

Dalit Subjectivity in the Post-Independent Dystopian Indian Society: A Study of Selected Dalit Writings in English Translation

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Abstract

The commonly encountered dystopian societies of science fiction and political fiction are vastly different from the dystopian lives led by the Dalits and the social realism that surrounds them. This paper looks into the dystopian space of a Dalit settlement known by different names like *maharwada*, *chandalsahi* or a *pariah* street. This spatial arrangement is marked by curbing the aspirational lives of the Dalits. But these spaces are not imaginary spaces as seen in science fiction. They are exclusive spaces meant for people who carry out 'polluting' activities. As modernity begins to reinstate the spatial configuration of Indian society, carving out new and secularized public spaces in urban areas, the Dalit ghettos and all the lines of caste-ness that define it undergo a peculiar transformation. The transition from rural to urban settlements also alters the role played by women, a prime stakeholder in this dystopian society. This paper also explores the crucial role played by women as individual entities to revise the societal dystopian structures. This process, in turn, subverts the ascribed identity of women as mother, wife or daughter.

By focusing on a few selected stories by Urmila Pawar and Baburao Bagul, this paper further analyzes how far inclusivity has been achieved in the society or if it is still a distant reality to be countered by Dalit subjectivity through education, aspiration and critical consciousness. Finally, this paper interrogates who/what challenges this brahminical Hinduism that has resulted in this dystopia. What would be a society without caste? Will it be a utopic society, a *begumpura* as envisioned by Ravidas or brahminical hegemony will continue to strive towards achieving a *ramrajya*?

Keywords: Dalits, utopia, dystopia, space, inclusion, modernity

*Those who by mistake were born here
Should themselves correct this error
By leaving the country! Or making war!*

— Baburao Bagul¹

The kaleidoscopic Indian society cannot prevent it from being classified as gendered, classist and casteist in nature. Despite years of concerted efforts in the post-

Independence era, social justice in India seems to be a distant dream, a utopic vision still. It may be because the efforts have not been whole-hearted. Widespread poverty, traps of informal labour and exploitative working conditions create a dismal picture of the hierarchical nature of the society we live in. The historical power and social hierarchies created thereof have relegated women and the Dalits² at the lowest rung of the society. The rhetoric of equality and diversity falls flat when we consider the living conditions and the treatment meted out to the Dalits who have historically always been associated with filth. Hence, Indian society can be categorically stated as the dystopia of a status quo. The formulated division of labor gave way to subsequent division of laborers marking social fragmentation. The totalitarian authority of this dystopian Indian society is helmed by Brahminical Hinduism and its concomitant ideology. The abolition of untouchability is nothing but a legal fiction³. The dystopian Indian society with its entrenched caste system sees itself as a different kind of normality which further strips the Dalits of their dignity.

Tectonic turbulence in caste riled Indian society and the ubiquity of fear within the minorities mirror the dystopian vision of Indian society. Pain, horror and rage define the precarious lives and experiences led by the Dalits. In an attempt to challenge the systemic oppression of Brahminical Hinduism, Dr. Ambedkar gave a clarion call for education, organization and agitation. Ambedkar's call for education also echoes the words of Frederick Douglass, the Afro-American social reformer, who considered education to be the *modus operandi* to achieve liberation. In "Blessings of Liberty and Education", Douglass states:

Education... means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature. It is easy to deny them the means of freedom and the rightful pursuit of happiness and to defeat the very end of their being (n.p.).

In other words, the upward mobility of the Sudras in the field of education will challenge Brahminical hegemony. Further, literary assertion by Dalits and Dalit writers poses a challenge to the educational dystopia in the form of historical monopolization of knowledge by the dominant castes. The Dalit writings, in this case Bagul and Pawar, need not necessarily be propagandist in nature. These writings rather mirror the complexities of the social and cultural forces which reflect the lived experiences of the oppressed castes. The irresistibly personal stories make us question the elements of a dystopian society we live in.

While utopia takes us to a future, dystopia drags us into an abyss of dark reality. The two abstract concepts, the dream and the nightmare, and the polemics that lie therein also beg for inclusion simultaneously. The imaginations of utopia and dystopia explore the social and political structures of a society. Dystopian fictions, in particular, are built on an implicit assumption of what the norm is. But the question arises what is the norm in Indian popular culture? We start to interrogate if the lived reality of caste is not a dystopian vision par excellence. The creation of caste on the basis of division of labor soon paved the way for the division among laborers, giving rise to an almost compulsively enacted social fragmentation. This is reflective of the horrific human subjugation and as Ambedkar stood at the cusp of history, with all his commitment to the

ideals of egalitarianism and rationality, he was facing a most dystopian reality. It was the concerted efforts of anti-caste intellectual figures like Ambedkar that led to the emergence of Dalit subjectivity as we see today. The debate around the concept of contemporary chaotic dystopian Indian society, which entails systemic violence perpetrated on oppressed castes, need not necessarily imagine a prospective future. It may also lead to exploration of concrete practices through which oppressor as well as oppressed reimagine their present and try to reconstruct it into a credible future.

The quixotic dichotomy of utopia and dystopia has been an abiding trope in literature. The question of fear, both real and imagined, has dominated human lives since its inception. Miguel Abensour (2008) in his essay “Persistent Utopia” looks into the multiple meanings that are associated with the term utopia. It comes from ancient Greek, meaning “a place that does not exist.” But gradually the term has also been understood as both a “no place”—outopia—and a “good place”—eutopia (406). Dystopia, often conceptualized as an alternative nonexistent or non-desired reality, is well reflected in post-Independent India. Further, as Gregory Claeys (2013) says somebody’s utopia often implies and becomes somebody else’s dystopia, which in the long run makes these two terms structurally inseparable (20). This again makes one question if the utopia of the dominant castes is the dystopia of the oppressed castes.

Plethora of science fiction since the time of H.G Wells had been interspersed with dystopia. Often set in a futuristic post-apocalyptic world, the society is ravaged by war, religious fanaticism, environmental deterioration, class hierarchies, monstrous technological advancements leading to a post humanist world and so on. This assumption is challenged in contemporary India. Dystopia—precisely because it is so much more common to find in our contemporary times—bears the aspect of lived *experience*. Baburao Bagul’s *When I Hid My Caste* (2018) and Urmila Pawar’s *Motherwit* (2013) documents the lived experience and places the subjects directly in a dark and depressing abyss of reality. The adjective dystopian often implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail. So, there are non-literary, empirical usages to it as well. But I argue not for dystopia to be a thing of the future, but a materiality of the present.

If equality, amicable relationships and faith in fellow beings are the ideals which designate utopias as the prototype of an idealistic society, dystopias isolate individuals from one another and annihilate the social fabric by administering a number of disintegrating processes. Dystopian fictions provide us with a view from below, someone living under a totalitarian regime and whose individuality and dignity has been compromised under such a rule. In dystopias, as Julia Gerhard (2012) points out, “the concept of individuality is vanishing—personal life merges with the social, human body and mind are appropriated according to the communal needs of the state” (101). Exploring the corpus of Dalit literature becomes a testament which speaks volumes about the marginalization of certain communities based on their occupations. The subjugation of Dalit lives to serve the dominant castes as dictated in the dharmashastras strips them of their unique identity.

The oeuvre of Dalit literature is driven by revolt, pain and dissent. Baburao Bagul and Urmila Pawar question the functioning of a dystopian society as Dalits wield the pen to say aloud their stories. It is a manifestation of their rebellion, their revolt in the chaotic hierarchical society. Their characters refuse to bow down to a concretized system of

caste and gender. Their stories are marked by revolt, aspiration and hope for a better future. Bagul's characters in particular do not romanticize casteism but they demonize it and then convey that demonization to us so powerfully that it becomes difficult to overlook. The invisibilized Dalit lives are visibilized by writers like Bagul and Pawar.

Certain spaces are frequently deliberated upon in Dalit literature. Bagul and Pawar throw light on the spatial surrounding and the space called home. The Dalit ghettos are often seen as squalid eyesore or romanticized as a place where 'real' community feeling is experienced. The stench and the squalor of the slum describe the spatial surroundings of Bagul where he grew up. These urban slums become emblematic of impoverishment, violence and exploitation. In his stories like "Revolt", he clearly does not romanticize it. Being brought up in one such slum, he is aware of the dehumanizing effect it bears on its residents.

The Gandhian idea of viewing villages as self-sufficient units falls short in the post-Independent India with rampant casteist practices. In the "modernist" society, the remnant of the feudal past is still observed through villages. This rural urban divide has not precluded villages from becoming the sites from exerting Brahminical hegemony. Quoting Mohandas Naimishray's story "Reet" ("Custom"), Aditya Nigam (2010) says, an invisible *savarna rekha* (literally, a line of casteness) divides a settlement. Everything—the temple, the well, the pond, even the land—is marked by this line of difference, where one side is inhabited by those who have the language of rights and power and on the other by those who have but only duties (256). The hellishness of the dystopian space as noted by say, *maharwada*, *chandala sahi* or a *paracheri*⁴, draws attention to the proscriptions that come with that place. And the most loathsome of these prohibitions have to do with the denial of access to even clean drinking water from the wells, so that often these inhabitants have to drink the same dirty water from the open ponds that animals drink from. The Dalit settlements, often ghettoized, are the terrain of domination and resistance. The streets running across these settlements have witnessed multiple political protests, contestations and negotiations.

The "untouchability" of their caste is tattooed on their bodies; their very appearance is strictly kept under surveillance—their riding of horses and sporting of moustache is what we so frequently hear in the media that becomes a contention for the dominant castes. Marking the bodies as untouchable is also not always enough; in many parts of the country, the untouchable was, until very recently, required to announce his/her appearance from a distance so that the upper caste could escape the polluting shadow of this impure body.

The *maharwada* or *chandal sahi* is a dystopian, but certainly not an imaginary space. It is a real place, located at the periphery of the village or the town, an exclusive space meant to house people who are to undertake "polluting" activities, so that "purity" may rigorously be maintained within the precincts of caste society. The prohibitions of the village and their surrounding Dalit settlements were not quite possible to enforce in the city—believed to be a space also of anonymity, where the untouchable could now "pass." But this idea has been contested by Bagul and Pawar.

In her short story, "The Odd One", Pawar portrays the internal workings of a Dalit household and the prejudices the protagonist Nalini faces on the basis of her caste and gender. Nalini was fed up with the small house amidst the stench of a Dalit basti.

Nalini's getting a government house incurred envy and anger from her upper caste colleagues. The story further showcases the struggle of an educated Dalit woman, at home and at work outside. Nalini's role as a wife and a government employee reveals a gendered and casteist nature of labour. There is devaluation attached to domestic work, and though it is absolutely necessary socially, it is still one of the most abject and exploited occupations reserved for the most marginal women of society. Domestic labour acts as a real site of complying with and upholding the rigid institutions of marriage, family, and the household. Frederic Jameson (2005), for example, argues that some dystopias are, instead, the outcome of "a conviction about human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs" (198). The fact that Nalini gets a house under the affirmative actions by the government is neither received well by her colleagues (who think her of taking undue advantage of her caste) nor her in-laws (who believe she is breaking up the traditional structure of family).

Brahmanism is a subtler form of slavery. Brahmanism is one such dominant ideology prevalent in Indian society. It is named after the brahmins positioned at the topmost rung of the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar calls out Brahmanism in the preface to *The Untouchables* as "a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity" (239). Brahmanism proliferated through the puranas and scriptures with exclusive access to the dominant castes. Thus, puranas and scriptures became a weapon to dehumanize and demonize the marginalized section. But the characters in Bagul and Pawar's stories portray an emotional and a prosaic world which registers their protest vividly.

In Bagul's short story "Revolt", the protagonist Jai rebels to not be a *bhangi*⁵ after being educated. Education enabled him to altercation and deliberate with others well. He was not one to be complicit in his present plight. His father Parbhu's priority like many others of his community was to get a job and earn some money. For him education could wait, but not for Jai. It shows the aspiration of a Dalit in a caste riled society. In fact, Jai proclaims, "When I finish my education and I am as wise as Socrates, I am going to destroy this inhuman practice of untouchability" (Bagul 69). Jai's determination is further revealed, "I am not going to do that job. I will never become a Bhangi" (ibid 70). He yearns for the respect adhered to an educated man. Jai's dreamworld of the future is one where he is identified as Dr. Jaichand Rathod. But how conducive is the environment to fulfill this goal of his? It appears to readers that he dreams of a utopia. Bagul's critique of the political economy of a caste society is difficult to miss where he highlights the dystopian and unequal life of a *mehtar*⁶ in Indian society. Jai raises apt questions in such a dystopian world but there is no one who can provide him with answers. Jai's contempt for the life of a bhangi is reflected where he exclaims, "Nowhere in the world is there a country like this one, which persecutes you every step of the way. How much must we bear? How much must we swallow? Is this a country or a prison, a jail? And why must I, an innocent man, live the contempt-ridden, insult-filled life of a prisoner?" (ibid 71). He further questions, "Where is it written that a Bhangi's son must become a Bhangi?" The father responds, "In our poverty. In our Dharma. In our country" (ibid 71). Of course, this answer does not satiate him. He finds the objective conditions around him, of poverty, filth, and stigma, disgusting—unlike the books he reads, which show him a bright future. It is here that he becomes an emotionally violent man. Jai sees himself and his wife as victims of conditions that are essentially constructed by caste. He is as powerless as his wife, but he has the power and wealth of books. But does his

uneducated wife Shanti have wealth and power? Bagul draws our attention towards the plight of Dalit women in these dystopian times who are triply marginalized on account of their caste, class and gender. The isolation felt by them in these times is immeasurable. Jai slowly realizes his isolation and his hatred towards his family, mother, father and wife is primarily because of the historical conditions that gave rise to it.

As the story progresses and Jai detests being a *mehtar*, he beats the carter to death. A person who dreamed of becoming a professor becomes a murderer instead. But he is fully aware of his rage, his anger, and what he has done. He reaches his mother and begs for punishment from her. He seeks justice from his mother. He concludes Manu⁷ to be a murderer for codifying the caste system. Unlike a lot of his contemporaries who justly portrayed the Dalit lives in their writings, Bagul outrightly attacks Manu. The other writers surmise the pangs of Dalit lives while Bagul questioned the root cause. He explores how Manu still exerts a strong influence on the people.

While “Revolt” depicted the aspiration of getting a job, the titular story of Bagul’s collection shows the consequences faced after getting one. The proclamation by the Mahar protagonist Masthur in “When I hid my caste” that a cup of poison is a friend for a Dalit, speaks volumes about the dystopia we live in now. The story revolves around how the caste prejudices lead to hiding of one’s caste and the guilt associated with a Dalit on getting respect from an upper caste. There is a lingering fear that their secret can be revealed any time now and an anxiety ensues. The utopic vision of a Dalit subject is reflected in Masthur’s identity, “Why do you ask me my caste? Can you not see who I am? Me, I am a Mumbaikar. I fight the good fight. I give my life in the defence of the right. I have freed India from bondage and I am now her strength” (Bagul 89). He also says, “We’re all the creators of the new nation. There are no dhedas, no poor, no Brahmins” (ibid 89). In this he tries to find an ally in Kashinath Sakpal. Ramcharan, who initially admires Masthur for being a poet, unleashes violence upon knowing his caste. He beats him for concealing the truth. Masthur invites his wrath for daring to break the Brahmanical monopolization over knowledge. He is subjected to cruelty for writing and reading, something which the lower castes were barred from doing for ages. Even Masthur’s poetic talent was discarded because of his caste. He is placed under constant surveillance to not reveal caste. Internalization of caste prejudices made Masthur guilt ridden every day of his employment. The city, a place of anonymity, does not provide him shelter from the caste biases harbored by the dominant castes.

The anonymity granted by urban spaces also provides the opportunity of social mobility to an individual. As Rebecca Solnit (2000) in her work *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* says, “The street means life in the heady currents of the urban river in which everyone and everything can mingle. It is exactly this social mobility, this lack of compartments and distinctions that gives the street its danger and its magic, the danger and magic of water in which everything runs together” (186). But even though the topological space occupied by an individual changes, the caste consciousness traverses around the world. The non-resident Indians cannot shed the vestiges of the caste system. In Pawar’s “Circle”, the protagonist Netra plans to escape from the setup of arranged marriages which is beset with dowry and casteism. Despite relocating to Mauritius, she realizes the apparition of casteism has in fact materialized and she has not left it behind.

Ambedkar’s clarion call to educate, organize and agitate is a tool for insurgency. But a lack of formal education is demeaned as ignorance. So, what about the education

obtained through lived experiences? Education is required for the Dalits but not at the cost of dismissing the informal education obtained primarily by women. The title *Mother Wit*, alludes to the wit, agency and strength the women characters possess and exercise when faced with difficult situations. This collection documents a protest without any sloganeering, spearheaded by Pawar through the various stories that she pens. The story "Armour" revolves around sexual innuendoes directed at women on a daily basis. Indira, a working lady goes to the market to sell mangoes. But her body is frequently hypersexualized as it is both Dalit and labouring, a body that has historically been exploited. A laxity is observed in terms of sexual chastity as one moves down the ladder of social hierarchy. A Dalit woman is sexualized not only by the upper caste men but also by her own community. In an attempt to prevent her mother's objectification, Gaurya gradually becomes the repository of patriarchal values himself whereby he tries to regulate and control his mother's words and acts. In the final scene he is rather taken aback on seeing his mother's retaliation towards the offenders. She says, "Yes, yes. These are mangoes from a choli, but your mother's choli. If you are so interested in checking them out, go and find your mother's choli. Go" (Pawar 86). Indira uses the elusive nature of language to speak back to the patriarchy that uses the same tool to hurl indignities at her and the women of her community. There is a reclamation of the abusive words directed at her. She turns the meaning of the word 'choli' to mean 'Sita's choli'; Sita often being called 'Ma' or mother in local usage. Sita choli is also the name of her village. Indira uses the same coded language as do the men who use it to humiliate her but transforms this quality of language into a feminist tool.

The final story, "The Cycle of Dhamma", portrays the struggle of a recently widowed Dalit Buddhist woman. The idea of giving a woman a deciding voice or acknowledging her "mother-wit" is so revolting to the village elders, that they find it emasculating in nature. Her idea of preserving their art of weaving baskets, or burying the dead body of her husband to maintain fertility of the land is outrightly rejected by the men because of her gender and lack of formal education. But this no-nonsense woman does not step back without drawing apologies from men for their demeaning behavior towards women. These consist of infrapolitics where every day small acts of resistance become crucial to survival in dystopian society. Traditional feminine wisdom might not appear feminist in an obvious way, but they often work more discreetly, employing the tools at their disposal to threaten patriarchy at home. And that is exactly how the dystopia is challenged.

When we observe the protagonists of Bagul's stories, they always have an identity which they have scripted themselves. With their ability to rebel, they also display their rage, anxiety, longing and aspiration. The brutal turbulent circumstances engendered by the caste system has not stopped them from questioning the dystopian world they inhabit. According to Eleanor Zelliot (1982), Bagul's comments evoked pungent emotions and the mood of Dalit literature. She quotes Bagul,

Even if Manu has been thrown into darkness, he has not died. He is living today in books, in holy scriptures, in temple after temple. He lives in mind after mind. The structure of the society that he created is what we have today. He is so great that society's arrangements are under his control. And only his loving people are at the centre of power. So in India at this time there are two worlds, two powers,

two life traditions and two scriptures. He who wants victory, he who wants influence must take a role in determining the future (56).

The Indian dystopian society witnesses a murky intersection of caste, class and gender. Frank Ruda in his provocatively titled book *Abolishing Freedom* (2016) in the aptly named “Provocations”, says “Act as if the apocalypse has already happened” (xi)! Ambedkar’s recognition of the dystopia which had already arrived led him to declare, “I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power” (qtd. in Zelliott 147). With this leap of faith in himself he forced the Dalits to question the reality of a lived dystopia in all its absurd and wanton cruelty as it bares its fangs.

A utopian land is concerned primarily with social and political structures. So, the individual agency is often undervalued. On the other hand, tales of dystopias primarily revolve around the helplessness of personal subjects against supra individual forces⁸. In our current society we find Brahmanical superstructure as that force which leaves the oppressed castes alienated from society. Dystopia is often seen as totally opposite to utopia. But dystopia may alternately be seen as a utopia that has gone wrong or something that serves a singular section of society. Utopias involve an analysis or diagnosis of the present, a review of the past and outline possibilities for the future. Utopias are interesting as imaginations but they become potent when they are backed by power. Utopias are essentially plans to engineer altruistic societies. But they have almost always yielded dystopias instead, where freedom gives way to organized repression in the name of some exalted cause. One such oft cited utopia in the Indian context is the *ram rajya*. The utopic ram rajya was never for women and the Dalits. Shambuka and Sita were ill-treated. Guru Ravidas held in his heart a pious desire to create a society where no one faced discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, social and economic status; where people would pay no taxes and enjoy the freedom to freely migrate to the places of their choice. He envisioned a society with people living in harmony without any sort of discrimination. He named this ideal society “*Begampur*” (a place with no pain). In the present context, the oscillation between ram rajya and begumpura seems unending.

Notes

¹“You Who Have Made a Mistake”, *Poisoned Bread*, p. 70

²The term Dalit means ground down and broken to pieces in Marathi and is a pseudonym that Dalits adopted in the twentieth century

³Sukhadeo Thorat chronicles the legal provisions adopted by different governments to abolish untouchability in India. He writes, In the “protective sphere” untouchability was legally abolished and its practice in any form foreboded by the Anti-Untouchability Act, of 1955. Nearly two decades later, in 1976, the 1955 Act was reviewed in order to make it more stringent and effective, and the “Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955” (PCR Act) was enacted. In 1989, the government enacted yet another Act, namely the Scheduled Castes/Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act in order to prevent atrocities against members of the SC/ST. The need for this additional act was felt because under the circumstances, PCR 1955 and normal provisions of the Indian Penal Code had been found to be inadequate to provide safeguards to SC/ST against several crimes.

⁴ Maharwada refers to the places at the outskirts of the village to shelter the Mahars. These societal outcasts are also named as *antevasi*, literally meaning living at the end. Chandalasahi refers to a locality meant for housing chandalas, the ones responsible for the disposal of carcasses. Paracheri refers to the living areas of the pariahs. It is to be noted that these oppressed groups do not belong to the *chaturvarna* of the four *varnas*. They are the fifth and therefore often referred to as the *panchamas*, or the outcasts.

⁵ Bhangi refers to an untouchable caste who are assigned the task of sweeping.

⁶ Mehtars were in charge of cleaning toilets

⁷ Manu is believed to be a lawgiver among the first who had codified rules of *Manusmriti*.

⁸ This idea has been explored in depth by Zsolt Czigányik in his essay “From the Bright Future of the Nation to the Dark Future of Mankind: Jókai and Karinthy in Hungarian Utopian Tradition.”

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