



Bringing Dalit Voices into the Limelight: Impact of Translation

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“Incredible” India boasts of age-old traditions and culture but still it has experienced dark moments. It has a very long history about the suffering and mal-practices in the name of religions and morality. One of the major draw backs of the country is the caste system ‘*varna vyavastha*’. The caste system was established in the name of religion and enforced by and the support of kings who considered themselves as champions of religion - ‘*dharma*’. The caste system was based on birth. People inherited their caste from their parents and passed it on to their next generations. They had no right to change their caste as long as they practised the Vedic religion.

The lowest of the hierarchy were Shudras. They were considered and treated as the untouchables because of their violent religious practices, magical rites and so called ‘unclean’ habits. They were called ‘impure ones’. They were not allowed to enter a village or city during day time or walk in the same street where men of other ‘upper’ castes walked. Even their shadow was considered impure and their very sight was seen as an ill omen. So they lived mostly on the fringes of society, unknown and uncared for, following some obscure religion of their own and working mostly in the graveyards and cremation grounds or as hunters, butchers and professional cleaners of human waste. In this regard, Mahatma Gandhiji says, “.....untouchability is a curse that is eating into the vitals of Hinduism, and I often feel that unless we take due precaution and remove this from our midst, Hinduism itself is in danger of destruction” (Hingorani 159).

The adjective of the root word ‘dal’ is Dalit. The word ‘Dalit’ is found in many

Indian languages. The meanings given to ‘Dalit’ in the dictionaries are: scattered, split, crushed, dispersed, burst, torn as under, broken, destroyed. All these meanings sum up the exact position of the Indian Untouchables and also such tribes.

After prolonged suffering, some awakened souls of the Dalit community rose to express their frustration in their own ways. Some started protesting violently while others started their expressions through words which were gradually converted into literature. In 1970s, a movement named Dalit Panthers, in India, revived the term and expanded its reference to include all those who are downtrodden, and exploited economically, politically, socially or in the name of religion.

Earlier to these literary protests, Dalit struggle against casteist tradition was found in Kannada where Madara Chennaiah, an 11th-century cobbler-saint who lived in the reign of Western Chalukyas, is considered as the first poet of this tradition. Modern Dalit literature is directly connected with the protests staged by Jyotirao Phule during 19th century in Maharashtra for social awareness against the casteism. Thereafter Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar undertook many struggles for justice and upliftment of the Dalits like Mahad Chaubedar Tank Satyagrah, Kalaram Temple Entry in Nasik etc. About the importance of writing of the suffering of the Dalits, Dr B R Ambedkar writes,

You should not forget that in India, there is a separate world of the avoided, the Dalits, the poor. Try to understand their sorrows, tensions and devote your creativity to make their lives uplifted through

literature. Real humanity lies in it. (Vaghela 99)

In modern times, because of the legacy of Phule and Ambedkar, Dalit literature got momentum in Maharashtra. But before these writers gained importance in the 1960s, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat were already writing. In today's literary world, Dalit literature has attained immense prominence and standing. Dileep Padgaokar says in this regard, "It is remarkable that during short duration Dalit literature came into being and today it is moving fast from protest to strength, from strength to movement and from movement to revolution" (Vaghela 99). Thus, the term Dalit has moved on from being merely a caste to becoming a symbol of change and revolution. Later, these Dalit works have been translated into other Indian languages which motivated other fellowmen to go ahead on the path of protesting by writing. Their voices of assertion have gained audibility. Dalitness, in its real sense, is in the process of attaining de-mystification.

Though Gujarat's Dalit history has a rich episode dating the Medieval Period, it expanded its wings later. The story of human sacrifice of Maya, a Dalit youth, during the Solanki rule, for the construction of the Sahastraling Pond and the welfare of the society in Patan is still remembered vividly. The novel writing began when Nandshankar Mehta in 1866 wrote *Karan Ghelo* which has been considered as the first Gujarati novel. But before that, Sorabsha Munsaf translated a French novel in Gujarati named *Hindustan Madhye nu Ek Zupdu* in which the co-protagonist was from the down trodden group 'Pariyah'. Later, *Antarpat* by Snehrashmi and *Gramlakshmi* by Ramanlal Desai had some Dalit characters expressing their sufferings. Well known poet Narmad explained the casteism as main reason for the ruin of the Hindus in his poem 'Ruins of the Hindus' ('*Hinduo ni Padati*').

The death of Ambedkar in 1956 gave an ample way to the creativity among the Gujarati Dalit writers who wrote "Tribute"

articles and poems. On the issue of the origin of Gujarati Dalit literature, Rita Kothari writes, "Unlike Marathi Dalit literature, Gujarati Dalit literature had a fairly delayed beginning" (Kothari 4308). She is right in her saying this because, a group of Gujarati Dalit youths awakened only during the post-Independence era.

The beginning of the Gujarati Dalit prose has its roots in the magazine *Panther* by Rameshchandra Parmar published during 1975. Historically speaking, the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit short story made its appearance with *Gujarati Dalit Varta* (1987) edited by Mohan Parmar and Harish Mangalam. This was a well known and well received collection of works by Dalit writers in Gujarat. According to Prof Yashwant Vaghela, Gujarati Dalit Literature is "voices to the human sensations lying on debris of cultural values" (95). This expression can be seen when Dalpat Chauhan, a well known Gujarati Dalit poet writes about the pain and suffering of slavery in his poem 'To pachhi' as:

Slaves shackles. / How they
are / Are never seen by
eyes./When walking on road
/Heart skips beats, / When the
head bending for prayer/ cut
off suddenly, /When the hands
can't be raised / To touch the
horizon, / When the screams
of wife being raped against the
eyes and silence isn't broken, /
What will you call it, friends
??? (Vaghela 104)

Now is the time for the entire literary world to watch out for the products of the Dalit literary canon. Today, it is not an exaggeration to believe what Dalpat Chauhan says about his own notion regarding the post modern era he writes, "Dalit Literature Era is the Post Modern Era itself because major part of the post Modern era is occupied by Dalit literature. This new trend has created many new dimensions" (Chauhan 5).

Angaliyat is considered as the first Dalit novel written in any language in India.

This novel firmly puts Macwan on the National literary field. The novel won the first prize of Rs. 10,000 in a novel competition organized under Kanaiyalal Munshi Birth Century Celebration during that year. This was considered as the highest reputation given to the first novel by any writer. Later in 1989, this novel received the Kendriya Sahitya Akademi Award. It was skillfully translated by Rita Kothari from Gujarati into English as *The Stepchild*, and published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 2004. It has the honour of being the first Gujarati novel translated into English and published by OUP. It works on four levels. It is a gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death. It is a vividly coloured picture of the lives of two neighbouring villages in the Charotar district of central Gujarat. It is a document of the politics of the pre- and post-Independence years, as seen from the perspective of the downtrodden; and finally, it is an account of the struggle of one Dalit community against its upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite. The translation of the book inspired its readers to know what the Dalits have been experiencing.

Wikipedia writes, “Translation studies is an academic inter-discipline dealing with the systematic study of the theory, description and application of translation, interpreting and localization.” If a literary text is translated well, it creates its effect on the readers of the translated language as well. The World Literature becomes popular in vernacular languages and vice versa in such a way. Similarly, Dalit ethos had been limited to a specific region/language if it had not been translated into other languages. It was through translation that the world of Marathi Dalit writing opened up before Dalits of Gujarat, instilling in them an unease, and therefore inspiration to turn injustice and anger into a voice and text. The Dalit literary movement from Maharashtra influenced the Gujarati Dalit Sahitya and later these literary texts got translated into English or other languages for more impact. These translations made their

voices heard, their presence felt and their ethos visible to all. Their agonies may be specific to a region or a social set up but translations put them together as a whole, a universal trauma – similar in a way or the other, everywhere. Thus the Dalit voices were brought into lime lights through effective translations in major languages.

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