

## Address the voice of “Debarred”: A reflection on the work of Mahatma Phule and Omprakash Valmiki

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the concept of subaltern in post colonial era. We know that the evils of caste discrimination are deeply rooted in Indian social structure. This has been pointed out time and again by many social reformers, scholars and writers. This paper will focus on the efforts of Mahatma Phule and Valmiki in the depiction of the deplorable condition of lower caste or underprivileged marginalised Indians in order to bring them into the main stream society. I have also tried to examine the various phases of Dalit’s movement and their representation in Indian social scenario as well as the impact of such a movement on the current social structure. However, in the process it is explored that the problem of caste ridden society still prevails even after our being self proclaimed progressive in every field of life and it needs to be addressed adequately in academic studies.

**Keywords:** subaltern, dalit, post-colonial, infantilized, suppressed, underprivileged, devoid

### Introduction

At first it is important to understand the term subaltern that has become one of the most popular areas of study in recent past. Generally the term is applied to the marginalised and underprivileged class of people who are devoid of power and struggle to find an equal place in the society. However it is difficult to define subaltern as it has become one of the multidimensional and most disputed concepts in the post-colonial study. The continuous expansion of post-colonial studies has given a conspicuous popularity to subaltern studies in the field of literature as well as in the other domain of global academic studies. It is considered as one of the latest subdivisions of post-colonial studies that was launched in 1980’s by some eminent Indian scholars such as Ranjit Guha, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha in their effort to restudy Indian history and society as a narrative. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> c, subaltern concerns have been prominent in cultural debates around the globe and remain equally central to the analysis of gap between elite and marginalised classes within India itself.

The concept of subaltern was first used by noted Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in his famous book *Prison Notebook* written between 1929 and 1935. Gramsci notion of subaltern fundamentally refers to any “low rank” person or community suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights to participate in making the local history and culture as individuals of the same nation. It must be pointed out that Gramsci used the term only for the proletariats and peasants who were oppressed and discriminated under the rule of Benito Mussolini, the leader of National Fascist Party. Gramsci’s work reveals his interest in the study of subaltern classes of consciousness and culture as one possible way to make their voice heard instead of relying on the historical narrative of the state which is by the end, the history of the ruling and dominant classes. After Gramsci no such efforts was made to develop the concept of subaltern till 1980’s when SSG (Subaltern Studies Group) arose to attempt to formulate a new narrative of history of India and South Asia.

Thus the Subaltern Studies historians, such as, Guha, have pointed out that the national independence movement ultimately conserved the existing class structure in India: leaving a small group of educated, bourgeoisie, middle-class men holding political and economic power, and a large indigent population of rural-based peasant labourers, with little or no access to the benefits of national independence. Another eminent thinker of this group is Gayatri Spivak who is best known for her overtly political use of contemporary cultural and critical theories to challenge the legacy of colonialism on the way we read and think about literature and culture. Along with other leading contemporary intellectuals such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism and academic philosophy by focusing on the cultural texts of those people who are often marginalised by dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject.

### Discriminatory Caste System and Dalits

In India the problem of caste system has been deeply rooted since time immemorial. The caste system is a discriminatory system of division of labour and power in human society. It is a system of social stratification. Historically, it divided communities into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called *Jatis*. In Brahminical texts these *Jatis* were divided into four well-known caste category or *Varnas* viz Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Among these castes Shudras were the people who were excluded altogether, ostracized by other castes and treated as untouchables. They were made to live outside the villages and bound to perform all sorts of lowly works. Their touch or even shadow was considered polluting by the so called upper caste people. They were not allowed to gain formal education or take part in state’s affairs. The first literary traces of the caste system were found in *Rigveda* and Purnasukta hymn. In the Bhagavad Gita the caste system is sought to be justified on the basis of the idea of *Guna*, *Karma* (deed) and *Dharma* (Religion). In the age of Smritis and Sutras, the society had been divided into

various castes. They had framed hard and fast rules regarding occupation, food conduct and marriage. In the same age, these castes became so diversified that they could not meet together in course of time. The feeling of untouchability also grew in this age. In the Rigvedic Hymn the origin of human is mentioned as Brahman emerged from the mouth of Bramha, the creator, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from the feet. The first three castes are twice born or Dvija since the men from these castes are entitled to use the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of Upanayana, which the Shudras were not allowed to perform. In Manusmriti or Manav Dharma Shashtra the topic of *Varna* system whether it is hereditary or acquired, has been the subject of much controversy. There are several shlokas which explain the fluid nature of *Varna* classification and how *Varna* could be changed with acquiring knowledge. There are some others which advocate compartmentalised *Varnas*. For example, the Brahmins are considered the highest *Varna* or caste, and are supposed to be engaged in learning, teaching and religious sacrifices. The Kshatriyas are the 'guardians' -- the kings, the soldiers etc., the "Vaishyas" are the traders and farmers and the "Shudras" are the serving class. The first three classes are called "twice born" or Dvija. The first three wear the sacred thread on their body, while the Shudras do not. He writes:

*“Dhol, Gawar, Shudra Pashu Nari  
Ye sab tadan ke adhikari”*

(Drums, illiterate, of lower caste, animals, and female deserve a beating to straighten up and get the acts together)

The earliest known historical people to have rejected the caste system were Gautama Buddha and Mahavira. Their teachings eventually became independent religions called Buddhism and Jainism. The earliest known reformation within Hinduism happened during the medieval period when the Bhakti movements and Ramanuja actively encouraged the participation and inclusion of Dalits. The Indian government officially recognizes historically discriminated lowest castes of India such as Untouchables and Shudras under Scheduled Castes, and certain economically backward castes as Other Backward Castes. Scheduled Castes are sometimes referred to as Dalit in contemporary literature. In colonial period under British rule the resistance against oppression became more and more prominent. The colonial period saw widespread changes in socio-political scenario of the country. After coming into contact with the idea of equality, a section of caste Hindus started opposing the discrimination against Dalit communities. In 19<sup>th</sup> c Social reformers like Inshawar Chandra 'Vidyasagar', Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Dyanand Saraswati and others tried to give a new life to the contemporary decadent society. The education policy adopted by the British government was also favourable for social change. It ensured that education was secular and should be provided to everyone without any discrimination of caste or creed. As a result they became conscious about their status and demanded for equal right and position in the society.

Against the atrocities of upper caste, the subalterns, especially the Dalits, initiated several movements in Indian history. Today, a majority of these discriminated subaltern communities identify themselves as Dalits, thereby acquiring a new identity by coming together with the perspective that

"Dalit is dignified". Explaining the term subaltern in today's context Homi Bhabha, a major postcolonial scholar, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of subaltern groups as:

*“—oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who have hegemonic power”.*

Dalit Movement gained its momentum with reformers like Jyotiba Phule who led stress on the education of Dalits. Shree Naryan Guru is another such reformer who denounced the superiority based on caste and led a movement which allowed entry of all the Hindus in the temple of Kerala in 1936. Rettamalai Srinivasan formed Paraiya Mahajan Sabha in 1891, demanding for the equal rights of Dalits. The most influential Dalit reformer has been Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. However the movement led by Ambedkar was somewhat different than that of the earlier movements. While earlier movements were reformative in the sense that they demanded equality within religion and society, Baba Ambedkar on the other hand rejected the Hindu religion altogether and searched for alternatives. However his contribution to the upliftment of Dalits in modern India has been immense and it brought several positive changes in the society.

In the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> c many writers came forward to expose the social evil and ill treatment faced by the Dalits in the contemporary society. A pioneer among the upper-caste Hindu writers is Munshi Premchand who identifies untouchability as one of the worst evils of the existing Indian society dominated by the Hindus. The predicament of the Dalits and the extent of violation of their human rights are well reflected in many of his short stories such as: "*Shudra*", "*Mandir*", "*Deliverance*" and so on. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* also suggests that the evil of untouchability has a strong hold even on those who want to help them out from the peril. This reflects the typical mindset of the upper caste. In *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand has enunciated the maltreatment of an exploited class with concern. Apparently these authors are only the sympathisers and observers of the societal norms as no concrete solution has been provided in their works to fight against such evils prevailing, engulfing and dividing the society in colonial India.

#### **“Addresses a pain of Dalit”**

On the basis of birth. Inspired by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and the ideals of Enlightenment philosophers, Phule mounted a critique of the *Vedas* as idle fantasies of the Brahmin mind. With the objective of liberating the Shudras and Atishudras He was the founder of Sstyashodhak Samaj (Society of the Seekers of Truth). He started this movement with a hope that would end the slavery inherent in caste system. His conceptualization of caste from lower-caste point of view shifted attention from social mobility the caste hierarchy to a rejection of the system itself. Phule dedicated *Slavery* 'to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime, disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery.' *Slavery* traces the history of Brahmin domination in India, and examines the motives for and objectives of the cruel and inhuman laws framed by the Jotirao Phule (1827-90) was one

of those earliest voices from the educated Dalit community who devoted his entire life for the emancipation of Dalits. He is best known for his work *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*, a scathing and witty attack on Brahmanism and the slavery of India's 'lower' castes that it engendered. Unlike Indian nationalists, Phule saw the British as people who could tame the local elite—the Brahmins who wielded power simply Brahmins. "He is known as a *Maali* (Gardner) (Phule was the son of a *Maali*) who weeded out the myth". Phule's book can also be read from Gramscian concepts of 'hegemony' and 'dominance'.

In Gramscian Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony describes the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who manipulate the culture of the society — the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores — so that their ruling-class *Weltanschauung* (world view) becomes the worldview that is imposed and accepted as the cultural norm; as the universally valid dominant ideology that justifies the social, political, and economic *status quo* as natural and inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class. Gramsci developed this concept to comprehend social class; hence, cultural hegemony proposes that the prevailing cultural norms of a society, which are imposed by the ruling class (bourgeois cultural hegemony), must not be perceived as natural and inevitable, but must be recognized as artificial social constructs (institutions, practices, beliefs, etc.) that must be investigated to discover their philosophic roots as instruments of social-class domination. That such praxis of knowledge is indispensable for the intellectual and political liberation of the proletariat, so that workers and peasants, the people of town and country, can create their own working-class culture, which specifically addresses their social and economic needs as social classes.

Phule's *Gulamgiri* establishes a similar notion about the Brahminical domination on Shudra and Atishudra which Gramsci explained from the perspective of the Bourgeois' beliefs for the working class. Phule writes that Brahmins are not the aborigines of India rather some 3000 years ago they came to the extremely fertile land of India with the same Western interest, not as mere emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors. They were the people who denoted themselves with pride-flattering epithets such as *Aryan* or *Bhudeva* etc. Shudras were the natives of this land who resisted Aryans for establishing their rule in this country and hence they were held with great aversion and hatred and denounced as '*Shudra*' (insignificant), '*Chandal*' (the great evil foe) and so on. Phule further denounces the Brahminical texts as it was written for their benefits to establish their domination in India. Thus he gives a brief History of Brahmin's struggle that how eventually they have succeeded in establishing their supremacy and subjugating the aborigines in their entire control.

In the same preface he has also reflected on the cunning intension of Brahmin which is evident from their own writings in which the highest rights and privileges are given to the Brahmins for living an easy and smooth life whereas the Shudras and Atishudras are regarded with supreme contempt and even the basic rights are denied to them. Their touch or even shadow is considered polluting. Phule is highly critical of ancient Hindu texts especially *Manusmriti*, providing the inhuman laws for protecting the cause of Brahmins by

establishing the 'hegemony' and demeaning the position of Shudras. He comments:

*"Any one, who feels disposed to look a little more into the laws and ordinances as embodied in the Manava Dharma Shastra and other works of same class, would undoubtedly be impressed with the deep cunning underlying them all... A Brahmin can do no wrong. Never shall the king slay a Brahmin, though he has committed all possible crimes..."*

Phule mentions that the main object behind fabricating these laws was to dupe the minds of the ignorant and to rivet firmly the chains of perpetual bondage in order to exercise slavery on them. He further puts the blame on the part of government as well for overlooking the deplorable and poor condition of Dalit in the society who continues to be considered as Shudra or subaltern and hence inefficient or insignificant. He pities on the glaring tendency of Government system of higher education that has been the virtual monopoly of the Brahmins. Thus Phule in his book reflects on the idea which can be related to Gramscian concept of 'world view' or class outlook' of the created culture of the dominant which makes everybody feels that all are free to choose what is actually imposed on them. This, in fact, is a way of manufacturing consensus through immobile form of social control such as literature, religious texts, art, and education system and so on. According to Phule this is what the teaching of Brahminical texts and practices did to the society and somewhere it still does as being deeply rooted in the mindset of the society

*"Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin schoolmasters! The Shudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them alone not to the Brahmins that the Government must ever look to ride them over difficulties, financial as well as political..."*

This discrimination against Dalits still prevails in the post modern period despite the efforts of various social reformers who through their writings reflected on the inhuman attitude of upper castes towards the subalterns who still remain the marginalized.

Another important Dalit writer whose work can be noted for the improvement of Dalit's condition is Om Prakash Valmiki. Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) is an autobiographical account of his experience of growing up in a village near Muzzafarnagar in UP as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the 1950's. Apart from *Joothan*, he has also written three anthologies of poetry, *Sadiyon Ka Santaap*, *Bas Ab Bohat Ho Chuka* and *Ab Aur Nahi*. Though he belongs to a middle class intellectual, an engineer by profession, he deliberately uses the name Valmiki as a mark of identification with his roots and also with a larger community of the sweeper caste who were variously called as *Bhangi*, *Chura* and similar derogatory terms.

*Joothan* is among the first texts in Hindi in 1997 (translated in English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee 2003) that identifies itself as a part of Dalit literature. It elucidates the powerful narrative which contests the claim that discrimination on the basis of caste no longer operates as a social force in India. Valmiki was born into the *Chuhra* or *Bhangicaste* (sweeper), whose ordained job it was to sweep the roads, clean the cattle barns, get shit off the floor, dispose of dead animals, work the fields

during harvests, and perform other physical labour for upper caste people. They used to be called not by their names but as 'Abey Chura'. They were forced to live outside the village. A high wall and a pond segregated their brick houses in the village from the Chuhra *basti*, or cluster of shanties. Upper caste men and women of all ages came out and used the edge of the pond as an open-air lavatory, squatting across from the Chuhra homes in broad daylight with their private parts exposed. 'There was muck strewn everywhere,' writes Valmiki. 'The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood.' Reflecting on this sort of disparity Valmiki writes:

*"Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Churhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Churhas were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done."*

Thus Valmiki sets an example through his own experience of being a Dalit that it is required to raise the voice against injustice and inhumanity to get a better life and position in the society. The Dalit writers in the past and today also continue to reflect on the poor and deplorable condition of the marginalized and demand for their equal rights in every walks of society. The Dalit movement in India and the issues raised by social reformers has definitely worked positively in improvement of their social identity. However a lot is yet to be done for their equal rights and opportunity so that they can be brought back to the main stream. It is the responsibility of government, intellectuals and empowered not only to reflect the problems related to Dalit identity but also take the necessary steps and strong measurement to prevent any form of inequality and evil practice found in the society against its people.

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