

Soumitra Chakraborty

Mallabhum Institute of Technology

Margin Speaks: Indian Dalit Literature.
A Review of *Writing as Resistance: Literature of
Emancipation*, ed. Jaydeep Sarangi
(New Delhi: Gnosis, 2011)

Writing as Resistance: Literature of Emancipation is a powerful amplifier to the increasingly audible buzz of writings by Dalits—the worst victims of mindless age-old caste-discrimination—and their sympathizers. It highlights the priceless contribution of the stream of Dalit literature to Marginal, Subaltern and Post-colonial literature. Though its boundaries are not totally rigid, the concept “Dalit” (also known as “Atishudras,” or the outcastes, or “avarnas”) has been applied to those communities who are considered too polluting to be accepted within the Indian four-fold caste system because of their hereditary occupations of animal slaughtering, carcass burning, garbage collection, etc, which were considered ritually impure by the exploitative version of the Brahminical scriptures. However, there are some writings that prefer to include every category of the oppressed under any system of stratification (not solely caste) under the term “Dalit.”

Bending low under the crushing arrogance of the higher strata of Caste for thousands of years, and with all avenues of a life of dignity closed to them, these communities have repeatedly wondered about the rationale of their condition, cried out for sympathy and revolted for human dignity. A powerful expression of such activism is Dalit Literature, which “received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who emphasized the seminal concerns of Dalits through their theoretical writings” (Preface by the editor vii). One also gets a clarification of the various shades of the concept of “Dalit writers,” with the majority considering them as those outcaste people who have directly faced caste-based atrocities. Yet again there are authors who have also accepted as Dalit writers those who merely sympathize with and write in revolt of atrocities against Dalits. Analyses of writings of both categories have been upheld by the volume, making it rich in content. The Editor’s note at the beginning gives a clear trajectory of the objectives of the book.

Writing as Resistance is a commendable effort to present a meaningful collage of the various regional currents of Dalit Literature spontaneously emerging in revolt of localized expressions of the pan-Indian caste-based atrocities on the “outcastes.” Thus prose, poems, short stories, novels, multimedia documentaries and auto-narratives, both translated into and written in English, all have been brought under lenses of varied analyses. There are articles which take up individual Dalit writers of various regions and take up their work/s and characters for in-depth analyses in an effort to give a feel of simmering Dalit vibrancy amidst life stripped of dignity and revolt; there are articles which have tried to capture the wide spectrum of literature on the theme emerging from a particular region of India and even compared it with similar marginal literature of other countries; ambitious articles have tried to tie disparate regional Dalit literature into a pan-Indian bouquet in search of common patterns; further are interviews with Dalit writers to throw light upon how sufferings have crystallized into literature and how it is evolving. These articles have variously tried to make sense of the vibrant phenomenon of Dalit Literature through sophisticated lenses of feminism, environmental consciousness, subaltern perspective, intra-stratum dynamics, post-colonialism and marginalization.

Six articles invite us to in-depth analyses of works of individual Dalit writers. S. Robert Gnanamony skilfully elucidates Dalit life as portrayed through the poems of Dalit Tamil writer N. D. Rajkumar, which “depicts the misery, discrimination, exploitation and downgrading of the Dalits and other downtrodden people in our country” (13). Though it “may sound very crude and harsh to our ears” (14), he claims it is a “blunt call for mobilizing the Dalit community to resist the elite domination and organized exploitation” (14). He proceeds to unearth the anxiety of a Dalit psyche, the Dalit community’s bondage with Mother Nature, “angry outbursts” against uprooting them without compensation, the paradoxes of caste discrimination in religious space, as well as modernized government bureaucracies. T. Gangadharan and Premila Bhaskar work on the first female Tamil Dalit autobiographer Bama Faustina’s novel *Vanmam*. The articles explore the theme of intra-Dalit feud that is a towering challenge to Dalit uplift—the politics and violence of gradations within the Dalits, the resilience of caste discrimination and resistance to the modernizing influences of conversion to Christianity and education, the contribution of Dalit women to the fight and the hope of ultimate emancipation through modernization. The articles of D. Ashish Gupta and Rajeev Kumar Sharma go into the deconstruction of a particular Dalit character Bakha of novelist Mulk Raj Anand’s fiction *The Untouchable*. Gupta shows how through the novel Anand “chiefly dealt with the ghastly evil of Untouchability afflicting the Hindu society of the pre-partition era, in the larger backdrop of the caste

configurations within the Hindu society that have successfully stifled the healthy growth of a considerable section of Indian community for centuries” (181). Commenting further, he says, “Latrines, dirt, squalor, beggars, poverty, disease and prostitution—are beautifully described in his works. He sees both the seamy and ugly sides of life minutely and portrays them realistically” (181). A few of the aspects Anand shows through Bakha, the protagonist, are: higher caste hatred in spite of diligent service, groping for meaning by the victim, sympathetic treatment of other communities such as Muslims and Christians towards Dalits, Hindu reforming efforts, and Bakha’s transformation from “a helpless sacrificial animal” into “a thinking articulate individual” (182). He is animated to “think, act, doubt, love and resent,” which gives him “honour and dignity” (182). A fascinating article is Khushi Pattanayak’s analysis of R.P. Amudhan’s *Shit (Pee)*—a video documentation of the horrid condition of the hereditary manual night-soil cleaners of India. It is a shocking exposure of the continued existence and humiliation of such professionals in spite of manual night-soil cleaning employment becoming a punishable offence under the Indian Penal Code.

Next come articles trying to capture the whole spectrum of Dalit literature and its evolution at the regional level. M. B. Gaijan explores the Gujrati Dalit literature from various perspectives. First is his attempt to give a feel of the Gujrati Dalit Literature through representative novels of Daxa Damodara, Dinu Bhadresariya and Kantilal Parmar. Damodara’s multifaceted *Sosh* portrays the “human excellence of Dalits” (46), the complex pressures of multiple stratified Indian society. Bhadresariya’s *Kideeae Khonkharo Khandho* exposes rural Dalit exploitation and the hypocrisy of social reformers, communal conflict and elite politics. Parmar’s *Gobi Timbo* among other themes upholds education and modernization as a panacea to Dalit sufferings. Harish Mangalam’s *Aganzal* gives agency to Dalits as the revolting group in modernized settings, and Damodar’s *Savitri* is a biographical novel of Savitrimayi Phule, documenting her significant contribution to supporting Jyotirao Phule in his activism for Dalit emancipation. It highlights the importance of education for women’s personal and Dalit community’s emancipation. Bajrang Korde’s article briskly documents the flourishing of Marathi Dalit literature and places it in the context of pan-Indian Dalit struggles. Two articles by G.A. Ghanashyam and Vandana Bhatt, respectively, attempt to document the development, diversity of and influences on Indian Dalit literature as a whole, bringing them under one umbrella and identifying common trends of militancy, activism and the search for identity.

Three interviews of Dalit writers contribute a lot to the phenomenon. Jaydeep Sarangi interviews Bengali Dalit writer (and the editor of *Dalit Mirror*) Manohar Mouli Biswas and gives valuable insight into the making

of a Dalit writer, the formation of Bengali Dalit literature and its English representation. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal interviews self-made Dalit writer from Uttar Pradesh, Jai Prakash Kardam, who rose from being an unskilled construction labourer to the Second Secretary in the High Commission of India in Mauritius. He talks about how Dalit Literature is gaining increasing space in academia, how Dalit activism is expressing itself powerfully through various cultural media, and the road ahead to Dalit emancipation through literature and translation efforts. Finally, the interview of promising Bengali Dalit writer Kalyani Thakur by poet-academic Jaydeep Sarangi and sociologist Angana Dutta explores the making of the writer, translations, Dalit literary organizations, propagation of Dalit writings, Dalit literary engagement as activism, and the failure of exclusive application of Gandhism and Marxism to solving Dalit problems.

Special mention must be made of the scholarly article by Debasree Basu, "In Search of a Dalit Female Consciousness: through the Religio-Folk Idiom of Meerabai and the National Womanhood of Sita." Emancipating these figures from the traditional perspectives of religion and womanhood, she portrays them as subaltern figures who have challenged the elites of religious and gender stratifications. "The gender fluidity present in their myths and legends can be worked not to re-establish the vulnerability of subaltern women but the vulnerability of patriarchy that generates it" (149). Rajeshwar Mittapalli's article explores Dalit social history through a study of postcolonial Indian fiction in English from the perspective of subaltern subjectivity and resistance.

This volume unifies and powerfully amplifies literary voices in revolt of the caste-based violation of human rights and thereby contributes to claiming their well-deserved space in the arena of English Literature.