

The Voice of Protest in B. Rangrao's *Farewell*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses how B. Rangrao's short story, "Farewell" offers a social commentary on the wretched condition of the Dalit lives in rural India, where despite grant of political rights to them, social change is yet to happen. The Dalits continue to be subjected to constant abuse by the powerful upper castes as exemplified by the village Chief in the story. The story captures a moment in India's social history, where the author Rangrao depicts the stirring of Dalit consciousness in a remote Indian village, when the protagonist, Lakhan attempts to stand up for himself and resist his oppressors, the upper caste villagers, in insisting that his father's funeral procession should be allowed to pass through the village square. The study highlights the baneful and deeply entrenched caste-based prejudices and rigid social laws of the Indian society, breaching which leads to the ostracism and eventual deracination of a Dalit family.

Keywords:

Dalit, Untouchability, Suffering, Pollution

Introduction

Traditionally Indian society has been a highly diverse and stratified society, where functional class divisions were evident along jati, kula, gotra and varna, signifying birth, family lineage, race and colour, which have persisted over time, well into the twenty first century. At the bottom of the social hierarchy lay the Dalits belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes, who have been subjected to unequal treatment and social discrimination besides being subjected to atrocities for centuries. The situation improved slightly

during the colonial period. Social reformers and advocates of Dalit rights, Phule and Ambedkar acknowledged British rule "for introducing modernity into the moribund Hindu society" but both the thinkers were also keenly aware of its limitations (Teltumbde 2000). Often, the colonisers co-opted the dominant social classes and attempted to preserve the status quo, and operate via the existing social laws of the land. When this happens, Ambedkar (1936) says that religious and legal doctrines make oppression a subtle practice, engendering conditions in which neither the body nor the mind is free to act

as per will. The will is morphed, defaced and substituted by the codes of conduct of the colonial ruler. The colonial powers often worked in tandem with the interests of the dominant social groups, leading to the maintenance of their ideological hegemony and further subjugation of the oppressed castes. The age-old practice of untouchability thus became a more complex form of slavery. The self-effacing attitude of these people for ages has obviated any scope for resistance against injustice as Gayatri Spivak's question aptly poses, "Can the Subaltern Speak?".

N. M. Aston has aptly commented on this in his *Literature of Marginality: Dalit Literature and African- American Literature*:

The conditions of abject poverty, unhealthy and unsanitary conditions in which these people sheltered, but they believed that they are bind to live such lives. Even the minimum rights as a human being denied to them, rendering them incapable of seeing the light of freedom and comfortable living, thanks to the age-old ideology taught to them by the upper castes in India and ... that they were fated to be hewers of wood and drawers of water- mere slaves. (Aston 9)

Concerns of Dalit Literature After independence, many Dalit thinkers took to writing as a way of protest, by adopting different genres like poetry, memoirs, testimonies and fiction to protest against the historical injustice meted out to them. They recorded their social tribulations as an attempt to bring it to the light of the civilized world. Reflecting on the bitter experiences of their community members, Dalit writers started manifesting and freely articulating their experiences, sometimes morbidly, at other times stridently. The

word "Dalit" with its origin in Marathi, is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dal' suggesting "the broken and the crushed." It was first used by Jyotirao Phule and was subsequently used by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to refer to the outcastes and untouchables, not just their economic, socio-political and cultural backwardness, but also to provide them with a new identity of liberation and assertion (Mondal). Dalit literature, has thus emerged as a cannon of writing that attempts to give a voice to these sections of the society, representing their concerns and their suffering through the tool of language.

Arjun Dangle rightly observes that: "Dalit Literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people" (Poisoned Bread, 266). Tarachand Khandekar, another Dalit author elucidates on the underlying rationale of Dalit writing:

Man is the centrifugal force in the philosophy of Dalit Literature. Man is supreme. He is above all gods, sacred books and science. It is a man who can make and unmake anything. Dalit Literature believes that nothing is permanent. Everything is subject to decay. With every decay, there is a resurgence, new creation. It, therefore, does not accept the maxim 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram.' On the other hand, it proclaims that nothing is true, which is not applicable for man's sublime freedom; nothing is good if it is not useful for man's welfare, nothing is beautiful, which is not useful for the beautification of mankind. (Khandekar 6)

Yogesh Maireya in his book *Of Oppressor's Body and Mind*, writes evocatively on some

of the abiding concerns of the Dalit literature:

How dominant-caste people think? In what way they reproduce caste through their texts and visuals? In what way they govern the direction of perceptions among Dalit and other non-privileged communities? It has rarely been discussed or analysed from the Dalit perspective. A Dalit perspective has always been about their lives and how dominant caste people stand there as an access point of oppression. (Maitreya 10)

Dalit Subjugation as Reflected in Rangrao's Story

The text under study here, B. Rangrao's short story "Farwell", sheds light on the oppression that the Dalits have experienced in the hands of the dominant castes of the Hindu society. It portrays the awakening of Dalit consciousness in the marginalised quarters of a village community, who attempt to challenge the hegemony of the upper caste and mobilise resistance against their tormentors. The paper explores the modus operandi of the elite savarnas who adopt devious ways to exercise their control over the Dalits and reflects on the latter's predicament when pitted against the powerful upper caste members. It describes the indignities that the Dalits in the countryside are daily subjected to, as this part of the country is still largely conservative, where social change in tune with India's changing political scenario is yet to take place. In his introduction to the *Poisoned Bread* (1992), Arjun Dangle, speaks of the pathetic and deplorable plight of the Dalits in Indian society:

The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to

tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them. (Dangle xxi)

B. Rangrao is a celebrated Dalit writer in Marathi whose stories are remarkable for providing vignettes of social and cultural life in rural India, with particular focus on the Dalit consciousness. The story "Farewell" dwells on the aspirations of a Dalit man, Lakhan and his ostracised community in a remote village of India. Lakhan, the protagonist and his wife Jamuna like the rest of the villagers, are dependent upon the farming sector for their livelihood. As a Dalit, Lakhan doesn't have any other option except to work as a farm labourer. The untouchables, to which Lakhan's family belonged, were considered to fall outside the varna system and were marked as Sudras and reduced to live under abject conditions. With the attainment of political independence, though untouchability was abolished in India and constitutional rights under the new laws of the polity, were granted to all, social emancipation for people like Lakhan was still a distant dream. The roots of the deeply entrenched caste system were yet to be shaken. It is against this background that Rangrao's short story is set.

Lakhan's ancestors had lived in the same village for generations and flourished there. His parents were proud of their ancestry. Despite living in penury, and suffering from hunger, Lakhan and his family lived blissfully till the death of Lakhan's father. An epidemic broke out in the village, to which Lakhan's father also became a victim, plunging Lakhan's family into grief and dejection. Meanwhile the villagers, wanted to renovate

the old temple of the Goddess which was in a decrepit condition. The village Chief invited the villagers to contribute either through donations or in kind. Lakhan who loved his father, wished to conduct for his father a dignified funeral rite by taking out 'funeral yatra' (31). All his relatives and neighbours joined the funeral yatra. Outraged at this, the upper caste village Chief together with his companions gridlocked the 'funeral yatra' (31) as it was passing through the village streets. The Chief ordered Lakhan to alter the route of the 'funeral yatra' (31), saying that, as a Sudra, he was not allowed to take the route as the temple under construction, was located in the same lane. The whole notions of purity and pollution that the story highlights are interesting. Anthropologists studying Hindu religion and ritual have often discussed how the notion of purity has been relevant to the Hindu caste system (Dumont, 1980 & Bouglé, 1908). They have spoken extensively on how the whole religious practices rest on the distinctions of "purity" and "impurity." Also, in this highly stratified Indian society, should any dalit or Sudhra –as per the Hindu Chaturvarna system encounter any of the upper caste Hindu, the former was to take every care not to touch them or even cast their shadow on the latter.

The village Chief and the other village elders point out to Lakhan that if the corpse of a Dalit or an untouchable is allowed to pass through the street where the temple is located, the Goddess may feel desecrated and show her wrath by bringing suffering to the villagers. Lakhan, was aghast on hearing their words. He argued that his father had toiled his whole life for the wellbeing of the villagers. He had served and worshipped the Goddess. It is evident that even after so many years of independence, people like the Chief's mind-set had yet not changed. However, the Dalit community, led by Lakhan attempts to resist

it. Lakhan argues with the Chief, asking him:

How can the mother Goddess be so unkind and get infuriated because a dead body is carried out through the lane where her temple is rebuilt? She certainly knows the worth of the man- pure-hearted servant of the people and a total devotee of the Goddess herself. (29)

Lakhan refuses to heed the Chief's command and decides to proceed as planned. One of the Chief's companions angrily asks Lakhan when he refuses to kowtow before the figure of authority, "How dare you disobey the Chief's order? Are you bent on destroying the lives of us all?" (29). Undaunted by the Chief's threats, Lakhan moves his father's 'funeral yatra' (31) to the graveyard through the same lane. He insists that he had every right to give his father a decent funeral as he had offered his entire life for the welfare of the village. Though the Chief and his companions bully him and tower over him and his family, Lakhan resists their brute force to make way for the procession. However, his act of defiance costs him dearly. Lakhan's disobedience injures the Chief's ego badly. He wreaks misery on Lakhan. After the thirteen days of the funeral period, the Chief passes a dictum in the village not to hire Lakhan's services. The villagers follow his orders and refuse to offer work to Lakhan or his wife, Jamuna. Both the husband and wife are boycotted by the whole village and they are soon out of work.

The Wretched of the Earth

Lakhan and Jamuna found no way out, other than meeting the Chief. Lakhan pleads with the Chief, "Have mercy on my old mother and little children, who will die of hunger if you don't allow us freedom"

(32). On hearing the proposition of freedom, the Chief reminds Lakhan that the Dalits don't deserve freedom as they were born in servitude and would die so. Lakhan tries to reason with him but to no avail. The following conversation between Lakhan and the village Chief is quite illustrative:

Oh, I see, said the Chief, you don't remember now the act of your disobedience when you took away your father's dead body from the front of the Goddess temple despite our command. You have forgotten it, ah...How can that be sin, sir? enquired, Lakhan. Was not my father a native of this village? Was he not a faithful servant of the people and the Goddess herself? How do you deny an honourable death to a man...Honourable death? To an untouchable? The Chief spat contempt once again; an untouchable can never expect honour even in death. An untouchable is a footwear whose place is determined by the shastras. He will live in filth and die in filth, that's all.... He is a human being rendered untouchable by your society. He is as much a child of God like you, sir. Why, then, this discrimination? God's compassion reaches out equally to all. You people hamper its rendering, Lakhan's desperate argument. (33)

The story is instructive, how despite the progressive laws and the social reforms initiated by thinkers like Ambedkar, the attitude of the Chief towards Dalits largely remains unchanged. Lakhan attempts to exercise his agency and speak out against the injustice, but the powerful Chief suppresses it. The story highlights how the networks of power deeply rooted in caste based social affiliations are still very much in

place. Delivering his historic speech at the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference on 31st May 1936 in Bombay, Ambedkar had cautioned the Mahars, (the untouchable class) of the imminent conflicts when they would start to assert their rights. He asks:

Why then do the caste Hindus get irritated? The reason for their anger is very simple. Your behavior with them on a par insults them. Your status is low. You are impure, you must remain at the lowest rung; then alone they will allow you to live happily. The moment you cross your level, the struggle starts. (Ambedkar, 1936).

The above instance, proves that the struggle between the Hindus and the Untouchables is an ongoing phenomenon.

Doubly Vulnerability of Dalit Women

The story also suggests that the Dalit woman are doubly vulnerable. They suffer for being a woman as well as a subaltern. The village Chief denigrates Lakhan, refusing to admit that a Dalit is a human being, but when it comes to a Dalit woman, his hypocrisy becomes evident. Seized by lustful thoughts and evil desire, he tells Lakhan, referring obliquely to Jamuna, "Your women are the only human beings amongst you, untouchables. She can set you free if you so desire" (33). Unable to grasp the Chief's slanted hint, Lakhan innocently inquires what he meant. The Chief clarifies, "It's simple. Send your wife to haveli tonight and tomorrow you will be free" (33). Hearing this Lakhan flies into a fit of rage. He is disgusted with the duplicity of Chief, wondering whether it is the same Chief who had talked about untouchability and all the things on the day of 'funeral yatra'? (31). In a counterattack, the companions of the Chief beat up Lakhan

brutally. None of the villagers come out to Lakhan's aid, not even his relatives. The other Dalits of the village would not dare to resist or challenge the Chief's power or come to Lakhan's rescue. Lakhan and his family are left with no other option but to leave the village in search of a livelihood. They are thus compelled to migrate to another village. With heavy hearts, Lakhan bids farewell to the land of his ancestors, of which he could no longer be a native of. This exodus of Dalits is not a new historical event. The Dalits pan India have experienced the same.

Rangrao shows how even after the onset of modernity, the tradition bound Indian society, particularly the rural part has been slow to change. The powers that be, have allowed the toiling multitudes, i.e., the Dalit people to partake in the economic activity of the village and subsist, only if they didn't challenge the hegemony of the upper castes or did not transgress the boundaries laid out by them. The harmony of the village is sustained only till these downtrodden, accept their position at the bottom of the social pyramid. They are condemned to live on the margins, outside the mainstream society and lack the agency to challenge the oppressive power structures. The moment they attempt to assert themselves, as Rangrao depicts, they are ruthlessly crushed. Even a small act of assertion by the minority community, like Lakhan wanting to claim his right to use the public space of the village brings about a severe backlash from the powerful upper caste members of the village, heaping misery on their families. The story, thus presents the conflict between Lakhan and the domineering Chief of the village, who steeped in orthodoxy and bigotry subdues Lakhan leading to his further ostracisation. The story acutely presents the practice of untouchability. Caste remains a stigma for Dalits, as

they are considered accursed sinners by the savarnas. Even after the abolition of untouchability, Rangrao illustrates how the baneful caste system remains rooted in people's psyche. Mere laws directing the abolition of untouchability doesn't mean that caste-based discrimination is over.

Conclusion

The story thus sheds light on how 'untouchability' as a mark of disgrace is attributed to the Dalits and how they are stigmatized as polluting substance, who can contaminate the savarnas, who are generally considered to be pure. Though Lakhan raises his voice against the injustice and egregious practices prevailing in the village, the people in power refuse to cede him and his community members their right to use the public space or partake in the community life. It is a reality, that Dalits often agitate against social and political suppression, but they neither have the power nor the money to assert themselves or resist the unjust treatment meted out to them. The paper explores how even after decades of independence; the people of Indian society are still steeped in obsolete and retrogressive social laws, which is reflected in their outlook towards the Dalits. Despite the changing times, the village chief is not yet ready for the new realities of the world, and is unyielding to the historical mores of the village and the values of the dominant class, as an attempt to expose them as a dogma? Lakhan's aspiration for social equality and his insistence that the Goddess doesn't refuse anyone's worship as everyone is equal in her eyes, goes unheeded by the village Chief. He thwarts Lakhan's efforts to claim the use of the village public space. The study, while highlighting the plight of those at the bottom end of the social pyramid who are afflicted by the caste-based

prejudices and rigid social laws laid down by the powerful upper caste class, also sheds light on the strategies that the members of the upper caste use to suppress the voice of protest emanating from the downtrodden through a nexus of power in order to retain their hegemony. The paper also explored the social stigma of pollution, which is the root of the evil of untouchability in the Hindu society.

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