

The Politics of Survival and Recovery in Indian Dalit “Testimonio”

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A ‘testimonio’ is a narrative where the protagonist writes his or her own experience as an agent of a collective memory, identity and experience (George Yudice, 91). Testimonio is defined as

a novel or novella-length book or pamphlet...told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or ‘significant life experience’ (John Beverley,1992,91-114).

John Beverley discusses ‘testimonio’, in the context of Latin American Spanish literature. However, the genre has similarities common with Indian Dalit autobiographical narrative. It is not, however, wise to assume that testimonio is all about oppression and injustice. Testimonio illuminates ways to survive and even thrive by finding meaning and significance in the struggle of existence towards human dignity.

Dalit writing is a genre that has been marginalised in Indian literature. The term “Dalit” comes from the Marathi “dala”, meaning “of the soil”. Today it encompasses the tribals, socially suppressed caste groups, the working class, so called criminal tribes and the exploited. Dalit literature can be termed as literature of suffering and trauma that preceded the historical incidents of torture, discrimination, maltreatment, exploitation

and genocide. For centuries, the Dalits have been victims of gross human rights violations. Their low social and economic status within Indian society is a direct offshoot of this discrimination. All these have been occurring in a country where government has incorporated human rights into its constitution. The life of Dalit people is a saga of discrimination, deprivation and dispossession. What is important is that in the case of Dalits, there has been no visible self-representation of their trauma. Dalits have very rarely represented themselves. The social structures and main-stream literature attempt to obliterate the Dalit's very history by refusing him/her the right to bear witness to the atrocity. Dalit trauma has always been represented by others, while the victims have themselves always been silent. So there exists a gap between atrocity and representation. Dalit testimonios fill the gap. This journey from representation by dominant culture and society to self-representation is a gradual process in which the Dalits are initially depicted as inferior or of lower caste and class and it is through self-representation by dint of their writings that they succeeded in speaking with their own voices instead of being spoken about or derided by others. The Dalits used the autobiographical mode to transform a gruelling and harrowing experience of pain, suffering and humiliation into a narrative of subversion, defiance, resilience and spirited resistance. These life-narratives blaze a new trail in Dalit literature.

Autobiographies are writings by selves which are impressed by self-representation. On the contrary, in testimonios, self cannot be defined in individual terms but only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle. Dalit autobiographical narratives can be termed as 'testimonio' as they narrate a collective biography. Dalit writings are originated from brutal experiences. These are the experiences shared by many Dalits across India. Dalit authors point out that the trauma of Dalits is the inevitable consequence of a flawed religious and historical narrative tradition, as much as the Hindu law, colonial discourses that construct the Dalit as a lesser human being.

I would like to show how testimonio narratives have been used by Dalit writers as a form of political assertion of identity. Beverley has stated that a testimonio is not about a "problematic hero" but about a "problematic collective situation" (95). Dalit writers as representatives of their community document the atrocities committed upon their communities. Through their writings they show the process of loss of and threat to identity through policies of erasure and subsequent resilient modes of protest and resistance.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), first published in Hindi, is an

autobiographical account of growing up as a member of the “lower castes” in rural India and his journey through education to a metropolitan life. This life-long journey is not at all a smooth one. He had to confront the tentacles of caste all through his life. The word ‘joothan’ refers to the leftovers. Valmiki goes on to give a detailed description of preserving and eating the joothan after reprocessing it, during the ‘hard days of the rainy season’. The book seems to be giving a glimpse of the scale of poverty and suffering due to hunger in Valmiki’s community. In the very act of giving joothan or leftover food to the Dalits lies an exercise of power by the upper castes. On the occasion of the landlord’s daughter’s wedding, when all the guests have eaten, Valmiki’s mother asks the landlord for some fresh food for the children, the landlord remarks:

You are taking a basketful of joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going (Valmiki 11).

Thus, giving of joothan is a mechanism which ensures that the Chuhras don’t forget their “place” and the caste hierarchy and the corresponding power structure is maintained. Giving of joothan is not only an act of charity towards the impoverished but a means of robbing the Dalits of their humanity, dignity and sense of worth, and binding them into perpetual subordination. Valmiki always remains on the margins of privilege. Several of his fellow officers and subordinates comment disparagingly on his writing. Caste continues to haunt him and his family.

Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (2003), again translated from the Marathi, is the autobiography of a Mahar, a lower-caste boy who struggles against all caste-informed odds and goes on to become a major literary figure and government official. Limbale locates his flawed family life, patronage and upbringing within the social system. He reveals what ought to be a disgraceful fact –that he is the illegitimate son of an upper caste Lingayat community man and a lower caste Mahar community woman. Sharan, the protagonist, is haunted by his fractured identity-“Am I an upper caste or an untouchable?”(Limbale ix). In an interview, Sharankumar Limbale says,

In rural areas the Dalits are harassed by upper caste people and in urban life the upper caste people are torturing the educated dalits in many ways. ¹

Limbale chooses to call his son Anaarya, which means lowborn, as a sign of his protest against iniquitous social system.

Laxman Maruti Gaikwad's *Uchalya* is a harrowing autobiography detailing the author's trials and tribulations as he is born in a caste branded as a thieving caste—a 'criminal tribe' by the colonial administration in a 19th Century India. With the publication of *The Branded* translated from his autobiographical novel *Uchalya*, in 1998, the sufferings and emotional complexities of a tribe historically considered as criminals, came to the fore. Thievery was one of the primary occupations of this tribal community in which Laxman Gaikwad lived. The people of this community were not allowed to choose any other profession because nobody relied upon them. As Laxman Gaikwad says,

Even if someone desired to do honest work, nobody would employ him. The police would beat us making false allegations of theft; even when, in fact, no theft had been committed (Gaikwad 62).

Gaikwad focuses on the corruption in the police department. According to him, the police were also thieves but of different kinds :

If we ever travelled without a pass we were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up, and set free only after exorbitant amounts had been extracted from us (Gaikwad 2).

Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1997) *An Outsider* brought to the attention of the public the problems of nomadic tribes arising out of their social and economic conditions. In this book Mane demonstrates his overcoming of difficult circumstances through individual effort and perseverance. This autobiographical narrative, published originally in 1980, gives a vivid account of the writer's struggle in life and simultaneously it explores the vicissitudes of the Kaikadi caste. Mane records how tribal people are degraded when they attempt to study :

“ You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? ... If they study who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing! You want to study; huh!” The school master scoffed (Mane 36).

Since they are considered as criminals they have to give details to the village chief.

Jaisingea and father had gone to the village chief on our arrival. It was obligatory for the nomadic tribes to inform the village chief on their arrival. Also they had to give him details of the number of people, donkeys, fowls, dogs and so on (Mane 32).

In spite of all the difficulties, the text illustrates Mane's rise to success, thereby encouraging other oppressed people to be victorious.

Testimonios of women authors often expose the hidden operations of gender that exist as defining factors in the organisation of society. Indigenous women writers have successfully appropriated the narrative of testimonio in their relentless effort to challenge caste and patriarchy. Indian women's testimonio literature should be considered as a formidable challenge to the authoritarian powers that refuse and violate human rights to downtrodden people. Recovering a woman's voice is, therefore, very important to bring to the fore the conspiracies and practices that subjugate women.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) records the sufferings of and atrocities perpetrated upon a large section of the population. Says Bama,

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma- of my community- whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages. ²

The Tamil version of Bama's *Karukku* appeared in 1992. This life-narrative is concerned with the grave issue of caste oppression within Catholic Church. It delineates the tension between the self and the community and presents Bama's life as a process of self-illumination and self-realisation. The text highlights social and institutional betrayal, discussing the oppression borne by Dalits at the hands of state (police), panchayat, the upper castes, bureaucracy and the church. Her narrative is a virtual testimony to a life of deprivation, marginalisation, misrepresentation, maltreatment experienced by the Dalit women. It is a trenchant critique of casteism that prevailed in India. She writes how 'upper caste' Christians ask her to shift elsewhere from her seat when they came to know of her caste while travelling by buses. Bama decided to become a nun and chose to enter a convent so that she can get the opportunity to work for other children who struggle as she had done. To her utter dismay, she discovered that the convent does not know the meaning of poverty and it is indifferent to the cause of the Dalits.

And this convent too was not without its caste divisions. From the very first moment I understood the state of affairs...And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings (Bama 25).

The more Bama noticed this, the more frustrated she felt. Her mind was disturbed and her consciousness was bruised. She left the convent. Then came the writing. Bama wrote from the heart about her dreams, her aspirations and her desires. The writing proceeds from the account of bitter caste experiences while also gesturing at the ways in which victims have fought, overcome and survived the event. Bama tries to uplift the Dalit self-respect and at the same time appeals to the Dalits to realise the importance of educating themselves to elude all forms of oppression. She elevates her autobiographical tone from individual to the communal seeking justice to change and reform their lives and she tells her people,

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustices of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings, we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low (Bama 28).

The book records a spiritual development both through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realisation of herself as a Dalit. In *Karukku*, the "absence of the self" and the presence of the "collective we" is evident. Bama's text instead of privileging her own voice functions as a site for the criss-crossing of multiple voices from within her community. True to the characteristic feature of testimonio genre, *Karukku* becomes a text where the common people metonymically stand for the whole community. Bama speaks for an entire community. In the Preface to the first edition of *Karukku*, Bama writes,

In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them (Bama xxiv).

In *Aaydan* Urmila Pawar's objective is to document both caste and patriarchy in the lives that enter into the weave of her memoir. The original title of Urmila Pawar's life-narrative 'Aaydan' is a word from the local dialect spoken in villages that form the background of her life. Aaydan is weaving of basket by Burud community of Ratnagiri district. Aaydan is the name for the cane baskets that her

mother wove to sell for income for the family. She writes in the Preface,

My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us (Pawar x).

Aaydan or *The Weave of My Life* (2008) as translated by Maya Pandit represents a terrain where the Dalit women stand today. Pawar recounts three generations of Dalit women who left no stone unturned to overcome the burden of their caste. Pawar grew up on the rugged Konkan coast, near Mumbai, where the Mahar Dalits resided at the centre of the village so that the upper castes could summon them at any time. She locates her book in the intertwining social contexts of caste and women's issues. She eventually left Konkan for Mumbai, where she became a member of a feminist organisation and started a feminist group for Dalit women with friends and fellow writers. In the concluding paragraphs of *Aaydan* Urmila Pawar writes,

Life has taught me many things, showed me so much; it has also lashed out at me till I bled, I do not know how much longer I am going to live; nor do I know in what form life is going to confront me. Let it come in any form, I am ready to face it stoically. That is what my life has taught me. That is my life and that is me (Pawar 320) .

Aaydan interrogates the very established ideologies of caste, patriarchy and of course, the iniquitous social systems. In this life-narrative, Pawar unveils her relentless effort to surmount personal tragedy and create consciousness among the Dalit women. Like other Dalit testimonios, in *Aaydan* too, the focus is on community, rather than on individual life.

Dalit 'testimonio' narratives are narratives of loss and survival. These narratives resist and revolt, counter and confront the forces that dominate mainstream literature. They also generate awareness. The Dalit writers build solidarities through the charged content of their life-narratives, create awareness of the hidden history of India. The authors of these texts speak for themselves, they re-script history, re-define literary conventions and re-inscribe stories which have been either forgotten or ignored. As Ariel Dorfman has put it, testimonios must be understood as "texts that present themselves as instruments to drastically influence the social flow of events" (154). Kimberley Nance likewise states that "As part of a social project, testimonio is... [a matter] of speaking of one's suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to

act against the injustice of it" (90). "Testimonio speakers", Nance points out, "declare emphatically that their projects neither end with the production of text nor even with its enthusiastic reception. Instead, they describe the texts as intermediate steps in a process directed toward producing change in the lifeworld" (14). Dalit life-narratives or 'testimonios' have become the lingua franca to articulate and address the problems of suffering and pain, and, therefore become the potent vehicle for championing human rights discourse.

Notes:

1. "An Interview with Sharan Kumar Limbale" by Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu <http://www.the-criterion.com>
2. Bama, "Recognition for the Language of My People is The Biggest Award I Can Win ", Interview, 26 April 2001. <http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>

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