment of a new social order
 was your goal.

Destroying the demon of
 untouchability was your revolution.
 Women’s progress was your
 cherished aspiration.

And a caste free society was your
 dream.

Educate! Organize!! Agitate!!!

Is the slogan you gave to the nation
 A clarion call for revolution (1-14)

Sarella Venkataratnam in her poem
 “Human Jewel: Ambedkar” maintains that
 it was Ambedkar who opposed Manu’s
 Varna Vyavastha; he fought for the
 restoration of rights for the Dalits; he burnt
 the objectionable tenets against Dalits in
Manusmriti and he also advocated the
 political empowerment of Dalits:

Who is that pious man who had put
 the Dalits from sheer penury to
 progressive route?

Who is that honourable one,
 become path finder for women’s
 freedom and nation’s progress?

Who is the one applauded by every
 one on earth?

Who is that Manu’s killer and
 Modern Buddha?

The one with universal fame, Dr.
 Ambedkar

I salute him with all humility. (5-12)

Boya Jangaih sees Ambedkar’s
 statue and interprets his pointing finger as
 destroying the caste monster. He believes
 that Ambedkar worked towards ending
 Dalit’s slavery as expressed in “Ambedkar”:

With just your pointing finger
 “you wiped out the caste monster.
 With just a stroke of your pen
 You bettered our destinies.
 The slavery of the have-nots for the
 haves
 Will end hereafter.

Baba! Had you lived for ten more years,
The destiny of entire India
Would have changed for the better.”
(1-9)

Gurrum Joshua selects “Gabbilam” (Bat) as a messenger to carry the message of the miserable condition of Dalits to Lord Shiva. Joshua’s bird messenger travels from Tanjore in Tamilnadu, proceeding through Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the abode of Lord Shiva in the Himalayas. After the journey when the Bat comes back to the poet’s hut, he asks him whether he met Ambedkar and whether he admired the bat for his mission:

My Comrade, Ambedkar a great scholar with foreign education
Fought many a battle for my community
Eminently qualified for the high post of viceroy
Has he welcomed you and commended your mission? (1-4)

Spurred by the custodians of Hinduism, Dalits are embraced by Christianity and Buddhism. Even the statue of Ambedkar is being installed in the VIP colonies. These new icons fill Dalits with a sense of self-respect and dignity. They look forward to a new bright millennium. Yendluri Sudhakar in his poem “Low Caste Script” expresses the above thoughts poignantly:

Who knows where from
Yet, Jesus came into our ghetto
In the place of my spittoon
He gave the honour of a Cross to my neck.
Buddha, son of the soil
Sounded on my torn tongue the
Tripitakas unflinchingly.
Install the statues of the

Father of the Constitution not in Dalits streets
But at the thresholds of casteist VIPs
Time will prove
Whether flower garlands fall
Or pairs of *cheppals*. (13-25)

Joshua – directs “Gabbilam” (The Bat) in his journey to the abode of Lord Shiva to stop in Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha and instructs him (notice Gabbilam represents Dalits) to learn the preachings of the Buddha, Buddha’s teachings are for a casteless society as we know:

See Buddha in myriad forms in the ancient sculpture
Follow the message of nonviolence of king Sakyasimha
Learn the Buddhist preachings in the poetry of Amarasimha
Witness the decaying divinity of the cities of Kapilavastu
Shed a tear when Nature unfolds
The history of the glorious Maurya empire of two thousand years. (5-10)

Dalits try to identify themselves with the original dwellers of India. Dalits are responsible for the civilizations that flourished on the banks of the rivers. This redefined historical perspective finds its depiction in “The Song of Liberation” by Katti Padma Rao:

Dalit Man Oh! Dalit Man
The Son of Bharath Bhoomi
On the Banks of Indus River
You built the cities
Oh! The civilizations First Man. (1-5)

Dalit poets have constructed an alternative history by deconstructing Hindu mythological heroes. Through this, they have made mythological villains as

heroes and heroes as villains. Consider the poem "History In Progress" by Sivasagar in which he subverts mythology:

With a smile on his face
Shambhuk is slaying Rama
With his axe
Ekalavya is cutting Drona's thumb
away
With his small feet
Bali is sending Vamana down to
Pathala
With needles in his eyes
And lead in his ears
Manu, having cut his tongue is seen
rolling on the graveyard
Standing on the merciless sword of
time
And roaring with rage
The chandala is seen hissing four
hounds on Sankaracharya
Oh....!
The history is occurring today.
In the most Chandala History. (1-
15)

In this respect, Dalits follow the precepts of Ambedkar as against the philosophy of Gandhi and Marxists. For Dalit poets, Shambuka, Ekalavya and Bali are ancestors. They do not give any importance to the deities of Hindus. Satish Chander, a Telugu poet, describes Ekalavya as the 'Great grand-father to Dalits'. In this respect, Telugu Dalit poets are following the ideology of Ambedkar. A Marathi Dalit Poet, Tryambak Sapkale, demands the finger of Ekalavya, which be a fulcrum (guide) for him. A Telugu Dalit poet Suryavamsi, who uses Ekalavya's thumb as a weapon to fight against oppressive structures of Hinduism in his poem "No Better Murderer They Are" says:

You have Vishnuchakra with you
Be it so:
You maintain Arjun's Gandeeva
Bhim's mace, Drona's tuff of hair
Let them all be with you

You have Ram's arrow
Anjaneya's tail
And Parasuram's Axe
You have authority with you
Elegance with you
Let them be yours
But
We have only Ekalavya's sliced
thumb with us
And this is enough
To fight you all. (1-15)

Today's Dalits like their ancestors are not taking things lying down. They will put up resistance against injustice. He is neither blindly loyal like Ekalavya nor unreasonably docile like Shambuka. He puts a fight against Manu and attacks gods too:

To cut my thumb and give
Do you think I am a gullible
Ekalavya
Do you think I am Shambuka
To bend my head and do penance
Do you think I am Vali
To be knocked down with a foul
arrow
I am the one who breaks the sinews
of Manu
I hang colours
I peel the skin of gods who made me
lame: (qtd. in Narasaiah 40)

Telugu Dalit Poetry is critical of tenets of Marxism. A Telugu Dalit poet, Sambuka in his book *Poyedemee Lenivallam* (We Have Nothing to Lose) states that the policies of communists are not in consonance with the social Dalit reality. Their emphasis on class struggle as against on casteless society is not acceptable even to Jotirao Phule. Phule maintains that caste contradictions, not class contradictions define Indian society. The Telugu Dalit poet Sambuka accuses Marxists of neglecting Dalits in "Oh! Caste":
Dear Comrade!
In the name of Varnadharma
That fellow has looked down on me

And in the name of Class struggle
I have been over looked by you
He with his Sanskrit Slokas
And you with your Marxist Stereo-
typed sutras
Safely lead me into a jungle. (qtd. in
Narasaiah 62)

Dr. Ambedkar is of the view that
people join revolution only when they are
convinced that there will be no exploitation
of caste and creed. Economic revolution
endorsed by Marxists cannot guarantee
social equality:

Amn't I going to be an animal once
again
Won't it be my fate to be mocked at
Even after your economic great leap
forward
Tell me
Where is the guarantee of my being
treated as a human. (qtd. in
Narasaiah 62)

Dalits identified themselves with
other Dalits when they were in trouble.
Three gruesome, hair-raising shocking
incidents of torture that led to the rebirth
of Dalit movement in 1980s in
Kanchikacherla (1978), Padiri – Kuppam
(1983) Karam Chedu (1985), Neerukonda
(1987) and Chundururu (1991). 17th July
1985 is the Black day because it records the
cruel and inhuman slaughter of Dalit
Madigas with axes and sickles by the
landlords belonging to Kamma caste in
Karamchedu. In the wake of these ruthless
killings Dalits raised a collective voice of
revolt against the landlords and these
incidents brought them together as one
body. Melavuri Venkata Ratnaji in his poem
“Ascetic Godavari” makes reference to
these topical incidents:

Crying over the crores lingas you
lost
You content with just
Veeresalingam
And keep up your Arjun culture

When the body of Karemchedu was
burnt alive
Chundururu heads were beheaded
And faces at Vempadu were charred
Who is left out for us to be content
with?
Oh (lord) Pushkara celebrations
Just hand me over those miscreants
Then to the dead heroes of
Karamchedu
And the immortals of Chundururu
I'll offer Tarpanam. (82-93)

Dalits assert their identity by getting
united with other Dalits. Suryavamsi in his
poem “Strange Shit” airs these feelings of
togetherness:

Well,
We have been carrying out the
professions
Given to us according to their
Dharma
We have been cleaning up
The entire dust and dirt of this
country
But we couldn't sense the real shit
The real heinous thing
Which is in their minds
Let's be united, my Dalits
Let's cleanse the shit of their minds
Let's transform them into humans
Let's unveil a new humanity of
togetherness. (45-56)

Dalits are very much concerned
about their self-respect. They are proud to
be Dalits. This marks the culmination of
their self-identity. Satish Chander in his
poem “Panchama Veda” rightly observes:
“Tell the journalists / That it was self-
respect which burnt me / But not
kerosene” (73-75).

Yenduluri Sudhakar in his poem
“Sobbing Khairlanji” expresses the
powerful feelings of Dalits who though are
seething with vengeance, wish to live with
self-respect by creating a new world:

Hey, a mother India
We are grieving
Oh Gandhi, we are distressed

Oh, Babasaheb, we are steaming
with vengeance
We feel like living with self – respect
Then, at least,
Our limbs and secret parts would be
safe. (71-77)

For Dalits, their self-respect is supreme.
They are ready to go hungry but cannot
tolerate insult. Katti Padma Rao in “I am
Within You” declares:

All those I divided are now invading
me together
I am the watchman of the blazing
humanity
Rescuing the humans has
endangered my life
I am the oxygen of the caste-based
society
Dalitism is crying to silence me
I can bear hunger, but not insult.
(13-18 underlining mine)

Dalits are no longer ashamed to be Dalits.
The change that has taken place in them
shows that they are, in fact, proud to be

Dalits. Sambasiva Rao in his poem “Those
That Don’t Accompany Us” observes:

They give up Dalitism of uprisings
We may be poor devoid of food
But we are rich by caste. (11-13
underlining mine)

Conclusion

Dalits identify themselves with
other dalits socially, politically and
culturally and with the ideology of Dr
Ambedkar. They identify themselves with a
casteless society based on the principle of
equality, fraternity and justice. The
defining feature of Telugu dalit identity is
demand for self-respect and dignity. This
demand springs from the carnage of dalits
in Chundururu. Another component of dalit
identity is the recognition of dalits as being
the original inhabitants of India. The paper
exemplifies these components of identity
through the exemplification of poetry from
several Telugu poets.

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