

PG Fourth Semester: Course No. 404B: Dalit Literature

Dr Ambedkar's Speech at Mahad (Unit-02)

1. General Introduction

The word 'Dalit' is said to be of Marathi origin which literally means 'of the earth' and 'that which has been ground down' and signifies socially oppressed groups. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule gave coinage to this term in Maharashtra in the 19th century and was ably assisted by his wife Savitribai Phule to spread Dalit awareness in the country. Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys, sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. Dalit literature as a whole thus not only shares experiences but their meaning is also explained. Dalit traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. The social ostracism was sought to be justified in terms of presumed sins committed in a previous birth and 'untouchability' was justified under the idea of 'karma'. The effects of such practices became more far-reaching and nefarious than even the slavery practiced in Europe and America. Dalit writers prefer to describe their writings as Protest Literature or the Literature of Resistance. Dalit consciousness has become a source of inspiration for them to wage war against the hegemony of the caste Hindus.

Frantz Fanon talked about three stages in the development of Black Literature- Assimilation, Ethnic Discovery and Revolution. Likewise, Dalit Literature passes through the three stages of suffering, revolt and negation. With the help of Dalit Panthers in 1972, the meaning of the word 'Dalit' expanded and became synonymous with revolt, political equality, cultural liberation and economic independence. The literature not only ensures social justice but a literature making society aware of its humiliation. There is a sense of overriding protest as they document their realities and in this process their protest is being concretized. Their language is earthy, colloquial and speaks defiantly about emotion and sentiments. It constructs a distinct community narrative against rationality. The personal space and the public space often overlap in these stories. Their stories create a unique kind of discourse using the personal space. Dalit literature is often referred to as "traumatic realism" where trauma and testimony discourses reveal the construction of an abject human subject both denied her/his human rights and seeking the right claims. The writers of Dalit literature often regard B.R. Ambedkar as the icon who paved the way and inspired them to write and retaliate with their writings.

2. Introduction to the Author

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was a pioneering figure in the formation of various Dalit movements and furthermore in the introduction of Dalit literature to the world. During his lifetime, he played three roles: that of a caste leader, that of an untouchable spokesman, and that of a national statesman. In his first leadership role, he was guide, guru and decisionmaker for his own caste, the Mahars of Maharashtra, from the mid-twenties of the 20th century until his death. From the early 1930s onwards he was the chief spokesman of the untouchables in the estimate of the Govt. of India, the untouchable leader who had to be dealt with from the viewpoint of the Indian National Congress, and the individual most responsible for India's policies of compensatory discrimination towards the Scheduled Castes. In his third role, he spoke on all phases of India's development, worked on problems of labour and law as a member of the Government, and even put aside some of his own theories to help create a viable, generally accepted Constitution. However, the significance of these thoughts was erased from the mainstream Indian history and his speeches and writings were not available in libraries. In the late 1970s the Marathi and the Kannada Dalit thinkers resurrected the ideologies of Ambedkar and during 1990s he became to be recognized as a prominent Dalit leader and intellectual.

His life was a revolutionary one as he not only fought against the evils of the caste system but also fought for political and economic justice of the oppressed classes. These evils had existed for years together and became the greatest enemy of democracy as democracy stood for equal rights and freedom. His speeches and ideology interrogated colonialism from the Dalit perspective and his critique of Gandhian nationalism was well received by Dalit intellectuals. Ambedkar rejected the term 'harijan' as prescribed by Gandhi to describe the untouchables. He supported the idea of annihilation of caste as he believed it to be undemocratic. As caste is often sanctified by Hindus, Ambedkar pointed out that it not possible to achieve equality in Hinduism. He referred to the untouchables as 'scheduled class', 'depressed class' or 'Dalits'. The term 'Dalit' has been discussed in the earlier section vividly. He fought for the dignity of man and thus is acclaimed as the Champion of human rights. His message to his people was self-help, self-elevation and self-respect. His philosophy of self-reliance and self-development was advocated for the uplift of the untouchables.

3. Introduction to the Text

B.R. Ambedkar had sound knowledge of the marginalized sections of India. He fought for the liberation of Dalits from the clutches of casteist philosophy. It is literature that helps them to make others listen to the screams of their pain which was not heard before and the writings help them to express their pain. Babasaheb's ideas about social justice are evident in his defence of the untouchables. The events of Mahad Satyagraha, his speech, his entry into the Kalaram Temple and the burning of Manusmriti sent a strong message of Dalit awakening to the non-Dalit elite administrators of the country. The movement of his actions for rights and equality sowed the seed for Dalit protest literature. This speech at Mahad in particular was a clarion call for the downtrodden people subjugated by the hegemony of Hindu casteist society to come together and do away with the perils of casteist system prevalent in India. 25 December, 1927 is regarded as one of the important dates in the history of Dalit movement. Dr. Ambedkar began an agitation by the Dalits to draw water from the Chavadar Lake at Mahad. The waterbody was reserved for the caste Hindus. The historic event brought to the fore the fact that untouchables are not considered 'human' in India. The text is an excerpt from the speech he made on this occasion.

4. Guidelines for Reading the Text

The text selected for study is essentially an excerpt from Dr Ambedkar's speech. Naturally, it should be read along with an audio version of the speech available on YouTube. Besides, the context of this speech should also be kept in mind. The humiliation of the untouchables at Mahad motivated Dr Ambedkar to launch an agitation programme as part of a larger campaign to unite the untouchable caste against Brahminical atrocities. The topical allusions made by Dr Ambedkar during his impassioned address should also be properly understood. The allusions to the Mahabharata, Roman system of *conferatio* and the Samurais of Japan are to be read in connection with the core argument of the necessity to eradicate untouchability. A number of very useful anthologies and references have been mentioned in the reading list for a better understanding of the text and its context. The students are also advised to undertake comprehensive searches on the internet platforms to find out full glossary of the culture-specific expressions used by Dr Ambedkar during his speech on the necessity of removing untouchability and thereby ensure a 'caste-less' Indian society. It is an emerging domain of study and research with a huge potential of becoming canonized very soon.

II. Areas/Issues for Discussion**08 marks****A. Dr Ambedkar's Views on Indian Caste System and the Resultant Practice of**

Discrimination: Dr Ambedkar focused not only on the issues faced by the untouchables but also examined the root cause of such malpractices. He referred intermarriage as one of the key features to propagate equality. He believed that as long as the caste system existed, the supremacy of the Brahmins will remain. He advocates that the untouchables must acknowledge their fight against it themselves. It would be futile to wait for others to speak against the atrocities committed against untouchables. He considers untouchability not merely as a social concern but as the source of poverty and all kinds of lowliness that is associated with the untouchables. He argues that the only way to invigorate the Hindu society is to abolish untouchability and establish a single caste system devoid of inequality. There is a need to record the structure of Hindu society in India.

B. Ambedkar's Allusion to Ancient Roman System to Explain Social Inequality

While discussing the evil of untouchability in Hindu society as a prime marker of social inequality Dr Ambedkar alludes to the ancient European nation of Rome. In Rome, the patricians were considered upper class, and the plebians, lower class. All power was in the hands of the patricians, and they used it to exploit the plebians. To free themselves from this exploitation, the plebians insisted that laws should be written down for ensuring justice and transparency. For the officers who enforced the laws were all patricians. Moreover, the chief officer, called the tribune, was also a patrician. Hence, there was partiality in the enforcement of the laws. The plebians then demanded that there should be two tribunes, of whom one should be elected by the plebians and the other by the patricians. When the system was introduced the plebians rejoiced. But it was short lived. The Romans had a tradition that nothing could be done without the favourable verdict of the oracle at Delphi. Accordingly, the election of a tribune had to be approved by the oracle. The priest who put the question to the oracle was required, by sacred religious custom, to be one born of parents married in the mode the Romans called 'conferetio'; and this mode of marriage prevailed only among the patricians. Hence, the priest of Delphi was always a patrician. Thus, inequality existed in society.

C. Theme of Untouchability in Dr Ambedkar's Speech at Mahad

Dr Ambedkar defines the worst status of untouchables in Hindu society at the beginning of his speech when he describes how the upper caste people allow even the beasts kept by the untouchables to drink water from the Chavadar lake but do not permit them to have access to the pond. He also refers to the five-fold division in Hinduism according to custom- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Atishudras. Thus, he describes the untouchables as 'atishudras'. According to Ambedkar, the reason for preventing the untouchables from drinking water is that they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals. Being an untouchable himself, he describes how atishudras are limited by a series of prohibitions- inter-drinking, inter-dining, inter-marriage and social intercourse. To strengthen his point he refers to the instances of social maladies in different societies and times. He further asserts how this fight to gain social equality has to be fought by the untouchables alone as no other castes are going to help them in this revolutionary struggle. A privileged class, at the cost of a little sacrifice, can show some generosity. The class of caste Hindus other than Brahmins lies in between. It cannot practice the generosity possible to the class above and it does not develop the attachment to principles that develops in the class below. This is why this class is seen to be concerned not so much about attaining equality with the Brahmins as about maintaining its status above the untouchables. According to Ambedkar, the task of removing untouchability and establishing equality should be initiated by the atishudras alone. In fact, his whole speech was devoted to the depiction of the miserable condition of the untouchables and several ways to combat this stigmatization collectively.

04 marks

A. Reference to the first Agitation during March, 1927: Dr Ambedkar addressed the people to remember their first Satyagraha where there was no provocation but the attack on them by the caste Hindus showed that they had objections on the untouchables drawing water from the Chavadar Lake. The lake being a public property should be open for all but the untouchables are not allowed to draw water from the lake. He questions that when even the beasts are allowed to drink water from the lake whereas some human beings from their own religion (Hinduism) are not allowed. He prominently focuses on the caste system of the Hindus where each caste

must not transgress the rank as denoted by custom: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and Ati-shudras. He locates this system as the symbol of inequality. He also points out how he lodged several complaints against the upper-caste goons to the British administration and how it led to the arrest of several upper caste attackers.

B. The real motive behind Satyagraha: Dr. Ambedkar clarifies that the meeting is not convened merely to get permission to drink water from the lake but to “set up the norm of equality”. As he described- “We too are human beings”. The speech distinctively points out the loopholes of the other castes of Hindu society and the result of unjust treatment meted out due to the evil system. Inequality in the caste system resulted in the downtrodden and oppressed state of the untouchables. Ambedkar borrowed the idea of Satyagraha from Gandhi. Mohandas used this idea in the Indian independence movement and also during his earlier struggle in South Africa. Satyagraha helped shape Nelson Mandela’s struggle in South Africa against apartheid, Martin Luther King Junior’s campaigns during the civil rights movement in the United States and many other similar movements.

C. Dr Ambedkar’s Views on Intermarriage

Dr Ambedkar strongly feels that to remove untouchability in the home as well as outside, we must break down the prohibition against intermarriage. Nothing else will serve the purpose. From another point of view, Ambedkar argues, the breaking down of the bar against intermarriage is the way to establish real equality. Anybody should admit that when the root division is removed, the other minor points of separateness will fade away automatically. The bans on inter-dining, inter-drinking and social interactions have all resulted from the one prohibition against intermarriage. Dr Ambedkar advises to remove the last ban and there will be no need for any special efforts to remove other bans. If one wishes to root out untouchability, one must recognize that the root of untouchability is in the ban on intermarriage. Even if our attack today is on the ban against inter-drinking, we must press it home against the ban on intermarriage. Finally, Ambedkar avers that the Brahmin class cannot do it.

D.The Ending of Dr Ambedkar’s Speech

Towards the end of his speech Dr Ambedkar stresses on the need to observe reticence particularly by the upper caste social mandarins. The social revolution of the untouchables can only remain peaceful if there is no provocation on behalf of the

brahminical forces. In this context, he alludes to the Reign of Terror and the allied atrocities fostered by the French National Assembly of 1789. According to Ambedkar, if the rulers of France had not been treacherous to the Assembly, if the upper class had not resisted it, had not committed the crime of trying to suppress it with foreign help, it would have had no need to use violence. The whole social transformation would have been accomplished peacefully. He concludes his speech with a plea to the upper class people to follow the principle of justice and remove all opposition to the working out of a peaceful social revolution.

02 marks

- A. According to custom, how many castes are there in Hinduism? Name them.
- B. What, according to Ambedkar, is the main cause of social inequality in Hindu society? What is his prescription to remove this?
- C. In which context does Ambedkar allude to the Samurais of Japan? How did they contribute to national unity in Japan?
- D. Who were the 'patricians' and 'plebians' of Rome? What was the 'conferatio' system of marriage?

III. A Reading List

Dangle, Arjun, ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992.

Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu, eds. *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2013.

Basu, Tapan, Indranil Acharya and A. Mangai, eds. *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994.

Eleanor, Zelliott. *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2013.