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VOICE OF THE MARGINS: KANCHA ILAIAH'S COUNTER-DISOURSE IN
WHY I AM NOT A HINDU

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ABSTRACT

All religious communities in India are afflicted by an unfortunate evil tendency of exclusion. A sad trend of hatred has emerged in the battle against casteism and caste-based discrimination. Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu* (the non-fictional bestseller of 1996) has been constructed as an expression of the voice of post-Independence Dalitbahujan consciousness, which was an integral part of their socio-political movement. Born in a small South Indian Telangana village in the 1950s, he is the voice of the harassed subaltern, which exposes rampant cultural contradictions and practices. He talks about the marginalized and victimized identity, where they were not only neither included nor respected, but also looked down upon and repelled. The battle against disturbing dehumanizing social evils is manifested in the emergence of disparate groups having one thing in common – deep hatred for Hindus. He implores the upper stratas to read and understand what the 'Other' (here, an un-Hindu Indian) has to say, for, he believes that those who refuse to listen to new questions and learn new answers will perish and not prosper. The voice of the alienated existence of the subalterns on every level of experience makes us question certain trends of action and thoughts inscribed in our subconscious and evident in our consciousness. Though the book brims with undisguised and unidirectional attacks and opinions, which the readers might find appallingly biased, yet his voice deserves to be heard and acted upon, where necessary.

Keywords: Dalits, marginalized, Hindu, casteism, subaltern.

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INTRODUCTION

Legislation, social and religious reforms, and education has led to the betterment in the lives and dignity of *harijans* (scheduled castes) and *vanvaasis* (tribals). However, much more still needs to be done. *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) observes the binaries in Indian society through the prism of caste. In the year 2000, one of the very popular Delhi-based newspapers *The Pioneer* declared it as one of the five millennium books in

the Dalitbahujan stream of writings, along with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* (Ilaiah 133). Though it started as an autobiographical narrative, it builds a framework out of a social experience. After a lapse of two decades, reading this book currently gives us visible positive signs of development as we witness considerable heartening changes. Still, the deep-rooted ideologies need a fresh reminder from time to time, to re-awaken ourselves and overhaul the entire socio-religious machinery.

Discussion

The rendering of facts and expectations of the voices coming from margins of minority is what we call the 'subaltern' expression. It is the voice of the ones who are dismissed, neglected and humiliated, which could be intentional or done unwittingly. A distinctive, interdisciplinary assortment of scholars, led by Ranajit Guha at the end of the 1970s were the stepping stones of the 'Subaltern Studies', and the followers came to be called 'subalterns'. The prominent few among them were Gayatri Chakrovarty Spivak, Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee etc. Derived from Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony, in critical theory and post colonialism, 'subaltern' refers to the groups and populations that are socially, politically, economically, communally and geographically excluded from the established representative power structure of the society and homeland at large.

David Ludden in his chapter 'Introduction: Reading Subaltern Studies' (2002) talks about Benedict Anderson's book, first published in 1985, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, which, Ludden adds, "abandoned class analysis, ignored state politics, and argued that cultural forces produced national identity and passion." By 1983, scholars were writing two kinds of national history: one, a people's history filled with popular native culture; the other, an official history comprising of elites and political parties. He adds, "Nations and states were separating like oil and water. So were culture and political economy. A new kind of nationality was coalescing in a separate domain of popular experience, which was becoming increasingly isolated from state institutions and national elites" (Ludden 8).

The subaltern concept and theory began in South Asia but it is written for readers and by writers everywhere. It focuses on the ideologies of 'Otherness' and differences, on the consciousness, history and experiences of the subaltern classes. These are, thus, the studies of societies, histories and cultures "from below", collectively rebelling against subjugation, marginalization, hegemony and resultant victimization. In India too, caste-oppression has been resisted time and again by low castes and the untouchables (Dalits).

A well known feminist thinker Susie Tharu compared Ilaiah's book with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Ilaiah 145). Another sociologist Sujata Patel in *The Hindu* (20 Oct 1996) described it as "a slim, provocative and brilliant polemical text" and said, "We have perhaps, for the first time a radical explosion of Dalit secular indigenous tradition" (Ilaiah 145). It also works as a mediator between feminist and Dalitbahujan (the concept he uses for people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority) struggles as both share a common historic disadvantage.

He asserts that it is in everyone's interest that the Brahmins, Baniyas and neo-Kshatriyas listen what the 'Other' has to say. For Ilaiah, in post- colonial India, the imposed word 'Hindutva' is baffling and contradictory, for in reality, they have been socially castigated with a vicious humiliating environment to sustain in. Even the government and State act as advertising agencies. Not depending on Western methods, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy wrote and spoke of everyday Dalitbahujan experiences.

He informs us of his identity and his parents who were the Kurumaas (shepherds) who bred sheep and then later changed their occupation to agriculture. They paid land rent but not religious taxes as they were not allowed to visit temples. The entire village economy, he recalls, was run by the daily operations of the so-called lower classes. In his caste-specific training, he was introduced to its tasks and language. He describes at length how meticulously he learnt the intricacies of his caste-craft and became an expert with the varied techniques, to distinguish various sheep, their diseases, the rustic concoctions to cure them, to mid-wife a delivery, handle the young ones of sheep and how to carefully shear wool. The girls in his caste were taught to take care of their younger siblings, cook and make thread from wool. Their language, he says, is a flexible and

alert grammar, designed for production-based communication. But sadly and ironically, the uttering of names of Gods while reciting a mantra is considered wisdom whereas the Dalitbahujan knowledge is not considered worthy of any credit. He believes that the children of Brahmin and Baniyas do not have enough contact with Nature. They hardly play or work in pastures and fields.

He believes that Hinduism failed in constructing the dignity of labour and productive culture and constructed violence as its spiritual and social essence. The Brahmins and Vaishyas, he says, just consume natural resources without regenerating them. Whereas a Sudra reconstructs, with his knowledge of production and innovation of artisan and agrarian technology. The Brahmins do not even spare the Sudra deities and refer to them in a derogatory tone. They teach their children to despise and dismiss Dalitbahujans and this becomes a part of their consciousness. He claims that Dalitbahujan marriages are also more democratic and lesser oppressive. Their women also transgress the domains of sexes and work together, unlike the women from upper castes, who are appreciated if they do not retort. The author wonders that the history and Telugu textbooks glorified women who committed *sati* (the former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on to her husband's funeral pyre) but not a single lesson is dedicated to the Dalitbahujan women who lived after her husband's death, worked hard and brought up their children with dignity.

He adds, even if modern education and Ambedkar's theory of reservation takes the lower castes to schools, the Brahmins are privileged as that is the dominating culture. This intellectual untouchability is far more dangerous than physical untouchability. He recalls the helplessness as a student, as he could not comprehend and relate to the content and family settings in his school curriculum. Similarly, if a lower caste person reaches offices, he has to suffer humiliating wrath and alienation from the Brahmins and the Baniyas who strut over the corpses of the Dalitbahujan culture and self-confidence.

In a derogatory tone, he tells that even in matters of death and marriage, the priest mutters mantra that nobody understands and also economically exploits the poor families. It sums up as the inhuman relationship of the exploiter and the exploited. The entire community is rendered timid, fearful and subservient. Even the Baniyas own structured shops where they collect and sell goods. They manipulate, fool and mislead people without making it apparent. Thus, Brahmin-Baniyas manipulate and also mutilate the Dalitbahujan consciousness in social, spiritual and economic domains. Moving further, he brings in the Sudra upper castes, which are emerging slowly as neo-Kshatriyas and moving into the fold of Hindutva both mentally and physically. In political terms, they are attempting to establish their hegemony in all economic and political structures in which power operates. They are self declared patrons of Hindutva, saviours of Brahminism and pillars of modern fascism. They operate as bridges between Dalitbahujans and Baniya-Brahmins.

The subaltern experiences, though, are not always expressed by the disadvantaged only. There are literary instances where their stand is voiced by the privileged ones in too. The same echoes in the novel *Refuge* (2010) by Gopal Gandhi, who talks about the deprived Indian plantation workers in another country. Set in the plantations of Sri Lanka, it is based on the author's encounters with a large number of plantation workers during a four years' stay in Kandy. He was working on the rehabilitation of 'Indian' Tamils repatriating to the land of their origin in terms of the Indo-Ceylon Agreement of 1964, in which 9,75,000 estate labour was rendered 'stateless'. In the novel, there is a realistic depiction of the life of these people and their struggles. Trepidation and resignation alternate as chief emotions in the Indian psyche. All the workers had been wrapped in the blanket of a single appellation – 'Indian Tamils' – as distinct from the higher caste 'Ceylon Tamils'. On the estates of Ceylon, history, geography and class assigned to the Indian Tamils the role of workhorses. Many children did not study beyond the second grade of the estate's five-grade school. Gandhi talks about their smile of empathy and affection irrespective of the treatment meted out to them and destiny chalked out for them. The warmth of happiness was missing even in the Buddhist majorities who cherished the unquestioned hierarchy in this pluralist heritage.

Gandhi recounts the times when the 'Indian' Tamil workers had to return penniless to India, all their belongings – all their self-respect – snatched from them. It was a sight of the shadow of national tragedy to see families being torn asunder by repatriation. Human beings, as if, were reduced to being merely game of

numbers. The consideration carried out with objectivity seems possible while dealing with numbers, but here the subject of discussion was human beings. These people had lived there, not for some few years but for two or three generations; they knew no other place. This amounted to a reversal of history, a fold-back of a whole sequence in human progress.

Coming back to Ilaiah and India, Dalitism and Brahminism have been contesting each other throughout Indian history. The only difference is that Dalitist history remained in oratures while Brahminism got into literatures. Dalitism is now building its own historiography by transforming its oral histories into literatures as it is impossible to search one's identity in Other's history.

Tracing history also validates the point that the nationalist movement is always portrayed as a Brahmin-Baniya fight against the colonial masters. Nowhere are the Dalitbahujan masses glorified or even partially acknowledged. Consciously or unconsciously, the British themselves helped in constructing a 'brahminical meritocracy' (Ilaiah 49) that came to power in post-Independence India. Anti-brahmin ideologies emerged as a result of this from the organic intellectuals. Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar revolted against the casteized slavery of India. In post-colonial India, the colonial bureaucracy was transformed into a brahminical bureaucracy whose reshaped Anglicization did not undermine their casteized authoritarianism. Dalitbahujans always remain an 'Other' with a twofold alienation of caste and class. Even today, he puts forth, if some Dalitbahujan constructs or buys house in Brahmin localities, such houses remain socially and culturally isolated. Even children are encouraged to avoid interaction. Caste identities and caste-based humiliations do not dilute. With Dalitbahujans, however, the pull of the collective fold is very strong, "There is nothing like 'mine', everything for them is 'ours'" (Ilaiah 41).

With the 'cow' and 'buffalo' theory, he puts his impactful point that brahminist schools have been worshipping cow as a holy, secular and socialist animal. Whereas the fact is that it hardly gives milk. But the buffalo is never talked about. And ironically, those who contest on this discourse, feed themselves on the products made of buffalo milk. The challenge that the author gave to himself was to put buffalo in the centrality of the discourse. Here, as well understood, 'cow' is the Brahmin culture, void but ruling whereas 'buffalo' is the Dalitbahujan culture, which is productive yet ignored.

Ilaiah even compares and contrasts the Hindu and the Dalitbahujan deities, exposing the former and privileging the latter. He says, where violence has been Hinduism's principal mechanism of control, even their Gods were weapon wielders who used consent and violence to force masses, their minds and bodies into submission. All Hindu Gods and Goddesses are institutionalized, modified and contextualized in a brazen anti-Dalitbahujan mode. Striking contrast with the above is the description of Dalitbahujan deities who are more humane and protective.

He concludes that the need of the hour is to establish a new egalitarian future for Indian society which will be possible not only by hinduizing ourselves but by dalitizing the brahminical forces. The destruction of the Dalitbahujan ethos continues till now. We must appreciate what is positive and humane in Dalitbahujans. Their hope of life emerging from their inner strength and their sharing and distributing attitude is a lesson in itself. He blatantly states that the upper castes are the laziest forces living a life of perennial luxury, which destroys basic human values to the core and relations are reduced to that of private property and distrust. Whereas, Dalitbahujans have a thorough understanding of land which leads to increase in productivity. Still, it is the ritualistic mantric mysticism which gets social status and priority.

He believes that it is only through liberation of the Dalitbahujans that the whole society can be emancipated. He assigns this task to women. The parallel in the nature of oppression should be observed and the Hindu 'Swaha' culture (Brahmin chanting which gives them the authority to exploit helpless people in the name of religion and mandatory remedial ways) should be dethroned. The ideas of Dalitbahujan organic intellectuals should be massively restructured. Their ideology of suspicion should be nipped. He also gives the Dalitbahujans the power of action which could have changed the course of events in history. He states that if the social system would have been built on more democratic and stronger ethics of production, the defeat of the Indian systems by colonialists would have been impossible.

At the end of the book, he proclaims, "We hate Hinduism, we hate Brahminism, we love our culture and more than anything, we love ourselves" (Ilaiah 131). At certain places, though, this book can be harshly dismissed. Sometimes, we feel that he is blindly and ignorantly outpouring his venomous ire on Hindus, the 'Other' for him. He seems to be not knowing and not even trying to verify the total truth. He fills the gaps on his own with incoherent, displeasing half-truths presented with superlative confidence.

Conclusion

No doubt the author takes us through the injustices that have been a part of their daily experiences and existence as a whole. We empathize with the Dalitbahujan and collective subaltern stand and promise to ourselves to be evidently, remarkably corrective, inclusive and welcoming.

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