

Full Length Research Paper

Indian mindscape: Caste, class hegemony with reference to Kannada short story 'Classmate'

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Caste identity is not just a question of consciousness; it is a matter of structure, of power. Can the category Dalit merely represent a perspective? Can it just be a standpoint? And what are the tools/ideas/texts that would enable a Dalit perspective? Can a Dalit perspective be divorced from the experience of being termed an untouchable? Untouchability is not a singular experience; what holds Dalits together is the structural fact that they have all been termed untouchable and subjected to exclusions of varying degrees, and their rejection of that identity. Dalit, thus, is related to identity, and at the same time is anti-identity. Untouchability and feudalism exist in India even today in the small villages of South India. A Dalit has no right to voice out in resistance against oppression of the high caste and class feudal lords- this problem is presented through a heart-touching and thrilling story 'Classmate' written originally as 'Sahapathi' by P. Lankesh. The writer is not only depicting the plight of a Dalit but also presents the shame and guilt of the doer of the injustice and exploitation which he inflicts on the poor untouchables under the spell of his position, monopoly and authority. P Lankesh in 'Classmate' attempts to unravel the labyrinths of a decadent feudal order governed by a dehumanizing caste-system. The existential predicament of a Dalit in the trap of caste politics and feudalism is projected by Lankesh. To the usual theme of resistance of the down-troddens, Lankesh brings the subtle dynamics involved in the reality of caste system in India. Instead of bringing in a binary of right and wrong, he gives a holistic view of a social reality that is rooted in the Indian mindscape for centuries.

Key words: Dalit Literature, power, hegemony, mindscape, caste-system, feudalism, identity, oppression, dalit identity, contemporary kannada literature, subjugation, dalit perspective.

INTRODUCTION

"If there is to be a mission, it must be to the Untouchables and if the Untouchables can be cured, untouchability will vanish." (B.R. Ambedkar)

Caste system in India shapes the social, economic and political life of all communities in India. Caste identity is

not just a question of consciousness; it is a matter of structure, of power. Can the category Dalit merely represent a perspective? Can it just be a standpoint? And what are the tools/ideas/texts that would enable a Dalit perspective? Can a Dalit perspective be divorced from the experience of being termed an untouchable?

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Untouchability is not a singular experience; what holds Dalits together is the structural fact that they have all been termed untouchable and subjected to exclusions of varying degrees, and their rejection of that identity. Dalit, thus, is related to identity, and at the same time is anti-identity. Frantz Fanon comments on the same identity of the body and the world:

Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty...A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world-such seems to be the schema...It creates a real dialectic between my body and the world... (Black Skin White Masks 1967)

The word 'Dalit' was first experimented in Maharashtra to emulate the movement heralded in the United States of America for emancipation of Blacks as "Black Panthers". On similar planes, Dalit panthers got active in Maharashtra in late 1960s which finally paved way for Dalit literature in Marathi. It was the time when many Telugu poems were written and the poets used to call themselves Digambara writers. The regional formation of Dalit Panthers heralded a new path for empowering the lower castes. It created many waves of opposition and protest. For example, in Karnataka, when one of the Dalit ministers categorized the upper caste Kannada literature as nothing more than 'bhoosa'- cattle feed, it created violent protests which was retaliated by the young Dalits in a mood of movement. Thus, Dalit Panthers had not only an anti-caste agenda, but also an anti-class agenda. The semi-feudalism system exploited the Dalits. The Dalit movement had emerged in response to the numerous injustices suffered, mostly in silence, by Dalits for centuries. The term 'Dalit' represents their struggle for humanity. They were highly burdened with patronizing names imposed on them by upper castes like 'Pariah', 'Untouchable', and Eren Gandhi's term 'harijan'. Its impact was negative disguising the subordination of Dalits. The situation called for a new structure of equity and social justice.

Dalit literature in Kannada

If we look deeply into Kannada and Karnataka, Kannada lore was already having its quota of rebels but now the time came to ripe up all those thoughts and to express the injustice they suffered within. In 1975, a 'Dalit youth writers association' was formed and in March 1979, Kannada Sahitya Parishad held its annual conference and the Dalit writers demanded a separate session for discussing Dalit literature which was out-rightly denied by the organizers. Later on Dalit and Sudra writers joined their hands to form 'Bandaya Literary Movement' meaning protest literature. Now the identity of Dalit is

unique in Kannada. It is in this context the paper tries to draw the experience of Dalit communities of Karnataka to show their subjugation and their struggle against the practice of untouchability that mobilized itself into a massive movement of Dalits that advocated a cultural revolution. From a subjugated position of 'outcastes' in the caste hierarchy, the contemporary Dalits have deployed various mobility strategies to overcome caste inequality and oppression to achieve social, economic mobility and political power. It is important to take note of the literary environment of the time when this story was written. There were two major literary movements in Kannada in the last five decades: the Navya or the modernist movement of the sixties and the Dalit movement of the seventies. Most writers in this period were students of literature, actively engaged in the social and political situations of their times. The Navya writers indeed made a significant contribution to Kannada literature. The Navya phase generated tremendous intellectual energy by questioning long-held tradition, culture, community life and individual choices.

After this, a phase followed recognized as Bandy phase- meaning 'protest'. Bandy literature is protest literature being the uprising phase of the seventies which gave literature a social consciousness. However, by the early nineties, the enthusiasm of the Navya and Bandy movements was out. The cultural and political world voiced out against social injustice but the literary output did not match its conviction. Except for Devanuru Mahadeva, the creative writing of this period lost its spark. It was only in the writings of writers like Chandrashekhar Kambar, U.R. Ananthamurthy, P. Lankesh, Girish Karnad, Srinivas Vaidya who have worked on the questions of ecological consciousness, questions concerning the survival of Kannada language, new faces of communalism, rampant corruption, social justice, etc. All these echoes, resonances and voices are adequately represented in P. Lankesh's 'Classmate'. P. Lankesh appa, popularly known as P Lankesh, is one of the famous personalities that Kannadigas claim as their own. He was a novelist, academician and film director and his strongest claim to fame was the Director of the tabloid, Lankesh Partike. He was born on March 8, 1935. Being a native of Konagahalli, a village in Karnataka's Shimoga district. After receiving his primary and secondary education at Konagahalli and Haranahalli, he moved to Shimoga to complete his education. After receiving his Master's degree at Mysore University, he returned to Shimoga and started his teaching career. A year after moving to Bangalore University as a teacher, he published his first collection of short stories under the title 'Kereya Neeranu kerege Chelli.' He also translated *Oedipus Rex* into Kannada. He won the National Award for Best Direction for movie 'Pallavi' which was an adaptation of his novel *Biruku*. He also starred in the films 'Samskara' and 'Pallavi' in prominent roles.

P Lankesh in 'Classmate' attempts to unravel the

labyrinths of a decadent feudal order governed by a dehumanizing caste-system. The existential predicament of a Dalit in the trap of caste politics and feudalism is projected by Lankesh and he seems to be very modern in his style and technique. Through his writings, The Kannada literary world woke up to the sensation that Dalit writers created through an idiom that was quite unfamiliar to mainstream writers. Issues that tormented the nation tormented this Kannada writer, P. Lankesh as well.

Objective of the study

Untouchability and feudalism exist in India even today in the small villages of South India. A Dalit has no right to voice out in resistance against oppression of the high caste and class feudal lords- this problem is presented through a heart-touching and thrilling story 'Classmate' written originally as 'Sahapathi' by P. Lankesh. The writer is not only depicting the plight of a Dalit but also presents the shame and guilt of the doer of the injustice and exploitation which he inflicts on the poor untouchables under the spell of his position, monopoly and authority. The story is conveyed in first person narration. The narrator of the story is Bhagavan, a learned notable writer who used to be the classmate of Basavegowda, the owner and landlord of four villages- Kirumallige, Manavalli, Taraduru and Murji that he inherited from his forefathers. His order is the ultimate thing but in the very beginning of the story, he is found suffering from a mystic disease of haunted nightmares. The narrator, four decades ago classmate of the landowner is requested by S. Dyamappa, accountant of Basavegowda to have a visit and meet his master. He writes:

"He informed me that you were revered Basavegowda's classmate that you shared the same bench while studying middle school in Ananadapura." (Classmate 43)

On the grounds of humanity, he accepts the request and comes just to get dismayed at the condition of his friend who confesses to him:

"I haven't slept in over twenty days. I just sit up throughout the nights. You know why.... The nightmare.....thousands of dark strangers strip me naked, tie me to a pole, force excreta down my throat, beat me up black and blue....thud...thud. They untie me, push me to the ground and kick me. They even dig my father from his grave and torture him...." (Classmate 50)

Representation of caste-system in India

'Classmate' attempts to uncover yet another dimension of man. It deals with the complex web of caste-class relationships, turbulences of feudal set up, power and

human desire. To the usual theme of resistance of the down-troddens, Lankesh brings the subtle dynamics involved in the reality of caste system in India. Instead of bringing in a binary of right and wrong, he gives a holistic view of a social reality that is rooted in the Indian mindscape for centuries. As per the Gramscian theory, social power operates throughout the cultural realm of society which integrates people into social networks of oppression and subordination. The notion of hegemony' is rooted in Gramsci's (1992) distinction between coercion and consent as alternative mechanisms of social power (p137). Coercion refers to the State's capacity for violence, which it can use against those who refuse to participate in capitalist relations of production. By contrast, hegemonic power works to convince individuals and social classes to subscribe to the social values and norms of an inherently exploitative system. Gramsci gives us an image of society in which the cultural realm is a central location for the exercise of social power. The same hegemonic system we witness in Kirumallige village. S. Dyamappa though being the village accountant follows the instructions of 'revered Basavegowda'. In words of the classmate, Bhagawan, the narrator:

"Though a government employee, he seemed to be a staunch follower of Basavegowda." (Classmate 44)

The narrator on his first meeting with Dyamappa felt: "Dyamappa belonged to Basavegowda's caste and that Basavegowda was quite a fellow." (Classmate 45) Basavegowda inherited four villages, seven hundred houses of Bedas and Kurubas, ten belonging to the upper caste Lingayats and hundred belonging to Harijans. But the irony is that since Basavegowda has come, no policeman, sub-inspector ever arrived in the villages as the whole control was under one thumb of 'revered Basavegowda'. If someone had to give an announcement or speech, it always used to be accompanied by the supervision of Basavegowda. This was the hegemony played in these villages as informed to the narrator who feels:

Through his words it slowly became clear to me that Basavegowda with the four hundred forty families of his caste and the feudal authority he had inherited over generations, was able to keep the four villages firmly under his thumb- an insulated peace and away from the torments of civilization and freedom. (Classmate 46)

It did not take enough time for the narrator to grasp who Basavegowda actually was. He was exactly the same person the narrator had been agitating against through his revolutionary writings.

"In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich." (The

Wretched of the Earth 5)

Within this compartmentalized world, the colonized are subject to a hegemony that is material/economic as well as cultural and psychological. For thirty years of his reign, he did not open any school in any of the villages under his rule but only after getting influenced by the writing of his classmate, at last a school opened and a Holeyat teacher named Shivappa was appointed. Being a liberated thinker, he cooperated and consented the love between a Ligayat girl and a boy from Byada community who had to elope as inter-caste marriage was not allowed. The dispute ended only in a murder. This was the first time that police arrived in the village and arrested four-five people. Community people, the blind followers of Basavegowda, sensed that Shivappa was behind this and he was tortured brutally by Gowda's men because of his sense of freedom:

"They beat up Shivappa, stripped his wife and paraded them through the village while continuing to punch them. No, there was no frenzy or anger. They only humiliated the couple in many ways and threw them inside their home... all the violence and humiliation happened in middle of the night anyway." (Classmate 49)

Even at this, fire of anger did not slow down. Shivappa was kept as a hostage in his own home. Not an outsider was allowed to meet him. On fourth day of this incident also, he was again humiliated and beaten suspecting that he put the fire on the temple. He was solely considered responsible for all misfortunes and loss of mental peace of the whole community. But the mental peace of Basavegowda was lost forever. Under the impact of *Tragedy of Castes* written by the narrator, he realized the plight of caste society. After getting exposed to new horizons of freedom, revolution and equality discussed by the writer in his works, he had this inner guilt of what he did to Shivappa. As he confesses to his classmate:

"Sometimes I wondered as to what would have happened had I not read these books. Yet I read them twice, thrice, many times. The more I read, the more I felt bad...." (Classmate 50)

Guilt beyond diagnosis

In such a pathetic situation of his classmate who was having guilt ridden conscious, narrator wanted to help his friend anyhow. Though knowing that he was the every one in four village, nothing changed in the village in last thirty years and even nothing will change in years to come if situation remains the same. People will go on bearing oppression and subjugation perpetuated by feudal, caste and class hegemony unquestioningly. But we all know that the role of power is dispersive and

identity is not substantiality produced by power and in turn, resistance is not opposed to power, rather consequence of the disjunctive nature of power relations.

"Marriages, festivals, animal sacrifices, car festivals- everything would happen his way, for he was the government...suddenly I heard something fall." (Classmate 51)

Bhagavan, the narrator and the classmate of Basavegowda wanted to soothe his friend. He went to meet Shivappa and found out that he was nowhere connected to the elopement of the boy and the girl but still he had to pay a lot for this. He still had many wounds on his body and his wife was moaning from inside the house. They perhaps could never forget the shame and brutality inflicted on them.

After visualizing the pathetic reason behind his friend's sleepless condition and in order to appease his classmate, He suggested to his friend:

"You should cleanse your body and mind. If you listen to me, some dirt may wash away...."

And he got ready to wash the feet of a Dalit but only in seclusion where no one else could see him. He did the same with his trembling hands, after washing the feet of a Holeyat, Joni, he decorated them with vibhuti, sandal paste, flowers and also sang aarti but his mind was still unable to harmonize with his physical action that was the reason that the next morning, he went out to rape Joni's wife as a reaction of his frustration and anger. He and Dyamappa kept it as a secret from the narrator who felt that perhaps Gowda had some sleep as he seemed to be liberated from the shackles of his pain and guilt ridden conscience but:

In the deep darkness of the human mind, there are a hundred, nay thousands of stories. Not satisfied with what he has eaten, the sex he had and having grown old, a man is entangled and rooted deeply with the establishment he has built, incidents he was part of, his ego, his inferiority complexes...for him revenge, remorse, challenges are inevitable....(Classmate 55)

After this, Gowda seemed to suffer more than previously. This time, narrator convinced him to wash the feet of Shivappa in public whom he humiliated without any reason. People from four villages were announced to be assembled to see his guilt and remorse face to face. Gowda performed the same rituals what he did towards Joni in seclusion. He also embraced Shivappa but he felt so vengeful, remorseful, shameful that he collapsed after his last and final confession to his classmate which he would announce in the public as well:

"Do you know where I and Dyama had been to last night?"

To rape Joni's wife. I am sorry to say, my friend."
(Classmate 57)

CONCLUSION: DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER

Thus, we can say that he was beyond any psychological diagnosis. Even after acknowledging his guilt and maintaining it severely was redoubling his guilt and painful insight. Washing the feet of Dalit even could not redeem such an immoral, autocratic being. Gowda's death was like the death of the God of the village but it was the need of the hour. No doubt, people mourned his death for long but this was only how the centre could be shattered. It always takes time to get things upside down. In the end, we find a totally different picture of Kirumallige village through the letter of Dyamatta:

"A new school has started away in Murji village...Joni's wife eloped with someone. Shortly, Kirumallige village is going to have a police station." (Classmate 58)

To sum up, the root cause for subordination of Dalits is that they do not have proper space as it is always controlled and regulated by high caste/class people. Space is not a passive entity but it is invested with power as all the dwellers of four villages are voiceless and speechless denigrated souls because of the over-control of Gowda and his men. Their each and every activity is controlled and supervised by him. They do not have a school as the feudal lord has no kids. Shivappa cannot voice out without seeking prior permission from Gowda. Joni's wife is raped and made a scapegoat to vent out the vengeance and remorse of a high class/caste man. Environmentalists, cops cannot enter into Kirumallige preventing any chance of freedom and education. Shivappa and his family are kept as hostages in their own home allowing not going out of the inherent power structure of Kirumallige. Power is also related to the physical body of the Dalits. Body is the primordial symbol of human being through which the self appears to the world. It is through which the self-identity is perceived and constructed. Body is the crucial link between the self-identity and the social identity. Power exercised over the Dalits is the power over his body as here in the case of Shivappa, his body is assaulted by brutal beatings and humiliation. The scars and wounds on his body are actually carved on his mind and soul which will last till the end of their lives. If upper castes rob the Dalits of their clothes, they try to rob them of their sense of self-worth and social respectability. They are also deprived of access to material resources, cultural resources like education. In this scenario, the multi-faceted subaltern culture of the land has been unraveled in Dalit literature

by critiquing, debating, eulogizing and romanticizing. The voices are more authentic and will certainly influence the society in this transitional period of building postmodern India which dreams to have a casteless society. Thus, I would like to conclude with the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault who prompts us to analyze how power is exercised. He argues that power is employed and exercised through.

A net-like organization... individuals are (thus) the vehicles of power, not its point of application. Individuals are not passive, inert entities who are simply at the receiving end of power...power is never localized, here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appointed as a commodity or piece of wealth. (Foucault 1980).

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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