

## DALIT LITERATURE IN INDIA: A SEARCH FOR SOCIAL EQUALITY

*Prunima Sharma*

*Research scholar*

*Department of English, UILAH*

*Chandigarh University, Mohali, Punjab*

*+91- 7400172459*

*Email id: Prunimasharma1997@gmail.com*

*Dr. Khushboo Batra*

*Assistant professor*

*Department of English, UILAH*

*Chandigarh University, Mohali, Punjab*

*+91-9910057167*

*Email id: khushboo.e11179@cumail.in*

### **Abstract**

India is one of the world's fastest expanding economies, but it is also known for its severe caste system. The history of oppression, the plight of the oppressed, their fight for equality and the origins of Dalit texts are all explored in this study. This paper will cover topics like movement and the scope of Dalit literature. In all Dalit literary works, it is often assumed that they have their origins in Ambdekarite ideology. The literature also examines the harsh circumstances of Dalit people and their admirable efforts to improve their social standing. This literature presents vivid accounts of the Dalit community's social and political experiences in India's caste-based society. It examines the social situations that surround Dalits in India, as well as their relations with Dalits and non-Dalits. It looks at how the Dalit society fought for equality and freedom. Dalit movements, and by defeating upper caste culture by the help of Dalit literature by writers and philosophers, as well as the execution of welfare packages by the government, have resulted in a good attitude toward equality in the Dalit community's social life today. Discrimination based on caste and gender is prohibited by law. This is a literary journey of suppressed people from their search for identity to social equality as well as gender equality. This research will deal with Dalit Literature and Gender Equality.

### **Keywords**

Gender equality, Autobiographies, Dalit, Castes, Untouchables, Oppressed

### **Introduction**

In the 1950s and 1960s, a new literary movement known as Dalit literature exploded onto the Indian literary landscape, particularly in the Marathi language. It was accompanied by a marginalised group known as the Dalit Panthers. This movement quickly swept throughout India. The word "Dalit" was coined by the movement's poets and authors to replace the preceding terms "Untouchable" and "Harijan." Although Dalit writing appeared in the early 1960s as fragment of the movement started by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the

indisputable front-runner of the Dalits. During the 1940s and 1950s, Dr. Ambedkar's periodicals Janata, Muknayak, and Prabuddha Bharat published various untouchable stories and poetry, mainly short stories by Marathi writer Bandhu Madhav that focused on the true lives of oppressed people. This was followed by additional themes.

In many literary genres, Dalit literature is defined as an inspiring and logical literary expression that affects societal reality. It was a branch of Indian literature that represented a new literary movement in India. Dalit literature is essentially a social document about people who have been exploited socially and economically in India for centuries. However, there is evidence that socioeconomic equality is gradually gaining ground in India.

### **Objective of the study**

The paper titled “Dalit Literature in India: A Search for Social Equality”, which also examines the journey of suppressed or untouchables society of India from socio-economic-political exploitations to developments which aims to intricate the actual life of the Dalit society through their writing and optimistic steps toward equality. This genre of literature can be found in African-American writings, sometimes also known as “Black writing”. A small resemblance can also be seen in Palestinian literature. Academics and researchers should be aware of the untouchable’s creative literary energy, which has been robbed of their identity and equality.

### **History of Castes in India**

South Asia is renowned for its ability to absorb foreign ideas while maintaining its unique identity. Nowhere is this resilience more evident than in the Dravidian language’s ability to absorb what must be considered a major Indo-Aryan impact while maintaining their core Dravidian identity. Dravidian language Indo-Aryanization must have begun more than 3,500 years ago. The existence of possible Dravidian linguistic traits in the “Rig-Veda shows Aryan contact with Dravidian-speaking people several hundred years before the Rig-Veda was composed. The Aryans conquered India and established the Varna system, which divided people into four classes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra” (Sar Desai 103). Brahmins are those who labour in the arena of education, Kshatriyas are those who fight on the battlefield, Vaishyas are business people, and Shudras are those who work in other fields. Workers were classified according on their skill, talent, or capacity, resulting in separate castes based on their occupation. However, over thousands of years, “reality became tragic, with the result that children were assigned to the class and caste of their father or paternal family without regard for their employment, competence, or capacity to execute that labour” (Sar Desai 105). It is claimed that this classification was implemented to safeguard indigenous aborigines from miscegenation. The Shudras of the fourth class were expelled from society and labelled as untouchables. Several invaded administrations were unconcerned with their well-being.

### **Dalit**

The name “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit word “Dalita” which meaning “oppressed”. All were considered as untouchables and the lower castes of Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya in Indian society. In ancient times, the untouchables were known as "Chandala" or "Avarna." During the twentieth century, Narasimha Mehta and Mahatma Gandhi used the words “Untouchable” or “Harijan”. J.H. Hutton, a famous historian, coined the term "Exterior Castes" to describe these untouchables on a global scale. “Harijan” means “God’s people”. Scheduled Caste is the official designation for this group. Shudras have been referred to as Dalits for several decades. “Dalit”, a word that means “ground,” encompasses a wide range of marginalised people. This is a self-made term created from the Sanskrit and Marathi words for broken, oppressed, and ground down. It's used to show that untouchability is imposed by others. It is also used to refer to all of India's poor and oppressed people.

### **Dalit literature movement**

Subsequently the demise of renowned Dalit leader Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar in 1958, Mahatma Jyotibai Phule ignited a suppressed class movement in India. This was sparked by the present American Black Movement. The definition of “Dalit literature is writing about and by Dalits or oppressed people. This writing mimics the sorrow of untouchables' experiences. It depicts the higher caste's humiliation, injustice, brutality, and discrimination towards the lower caste” (Verba 19). It reflects a “political consciousness centred on the struggle for community self-respect and dignity. This literature could include works against environmental exploitation, racial discrimination against Afro-Americans in America, women's subjugation, and the neglect of the elderly” (Verba 25). The term "Dalit" has a broad definition, encompassing all forms of oppression that any minority may endure. This literature has the ability to heal the wounds of the past.

The British Indian Empire offered several improvement programmes to the people who had been historically marginalised. A rule was passed named as "Government of India Act 1935," which designated the lower castes as Depressed Castes or Scheduled Tribes. The rule also included various humanitarian programmes to help Dalits develop. Despite being regarded as dirty and uneducated, Dalits initiated to express their pride and individuality in speeches and writings. This movement resulted in the publication of research articles, dramas, poetry, novels, short tales, and other types of mass media about exploited social life.

Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) was a forerunner in Marathi Dalit literatures. *Jenvha Mi Jat Chorali* (When I Had Concealed My Caste), his first collection of stories, was printed in 1963 and caused a sensation in Marathi literature with its passionate picture of a harsh realities of the society, giving Dalit literature a new lease on life. Other writers such as Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal (founder of Dalit Panther) and N.R. Shende gradually reinforced the Dalit movement. “Though Dalit literature a ‘movement’ began only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the most important Dalit writers and a major forerunner of the movement was Annabhau Sathe,” wrote Gail Omvedt (1987) in her article “Dalit literature in Maharashtra: Literature of Social and Protest and Revolt in Western India” (1920-1968). He wrote in a variety of styles. His books and short stories are still widely read today, and no Dalit novelist has come close to matching his success. Though unfavourable “elements were present as early in the 11th century, the Dalit Literary Movement began in Marathi writing in the 1960s and spread to Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil, and Hindi literature later on. Dalit writers pioneered a realistic, experience-based, and true literature” (Verba 28) that posed a threat to society's upper-class rule. The Dalit characters anguish, sorrow, and unwavering will and hope were expressed in a foul language. Dalit writers from across India are united by a shared reason, a shared identity, and a shared politics.

### **Dalit literature and its inspiration**

Agony, sadness, suppressed, oppressed, struggle, protest, and untouchable are all words found in literature from various countries. African-American writing, sometimes known as “Black writing,” is written in the United States by people of African origin. Phillis Wheatney and Olaudah Equiano, pioneers of this writing, began their work in the late 1800s. It peaked in the early nineteenth century with slave narratives. During the twentieth century, African American literature became a wave of protest against racial discrimination in the United States of America. Similarly, Dalit literature in India documents the subjugated masses' sociocultural and political aspects.

Because of their race, African Americans were denied the opportunity to enjoy life. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance established “African American literature as a subject of academic investigation, ensuring that both writers and readers were conscious of the circumstances in which they wrote. Whether the writers accepted or rejected the tradition, their work” (Kapoor 15) shaped its outlines.

The "New Negro Movement" was the precursor of the Harlem Renaissance. It gave birth to a “new Negro culture and music such as jazz and blues. It was marked by an outward display of racial pride that came to symbolise the concept of the "New Negro." Negro championed progressive or social equality in America through intellectual writings and creative arts” (Kapoor 20). Because of illiteracy and the slave trade's use of blacks as a commodity, most Negro slaves had no idea who their biological parents were or when they were born. They weren't permitted to speak or learn at all. However, blacks verbally conveyed their destitute past through speeches, which were then modified into "creative forms" such as autobiography and folklore. The “Black Panther Movement” began as a legal welfare programme in America to improve black people. Following the Negroes' lead, the Dalit Panther Movement in India gained academic prominence during the lifetime of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). He was the first person to receive an education in both the United States and England. Following India's independence in 1947, the concept of democracy spread throughout the country, inspiring the public.

In their regional languages, Dalit literature depicted their society. African American literature had a profound impact on Dalit literature, and Dalit writers discovered a "parallel phenomenon" in their movements. These oppressed people's writings are innovative ways for them to rise beyond traditional and conservative civilizations. In the field of subaltern studies, the term "resistance" has been used widely. The word derives from the Latin “resistere”, which means "to take a stance." Ghassan Kanafani's work on Palestinian literature was the first to use the term resistance in relation to literature. This literature is a work of art that expresses strong opposition to oppressors.

In this context, it is reasonable to regard Dalit literature is India's most fresh types of resistance literature. The surge in Dalit writing is intended to bring attention to concerns of exploitation, prejudice, malnutrition, and the rising death rate among India's poor, including “untouchables, minorities, nomadic tribes, and other degraded people. It represented a shift away from symbolic big narratives and posed a significant challenge to established literary standards” (Kapoor 24). Dr. Ambedkar, a planner of the Indian constitution, has emerged as a great hero for Dalits following the advent of democracy in India. The idea of Dr. Ambedkar has created a new nation among Dalits. His message of education, unity, and fighting for rights served as a beacon to the Dalit shipwreck. Buddha, Kabir, Periyar Swami and many more local Dalit heroes have given fresh vision to downtrodden humanity as a result of Ambedkar's ideology, and Dalit culture and life have changed as a result.

### **Literature Review**

Dalit women used literature as an armament in feminist writing in the post-Ambedkar period, including poetry, short stories, essays, novels, and autobiographies. *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble is a revolutionary autobiography of a Dalit lady. Her stories were featured in the Marathi journal "Stree" in 1982 as Jina Amucha. Jina Amucha was translated from Marathi to English by Maya Pandit. This autobiography features a thorough introduction written by her. She also conducted a meeting with Baby Kamble, which she published. *The Prisons We Broke* depicts the Mahar community's fight with Brahmins and other upper-caste individuals. Not just her peers, but also other Dalit pupils, humiliated, bullied, and discriminated against Baby

Kamble but by her teachers also. Despite the fact that Baby Kamble stopped studying after fourth grade, she was a victim of the horrible practise of "child-marriage. *"The Prison We Broke* discusses more about Dalits blind beliefs and superstitions," writes Ms. Nagarale (2011) in her essay "Discourse Analysis of African-American and Dalit Women's Selected Works/biographies: A Comparative Study". The evil spirit afflicted both men and women, who saw it as a curse from God and Goddesses. "The autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* transcends the confines of personal narrative," wrote Acharekar (2008) in her review "Liberation Narrative on the Autobiography: Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*." It also contains information on sociology, history, and politics. It amplifies Dalit feminist criticism and anti-religious rallies in general."(Acharekar 2008)The greatest widespread Dalit woman autobiography in Tamil is Bama's *Karukku*, which was released in 2000. It is a Dalit woman's life narrative, but the author considers *Karukku* to be the story of the Dalit masses. *Karukku* was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Founder-Trustee, South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, who also presented a detailed introduction to Dalit culture and works. Bama came to Catholicism and discovered that her discrimination stemmed from her birth as a Dalit. She, on the other hand, faced discrimination in churches, schools, and society as a Dalit lady. Dalit women also work as labourers or sweepers with their families, as working collectively for survival is a prerequisite for Dalit survival. They must live in deplorable conditions while performing their assigned tasks. They are frequently victimised by injustice. "In this patriarchal upper caste culture, a Dalit woman suffers a double curse, the curse of being a woman and the curse of being a Dalit in her own house, a lady is like an ox tethered to the yoke..... In this patriarchal high caste society life of the woman is a curse" (Naresh 82).

On this subject, Dalit poets and poetesses have written poetry. For Dalit women, suffering in silence was a thing of the past. Raising one's voice against injustice has become a reality. They do not bear all injustices at the moment, but they protest vehemently. Disgust for Dalits has existed for centuries in Indian society, although it is progressively fading. Dalit writers have been vocal in their opposition to untouchability and have attempted to persuade the "orthodox upper castes that if we are going to live together, why not do so with human feelings and brotherhood?" (Kapoor 43).In the works of upper caste individuals, there is a sense of contentment, "whereas each Dalit autobiography records a life of caste atrocities" (Kapoor 43) and prejudice that continues beyond the auto biographer's death. The experienced narratives of Dalits are considerably different from non-Dalit narratives in a number of respects.

The majority of writers, academics, critics, and reviewers believed Dalit works to be testimony of recent caste oppression and exploitation. These are considered an epic of the Dalits' hardships, which has been told through many sources. All of the authors represented their lives in Indian society without food, shelter, settlement, or culture.

### **Dalit Literature in India: A Search for Social Equality**

Dalit literature is around those who are suppressed by the Indian caste system. Dalits have a long history of living in suppression under Indian society's upper echelons. As a result, they have long been a marginalised, oppressed, and subaltern group.

Munshi Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Mannu Bhandari, Amrita Nagar, Omprakash Valmiki, Jai Prakash Kardam, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Jai Suraj Pal Chauhan, and a slew of other writers used their writings to address social issues rather than simply entertain. It should be viewed in the perspective of its time, since it is not "recreational" or "leisure" literature because it campaigns for Dalit rights and urges people to fight injustice. Limbale (2004) recommends various crucial qualities to distinguish the form of Dalit literature and has also attempted to explain some of the primary causes behind this paradigm change in the literary arena of Indian literature in one of his important articles entitled "Dalit Literature: Form and

Purpose. He wrote “Rejection and revolt in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective... The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness.”

Dalit writers are worried about the Dalits terrible situation. They encourage fellow Dalits to be vigilant and fight for their rights, which the so-called upper castes deny them. Dalit autobiographies are sources of Dalit social reality in contemporary India as memories. These authors depicted the plight of the poor and provided dramatic descriptions of poverty and survival in general. They do, however, receive some benefits as a result of the Reservation Policy, but they are unable to participate in welfare programmes. This literature also addresses these social and legal inequities.

Dalit writers emphasise the relevance of living situations and meticulously document what they perceive "as it existed" in each case. The authors depict life as it is, leaving nothing "ugly or painful" out and idealising nothing. The most important job of the writer, according to realists, is to explain what is experienced through the senses as accurately as possible. The upper castes in India are being chastised for cruelly destroying the lives of Dalits and Tribes. The desire of authors to document every occurrence, as well as the methods by which they can do so, has long been a source of debate. Dalits now see their writing as a tool for influencing social and political change.

Every human behaviour phenomenon occurs in the author's social life. In their creative work, Dalit authors respond to the societal feature or people's conduct that they observe. There is no imaginary subject in Dalit writing, and the authors love and romance are not glorified instead they portray the matter of basic human rights

Discrimination based on caste and gender was common in the past. Temples, tea stores, schools, and upper caste villages were all closed to Dalits. Despite their deprivation and exploitation, Dalits try to assert their educational and employment rights. However, they frequently face significant opposition from the upper caste, leading to inhumane assaults, torture, rapes, massacres, and other sorts of horrors. Despite the fact that the Dalits' socioeconomic situation is improving, incidences of humiliation and discrimination against them have been documented in the literature. The caste hatred that runs through the stories is devastating. They had a significant impact on the authors' life. It entails barring or restricting members of one group from opportunities that are available to members of other groups. All of these authors emphasised the importance of education and self-reliance. "Caste is not a physical monster," writes Shemaiah (2011) in his article "Dialectics of Caste Culture: A Social Crisis in Indian Nation." It's more of a psychological phenomenon than anything else. Every Indian is imbued with a sense of destiny and caste consciousness."

The history of human civilization, culture, and progress shows that the powerful class has remained at the centre of the planet, while the rest of mankind has remained on the perimeter. The powered class had reaped the benefits of the peripheral class's physical and mental toil, and had always strived to stay in the centre for as long as possible. The powered class had complete control of all resources and sources at the centre. As a result, without contemplating egalitarian philosophy based on religion or reason, people of this class prioritised their own

riches over the welfare of others. As a result, the poor and marginalised mankind went forgotten. They remained little more than instruments in the hands of the powerful.

India has always been a bilingual, multicultural, and multifaith country. Previously, teaching by saints from the higher castes and Dalit castes was a vital influence in overcoming all difficulties. Many Dalit men and women have converted to Christianity or Buddhism as a result of the Hindu religion's harsh and cruel caste-based persecution. Those who have changed religions risk discrimination in their new faith as well. Despite their poverty, many Dalits have been given opportunities to obtain a good education and employment. Some Dalit women, for example, worked as nurses in Christian missionary hospitals and clinics.

During their reign, the British government provided Dalit communities with fundamental benefits such as education, work, and franchise. In addition to political identity, Dalit discourses in national and international venues stress caste-based issues. The writers and experts were called out to discuss and debate the concerns of social prejudice. In numerous languages, Dalit literature has produced new kinds of intellectual expression. It raises social and political awareness and keeps track of the Dalits' well-being.

Dalit caste organisations such as Maharashtra's "Dalit Panthers of India," Andhra Pradesh's "Dalit Mahasabha," Karnataka's "Dalit Sangharsha Samiti," and Tamil Nadu's "Arundhatiyar" developed in response to mainstream abuses. They seek equal chances and reservations for all. The majority of the campaigners are also excellent writers.

Dalits have been extensively researched as political participants in their fight against caste prejudice in all forms. Dalit movements have progressively entered and engaged with political institutions in the last few decades, forming parties, fighting elections, and holding officials accountable. While Dalit parties are becoming more prominent in Indian politics, the Dalit fight goes much beyond official interest mediation processes. Dalit movements have organised outside of institutions to oppose caste's everyday procedures and practises, both directly and symbolically. Furthermore, Dalits have had to discover new and more nuanced ways to challenge the social order, with the erecting of Ambedkar monuments and the construction of colossal buildings that reflect a "Dalit architectural style" being key examples. Campaigns with a cultural focus and emphasis run alongside these direct issues. Dalit literature is growing right now, and translations of regional literatures are making this work more widely available. All of these initiatives contributed to a more positive attitude toward social equality in India.

## **Conclusion**

Aryan or Hindu texts include the earliest accounts of Indian culture. Varnashrama Dharma, a labour-based caste system in India that ultimately resulted in racial prejudices, was the foundation of early Indian society. The Brahmins were at the top of the social ladder, and the Shudras were destined to serve the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. They remain society's "untouchables." In the Indian constitution, they are classified as Scheduled Castes. Mahatma Gandhi's and Dr. Ambedkar's efforts improved their social standing. They also fostered Dalit education, which eventually led to new writing. These people, known as Dalits in Indian civilization, have a long history of being oppressed by the upper castes. From millennia, they have been a marginalised, oppressed, and subaltern group.

Marginalization is a worldwide problem that is a major source of worry for both national and international populations. Its extensive prevalence is the result of various interconnected variables in socioeconomic development that are becoming increasingly important in the globalisation period. Classism exists everywhere in the world. African-American literature

resembles Dalit literature from India in various ways. The motivation of renowned Dalit leaders sparked a suppressed class struggle. It gave Dalit literature a fresh lease on life. The womb of Dalits' pain has given birth to rejection and struggle in Dalit literature. It is about those who are oppressed by the Indian caste system. It is a significant and unique aspect of Indian literature.

The primary goal of Dalit literature is “authenticity of experience, not beauty of craft. The most important characteristic is that Dalit literature reflects Dalit consciousness. It is a belief in defiance of the caste system, with the human being as its focal point” (Kapur 64-65). This consciousness is inspired by Ambedkarite thinking. Dalit literature has been accused of being propagandist at times. This literature is said to be lacking in creative finesse. It has also been claimed “that their writing reflects the fervour of a movement and lacks neutrality and objectivity. Today, Dalit literature encompasses not only writings about oppressed people in India, but also other groups around the world” (Kapur 66) who are marginalised by the privileged classes.

These Dalit authors used the influence of Western literature, writers, and politicians to document their personal life tales in order to raise “awareness among fellow Dalits. They are creating possibilities for younger generations to do further research on Dalit literature. They wrote their soul-crushing survival stories alongside those of American slaves” (Kapur 68). They recorded hardships "as is" - the truth. In their writing, the caste system is described as "mimics." Dalits, the caste victims, come from social mistreatments, but they are often underestimated and denied access to socialisation. The bereft "self" sees their autobiographies as "agents" for good change in the lives of modern Indian Dalits across boundaries.

Dalit culture in the twenty-first century includes empowerment via education, followed by a struggle for human identity and dignity. Culture is a social phenomenon that changes over time. Previously, Dalits were the silent victims. After completing their schooling and settling into their new lives, they raise their voices against injustice in order to claim their human identity. Their fight isn't about inciting violence or anarchy; it's about being accepted as human beings with human dignity in a democratic India. Dalit literature, particularly autobiographies and then self-stories, centred on the role of the Dalit community. Due to powerful Dalit activities and literature, the Indian constitution was altered to ensure the safety and social equality of this minority. Reservation rules in education and employment were developed under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. Others from other castes stepped forward to accept them in all fields, including politics. The study of Dalits and their writings has become a well-established subject of study within South Asian Studies, with numerous notable publications emerging from a variety of disciplines. The Dalit journey from search for identity to social equality is still ongoing, although good indicators and impacts can be seen all over India.

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