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THEORY AND PRAXIS OF 'AMBEDKARISM' IN THE FIRST ODIA DALIT NOVEL *BHEDA*

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Abstract

'Ambedkarism' is broadly understood as the thought/philosophy/theory of Dr B. Ambedkar found in his numerous speeches and writings. Ambedkarism, in its philosophical context, is based upon the principle of humanism in which the cultivation of the human mind is of utmost importance for the emancipation of human beings from all forms of prejudices and associated slavery. Similarly, to arrive at this, the education of the human being is the first step. Moreover, only when the mind gets educated gets agitated, it starts problematising and questioning the seemingly normal ideas and the absolute notion of the truth, so agitation of the mind is the second step. And the final step is to organise, to bring in change through affirmative actions, which is political in nature and in which step it becomes a movement. Furthermore, Ambedkar's call for "Educate, Agitate and Organise" has to be understood in terms of Dalit consciousness and emancipation of Dalits from the indignation of the caste system in Hindu society. As opposed to the *Savarna* Literature about Dalits, Dalit Literature has always been influenced by Dr BR. Ambedkar's ideology, in theory, but to use it as praxis is rare even in Dalit literature. In this research paper, I seek to argue that in *Bheda*, the author Akila Naik has not only used 'Ambedkarism' as theoretical premises but created the praxis of 'Ambedkarism' a) through his delineation of both Dalit and upper-caste characters and b) by subverting the dominant-canonical-totalitarian-homogenous aesthetic of *Savarna* literature in its construction of the Dalit's identity(s) and c) by reimagining a counter-narrative of Dalit consciousness and assertion using Ambedkar's methodology of "Educate Agitate and Organise."

Keywords: *Savarna* Aesthetics, Dalit Literature, Dalit Aesthetics, Dalit-consciousness, Ambedkarism

I. Introduction

The Odia literary history is predominantly a history of the *Savarnas*, by the *Savarnas*, and for the *Savarnas*, wherein the presence of the Dalits only loomed as an absence. It is only during the Odia

nationalistic phase that the Dalits were given some textual space in the literary imagination of these *Savarna* writers like Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Godabaris Mahapatra, Radhamohan Gadnayak, Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi, Sachi Raoutray, Gopinath, Mohanty, Kanhucharan Mohanty. This

attempt to represent the Dalits in *Savarna* Odia literature was celebrated as 'progressive' during this period without interrogating the nature of that representation(s). However, when these representations were interrogated from the Dalits' perspective, later on, it was found that these representations are the result of a perceived popular belief system about Dalits in the caste-ridden Hindu society; Dalits are only the primitive Other according to the Hindu Varna System. In their work, Dalits have only been 'subjected to' and 'acted upon by their upper-caste, upper-class counterparts. Their identity(s) have only been defined in terms of their 'suffering' and victimhood by their upper-caste creators. In other words, the aesthetics used in these *Savarna* writings to (re)present the Dalit personal experiences are antithetical to Ambedkar's ideology. The image of Dalits that emerges from this *Savarna* Odia literature is that all Dalits are only 'victims' of different kinds of marginalisation without having any agency to protest against this marginalisation; 'Silence' is the only metaphor used in these narratives of Dalits to represent their identity(S). In other words, they have got only a homogenised, totalitarian identity. These discourses about Dalits have willfully dismissed any moment/movement of resistance on the part of the Dalits against their domination by the bourgeois upper-caste counterparts. Even Dr. Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy(ies), which was instrumental in creating Dalit consciousness, has also been omitted in their construction of a Dalit's identity.

### I.I. What is Dalit Literature?

The genesis of Dalit literature lies in the Dalit Panthers Movement that started in Maharashtra in the 1970s. Some prominent architects of this movement were Namdeo Dhasa, Arjun Dangle, Babu Rao Bagul and Raja Dhale. So what is Dalit literature, according to this group of activists-cum-writers? For these Dalit activist-cum-writers, caste is an essential factor in determining the nomenclature of Dalit literature. In other words, Dalit literature is literature written 'by Dalits of Dalits for all human beings.' Dalit literature engages with the issue of caste in Hindu Society and how a *Shudra* or an *Ati-Shudra* negotiates caste in his day to day life. Its purview ranges from portraying the

experience of untouchability to negotiating micro-aggression realistically. But most significantly, Dalit literature portrays various moments and movements of resistance by Dalit(s). Those 'moments/movements' of protest are not glossed over as insignificant, as in *Savarna* literature, which reproduces the same feudal social relation and caste hierarchy. The Dalits of Dalit literature, on the other hand, challenge this caste-hierarchy by asserting their Dalit identity and envision a new emancipated society without caste discrimination and atrocities. As Dr C. B. Bharati says, "The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes" (Dr. C. B. Bharati qtd. in Pawar 47). Similarly, according to Arjun Dangle, "Dalit literature is not simply a literature, but it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and a new people" (3). Similarly, Other Dalit writers like Babu Rao Bagul call for a complete rejection of their association with Hinduism and advocate for literature based on democracy and social modernity, "Democratic socialism, the new sciences and technology, and the revolutionary present, form the essence of Dalit literature" (Bagul qtd in Thiara, Nicole and Judith Misrahi-Barak 5 ).

### I.II. Aesthetics of Dalit literature

While rejecting the aesthetics of *Savarna* literature, the Dalit writers advocate for differential aesthetics of Dalit literature. According to C.B. Bharati, "there is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life" (Dr. C. B. Bharati qtd. in Pawar, 47).

According to Sharan Kumar Limbale, "The aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on three things: first, the artist's social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the readers' consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity" (120).

While rejecting the traditional notion of '*Satyam-Shivam-Sunderm*' as it is used in the *Savarna* literature, Limbale has redefined as "Human beings are first, and foremost human-this is

the Satyam. The liberation of human beings is Shivam. The humanity of human beings is Sundram" (120)

## II. Theory(s) of 'Ambedkarism.'

Dr B.R. Ambedkar is a name synonymous with every ideal enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution, i.e., Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Social Democracy, thereby touching upon the life of every individual who is a citizen of India; The preamble is known as the soul of the Indian Constitution. However, more than anything, Dr Ambedkar's lifelong protest against the caste-based hierarchy and discrimination that existed (even exist today) in Hindu society, governed by the rules of the *Manusmriti*, made him the most extraordinary human existed in the history of civilisation. His numerous speeches, and writings, books and articles, on the complete annihilation of caste, on the critique of institutionalised religion driven by brahminical ideologies, his advocacy for an egalitarian society based on social justice, and more fundamentally, his call for Dalit consciousness, revolutionised the collective imaginations of the poor and the downtrodden, the socially marginalised, the oppressed, the Dalits.

'Ambedkarism' refers to the philosophy of Dr B.R Ambedkar expressed in his extensive writing and speeches. This philosophy centres around humanism, based on the constitutional principle of liberty, equality, fraternity and most importantly, social justice. Ambedkarism gives the road map for this, which is 'Educate, Agitate and Organise', to reach this fundamental concept of humanism.

However, history and the social realities of the Indian society witness the fact that it is impossible to realise the ideals of 'Ambedkarism' entirely in a caste-ridden society where the lower-caste identity is not just caste identity, but a stigma without having any human dignity, and agency. In this caste-ridden society, the upper-caste people treat the lower-caste (Dalits) in the most inhuman way possible in the name of 'purity and pollution,' the transcendental binaries popularised in Indian *Shastras*.

'Ambedkarism' in its broader sense can be understood as a political movement against injustice and exploitation to replace the hierarchical system, with unequal power distribution of any kind, with an alternative humanist system. In other words, it is a movement to bring changes in social, educational, religious, economic, and cultural life.

## III. History of Dalit literature in Odisha

The history of Dalit literature in Odisha goes back to the Sarala Age in the fifteenth century. Till the Fifteenth century, Sanskrit dominated the literary landscape in Odisha as the Kings, nobles, and elites patronised the Brahmins Sanskrit Scholars. Sudramuni Sarala Das, a poet, belonging to the lower caste, broke this trend by introducing the Odia vernacular as the medium of his work. Significantly, Sarala Das is known for the Odia translation of the three primary Sanskrit texts- *Odia Mahabharata*, *Blanka Ramayana* and *Chandi Purana*. Although Sarala Das was a Sudra by caste, he nevertheless defied the caste norms and trans-created these epics using the vernacular Odia. According to Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik, Sarala Das, with his revolutionary zeal, could bring Indian philosophy and literature to the ordinary people after freeing them from the monopoly of Sanskrit scholars. He democratised classical knowledge by making the texts available to all society sections, including women (71-86). Despite being a lower caste by birth, he could challenge the hegemony of the elite people by translating Sanskrit epics and manuscripts and "this was no mean achievement for a Sudra" (Raj Kumar xxi )

Sarala Das's protest was carried on by five saint-poet who dominated Odia literature for a century, from 1450 to 1550. These poets were Balarama Das (*Jagamohan Ramayan and Lakshmi Purana*), Jagannatha Das (*Odia Bhagavata*), Achyutananda Das (Harivamsa), Jasobanta Das (*Gobindachandra Tika, Premabhakti Brahmagita*) and Ananta Das (*Hetudaya Bhagavata*), collectively known as the Panchasakha. Except for Jagannath Das, a Brahmin, the rest of them were Sudras by caste. They rejected the dominance of Sanskrit in literature and espoused the cause of the vernacular as the medium of expression, thus contributing

towards the use of everyday Odia in the literature of their region. This group also defied the Brahminical supremacy and hegemony, freed the text from the so-called *deva bhasa*, Sanskrit, and helped the Odia language build its own identity.

The period followed by Panchasakhas in the history of Odia literature could not produce any significant protest literature; it mainly was the era of princely writers like Upendra Bhanja. However, this trend was revived by the saint-poet Bhima Bhoi in the nineteenth century ( *Mahima Bhajana Stuti Chintamani*, *Strutinisedha Gita*, and *Nirbeda Sadhana*). Born into a Kondh Adivasi family, and lived by the code of the *Mahima Dharma*, the religion that developed in Odisha in the nineteenth century, attracting people mainly from the lower section of society, since it rejected any hierarchy in its concept of *Dharma*, the religion that advocates for the worship of '*Shunyata*' and rejects idolatry, Bhima Bhoi became the people's poet and leader.

In the post-Independent era, a group of Dalit writers started the *Dalit Jati Sangha* in 1953. The members of this group include Govind Chandra Seth, Santanu Kumar Das, Jagannath Malik, Kanhu Malik and Kanduri Malik. This group of writers, influenced by Dr B.R. Ambedkar's ideology of 'Dalit Consciousness', started discoursing caste in their literary pieces; talking about Dalits in the public domain, until then, was considered as taboo. For example, Govind Chandra Seth wrote a *Biography of Ambedkar* that instantly gained popularity. Santanu Kumar Das seems to have written four novels on caste inequalities and social injustices. The titles of the novels are *Aawhana (A Call)*, *Vitamati (Homestead)*, *Sania and Pheria (Comeback)*.

It was only around the 1970s and the 1980s that Dalits of Odisha began asserting themselves, if not organizationally at least individually, through their writings which constituted 'Dalit literature' proper. Bichitrananda Nayak can be called a pioneer in Odia Dalit writings. In 1972 he published a collection of poems titled *Anirban(Liberation)* using the term Dalit. Like Nayak, poets and writers like Jagannath Malik, Krushna Charan Behera, Gobind Chandra Seth, and Ramchandra Sethi exposed the hypocrisies of the upper-caste Odia society.

Jagannath Malik is well known for his novel, where he takes a dig at the historical character of Kharavela (a medieval Odia king) to interpret contemporary issues. Without naming anyone, through the novel, he scrutinises a modern politician, probably a chief minister of Odisha, who is both corrupt and autocratic. Malik's second important work is *The Ramayana*, where he reinterprets the episodic events of the epic from a Dalit point of view. He considers Ram, an Aryan king who goes to the jungle to teach the Adivasis and Dalits a lesson.

Krushna Chandra Behera, Gobinda Chandra Seth, and Rama Chandra Sethi wrote on untouchability, caste exploitation, gender inequality, and class oppression and tried to bring Dalit discourse into the domain of Odia literature in a limited way. However, the Ambedkar Centenary Celebration in 1991 motivated many Odia Dalit poets and writers to write their histories. Accordingly, many educated Odia Dalits openly wrote about various caste, class, and gender exploitation facets in Odia society. Among several poets and writers, we can name Basudeb Sunani, Samir Ranjan, Sanjay Bag, Gopinath Bag, Dolamani Kandher, Pitamber Tarai, Ramesh Malik, Chandrakant Malik, Kumaranamani Tanti, Supriya Malik, Basant Malik, Akhila Naik, Anjubala Jena, Mohan Jena, Samuel Dani, Anand Mahanand, Panchanan Dalei, and Pravakar Palak.

#### IV. Introduction to Bheda

*Bheda*, written by Odia Dalit writer Akhil Naik, and translated into English by Raj Kumar, has tried to bring in the collective memory about the 'forgotten' people of Odia society by engaging with caste discourse in the public domain. In that sense, *Bheda* can be seen as a 'supplementary writing' to quote Homi. K. Bhabha that "points to the problematics of the decolonised nation-state in the post-independent period," and that exposes that sham of India being a genuinely democratic nation. However, it can also be read as history or alternative historiography as the Dalit writer has tried to 'write in' the history of those dispossessed and displaced communities, the "Doms" in particular, and Dalits in general. They have been "written out" of the official national historiography.

Akhil Naik's *Bheda* is a concise novel of eighty-eight pages, comprising seven chapters, each named after a character, i.e., "Dinamastre," "Baya Lawyer," "Laltu," "Semiseth," "Muna," "Mastrani," and "Santosh panda." While defining the Title of the novel, Prof. Raj Kumar, the translator of the text, has mentioned,

The primary meaning is a 'sense of difference.' If 'bheda' is used with the word 'bhava', it implies the difference between people in terms of caste, class, or race. In the Indian context, *bhedabhaba* denotes various caste practices against the lower castes, especially Dalits. *Bheda* also means 'the target'. In the novel, Dalits target the upper-caste because, after availing themselves of modern education, educated Dalits are now mobilising resistance to protest against the monopolies of the upper castes. Dalits in rural India have hardly any freedom and security. Without material means and opportunities, they continue to stay on, although choosing to organise protests against the monopolies of the upper castes in their villages. The result is that they face severe atrocities. Their houses and shops are burnt down by the upper-caste mobs, leaving them without help or hope. They are rendered homeless in their homeland. ("Introduction," xxviii).

In other words, this novel, perhaps, is trying to bring forth the various dimensions of caste and its physical manifestation in the form of discrimination and atrocities on the one hand and the issue of Dalit consciousness on the other. Therefore, the primary purpose of this paper is to locate the various moments/ movement of Dalit consciousness in the text. Moreover, it seeks to establish that this Dalit Consciousness is manifested through the aesthetics of Ambedkarism that is "Educate, Agitate, Organise."

#### **V. 'Amedkarism' as a Praxis in *Bheda***

**V.I. "Dinamastre" and his Ambedkarite Consciousness: Education is the key to the cultivation of the mind**

The text unfolds with the "Dina Master" chapter. Dinabandhu Duria is the headmaster of the local primary school, and he belongs to the 'Dom' community. He came across as a person who helps others, especially his students, i.e., to give his poor students a meal of *Dalia*; he does not mind opting for unofficial ways to procure the ingredients since the government does not provide the necessary ingredients other than the raw *Dalia*. His caste or surname has never been an obstacle in imparting education to students across castes alike. However, when the school S.I., an upper-caste government official, came for surprise checking to Dinamastre's school, none of the students could tell the full name of their headmaster when the S.I. asked them, and the S.I. started humiliating him by questioning his merits and quality of education in front of students: "Students are unable to tell me your name. what kind of teaching are you imparting, O master!" (3). As if that was not enough to humiliate him, he was again accused falsely by the S.I. of financial fraud, "Eating away poor children food? Is it your Dharma? Thieving...robbery...you are teaching this to students? who appointed you as a teacher?... go and beat the drum" (4).

The Dalit author's use of the 'School' as the setting and his character as a 'Head-master' is critically significant in understanding the use of the aesthetics of Ambedkarism; education is a way of empowerment for Dalits, according to Dr B.R. Ambedkar. However, it is to be noted here that although the constitution of India guarantees equality of opportunity, as envisioned by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, and because of which Dalits have gotten access to public education, their merits are constantly questioned. Moreover, the whole reservation debate, in our time, centres around that merit discourse. Another significant point to be noted here is that the upper-caste students, including the most brilliant school student, could not tell his surname because he is a Dalit, whose identity is ahistorical and therefore easily forgotten. This points to the passive form of caste discrimination practised in educational institutes even after 70 years of Independence.

However, the point of departure is Dinamstre's reaction to the incident, the precise

moment in the text, which points to his consciousness about his Dalit identity:

“Had Baya advocate planned and invited the S.I. to humiliate him? had he? It was possible. The advocate was a dishonest man and a hypocrite. Moreover, the advocate was a Tripathy and the S.I. a panda, both brahmins. They could even be related. So to take revenge on him, had baya advocate taken this crooked path(8) but was he guilty? what crime had he committed?”(9).

Unlike his Dalit forefathers like Lochan Hati and Pangnia Budha, who had internalised their lower caste identity and did not understand discrimination as discrimination but as preordained and normal, Dinamstre could feel and sense the discrimination the upper-caste school S.I. subjected to him. He is conscious that as Dalits are getting educated and making their way into government jobs, thus making their way into those domains that only the Brahmins previously monopolised, they are now being targeted as thieves of government money. He is also aware of the nexus between dominant castes and the government machinery, which only act as an ideological state apparatus to further the ideology of the dominant caste so that the power relation between the upper-caste and the Dalits will remain intact and the same social relation will continue to be reproduced. He may not have been in the position to protest against the authority, owing to his vulnerable subject position, but the questions that are breaching in his mind and overwhelming him is suggestive of his consciousness about his marginal subject position.

#### V.II. “Mastarani” and her Ambedkarite Dalit Consciousness: Critique of the Dominant Religion

If Dalit men are subjected to caste-based discrimination in the educational sphere, Dalit women are the worst victim of Brahminical hegemony in the religious sphere in the text. It has been observed in the text as well in the real world that temple entry of the Dalit community, an idea started by Mahatama Gandhi, is only a symbolic form of assimilation of Dalits in the mainstream. Dalit women are still not allowed to worship Hindu

gods and goddesses without the brahman mediator to do it on their behalf. Mastrani, wife of Dinamastre, and the mother of the Dalit protagonist Laltu, a fifth grade educated woman, is subjected to such discrimination in the text. Initially, she was asked by a brahmin pujari to start worshipping the Hindu God, Maheswara and Vishnu. This is called the Hinduvization of Dalits, who otherwise are outside of the four-fold varna system prescribed in the *Veda*. This so-called act of benevolence on the part of a brahmin Pujari results from the conversion of Dalits into other religions and can be seen as the cultural hegemony of the natives by the upper caste outsider. Traditionally, Masterani only worshipped her kuldevi Thutimaili and Kalisundri, but as was advised by the Pujari, she started going to the temple. However, in the temple, she was treated differently. When the upper caste women could do puja of their own, she could not. This discrimination made her question the nature of institutionalised religion and the existence of God. She realised that it was because of her lower caste status, she was being discriminated against and her critiquing of the brahminical monopoly of gods and temple, socially accepted norms and custom in strong and unambiguous language :

In which *Shashtra* has it been inscribed that the Doms are forbidden to enter the temple? The shastra must have been written by you or your forefathers. Was it because she was a Dom that Mahadev hated her? If that is not so, why did He not take offerings from her personally? If He is the God of all castes and communities, why did He not cut the tongues of either Shanker or Bishua with his trident when they drove away from the Doms from the temple entrance? If someone hated to touch you, would he want to see you prosper? Can he? One who turns up his nose at you will he listen to you however much you pleaded with him during your time of need? Was the belief that she had got Laltu through Mahadev’s blessings a lie?... Yes, it’s a lie; it is a pure lie. Even such a belief is useless and complete nonsense. (88)

These are suggestive of her consciousness building about her marginalised identity. Moreover, ultimately by rejecting the Hindu God as completely a lie and only the product of brahminical hegemony, she made her ideological position visible to the readers. Moreover, in another instance, through her sudden outburst of anger at the news of Krupa's mother, a Dalit woman, being abused by an upper-caste man, "why should he leave without beating him? If someone abuses your mother and sister using obscene language, will you let him go without a beating? Will you excuse that? Which man? Why should he leave him?" she exposed the patriarchal nature of society and the problem of intersectionality where the Dalit woman is at the receiving end as she is the victim of double marginalisation. Her monologues with sharp comments about Gods and phallocentrism are a glaring example of her identity formation as a woman and a Dalit.

### **V.III. Laltu and Ambedkarite Dalit Consciousness: "Educate, Organize, Agitate"**

It is in the representation of Laltu, the central character of the text, we see the culmination of Ambedkarism. Laltu, the third generation Dalit boy, is presented here as an affirmative Ambedkarite. Being the victim of 'untouchability' from his early childhood (he was not allowed to touch the water pitcher at school, he was prohibited from participating in Saraswati Puja at school), Laltu not only questioned the basis of such discrimination but rejected it altogether.

#### **V.III.I. Laltu's rejection of all forms of institutionalised religion:**

In at least three of his texts like, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who were the Shudras* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948) -Ambedkar offered a strong indictment of the earliest known Hindu text. In 1936, Ambedkar wrote, "The Hindu religion, as contained in the Vedas and the Smritis, is nothing but a mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up. What is called religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions" (*"Annihilation of Caste"* 75)

When Laltu was still very young, he was not allowed by the upper-caste school teacher Mishra sir to perform Saraswati Puja, "If we human beings do not touch the water from the Doms, how can Goddess Saraswati eat food offered by them" (85). This was the first moment of reckoning for him; for the first time, Laltu realised his marginalised subject position in a caste-ridden society like India. In reaction to this childhood traumatic incident of caste discrimination in accessing the God/Goddess, Laltu became an atheist. In his discourse with his mother about the good motive of such God and wickedness of his teacher, he replied, "Ma, you are saying that Mishra sir is wicked. Where did he get that wicked mind? Was it not Ganesh who gave him such a wicked mind? Both you and father tell me that Ganesh is the God of knowledge. If it is so, it is better to break the neck of such a God of knowledge (87). As a part of his affirmative action, he refused to go and study in that school that perpetuated inequality and injustice, but as a child, he came back home that day and painted the portrait of gods with his spit at his home. of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in 1935 publicly proclaimed, "I was born a Hindu because I had no control over this, but I shall not die a Hindu." Laltu also realised that it is only with the rejection and complete demolition of institutionalised Hindu religion, Dalits can be genuinely free and get the dignity of life.

Again Laltu, in his debate with Santosh panda, his upper-caste employer, did not hesitate to question the practices of doing Ganesh puja and Saraswati puja in a public-funded institute. His sharp critique evoked article 28 (1) "No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds." Thus he pointed out how the promotion of any particular religion exposes the biased nature of the state.

Laltu not only rejected the dominant Hindu religion but all kinds of superstitious beliefs associated with religion. He did not believe in evil spirits and witches. He laughed at *shirakaleshi*. He also exposed the existence of other gods and goddess-like Thutimaili as a lie: "Only if there is a Thutimaili, will She possess her? Just as Phagnu's mother getting possessed by Thutimaili is a lie, the

existence of Thutimaili is also a lie. Whether it is Maili or Thakurani-everything is pure nonsense.”(81)

He further rejected the self-proclaimed mediators of God, i.e., When his mother asked him to pay obeisance to the Bididhungia Purohit of the Mahadev temple, he replied, “I will never do obeisance...never pay any respect to the old beggar.” (82)

And again, he also rejected Krupasindhu Baba, a follower of Mahima Dharma, and did not accept his leftover tea as prasada(83).

### **V.III.II. Laltu's rejection of Brahminical monopoly and Hindu varna System**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in his famous *Annihilation of Caste*, while critiquing the *Chaturvarna* system mentioned in the Hindu Vedas and Puranas, which is the root cause of discrimination amongst humans in Hindu society, call for the complete annihilation of caste, “In my opinion only when the Hindu Society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery” (80).

Just like Ambedkar, Laltu rejects the supremacy of Brahmins in the organisational structure of village life. In several instances in the text, he defies the caste norms. For example, according to the caste norms of the village community, it was forbidden for a Dalit/Dom boy to beat a Teli (OBC). However, when he was provoked by Yuvraj, who first punched him and bled him, he was not the one to think about being cast out; he instead “swung the stick, brought it down hard over Yuvraj's hand.” This was his first act of rebellion, although unknowingly done, against the hierarchical norms of society.

Similarly, when the Pangania Budha asked him to step aside from Baya's way because he was a powerful brahmin Gauntia of the village who can do anything to crush a Dom boy, he did not budge from his position. On the contrary, he even openly confronted him by seizing his illegal timber smuggling tractor.

Laltu further did not succumb to the pressure of the elite Marwari, Somen Agarwal, and in order to defeat his evil purpose, he motivated the Dalits to choose their own Sarpanch in the election.

### **V.III. III. Laltu and his Ambedkarite Humanism.**

The core of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy is 'humanism' based on democratic principles, liberty, equality, and social justice. Because of his lifelong activism to better the lives of the poor and the downtrodden, the oppressed, he is also known as the Messiah of the Dalits. His activism was not restricted to the only annihilation of caste but to end all forms of discrimination. i.e., exploitation of the labourers, women and children. In other words, he was a humanist who wanted complete emancipation of human beings from all kinds of bondage and slavery and not just caste.

Laltu also, in this text, exhibits this humanist philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar time and again. In the text, when Laltu learnt of Chemeni Ai, a poor elderly woman of Beheda village, being chated off her old-age pension by the Block Development Officer of Dharmagarh Block, who was also a Dom by caste, he became furious. He questioned his unjust way of siphoning these poor people's money and even resorted to physical violence, which is, of course, illegal, to give them justice. Laltu had to go to jail for that, but that marked the beginning of his social activism and got him a journalist job in the local daily newspaper, *Hastakhep*. Laltu's compassion for these have not who are the victim of both caste and class are exemplary.

On another occasion, when Laltu learnt about the organised attack on Muna, the fearless young orphan Dalit boy of Beheda village, orchestrated by Banabihari Tripathy (Baya the mad lawyer) and Somen Aggarwal

Thus Laltu's activism can be summed up in terms of Ambedkar's methodologies of “Educate, Agitate, Organise” for the emancipation of the Dalits. A Dalit needs to get educated first before he can have agitated thoughts for the movement so that people can organise with his support.” Laltu also seems to have been inspired by the same Ambedkarite ideology in the text. First, he moved



from Beheda village to Bhawanipatna to educate himself. His education later took the form of agitation when he saw the rampant corruption in the system. He did not hesitate to slap the corrupted BDO of the place that was cheating on people's pensions.

Moreover, later on, he organised and mobilised a group of Dalit youths and started Sahajzkhol Jungal Suraksha Committee to safeguard the jungle from illegal deforestation, wood cutting etc. He also organised Semi Seth's rice mill labourers to go on protest till they are adequately paid. Of course, he had to pay the price or being an activist, as he was falsely implicated of creating religious violence and was arrested by the police, but that is the price every activist has to pay for the larger good, that is the price a subaltern has to pay while articulating his voice, and that is the price a marginalised Other has to pay in his attempt to reach to the centre. Lastly, Laltu's activism is not restricted to his fight against caste discrimination but every form of corruption prevailing in the society, i.e., corruption, state-sponsored violence, money laundering etc. His activism is to safeguard the ideals enshrined in the constitution's preamble: justice, liberty, equality, fraternity.

#### VI. The Upper-castes' Hatred for Ambedkar and Ambedkarism in *Bheda*

The text further unambiguously presents the upper caste's myopic understanding of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and Ambedkarites. The conversations that transpired between Banabihari Tripathy and Semi Seth exemplify their deep-rooted prejudices and hatred for Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and Ambedkarites.

He was not just a cheat, but the leader of all cheats called Ambedkar...Oh yes, that Ambedkar," he continued, "Is it a constitution or a big zero? Do you know his caste? Mahar. Mahars in Maharashtra are like the Doms and the Ghasis of our area. So whoever is Dom is also a Mahar, understood?" "The country is governed by those laws; that is why it has come to this state. Don't you see that the Doms and the Ghais have become the sons-in-law of the government? That's why they

are pissing on our heads. If they study, they get stipends; if they look for a job, they have quotas. But their days are numbered, Seth. Let our party come to power. You will see we will throw that Mahar's constitution out on the dunghill. (59)

Their casteist slur against the Ambedkarite Dalits,

If the Doms have some food at home, they show off so much that you can't even imagine...and if they are able to even read two letters of the alphabet, they think that they know the Vedas and Upanishads by heart. They are not staying in the places assigned to them by caste rules. Because of their mobility today, they do not respect Indra or Chandra. Till yesterday we watched you removing the carcasses of cattle and eating carrion. During weddings and ceremonies, you beat the dhol and Nishan and ate rice seated on dunghills; after eating, you tied the leftover in the corner of your towel and took some home for your family and children. Today because you have two paisas, or you can afford to have two meals, or you can read two letters, does it mean you have become Brahmins? (58)

Their response to Ambedkarism, "if we do not control him now...his mischief will grow by the day" (56). And resultantly, in order to thwart the Ambedkarite movement that was gaining momentum in the village, leading to affirmative actions and a heightened sense of Dalit consciousness, which has the potential to subvert the traditional caste-based hierarchy and liberate human beings from this indignation, under the leadership of Laltu and his group of friends, both Banabihari Tripathy and Semi Agrawal conspired against them with a series of atrocious acts, i.e., falsely accused his father of corruption, stopped his mother from going to the temple, attacked Muna's shop and other houses of the Doms and finally accused Laltu, and have him arrested for "throwing a cow bone into the Mahadev temple" (98) and creating a communal riot. Thus Laltu had to pay the price because he argued with his Brahmin employer, the supposedly liberal brahmin, and the editor of the

newspaper *Hastakhep*, against the celebration of Ganesh puja and Saraswati puja in the state-sponsored school since it is against the constitutional ethos as envisioned by Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

## VII. Conclusion

To conclude, *Bheda* has faithfully portrayed the nuances of Dalit lived experience and stages of Ambedkarite Dalit consciousness through the portrayal of its three central characters, i.e., Dinamastre (Dinabandhu Duria), Masterani and Laltu (Lalatendu Duria) and by exposing the upper caste's narrow understating of Ambedkar and Ambedkarism and their resultant atrocities against the Ambedkarites through the delineation of such characters like Banbihari Tripathy (Baya the Mad Lawyer), Somen Agrawal (Semis Seth) and Santoshpanda. Whereas in the character of Dinamastre, it was the importance of education in formulating Dalit consciousness which was explored along with underscoring the merit discourse of the reservation narrative propagated by the upper castes; the rejection of the dominant religion, which is the basis of the caste system in India and the root cause of untouchability was explored in the Dalit Woman character called "Mastarani." Moreover, in the character of Laltu, the author has found the perfect outlet to textualize his Ambedkarite ideology; Laltu is created in the model of Ambedkar in his rejection of caste and religious norms and also in his activism based on humanism. Furthermore, through its portrayal of upper-caste characters, the novel has also successfully foregrounded the deep-rooted fear of the Brahmins and the Banias for Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and Ambedkarites, which/who can subvert their status quo.

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