

## Dalit Theatre: A Theatre of Protest

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### Abstract:

*Since 1965, Dalit literature has emerged and developed as a movement. Rise of Dalit theatre is a political process, at least the beginning has taken place with a political bearing. The movement in literature is a fallout of the political happenings under the leadership of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. It helped to define who is 'oppressed'. Although the poetry and autobiography seem to be the most sought after forms, the potential of theatre seems to have been realized by the Dalit writers in the recent times.*

*As G.P.Deshpande observes, with reference to the social life in Maharashtra, it is essential to locate the status of caste and class. To place the international concept of 'Class' in the growing struggle is important.<sup>2 1</sup> Indian society has always been a divided society. The literary tradition predominantly cultivated by Brahmins and upper castes has resulted in limited expression, vocabulary, emotions etc. Hence we see a revolt against these established norms in Dalit literature.*

*Dalit Theatre does not talk of a past glory /history but relates it to the present and looks for creating a future. Creating social awareness has been a prominent motive of the Dalit writing. It has become an inseparable part of history of Marathi Theatre. All the dramatists associated with Dalit theatre believe in a sense of social commitment.*

*However, against the background of the atrocities faced by the Dalits for generations and even today, Dalit plays certainly seem to perform an important function of enlightening the Dalits and awaken the spirit of rebellion among them. It can be called as the theatre of the 'proletariat' in the truest sense of the term. Hence its significance as 'a social theatre' is to be acknowledged.*

**Key words:** Oppressed, Revolt, Class, Spirit of Rebellion, Social Theatre

Since 1965, Dalit literature has emerged and developed as a movement. Rise of Dalit theatre is a political process, at least the beginning has taken place with a political bearing. The movement in literature is a fallout of the political happenings under the leadership of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. It helped to define who is 'oppressed'. Since the times of Jyotiba Phule, there has been an attempt to define the oppressed and then unify them. The Dalit Literary Movement has made it a meaningful exercise to look at literature as a movement. In Dalit theatre, a sense of commitment is quite vocal. Although the poetry and autobiography seem to be the most sought after forms, the potential of theatre seems to have been realized by the Dalit writers in the recent times.

Considering the fact that Dalit literature is a literature of revolution, historically, the saint poetry could be called the first voice of revolution. The saint poetry which was a manifestation of Bhakti movement was fighting against Brahminism.<sup>1</sup> Saint Eknath challenged the dominance of Sanskrit by putting the case of Prakrit; also he contributed to the folk-tradition like *Gondhal*, *Bharud* etc. Tukaram challenged monopoly of Brahmins to seek knowledge.

The word 'Dalit' itself means one who is exploited, deprived of the privileges. Influenced by the philosophy of Buddha and Mahatma Phule and mainly inspired by the teachings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalit theatre has emerged as an expression of the sufferings of the community suppressed for centuries. It was a theatre of revolt to begin with.

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by Brahmins and upper castes has resulted in limited expression, vocabulary, emotions etc. Hence we see a revolt against these established norms in Dalit literature. At this point a mention is deserved for the literature written by non-Dalits about the neglected segments of society in the past, by writers like S.M.Mate.<sup>3</sup>

Dalit Theatre does not talk of a past glory /history but relates it to the present and looks for creating a future. Creating social awareness has been a prominent motive of the Dalit writing. It has become an inseparable part of history of Marathi Theatre. All the dramatists associated with Dalit theatre believe in a sense of social commitment.

Dalit Theatre is the theatre that uses Dr. Ambedkar's teachings as its foundation. The socio-historical background related to the rise of Dalit theatre included the mass-conversion with the inspiration of Dr. Ambedkar and the post-independence constitutional provisions.<sup>4</sup> There have been plays dealing with the issues of the exploited sectors like the *devdasis*, the problem of the bonded laborers etc. However the discussion of Dalit theatre in the context of the present thesis would confine to the theatre by those writers whose works are based on the teachings and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. It was realized that the language of theatre could be the best medium to reach out to the literate as well as the illiterate section of the society. Hence it would be the most appropriate medium to articulate the feeling of suffering of the Dalits. If we interpret Dalit literature as a voice against oppression, and so also Dalit theatre, it can be traced back to the pre-independence times. For example, the instances of Dalit theatre could be given from the plays written in 1932- *Sanatan Dharmacha Panchrangi Tamasha* by Kisan Faguji, the *Satyashodhak Jalse* by Shahir Dongre and so on.

Modern Dalit theatre has a tradition of folk-art. The form of *Vaga-Natya* arose from this tradition. The theatre dealt with themes in confirmation with the traditional theatre. The *Satya-shodhaki Jalse* were performed to carry on the thoughts

of Mahatma Phule, mainly against caste discrimination and for right to education. This tradition was continued by the *Ambedkari Jalse* for the cause of social enlightenment.

The Dalit theatre inherited all the earlier traditions though mainly performing within proscenium theatre tradition. The overall themes reflected in the Dalit theatre included the theme of injustice to the less privileged castes, unjust incidents in epics like *Shambookvadh*, events in the life of Budhha, themes based on the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar, gender discrimination, call for social justice etc.

Post-independence period saw a surge of play-writing with plays by Gangadhar Pantawne- *Manuskiche Banda*, Datta Bhagat-*Pinjryatil Popat* etc. In the first stage of Dalit theatre, the dramatists have tried to awaken the spirit among the Dalits, without losing the form of the theatre.

In the second phase of the movement of Dalit theatre, Datta Bhagat, Premanand Gajwi, Sanjay Pawar etc. could carry this movement with a wider perspective and hence their plays made an appeal even on the commercial stage. Significant among the Dalit writers are B.B. Shinde, Prabhakar Dupare, Sanjay Pawar, Prakash Tribhuvan, Premanand Gajwi, Datta Bhagat, Avinash Dola, Amar Ramteke, Sanjay Jivane, Texas Gaikwad, Rustam Achalkhamb, Ashok Handore, Ashwaghosh Kamble, Bhimsen Dethe, Shukracharya Gaikwad, Kamalakar Dahat and others.

There are several objections raised to the phenomenon of Dalit theatre. No doubt, Dalit theatre is a necessity of the society and a theatre of commitment. Theatre study as a discipline implies a study of actors, dramatists, producers and audience. Dalit playwright needs to decide who is his audience – Dalit or non-Dalit – and why does he wish to write—to awaken the Dalits or to entertain them? Perhaps the Dalit writers need to write for the Dalits first, write about the struggle and the mental stress, the superstitions in their society. Hence Dalit theatre needs to portray this spirit of revolt. At the same time it needs to keep up with the modern

times, the changing problems including those of the urban Dalits and so on.

Plays like *Jalwa* by Texas Gaikwad are meant only for Dalit audience whereas plays like *Awarta*, *Kaiphayat* by Datta Bhagat and *Devnavri*, *Tanmajori* by Gajwi appealed to the non-Dalit audience as well. Hence while writing the play, it is important to consider the fact that the thought process should be central and it should reach Dalit as well as non-Dalit audience since the Dalit theatre aims at liberation of human beings. Dr. Shreeram Lagoo had contradicted the term 'Dalit' as a category for play-writing. 'Dalitness' cannot be eternal according to him.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Lagoo seems to be missing the crux of the term 'Dalit'. It is no longer a term used for social backwardness but a new phrase associated with resistance, protest and rebellion. Baburao Bagul, the noted short-story writer and critic, defined 'Dalit' as the one who fights against injustice of all kind-economic, social, political and religious.<sup>6</sup> Also, the deconstructionist trend that resists grand narrative rejects the conventional meaning of the term 'Dalit' within the conventional linguistic structure and announces the new meaning propounded by Bagul.

There is another issue often debated— which, in fact, is an old debate--whether the Dalit plays should be written by Dalits only or even the non-Dalits could write them. Datta Bhagat believes that non-Dalit playwrights too can write Dalit plays.<sup>7</sup> Gajwi stated that the word Dalit is no longer a casteist word, it has acquired the sensitivity which aims at the wellbeing of the entire humanity. He endorsed Bhagat's view of plays written by the non-Dalits by illustrating *Kaaran* by Tushar Bhadre, *Zhulwa* (an adaptation of a novel by Uttam Bandu Tupe) by Chetan Datar which have contributed to the Dalit theatre in the sense of exposing the issues. *Suryaasta* by Jaywant Dalwi flops whereas *Zhulwa*, *Lokakatha-78* (by Ratnakar Matkari) make an impact. Thus developing Dalit sensibility has to be given importance according to some critics. However, another view stresses that the true expression of the

problems of Dalits can occur in the theatre if the plays are written by the Dalits themselves.

Datta Bhagat, a conscious writer and critic himself, has called Mahatma Phule's *Tritiya Ratna* as the first play not only in Dalit Theatre, but in the entire history of Marathi drama. His argument has been that of the presence of the element of modernity in the play. It is debatable whether it can be called the first Marathi play.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, *Tritiya Ratna* can be held as a significant piece of work which challenged the established religion.

Bhagat has tried to present in his plays the ideological politics which is rare in the entire Marathi theatre scene. For example his plays *Kheliya* and *Wata-Palwata* have a multilayered social and cultural level. Especially in *Wata-Palwata* Datta Bhagat has tried to portray the deterioration of the Ambedkar's movement after his death in 1956. Bhagat shows this through the tensions between three generations. The first generation represented by Kaka, an illiterate person awed by the personality of Dr. Ambedkar and ready to face hardships. The post-independence period witnessed various facilities offered to the Dalit community. As a result, this generation started thinking on several levels. However, through the character of Prof. Satish Godghate, Bhagat shows that this has resulted in making the Dalit movement defunct. Third generation is frustrated with the selfish political parties which have taken advantage of the Dalit community. Hence this generation tries to revolt against the country, as represented through Arjun's character. Here Bhagat makes an important point; the Ambedkar movement getting a setback due to the transitions of times. Bhagat also touches upon issues like politics affecting the field of education, the issue of inter caste marriages, the attitudes of the so called higher castes of looking at the Dalits especially in the rural areas and the hypocrites like Dasrao Guruji who are fake freedom fighters. Bhagat also points out the second generation of Dalits trapped in the Hindu superstitions; as is evident through the belief in the re-birth

expressed by Satish.

Premanand Gajwi is a writer making a difference to the Marathi Theatre. He proclaims that he is more concerned about the problems around him than merely concentrating on the aesthetic aspect. He also considers it his duty to make people aware of the existing social problems. (Gokhale, 337)<sup>9</sup> All his plays seem to manifest this commitment. He mentioned *Wata Palwata* and *Thamba Ramrajya Yet Aahe* as remarkable plays of the time.

His *Ghotbhar Paani*, a one-act play presented in 1977 created a record by over five hundred performances. The one-act play poignantly showed the struggle for getting a sip of water, a basic necessity of human beings by the Dalit community in villages. The play was written on the background of the movement by Baba Adhav called *Ek Gav ek Panavtha*, the movement by Jayprakash Narayan proclaiming total revolution, the scattered Dalit leadership etc. It received the award by Maharashtra State in 1980/81. Gajwi's chairing Dalit Rangabhoomi conference, his middle class affiliations, his plays like *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samartha*, confused both—his Dalit brothers as well as the non-Dalits. In addition to this, eyebrows were raised when he wrote *Kirwant*, about a sub-sect of Brahmins with almost an outcaste status.

The focus in his plays is the relations between people and the outside world, as he himself has stated. Hence one sees the themes in his plays ranging from the *Kirwant* Brahmins, *Devnavri* based on Devdasi custom, *Tanmajori* about the bonded labour, *Gandhi Ani Ambedkar* about the two stalwart leaders and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samartha* exposing the hollowness of the so-called spiritual sect etc.

Gajwi states:

I had never thought of myself as a Dalit writer. I don't belong to the group of playwrights who see themselves as contributing to the Dalit movement by writing about the scheduled castes. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said society must be in a constant state of progression.” (Gajwi, 5) <sup>10</sup>

However the play cannot be called a Dalit play since it would fall outside the category of 'Dalit' considered for the present discussion. Sanjay Pawar's *Kon Mhantoy Takka* portrays the problems of the tribal community- the Nomadic tribes which were considered outside the *ati-shudra* by the society. This play, again, by Gajwi's definition would be termed a Dalit play since it depicts the oppressed class as is *Kaaran* by Tushar Bhadre based on the lives of *Jogti* and *Jogtin* custom. However these plays are not discussed here since they fall outside the framework chosen.

Gajwi has raised questions about the need to record the present and states that after converting to a new religion there was no need to write about the past lives. According to him, the constant looking back explains, at least partially, the absence of 'modern' plays in Dalit literature.(Gajwi,p.330.)<sup>11</sup>. Gajwi's argument, however, cannot be accepted totally because history of a community and its past often become a source of inspiration to a creative writer. So, if a Dalit writer turns to his past drawing inspiration that would certainly help him as an artist and in doing so, if he turns out to be aggressive, he should not be blamed.

Gajwi's *Gandhi Ani Ambedkar* is no doubt a Dalit play since it deals with Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, the two significant thinkers. A discussion- play dealing with Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar, two statwarts contributed to the creation of India. It takes the uncompromising form of a debate. The progression of history is echoed in the agreement and disagreements of the two leaders. Hence it is a political play too. Instead of creating dramatic events, the play presents before us an ideological conflict. Character of *Vidushak* is created as a link between Gandhi and Ambedkar as well as these two and the masses. While dealing with these two demi-god like figures in the Indian psyche, it was essential to have a detachment while searching for their visions. Many have tried to understand/comprehend the thoughts of Gandhi as well as

Ambedkar. *Vidushak* asks questions regarding this dilemma. While *Vidushak* discusses the problem they have with each other's position it appears that neither is entirely right nor wrong. Ambedkar comments about not having a mother land. He called Gandhiji an illusion. *Vidushak's* questions provoke Gandhi and Ambedkar into revealing themselves and confronting each other on points of ideological difference. No solutions are found to the problems the emergent nation had to face before and after independence. Therefore the play suggests no moral. Perhaps this must be the reason why the audience could not digest it in spite of receiving the critical acclaim. Though far from a conventional mainstream theatre, the play was brought to the mainstream by Lata Narvekar, a producer with a strong sense of social commitment.

B.S.Shinde projects the issue of the renaming of the school, echoing strongly with the once upon a time burning issue of renaming of the university at Aurangabad in *Kalokhachya Garbhat*. He highlights the social problem of the channelising of the young Dalit blood. The play begins with the entry of a *sutradhar*-a narrator who questions the humanity of the audience referring to their silence in spite of the atrocities to the Dalits. The inspiration given by Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar is told in a symbolic manner. There are about twenty characters, Tatyasaheb Sonavane and Satappa Patil being the central characters. The characters from the privileged class are shown manipulating the situation with the money and the political power, while Dalits are depicted as victims. The end of the play vividly portrays the violent act of revenge by *Sidram Sakat* who kills those from the privilege caste responsible for the atrocities on the Dalits. In the end, the *sutradhar's* warning tells us that knowledge alone would liberate the Dalit youth else they would tread the path of violence. The playwright has highlighted the problems of the Dalits – the problem of drinking water, independent constituency, atrocities to the women, the issue of renaming the school and the opposition of the established class. The play highlights the injustice meted out to Dalits; however,

too many scenes and characters have diluted the general impact one expects from the play.

*Thamba Ramrajya Yet Ahe* by Prakash Tribhuvan is written on the background of the renaming Marathwada University and the rise of conflict resulting among the Dalits/non-Dalits. The title itself indicates the folly in the concept of *Ram-rajya*, an ideal society. The playwright tells us with sarcasm that *Ram-rajya* is approaching fast perpetuating social injustice, wherein the Dalits are always at the receiving end. The central character is Ananda, an educated youth inspired with the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar who wishes to fight for the rights of his fellow villagers. The play begins with a scene from *Dashavatar*, with the known tale of the Lanka-burning by Hanuman; what one witnesses is burning the school started for the dalit children. The episodes from *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* are inserted between the scenes of the main story including the humiliation of Karna by Draupadi, Parshuram's massacre of the *Kshatriyas*, the *Waman avatar*, etc. The end of the play shows Ananda losing his life at the hands of the Patil. However there is a note of optimism since the *potraj* decides to educate his son inspired by Ananda's teachings. The portrayal of Ananda, the central character is quite impressive. The use of the folk-theatre and a multi-layered stage have made the play effective. The performance of the play at the Jawaharlal Nehru University at New Delhi received a phenomenal applause by the likes of Peter Brook, Badal Sircar, Habib tanvir and others. Hence *Thamba Ramrajya Yet Ahe* may be considered as one of the most effective plays of the Dalit theatre today.

*Jayakranti* by Prabhakar Dupare keeps on attacking the hypocrisies in the society. Texas Gaikwad had written *Amhi Deshache Marekari* in which there is an indirect criticism on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha and its ideology. The play lacks a subtle tone else would have delivered the message in a more effective manner.

Thus, Dalit theatre today, with all its merits and drawbacks, constitutes a major trend in contemporary Indian

political theatre.

### **Use of Street Theatre by the Dalit Theatre Movement:**

Street theatre is totally Indian in its nature and is a weapon for many to reach out to public without any technical means. Dalit theatre has, right since its inception, been a theatre of social commitment. It has kept its goals and means before the society, also drawing attention of the establishment. Through the genre of street theatre attempts are made to portray the Dalit life including the stories of their pain and their problems and the atrocities inflicted by the established class and their exploitation. Along with this, the revolt against traditions, superstitions and customs get manifested. There is a search of history, at the same time awareness of newly awakened self-identity. In the *Natyakosh* edited by V.B.Deshpande, there is a mention of Prabhakar Dupare, a Dalit playwright, who has published a collection of street plays. This may be probably the first ever published collection of street plays in Maharashtra. Amar Ramteke and Rustam Achalkhamb have also significantly contributed to this field. Overall, Dalit theatre looks at street theatre as a weapon in the struggle for equality. In the Dalit theatre movement, street theatre gained significance due to the efforts of Kamalakar Dahat who believed in the strength of street theatre in forwarding the cause of the Dalit theatre. Dalit Theatres from Aurangabad, Kranti Theatre from Pune have contributed to the movement as well.

However as of today, Dalit theatre does not seem to have achieved this kind of status barring a few exceptions like the plays written by Datta Bhagat, Gajwi and a few others. One of the reasons of getting the ineffective plays by Dalit writers is stated as the lack of unavailability of a proscenium stage. Plays which have made a mark are precisely those which are rooted in the middle class Marathi tradition of playwriting. The only effort of using a folk form was that of *Jalsas* of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar which were created as an alternative

theatre form, but they were too unrefined to be alternative as models today. So stories told by Dalits may be those of the underprivileged, but the form used is that of the privileged. One needs to evolve a form for the expression of the content; especially is case of theatre which is a performing art. This is observed in a few cases like *Thamba Ram-rajya Yet Ahe* by Prakash Tribhuvan, whose play has been successful from the performative aspect.

Often, Dalit theatre creates the impression of a lone voice of suffering or showing the one-sided portrayal of the problem. Also, the characters are often developed in connection to the circumstances, not as the flesh and blood characters essential for the dramatic impact. Though it is looked at as a weapon in their struggle by the Dalit writers, use of music, instruments like *dholaks* may make their theatre amusing. Most of the Dalit theatre appears to be capturing a mere historical moment. One observes a degree of stagnation in the movement of Dalit theatre since it does not seem to portray the problems of the urban Dalits, the changed lifestyles, for example. There is little sense of contemporaneity and it is the contemporaneity which is an important condition for any work to be called political.

However, against the background of the atrocities faced by the Dalits for generations and even today, Dalit plays like *Kalokhachya Garbhat* certainly seem to perform an important function of enlightening the Dalits and awaken the spirit of rebellion among them. It can be called as the theatre of the 'proletariat' in the truest sense of the term. Hence its significance as 'a social theatre' is to be acknowledged.

### Notes:

1. This was a tradition wherein element of devotion was stressed more than following the rituals in the orthodox religion. Also, emphasis was laid on eliminating caste discrimination.

2. The tradition of materialistic thinking has been developed by Charvaka and Marx as stated by G. P. Deshpande in *Charchak Nibandha*. Mumbai: Lokvangmaya Griha Publication, 1999, p.45.
3. *Upekshitanche Antaranga* portrayed the problems of the neglected sectors of society.
4. Dr. Ambedkar discusses two terms-*Dhamma* and *Dharma*. Though linguistically they mean the same, these terms were used by Ambedkar to differentiate between Vedic and non-vedic religion. His fight was against Brahminism not against Brahmins. Hence he felt closer to teachings of Buddha who was a propagator of voice against Brahminism.
5. In a programme of the playwright B.B.Shinde being awarded the *Mooknayak* award in December 1997, described in an article in *Maharashtra Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1997.
6. Baburao Bagul. *Dalit Sahitya:Ajche Krantividnyan*. Nagpur: Buddhist Publication House, 1981, p.267-286.
7. Datta Bhagat, Speech at Third National Dalit Theatre Meet, Ambejogai narrated in Madhukar Mokashi, *Dalit Rangabhoomi*. Pune: Snehavardhan Publishing House, 2000, p.53.
8. No theatre groups including the Dalit groups have tried to stage the play. In a way, the credit of staging it goes to the *Pratyay* group of Kolhapur while staging the play '*Satyashodhak*' by G.P.Deshpande.
9. Shanta Gokhale. 2001. *Playwright at the Centre....* Calcutta: Seagull, p.337.
10. Gajwi in an interview by Ravindra Khot, *Mumbai Sakaal*, February 1988, p. 5.
11. Told to Shanta Gokhale, p.330.