

## Mapping the existence, pain and suffering of Dalits: A Study of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Smaskara* and Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*.

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**Abstract:** India is a cosmopolitan country. Here, we have the hierarchical caste and class-system which accomplished authorization in various Hindu texts written by Brahmins. These religious texts intricate the fact that class-system is verdict of God. High class Brahmin formed propaganda by boasting themselves as the proud sons of Brahma who directly came from the mouth of him, the Kshatriyas were born from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from the thighs, and the Shudras from his feet thus, a hierarchical process of exploitation was created. In the reign of upper strata Dalits were forced to live dehumanized life. They were considered to be “untouchables” who had the restrictions from wearing good clothes, ornaments and footwear by the Hindu religious texts and harsh penalizing measures awaited them on violation of the same. Though, with the passage of times various positive measures were taken for the development of these depressed class yet, in some places the practice of the same is still prevalent. However, one should now try to eliminate all the previous mindset to eradicate the oppression and injustice those were in practice.

**Key Words:** Dalit, Oppression, Trauma, Caste, Untouchable,

### Introduction:

Dalit literature talks about the oppressed Indian caste under the Indian caste system, creates a significant and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature emerged in 1960. It started with Marathi language and later on appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages. Various authors discussed about Dalit life through their narratives such as poems, short stories, autobiographies, which stood out due to their harsh portrayal of reality and Dalit political scene. The actual meaning of the word Dalit is oppressed. It is the self chosen political name of castes in SAARC (The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) region which are "untouchable". The economist and social reformer B.R. Ambedkar worked for the betterment of the Dalit thus; the term Dalit got popularized (1891–1956). The famous word, 'Daridra', which is popular in many Indian languages, is derived from 'Dalit'. History says that Dalits were debarred from the four-fold Varna system therefore; they formed the unspecified fifth Varna and were known as Panchama. However, "Scheduled Castes" is the legal term given to those who were formerly called "Untouchable," the term Dalit also encompasses scheduled tribes (ST) and other historically disadvantaged communities who were traditionally excluded from society. In the words of Arjun Dangle:

Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Arjun Dangle)

Though the word Dalit specifically refers to Untouchable but now a day the term is used for Muslims, Women and all those persecuted minorities. Another word is also getting popular with Dalit i.e. Dalitism which refers to both ideology and nationalism of India's maltreated, concealed masses. It is

rooted in Ambedkarism. Dalit philosophy emerges to superimpose the way for a liberal tradition against casteism and untouchability. The new idea of Dalitism refers that only Dalit can bring liberty to Dalit from ruling class. The prime motto of Dalitism is to seek the attention of youth all over India and to make them realize the culture and history of India's submerged class. The ruling class historians and writers have given little attention to the history of Dalit's life and culture. Historical evidences are either destroyed or simply neglected. No interest haven been paid for the development of this strata. They were treated not less than slaves. Truth cannot be suppressed for long. The human mind is the most powerful apparatus in the world. Words are more powerful than weapons. Dalit thinkers and writers taking all the evidence into consideration assail the castle of the Ruling Class that manipulated the Indian history and culture.

Over one-sixth of India's population 170 million people live in a wobbly condition, because of they are ranked as “untouchables” or Dalits—literally meaning “broken” people. They fall at the bottom of India's caste system. From times immemorial Dalits faced discrimination. They don't have access to land and basic resources, forced to work in mortifying conditions. Dominant class time and again even abused these people. Rigveda, the oldest Veda of Aryan supremacy provides the details of Dalit's origin as a clan. Even in Purusa-Sukta myth contains the depiction of the origin of the Indian Caste system. Purusa is described in the Rigveda as, “The man... with thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet... the ruler of immortality” (30),

It is believed by millions that all creatures are part of him; the human beings also are descended from his monstrous body. The Rigveda further enunciates,

“His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the business people and from his feet the servants were born”. (30)

This forms the four Varnas: Brahmins (the learned men who become priests and religious leaders), the Kshatriyas (the strongmen who would be the warriors) the Vaisyas (the men of business acumen who ensure prosperity through commercial transaction), the Shudras (the humble toilers who lacked the governing graces of the other three varnas). The four castes are divided into innumerable sub castes and there is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowest of all. People of this category are considered as impure and disgraceful that they are forced to stand outside the caste and social structure. Finally they are termed ‘Dalits’ in modern linguistic terminology.

From the beginning of 1920s several social, religious and political movements grew up in India against the caste system. Lots of protests are made in support of the human rights of the Dalit community. Because of the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (chairman of the constitutional drafting committee) in 1950, the Constitution of India departed from the norms and traditions of the caste system in favor of Justice, Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity, guaranteeing all citizens basic human rights regardless of caste, creed, gender, or ethnicity. The implementation and enforcement of these principles has, unfortunately, been an awful disappointment. Though “untouchability” was abolished in 1950, yet the practice of “untouchability” the imposition of social disabilities according to birth in certain castes still functions in some parts of rural India. Untouchables are not allowed to use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are often forced to sit in the back of classrooms. In some communities they are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste. Therefore, Dalits continued to live in acute poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education. Dalits are demoted to the most

tedious jobs such as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers, and cobblers. Dalit women face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender whereas Dalit girls are forced to become prostitutes for the patrons of dominant-caste as well as village priests but pathetically, less than 1% of the perpetrators of crimes against Dalit women are ever found guilty. In the words of Dr. Ambedkar:

“My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality. It is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality.”

We have the reference of subjugated Dalit class in the religious books. Chandagya Upanishad compares the Chandala (outcaste) to a dog or a pig. In The Ramayana we have the reference of old lady Sabari (an old lady who offered fruits to Lord Rama) as well as discusses about a Dalit youth, who has presumptuously learned penance and meditation whereas in The Mahabharata we have the reference of Dalit's status in much degraded way. In The Mahabharata character of Ekalavya is depicted as a Dravidian indigenous boy (Dravidian race is considered as low caste by the Aryans) who is forced to learn the art of archery by himself thus, dared to challenge the courageous Arjuna in archery. But proud Guru of Pandava's i.e. Dronacharya could not tolerate such bravery of Dravidian Indigenous boy so as a punishment (Gurudakshina), he asked the thumb of his right hand. That is how Dalits were treated. They were not allowed to learn anything, not allowed to enter in the religious place. Even, if they touch something it was considered as similar as the polluting vigor by the upper caste people. In various parts of India Dalits were called by differently. They are called as dasa, dasya, raksasa, asura, avarna, nisoda, panchama, chandala etc. The British had termed them as “Depressed classes”. After India became a democratic country the entire Dalit communities officially called as “Scheduled Caste”. Pathetically, one must accept that untouchability is prevalent even in modern Indian society, where educational opportunities are decentralized and the practice of untouchability is banned through Article 17 of the Constitution of India. Very often in the name of civilization upper class tried to dominate these people through conversion. Foreigners did not follow the concept of untouchability therefore; a few Dalits willingly converted to Christianity.

Between 1947 and 1949 Constituent Assembly of India came out with the concept of basic rights (Fundamental Rights) of human beings. These rights, defined in Part III of the Constitution, apply irrespective of race, place of birth, religion, caste, creed or gender. Fundamental Rights guarantee civil rights to all Indians, and prevent the state from encroaching on individual liberty. Seven fundamental rights were originally provided by the Constitution – right to equality, right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights, right to property and right to constitutional remedies. However, the right to property was removed from Part III of the Constitution by the 44th Amendment in 1978. The principle of the Fundamental Rights is to protect individual liberty and democratic principles based on equality of all members of society.

“Dr Ambedkar said that the responsibility of the legislature is not just to provide fundamental rights but also and rather more importantly, to safeguard them.” (Wiki 1)

Right to Equality is embodied in Articles 14–16 which basically talks about the principles of equality (Social Equality) before law and non-discrimination. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them. The practice of untouchability has been declared as an offence punishable by law under Article 17, and the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 has been enacted by the Parliament to further this objective. The Right to Freedom is enclosed in Articles 19–22. It guarantees individual's rights those are considered as essential by the Constitution makers. These include the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly without arms, freedom of association, freedom of movement throughout the territory of India, freedom to reside and settle in any part of the country of India and the freedom to practise any profession. All these freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions that may impose on them by the State, listed under Article 19 itself. As the constitution of India has given the rights to equality and free not only to human beings but to other creature at that time being normal human how one can stop the other from enjoying the basic rights. In the name of cast and creed from times immemorial till present era people are facing discrimination. The plight against the lower cast was practiced by the upper class to dominate them. Lower class experienced all sorts of the deprivations. In the movie *Sudra* we have the depiction of dehumanization and exploitation done by upper class. If one is created equal than how one can be treated and degraded like the animals. In the name of Untouchability, Dalits experiences nearly 140 forms of work & descent-based discrimination at the hands of the dominant castes. Here are a few:

- Prohibited from eating with other castes members
- Prohibited from marrying with other castes members
- Separate glasses for Dalits in village tea stalls
- Discriminatory seating arrangements and separate utensils in restaurants
- Segregation in seating and food arrangements in village functions and festivals
- Prohibited from entering into village temples
- Prohibited from wearing sandals or holding umbrellas in front of dominant caste members
- Devadasi system - the ritualized temple prostitution of Dalit women
- Prohibited from entering dominant caste homes
- Prohibited from riding a bicycle inside the village
- Prohibited from using common village path
- Separate burial grounds
- No access to village's common/public properties and resources (wells, ponds, temples, etc.)
- Segregation (separate seating area) of Dalit children in schools
- Prohibited from contesting in elections and exercising their right to vote
- Forced to vote or not to vote for certain candidates during the elections
- Prohibiting from hoisting the national flag during Independence or Republic days
- Sub-standard wages
- Bonded Labor
- Face social boycotts by dominant castes for refusing to perform their “duties”

(National Campaign on Dalit Rights 1)

The practice of Caste and analogous systems of social hierarchy is prevalent in world wide. Such practice is more visible in Asia and Africa. Here, millions are subjugated and given inhuman treatment on the basis of being born into a certain caste or similar social group. Given record said that around 250 – 300 million people across the world suffer from caste, or work and faced discrimination against their

civil, political, religious, socio-economic and cultural rights. National Campaign on Dalit Rights has provided a list of some communities around the world which are still facing discrimination due to caste or some analogous social hierarchical system:

**Bangladesh:** Methor community (traditionally sweepers and manual scavengers)

**Burkina Faso:** Bellah community (traditionally slaves, unpaid manual laborers, to other caste ‘owners’)

**Japan:** Buraku community (at the bottom of the Japanese class system; traditionally viewed as filthy)

**Kenya:** Watta community (traditionally considered low, worthless, and consigned to a life of servitude.

**Mauritania:** Haratin community (these ‘black moors’ are considered slaves to the Bidan, or ‘whitemoors’,

**Nepal:** Dalit community (situation is essentially the same as that of Dalits in India)

**Nigeria:** Osu community (traditionally the Osu people are ‘owned’ by deities and considered as outcaste.

**Pakistan:** Dalit community (like Dalits in India except in Muslim society there is no concept of ritual pollution concepts of privilege and shame used instead)

**Rwanda:** Twa community (at bottom of social hierarchy with no legal protections from discrimination and no representation in positions of power/authority)

**Senegal:** Neeno & Nyamakalaw communities (largely blacksmiths and leatherworkers, they are considered impure and face explicit segregation and exclusion)

**Sri Lanka:** Rodi/Rodiya & Pallar/Paraiyar communities (these groups face discrimination in employment, practices of social distance, and denial of access to resources) (National Campaign on Dalit Rights 1)

Keeping all these conditions in mind various Dalit writers started writing about the traumas, agonies and oppressions on Dalit along with plight. It can also be termed as protest literature. It discusses about the ongoing oppressions on Dalits thus, tries to help the readers to understand the life and culture of Dalits. Dalit writing emerges as a post-Independence literary phenomenon. The basic motto of Dalit literature is to bring the historical significance. Highlighting the causes and effects they even try to focus on existence of oppression and despair in the lives of marginalized class which is still in practice. Lalmingthani observes, “We can see from reading Dalit literature that spans several decades, that the suffering of the untouchables is a never ending chain” (Lalmingthani 11).

Mulk Raj Anand (12 December 1905 – 28 September 2004) was an Indian writer in English, noteworthy for his portrayal of the lives of the poor castes in traditional Indian society. He was one of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian fiction. He is well-liked for his creation of novels and short stories, which have acquired the status of being classic works of modern Indian English literature. He discussed about the lives of the oppressed and their analyses of impoverishment, exploitation and misfortune. He is also admired for being among the first writers to incorporate Punjabi and Hindustani idioms into English. He is also a recipient of the civilian honour of the Padma Bhushan. *Untouchable* is the first novel written by Mulk Raj Anand. It gives the description about a sweeper boy, Bakha. Here, Bakha is the Untouchable. He has all the capabilities with flourishing dreams but because of his work and birth no one was ready to consider him as their beloved one. Higher class did not even ready to teach even if he paid. Thus circumstances forced him to lead the life of humiliation and tortured and ultimately he was left with three options. First, a Christian missionary, who invites him to join Christianity so that the untouchability based on the caste, can be removed. The second option he considers is the idea of sacrifice from Mahatma Gandhi, who came there to preach against the discrimination to the lower caste.

The third option he considers as a solution to the entire problem is a flush system. Untouchable is an appeal for social justice, and equality. It reveals the malevolence of Untouchability. The novel simply shows a way to solve two problems still lingers India i.e. Sanitation and Castism. The author criticizes the social injustice and the hypocrisy of the upper class with powerful voice. The novel not only narrates the pathetic conditions of the untouchables, but also the psychological conditions of the protagonist. E.M. Forster in this connection observes:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound to his master and forever born into a state, from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. (E. M. Forster iv)

Though, The Indian Constitution debarred the practice of untouchability under Article 17 and the Schedule Caste/ Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act), 1989 was introduced to fight persecution and discrimination against Dalits and Adivasi (tribal) people yet, the existence of these strong legal provisions for Dalit and Adivasi populations have found it virtually impossible to access their rights through the legal system. Similar conditions were depicted in the novel *Untouchable*. We can compare the character of Velutha (God of Small Things) with the character of Bakha. Both are not allowed to enter into the house of upper class. Once Bakha unintentionally touched an upper class person in which the person reacted so furiously that he shouted at Bakha naming as ‘Dirty Dog’, ‘Swine Dog’ or ‘You Brute’. Thus, they created such a painful and humiliating condition for Bakha that they did not even notice his plea. Later on, he was rescued by a Muslim. The irony here is that a Hindu is humiliated by a Hindu but a Muslim is consoling and rescuing him. Here, Bakha cries:

Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why, I came here. I was tired of cleaning on the latrines every day. That is why, they don’t touch us, the high caste. (58)

U. R. Ananthamurthy, Professor in English at the Mysore University is one of the most important representative writers in the literature of Kannada language. The novel *Samskara* by U. R. Anantha Murthy (translated by A. K. Ramanujan), created a big hullabaloo in Karnataka with his first publication in 1965 in the Kannada language. The novel is an accurate estimation of brahmin society in the sixties. It depicts about the brahmin societies of all times which suffer the serious problems of backwardness despite having intellectuals among them. Ananthamurthy depicts about the sensitive issues like rituals, samskara, untouchability, sex, communal feeling and human weakness such as materialism, jealousy, selfishness, and lack of human concern in the brahmin community. The novel basically discusses about the rights of a death man. Naranappa was the *prime* focus in this novel. Though, he was a Brahmin by birth yet, all the activities of Naranappa were as degraded as a person of lower cast. He discarded Brahmin hood therefore, he drank alcohol ate meat and often visited the prostitute Chandri. In the words of Pranesharacharya: “Alive, Naranappa was an enemy; dead a preventer of meals; as a corpse, a problem, a nuisance.”(03) Here people were confused “Who should cremate Naranappa?” At the end of the Pranesharacharya himself faced the situation like Naranappa as he had an encounter with Chandri and went to find out the actual connotation of life.

Om Prakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) was an Indian Dalit writer and poet well known for his autobiography, *Joothan*. He was born at the village of Barla in the Muzzafarnagar district

of Uttar Pradesh. The book *Joothan* is considered a milestone in Dalit literature. Being a Dalit child, he experienced the torture and abuse everywhere in society. He got immense support and love from this family this enabled him to face the dangers of being a Dalit. From the early stages of his life, Valmiki was conscious of the importance of studies. Reading and writing made him an enlightened human being. Because of his marriage he had to face lots of suffering and pain. He was not allotted a house in the government colony. They had to struggle a lot during the initial days of marriage. But he soon settled and both of them started a happy married life. The book talks about the inhuman treatment that they faced being student. He says: “During the examinations we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from way high up, lest our hands touch the glass”. The word *Joothan* refers to scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. Pthetically, Dalits have been forced to accept and eat *joothan* for centuries thus, they lead a life full of humiliation and pain. In the book, *Joothan – A Dalit’s Life*, Om Prakash Valmiki writes, “One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste.” Through this statement Valmiki reflects the firmness of caste system. Author himself describes that though government has taken various measures for the development of Dalists but discrimination against Dalits are still in practice. Even, both Ambedkar and Gandhi advised untouchables to stop accepting *joothan*. Ambedkar, is an remorseless documenter of atrocities against Dalits (and an ‘untouchable’ himself), illustrates how the high caste villagers could not tolerate the fact that Dalits did not want to accept their *joothan* anymore and threatened them with violence if they refused it. The book, *Joothan – A Dalit’s Life*, is an exceptional piece of literary work, though the translated version fails to describe the agony and the pain felt by the author, which is clearer in the original version yet it gives a clear picture of ongoing oppression in social structure. To conclude one can say that from ancient times till present era SC has been facing enormous brutality and oppression in the name of castism and religion. The orthodox mentality of the higher strata always brings a note of cry and depression for the Depressed Class without noticing their pain.

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