

Observe, Revolt, Win – The fight against Untouchability in Vinodini’s “Thirst”

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Abstract: The paper presents the issue of the dispute between the upper class Brahmins and the lower class Dalits on the matter of touching the water of the only well in the village as presented in the play. The hypocrisy in the play is shown by how the upper class people keep the village in their hands and keep the situation in their favor as per the need of the hour. They can rebuke a person and then in their time of need, they might also request the same person to do as per their bidding. When this is understood, the ‘Dalits’ revolt – and they win their right to one of the most essential elements of life – Water.

Keywords – Caste, Dalit, Play, Untouchability, Water

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIETY AND THE CASTE DIVISION:

The Indian society has been stratified into many sections since the pre-modern times. The stratification was based on the concept of *Varna*. *Varna* is a form of ‘class’ division. Four classes existed in the Vedic Society: The Brahmins, The Kshatriyas, The Vaishyas and the Shudras. *Varna* literally means color. It was a base of dividing people into classes. The Brahmins were the priestly people, The Kshatriyas were the rulers, administrators and warriors, The Vaishyas were artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers and The Shudras were the laboring class.

A fifth group of people, now known as Dalits, was historically excluded from the system as they were deemed to be entirely outside the scope of such stratification. They are banished from the society even today as untouchables in many parts.

The word ‘Dalit’ particularly emphasizes the dehumanizing ‘caste oppression’ that makes them outcastes and Untouchables (a degradation not shared by the tribals or soshits) within the context of the Hindu caste system with its religio-social organizing principle of ‘purity and pollution’ ... (Michael)

The term ‘Dalit’ thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on the ground of their lowly birth. The word ‘Dalit’ is a descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimized section of the Indian population right down the ages. (Michael)

According to the rules made by the higher class Brahmins, any form of physical touch with the Dalits would make them ‘impure’. Drawing their references from Vedas and Puranas, the Brahmins and other class of Hindus consider them outcast since the mere presence of the Dalits can pollute the sacred things. (Aziz)

S. M. Michael analyzes Dumont’s structuralist approach to show the pure/impure binary structural and functional opposition in a Hindu Society:

Brahmins and Untouchables are conceptually opposed in a number of ways that contribute to their archetypal purity and impurity, according to Dumont. The Brahmin lives in the center of the village and is a ‘god on earth’, while the Untouchable lives outside the village and is apparently excluded from religious life. The murder of a Brahmin is as heinous a crime as the murder of a cow, while the Untouchable is a scavenger and the eater of dead cows. The Brahmin purifies himself in order to approach the gods and thus mediates between man and god. The Untouchable makes personal purity possible by removing the strongest sources of organic impurity and mediates between man and the maleficent ‘demons’. (Michael, Introduction)

The Vedic society made it compulsory for the Dalits to observe the restrictions laid on them completely and loyally. Going against any of the norms will outrage the dominant ones and the Dalit who went against them will be labeled arrogant and disrespectful. The punishment will be harsh, which can be from publicly shaming the person to even killing them, to set an example for the others. As per the theory of the Self and the Other, the upper castes are the Self and the Dalits are the Others. Talking back of the Dalits to the upper castes is like talking back of the Other to the Self. When the Other talks back in that way, the mental restrictions binding the Other gets broken in the process and the identity of the Self is challenged.

Dalits should not adhere to these language regulations. They should not be silent. They should not keep their mouth shut. There is no need to degrade you. Talk! Keep talking! Talk aloud! [...] The niceties in handling certain prescribed words such as 'euphemism' and 'politeness' should be violated. (Gauthaman)

This dominant ideology of the upper class and the caste based tyranny towards the Dalits must be questioned and eradicated. This could be done only by the Dalits as the upper class will of course not give up their superiority. The claim of identity must be made by the Dalits. A body of literature must be produced that puts up the voice of the Dalits and registers their anger and opposition towards these ideologies.

Through literature only, the notion of Untouchability could be destabilized. Through literature, the existence of the Dalits could be made visible. This will not be easy as the opposition of the Self might be strong but the Other has to raise their voice.

II. CASTE AND LITERATURE

The voice of protest and resistance in literature is comparatively newer and especially in Drama, the Dalit voice remains silent till 1980s. The initial phase of visceral portrayal of oppressed, suppressed, wronged and subjugated Dalit class has given away the place to more rational picture of Dalit consciousness and their struggle for equality and justice through the writings of prominent Dalit novelists, poets and playwrights. Educated by the western education system and enlightened by the rational thoughts of Western Culture, these writers reflect on the condition of the Dalit community and raise their voice on several issues of Dalitisation by the upper class Hindus. (Aziz)

The Dalit literature has famous writers like Mahatma Jotiram Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (commonly known as Periyar), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and others who tried to create a consciousness in various fields for the Dalits like social, religious, economic and political. The Brahmin tyranny in the social sphere was publicly exposed and ridiculed by Naicker. He organized the 'Self – Respect Movement' in 1925 for Dravidian uplift. The deceptive methods of the Brahmins were exposed and this created quite a storm in the society.

But the major role was played by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who fought untouchability upfront. He was the pioneer to build a new India free from all the shackles of caste based restrictions. A free, open, equal and non hierarchal Indian society was what he wanted his country to be. According to him, untouchability was more a political problem than a social one. According to Ambedkar, it was difficult for the so called untouchables to be accepted into the society. He understood that there are only two possible options for the untouchables: a political unity and an *en masse* conversion. In 1936, he talked of conversion of the untouchables to another religion: "Though I was born a Hindu, I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu." (31 may 1936, Bombay)

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had a vision to make India a nation where people are not judged or marginalized by their birth into the shackles of casteism. His vision is yet not fulfilled but the movement started by him has gained momentum over the years and it has also been supported through literature. Raj Gauthaman says in his article that the Dalits have been steeped in guilt, fear, despair and poverty. They have been bonded with ignorance and slave mentality since so many centuries that they have to get rid of this mental block by attacking, humiliating and rejecting the rules of this hegemonic culture.

III. 'THIRST'

Vinodini is a Kannad playwright who herself belongs to Dalit community. She has portrayed the pain and agonies of the community in her play *Daaham* – originally written in Kannada and translated into English as *Thirst*. She conveys a strong message through her play.

The unfair domination and exploitation of the dalit people must end and the dignity of life and their share of land resources must be returned to them. [Vinodini] responds with sensitivity to their needs and is able to record the painful discrimination that her people have suffered for centuries. (Mukherjee)

The play deals with the issue of the dispute between the upper class Brahmins and the Dalits on the matter of touching the water of the only well in the village. The Dalits dug the well but they were not allowed to take water from it. They were forced to live in severe poverty in an unhygienic part in the outskirts of the village. The hypocritical and shrewd ways and the inhuman approach of the Brahmins to maintain their self-made dominant position in the society is reflected in the play. The play is a benchmark in itself as it is one of the first of its kind where the Dalits revolt against the Brahmins. The Dalits not only oppose the Brahmins but also rebel openly against the inhuman atrocities of the Brahmins towards them on illogical and antisocial aspects.

The play is about Malapalli village where there is a dispute between the Dalits and the Brahmins. The Dalits are always oppressed by the Brahmins but they are too weak to oppose it. Also, it has been established that whosoever tries to speak against the Brahmins, is murdered secretly.

When there was a drought in the village few years ago, the entire village was affected. At that time, the Brahmins of the society persuaded the Dalits to dig a well. The head of the Dalits at that time, chinnaiah (uncle) of Dasu made sure to mention that when the well is dug, there will be a separate pulley for the Dalits. Subbba Reddy, the Brahmin head mentioned that there will be four pulleys on all the four sides of the well and the

Dalits could use any of them. At this, chinnaiah still argued to put up a separate pulley. In desperation and compulsion, the Brahmins agreed at that time to put up a fifth pulley, especially for the Dalits. The well was a combined need of the Brahmins as well as the Dalits. However, only the Dalits worked hard on it and the Brahmins did not help. When the well was dug and the Dalits went on to fetch water from the well from the pulley meant for them, the log on the pulley broke on the very first attempt and they could not get water. This was a conspiracy of the Brahmins to use a poor quality piece of wood in the fifth pulley. The Dalits were not allowed to touch the other four pulleys. The Brahmins made this up as a religious issue.

[t]he Brahmins came and said that it is ominous. Since the low caste people went equals with the upper caste people, Mother Gangamma was angry, they said. If it went on like this, she would disappear into depths with anger, they said. The village would become a desert. (Vinodini)

The hypocrisy behind this is amusing and disturbing. The well was dug up by the Dalits and at that time, the so called Gangamma did not have any problem but the moment the Dalits touched the water after the well was ready, Gangamma would be angry. Such a double standard behavior of the Brahmins was not understood by the Dalits. However, chinnaiah asked to put up a new pulley. He confronted the Brahmins openly. His dead body was found the next day. Rosammavva, the woman who cursed the villagers for their questionable behavior, was beaten up severely. After these two incidents, the Dalits gave up their struggle and gave in to the unjust atrocities of the Brahmins. They decided never to speak up against the Brahmins.

As far as the water need was concerned, the Dalits were not allowed to take water from the well and they had to wait at the well for the mercy and sympathy of an upper caste woman. If not, they had to walk for ten miles to fetch water from a canal which was used to bathe the cattle and drink that water.

The upper class people had murdered the chinnaiah of Dasu for protesting against them. But he had set up an example for the Dalits that they can also shout back. Though the result might not be in their favor, but they can, nonetheless, protest. He shook the base of the Brahmin superiority with his courage. He believed that the Dalits must fight for their right as simply living at their mercy will do them no good. The upper classes will be strengthened with the docile and submissive behavior of the Dalits. Pedda Mala, an elderly Dalit says,

Till your Chinnayana spoke in that tone, we didn't know that we could talk like that to the upper castes. [...] He wouldn't bend before anybody... he wouldn't take abuse from anybody. If anyone used derogatory words for our people before him, he would not tolerate it. if you talk like that again, we may have to talk the same way, he would say. He would not allow them to breathe... but that boldness and that intelligence brought him to his death. [...] We felt that what he said was correct. That's why we followed him. We thought that our lives would finally change ... in the meanwhile, this happened. (Vinodini)

This incident changed the lives of the Dalits. Tata, another elder person of the community mentioned that after that, their courage evaporated. They became cowards and everyone lost the courage to talk back.

The next incident was even more shocking for the Dalit community. Dasu's mother, Souramma, had gone to fetch water from the well. She stood there for a long time in the sun but not a single upper caste woman gave her a pitcher of water. Finally, she took water from the well herself and this raised a commotion. The upper class women abused her and beat her up severely. She cursed them as pigs. This was a severe offense according to the Brahmins.

As retribution of what she did, Souramma was fined heavily. She was asked to pay ten thousand rupees as punishment – something that they knew she could not do. They also mentioned that if she fails to do so, she will be “unclothed, her head will be shaved, and she will be paraded naked around the village.” (Vinodini) According to Pedda Reddy, this was done to avoid further such confrontations between the Dalits and the upper classes. Dr. Sohail Aziz observes that this kind of punishment was obviously meant to dishonor the woman's body as they knew that she would not be able to pay the amount. The punishment shows how the upper classes regarded the Dalit woman's body as an object to satisfy their lust. The punishment was a two pronged instrument for Pedda Reddy – he dishonored the woman's body and through that the family and the entire Dalit society and he also wants to fulfill his sexual urge for a woman of a lower birth.

The incident shakes up the community and they are too weak to protest or to argue. The elders of the community rebuked the husband of Souramma, Dasu's father, Narsaiah. Pedda Mala says,

“You are incapable of controlling your wife. Why have you taken birth as a male? (*Spits.*) *Thoo.* Shameless fellow, motherfucker! Will you die if you have no water for one day? I've noticed, its only your wife who cannot wait at the well for water even for a day. This should happen to you for having married that kind of a wife. Now fall at Reddy's feet ... fall and ask for forgiveness ... (Vinodini)

Such a subservient mentality is responsible for the ever fallen level of the Dalits. They accept their fault even though there is none. They are submissive and they lack the courage to speak up for the truth and their rights. They have been oppressed for centuries but they never get rid of it because of their passive and meek behavior. They have been told so often that they are degraded that it has been rooted in their conscience. They have been told to lack credit and self worth and that they are ‘untouchables’. They have accepted their level and position in the society through the constant insult and admonishments thrown at them. Even the babies born in

their community have been told from the very beginning about their inferior status. This is the worst kind of injustice. The Dalit society doesn't put resistance against the atrocities of the upper class but they reprimand Souramma for touching the rope of the well and cursing the upper class women. They try to go for the amicable solution by asking Narsaiah and Souramma to beg for mercy and forgiveness from the upper class people. When the younger generation of the Dalits are angered by the incident, they are rebuked. Pedda Mala says, "This is the problem with you young folks... not only you, we can even get angry and show it. But time is not favorable to us always. We should not talk without thinking." Also, Dibbabu, another old person of the community mentions, "With your hot blood, you are not able to speak properly. Calamity will come to the village." (Vinodini)

The younger generation presented in the play is getting educated. They realize that the methods used by the so-called upper caste are deceptive and oppressive. They become rebellious and resist the onslaught of these traditional norms. They know that if the situation takes a vicious turn, there would be many other people and organizations who would support them. Their fight for equality and justice will not have to settle down because they are poor and powerless. The young generation puts the present situation strongly, saying that they are not allowed to take out water from the well that they themselves have dug. They are not allowed inside temples. They are not allowed to tie a head cloth or wear shoes. They are beaten if they talk back. They are murdered if they ask for justice. They are treated as 'pariah dogs'.

Their voice is strengthened because of the generations of oppression and they don't want to take it anymore. They express their revolt before the elders of the tribe first. The elders also consent to the life of humans and not as dogs. Pedda Mala says, "No, anna. I feel that what the children say is right. They are saying that we should stand united. We shall see what happens. We are not alone today." (Vinodini) The women, too, are fed up of the subjugation and support the men in the revolt.

The final scene of the play is the strongest representation of the revolt. It is the mirror to the overlooked truth that the Dalits can also fight back and the Brahmins have to step back. Dasu questions the norms and traditions of the society and questions the legitimacy of the 'rules'. He points the Brahmins saying that the rules were made by them to suit their need and to stay at a higher social hierarchy. They wanted to be and to remain the kings of the village and thus came up with these restrictions. The Brahmins were shocked at this unexpected outburst and they take a back foot. They ask the Dalits not to talk so arrogantly. But the outburst is then supported by the Dalit women too. Pushpamma comes forward to talk about the hypocrisy of the Brahmins when they mention that the Dalits should not touch the well but in the hour of need, the Dalits are called. When there is a need of digging the well, saving upper caste women fallen into the well or taking out a fallen pitcher from the well, the Dalits are called to help. Dasu questions if during those times, wont Gangamma (the holy river Ganga) dry at the touch of the Dalits and curse the village?

The final twist comes when the daughter in law of Pedda Reddy comes to the scene with a crying baby. The baby is fed by Ganga, the daughter in law of Souramma as the baby's mother is unable to breast feed the baby. But Ganga refuses to take the baby in her arms unless the upper class women apologize to her mother in law for the inhuman torture and abuses hurled at her at the well. The tables are turned. The Dalits get an upper hand with this statement. Pedda Reddy agrees to repair the pulley for the Dalits and asks Ganga to take the baby for feeding it. But Ganga has other plans. She isn't bothered about the pulley as she says that she would take the water from any pulley now as she knows that getting water from the well is her right and she will not take the permission from anyone in the village for that. What she is more bothered about, is the dignity of her mother in law. She affirms that she will not feed the baby if the lost dignity of her mother in law is not restored with an apology. Only when the sister in law of Pedda Reddy apologizes to Souramma, she takes the baby.

The sub plot of the baby and the breast feeding by the Dalit woman is a strong message to confirm that the Brahmins have no base in suppressing the Dalits or in the theme of untouchability. It is just to maintain their supremacy over the Dalits. The name Ganga is also symbolical in the story. The river Ganga, considered holy by a majority of Indians, and termed as mother – Gangamma – is said to curse the village if the Dalits touched the well. But the same water and the well is touched by the Dalits when it is to be dug or an upper class woman is to be saved from drowning or a fallen pitcher is to be taken out. Also, just as the river is a mother and gives life to the people, the character of Ganga is the mother who feeds the baby and brings life to it. The barrier of caste and class is not a hurdle in the way of mothers.

The title of the play, "Thirst" is important at many different levels. It is the thirst for water for the Dalits. It is the thirst for milk for the baby. But most importantly, it is the thirst for recognition, justice and equality for the entire Dalit segment and everyone who is oppressed in some way or the other under the name of societal rules and traditional norms. The 'Thirst' is quenched if we fight for it. The play is a strong representation of the voice of resistance and protest. The play is a reflection of the movement started by the younger Dalits. The play is a mirror to the 'overlooked' truth that the society still faces the issue of 'untouchability' and to the truth that they can also fight back – and win.

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