



Dalit Trauma by Systemic Poverty and Hunger

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Abstract

Dalit trauma, collective and individual, spawn from centuries of casteist oppression and suppression. This intergenerational trauma is ingrained into their psyche and gone deep in their being. Being excluded and dispossessed, they are denied of their primal needs which has triggered in them a constant sense of anxiety and insecurity. While the upper castes are in the pursuit of the fulfilment of the higher functions of life, they are on the lookout for the next meal. The system has made it almost impossible for them to fend off the spectre of poverty with a decent means of life. There are boundaries drawn around them and restrictions imposed upon them that keep them always in their prearranged predicament and block all prospects of development. “Untouchability,” Ambedkar says, “is the mother of all our poverty and lowliness” (Dangle 231). They are forced to engage in menial and so-called polluting jobs like cleaning sewages, scavenging and removing carcasses to procure the provisions of life. Attacked by claws of penury, they have no other way than to depend on leftovers and sometimes feed even on dead animals to keep themselves alive which, in turn, makes them all the more detestable and despicable. This article attempts to accentuate how the system has made their life miserable by already closing the doors to success and prosperity by placing them outside the system and branding them untouchables. Their autobiographies are replete with the portrayals of poverty and scenes of hunger.

Key Words: exclusion, untouchability, poverty, hunger, left-over,

Poverty is a recurrent theme in Dalit writings especially in their autobiographies. Nagaraj remarks, “A Dalit story without poverty and caste humiliation would be false” (111). They consume much space in autobiographies such as Sarankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* and P.I. Sonkamble’s *Athawaniche Pakshi* and even in others it is quite ubiquitous. “Poverty shadows and blights Dalit life and it is almost akin to a terminal disease that



exerts a paralysing effect on their already downtrodden existence” (Patel 323). As most Dalits have no regular and reliable income, hunger is a frequent visitor to their hamlets. The system demands that the Untouchables be kept poor forever so that they will be forced to do all menial works for mere leftovers. According to Gautama Dharma Sutra, the Untouchables are entitled to get the leftovers for serving the dominant castes (Müller 230). Valmiki, a Hindi Dalit writer and activist, named his autobiography *Joothan*, meaning leftover around which, as he recounts, his childhood life revolved.

Limbale, a prominent Dalit critic and intellectual, remembers that the one thing that controlled his life from the time he was a child was hunger. He knew that a man was no bigger than his own hunger and that there was no escape from it. He believes that a man starts selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief not by choice but driven by hunger. “The stomach makes you clean shit; it even makes you eat shit” (8). The depiction of Santamai, his grandma collecting the undigested jowar grains from dung shows the plight of these hapless citizens of India. “During the harvest when cattle grazed in the fields, they passed undigested grains of jowar in their dung. The grains were yellow and swollen. Santamai picked up such lumps of dung and on the way home washed the dung in the river water, collecting only the clean grains” (10). He recalls with much anguish an occasion when a fruit vendor hit Vani, his sister, with his chappal in the crowded market. “Vani wriggled and cried on the street. She had stolen just a banana but the fruit vendor was wild with anger . . . My eyes flowed like a leaking roof” (21). He writes: “Sometimes hunger gnawed at my intestines so much that I went in search of offerings made to evils spirits” (41).

When hunger is impinging their guts, for a piece of bread, they would do any job unmindful of its nature. Prahlad, the orphaned boy in P. I. Sonkamble’s *Athawaniche Pakshi* relates an incident of throwing away a dead dog: “Somehow, I controlled my mind and held the tail of the dead dog. As it was completely decomposed, that part of the tail gave way and came to my hand. Though it had a stinking smell, I continue with my job as I had a craving for a small piece of bread which I hoped to get after finishing it” (87). “It is doubtful whether anywhere in literature we can come across an episode such as the one described in *Athawaniche Pakshi* where



Prahlad, the narrator-author decides to snatch away a piece of flesh from the mouth of a ferocious dog. The boy throws stones at the dog and the dog tore off a piece of flesh from his leg” (Shirwadhar 175).

Luxman Gaikwad, the author of *The Branded*, narrates the plight of his stigmatised criminal tribe the *Uchalyas*: They had traditionally been wandering in forests where they used to take whatever they needed without waiting for anybody’s permission, for they had always believed that it was their right to do so. When they were driven out of their forests, they were bewildered as how to extricate themselves from the clutches of hunger. They were engaged in odd jobs that were seasonally available. Gaikwad laments, “But so branded and distrusted was our community socially that no one offered work to the people of our tribe” (10). He grieves, “Even if someone desired to do honest work, nobody would employ him” (62). “We are forced to take to thieving because we are denied work. Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life?” (63) He likens the plight of the starving *Uchalyas* to that of a famished animal:

If a domesticated animal, tied to a peg, is not given its usual feed, its ration of grass, it growls, grumbles and cries out. Then at night, when it can stand the gnawing hunger no more, it pulls and tugs at the rope tied to the peg till the rope snaps. It then runs, falls on and devours whatever crop it can eat in whosoever’s farm it may be standing in. When satiated fully, it returns to its place. The farmer, whose crop has been so eaten and destroyed, tracks down the animal by its foot-marks and locks it in a pond. It is released only when due fine is paid. (63)

Uchalyas do not feel guilty about stealing as they believe that it is their fundamental right to satiate their hunger through some means or the other which may not always appear upright in the eyes of the public. It is hunger that drives them to fields and markets where both men and women, the young and the old indulge in stealing. When people go hungry for days together, society cannot expect high standards of morality from them unless they are fed first. They resort to stealing and only when the proceeds from the booty are spent on groceries and other basic



needs, do they think of the next theft. He remarks that no *Uchalya*, however smart a thief he was, ever built a bungalow or had a bank balance or enjoyed modern facilities.

Gaikwad questions the hypocritical attitude of the society: “Black marketeers become leaders whereas those who are driven to steal by hunger are considered criminals” (177). Eugene O’Neill ridicules such state of affairs in *Emperor Jones* where Jones, the self-appointed bogus emperor, boasts, “Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks” (5).

Luxman Mane too, in *Upara*, questions the logic of branding people as criminals because they steal some food to keep themselves alive or gather a few canes from the wayside to make some baskets which is again to prevent them from dying of starvation. It is not for making wealth or living in luxury but just to keep themselves alive and ward off the ghost of hunger. Usually, the nomads steal food or some raw materials for their work like canes. As was their custom, they take from nature what they need. Mane writes about his mother, “While returning home, she would slyly cut down a few canes from the fences belonging to the peasants. Had she been caught red-handed cutting down the canes, she would be cursed and abused . . . and even mercilessly beaten up by the peasants. Even father would be beaten up in such a situation” (60-61).

Mane recalls the days when he and his sister would starve in the hut as there was nothing to eat. When the monsoon arrived, his father would say that death had arrived. His mother was hardly seen eating for as many as four days at a stretch (68). “After marriage feasts,” Mane recalls, “there would be a pile of plates made of jackfruit tree leaves with the leftovers. We would rush and pounce upon them. Whatever eatable came to our hand, we would grab it and put it in a piece of cloth. We had to finish our job before these plates were licked clean by the street dogs” (94). He asked himself: “In this world, why are certain people poor? Why does God keep them that way? . . . I never got answers to these questions. But, even if I got them, I was not able to convince myself of their validity” (34).



In Gunasekharan's, the Tamil Dalit writer, *The Scar* there are numerous scenes which depict the poverty of the Dalits. Good food had been always a distant dream for the family and they often consumed just tamarind rice and most of the time remained half-filled or hungry. He recalls, "Most mornings we would only have soaked tamarind seeds for breakfast. The skin of the roasted seeds would be peeled off and the white kernel would then be soaked. "If we had idlis or dosais, it ought to be either Deepavali or Christmas" (10). One cannot call this a proper meal but an assortment of odd things used to ward off hunger. He says, "We would cook the greens that grew in the wild. Often, we would pick the pumpkin leaves, clean and cook them; this would be served with our morning kanji" (42). He recalls, "Due to poverty, our sisters Kalavathi, Malathi and Jothi did not have the ear-piercing ceremony . . . I feel sad when I think of how my sisters did not have a decent function for it like the others . . . We had always lived in a rented house. Very many times we had to shift because we could not pay the rent" (10-11).

Poverty shadowed Gunasekaran's younger days. He states, "I realise that poverty and youth have run like parallel rail tracks in my life" (75). He laments, "For all my troubles, poverty had been the fundamental reason. I had to struggle against poverty to get educated. Even today many young men who came from Dalit families are like me, struggling to escape the clutches of poverty" (77). He writes,

During the third-year final exam, I was not in a position to stay in a hostel to study for the exam. Mother made tamarind rice for me that was supposed to tide over for four or five days . . . On the third day the rice got spoilt. Since there was no other go, I threw away the part that had fungus and ate the rest. The last paper was on the fourth day. I started purging and bleeding . . . I wore a vetti over my underpants and then wore my trousers on top of it. I wrote the exams even as I was purging . . . If I had not written the exam and passed, my life would have taken a different turn. (76-77)

Sidhalingaiah's "*Ooru Keri* narrates the story, with a light tone and humour, of an active student in Bangalore slum who has migrated from a village due to poverty" (Srinivas, 15). Sidhalingaiah recalls, "People were at work on either side of the tank. Someone gave out a yelp



and, in a flash, women, men and children started running at the speed of arrows towards the Brahman house . . . Dalits sat in a row a little distance from the front yard. People from Ainoru's house were giving away leftover and chitranna" (3). His sense of shame seems dead as he relates with a sense of detachment the generous act of an upper caste man.

The owner of the mango tree land was generous. When Appa, Avva and I went to town and stood in front of his house, he gave us the chitranna and *poori* leftover from the previous night. I had never tasted these delicacies before . . . A strange gratitude overwhelmed us. Occasionally, Ainoru also gave me some old, tattered shirts and pants that his son had discarded. (3)

Poverty and the resultant hunger, it is generally believed, rise in the aftermath of natural calamities or wars which may lead to famines and disasters. The scarcity in production and unjust allocation of resources also could pave way for deficit in public distribution system and discrepancy in food supplies. Nature is, in fact, an inherited barn of resources for all humans and it has plenty for everyone but some have taken possession of it and are reluctant to share it with others (Marayoor13-24). "Most of the Dalits do not own any farm lands which makes them work on the lands of the upper castes as labourers" (Patel 323). When a famine or drought strikes, it is mostly the backward classes that fall prey to its blows as they have no alternate means or stored up resources. They usually survive on their daily jobs and wages and they go hungry when they are jobless and wage-less.

Poverty, said Mahatma Gandhi, is the worst form of violence especially when it is thrust upon people. Nagaraj writes,

The single most important contemplation of our times concerns poverty. That is why this is an age of poverty . . . Age of poverty and age of the poor differ in many ways. This age has revered, through numerous political ideologies, the rebellious and revolutionary nature of the poor. Socialism and communism are perhaps names given to the aspirations of the poor. But the more this age contemplated the poor, the more it dwarfed them. The more the belly



was made the centre of human life, the more the other dimensions of the poor shrank. (109)

It is not the metaphorical hunger for political freedom, social ascendance or self-realisation they are writing about but actual hunger. The pain resulting from penury, when it is felt, is excruciating. Dalit autobiographers employ it as a stratagem to awaken the consciousness of Dalits and the conscience of people, by and large. Limbale holds that hunger is a psychological state as well and in the life of Mane, both physical and psychological hunger could be seen. They were hungry not just for food alone but for education, equality, liberty and identity as well. Hunger may make its adverse effect on one's intellectual and imaginative development. "The more sharply the poor man is analysed from social, economic and political perspectives, the more circumscribed his life of the imagination becomes", observes Nagaraj (110).

Hunger is now recognised as more a political problem than a social or economic one and it spawns from the neglect of large swathes of population by the callous political profiteers. Ute Schaeffer, *Deutsche Welle* Editor-in-Chief, remarks, "The world community continues to demonstrate apathy and ignorance toward the scandal of hunger even in the 21st century which is a devastating mistake, not just for moral reasons. In the 20th century alone, as many as 80 million people are thought to have died in famines" (1). Hunger is not natural but an invited guest and manmade disaster. Society, in general, has grown insensitive to the pain of the poor and revels in playing out different hunger games. While the privileged amass wealth and the rich roll in luxury, the underprivileged struggles for their daily bread. While the poor are dying of hunger, some iniquitous desperados revel in wasteful merriments.

According to Abraham Maslow, everyone has a hierarchy of needs to fulfil—from physiological needs to self-actualisation. It is only after one is provided with fundamental needs like food and clothing, he/she would think of his/her safety needs, need for belonging, self-esteem and creativity. It follows that when people have not fulfilled their primary physical requirements, they cannot think of the needs of their mind and soul. The social and political systems in India have made it almost impossible for the low castes to rise above the need for



their daily bread. Mostly, their worries are about the next meal. Gunasekaran points out, “As we have our morning kanji, we would be worried about lunch—we may or may not have one” (42).

Dalits are defined by their hunger as if it is part of their identity to remain poor and hungry. Hunger has become a crime now and one should not express it, or else he will be beaten, or branded a thief. He will be bereft of his self-respect and self-esteem. He will have to undergo humiliation and dishonour. He will be exploited physically, sexually and mentally. If one feels hungry, he has to stomach it and succumb to its eventuality. The outer world comes to know that some were hungry only when they die of hunger. And then they make a hue and cry for some time and then remain inert and passive till they see the next prey of hunger. Hunger is not figurative or imaginative but a deeply felt reality by the unfortunate masses (Marayoor 13-24).

Apparently, there is no cure for their predicament in the near future. Schaeffer notes:

They have nobody to represent their interests in multilateral economic institutions. When free trade treaties and global contracts are negotiated, they have no voice, despite the fact that there are very many of them. Although there is more than enough food to feed the world’s growing population, a global economic system that benefits the industrialized nations creates hunger in developing countries . . . those who profit from hunger have largely escaped public scrutiny. It has to be clearly stated that there are interests which benefit from the current hunger-producing system. (1)

As Ambedkar points out, Dalit’s poverty and lowliness stem mainly from their untouchability by which the system has kept them away from the serious and major political, economic and religious functions of the society. Untouchability, though it is deemed a crime now, still shows its ugly face, directly or indirectly, in the different domains of life where they are excluded and rejected due to their inferior status in caste which carries a host of negative implications about their outcaste life. When their caste names are pronounced, they are denied access to decent jobs and the probable prospects of development. As a result, their age-old trauma continues and there is no sign of any definite change in their present predicament in the



immediate future. As long as caste system together with its offshoot untouchability prevails, there is no cure for Dalit trauma or any permanent remedy for the Dalit problem.

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