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UNBREAKABLE CASTE-IDENTITY AND 'THE STORY OF MY SANSKRIT'

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ABSTRACT

Caste system is an irrefutable truth of Indian society. The origin of caste system in India can be traced back to the time of Aryans who invaded India and settled in. Today, irrespective of the class and religion, caste system is found in every society in varied forms. This system which is predominantly discriminatory, has deeply affected a large section of people belonging to economically poor and socio-politically marginalized classes.

This paper intends to study Kumud Pawde's 'The Story of My Sanskrit', an extract taken from her autobiography *Antasphot* in the light of Caste-discrimination and its psychological impact on individuals of the socially marginalized groups.

Keywords: Caste, Untouchables, Discrimination, Education, Sanskritization.

Introduction

Caste system has been accepted widely as an essential element of society in India to maintain social-order and to run it smoothly and properly. Presently, this system exists in every Indian society irrespective of class and religion. Even among Muslim, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Jews, caste system exists, though it is not as prominently visible as it is among Hindus. Traditionally based on social functions, among Hindus, Castes are usually assigned to one of four large caste clusters, called *Varnas*. The top position of the social hierarchy has been assigned to *Brahmanas* (priests), then in descending prestige, are placed – *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (traders and merchants), and *Shudras* (artisans and labourers). Caste classification into a *Varna* depends in part on its relative level of "impurity", determined by the group's traditional contact with any of a number of "pollutants," including blood, menstrual flow, saliva, dung, leather, dirt, and hair. (Britannica.com). Some traditional occupations and life styles such as manual work done by Mahars and the leatherwork among Chamars, brought certain group of people in contact with these impurities. Because of their contact with impurities they were considered impure and were excluded from the system. They were placed in a fifth group formerly known as untouchables. Their touch was avoided as they were believed to carry pollutants with them and might transmit those pollutants to pure upper caste people. Officially recognized as Scheduled Castes, national leader Mahatma Gandhi had called them 'Harijan' – the children of God. In present time, they prefer to call themselves Dalit – 'the oppressed'. This term was first used by Jotiba Phule, a Martathi Dalit leader and reformer. In the post-independence era, it was revived by Dalit Panthers Movement which expanded the term by including Scheduled Tribes as well as

“...neo-Budhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.”(Omvedt)

In the words of Fr. Felix Raj, S.J., the term Dalit is “... not a mere name or title, in fact it has become an expression of hope and identity.” (Raj)

India’s many tribal peoples – officially designated as Scheduled Tribes – have also been given status similar to that of Scheduled Caste. In the tribal communities, this classification of people exists in the form of Clans. Clan system, however, is not discriminatory or suppressing like caste system, it is just the social arrangement for better functioning of indigenous culture and tradition. On the other hand, Caste system in non-tribal communities is hideously at work varying in degrees. Still, irrespective of the degree at which Casteism works in society, one cannot deny the negative connotations it carries which is deeply rooted in the society and the psyche of the people. Not only the privileged upper caste but the suppressed lower caste also are conscious of their status in the hierarchy of caste system. Their suppression has continued for so long that they have surrendered to the system and have compromised with the inhuman treatment they get from the upper caste people, believing it to be their fate and the part of their existence.

‘The story of my Sanskrit’ is an extract taken from Kumud Pawde’s autobiography *Antasphot* (1981). Pawde’s autobiography, probably for the first time, records the struggles of the life of an untouchable woman who had dared to enter the public sphere. The text deals with the author’s consciousness of her identity as a Mahar, and the resistance to discriminatory attitude and behavior of the society towards her due to the identity she carries. By studying and teaching Sanskrit she resists to the two fold discrimination on the ground of gender and caste.

A fight against the Caste stereotype

The story takes us to a meeting point where two distinct entities which were kept separated for centuries, are meeting for the first time. These are – Sanskrit- the *Devvaani*, the language of *Vedas* and an untouchable *Shudra* woman who belongs to lowest of low in Hindu caste system. Throughout the story, author is conscious of her lower caste identity though she finds herself better than those so called splendid people. Since her childhood her caste is the constant cause of her humiliation and discrimination. This discrimination was prevalent and its function so dominant to such an extent that she finds herself accustomed to it. As a child she was mistreated by the so called educated and civilized mothers of upper castes. Their daughters were warned to stay away from her and not to touch and play with her. Still, she waited for them at their doors ignoring the scornful glances and words of hate.

Since her childhood, author seems to be conscious of the notion of impurity attached to her caste. And in her attempt to cast off that notion, she constantly tries to keep herself clean and pure. However, she regretfully accepts that all her efforts made no effect to ward off that impurity from her identity as if it was something inside, in her blood. The fact that she took bath and cleaned herself every day with *Pears* soap and applied *Kaminia* oil on her hair and plaited neatly and dressed herself with well-washed and sparkling cloth did not make any impact on those girls and their mothers. Her clean living and decorated household couldn’t help even to a slightest degree to raise her status from merely a Mahar. The very fact that her father could afford scented soaps and oils and they spent on white washing their house every fortnight lead us to assume that she belonged to a well to do family but her identity was confined to her caste only irrespective of her family’s economic status. As a child, author is very clever and very conscious of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. She was aware of her neat-healthy living and the dirty-unhygienic living of those splendid people which she could never understand why they were called ‘splendid’. She could point out the sour smelling body, bad breath and unbearable smell of *Shikakai* mixed hair of those girls.

Caste discrimination has humiliated and tortured lower caste people not only physically but it has also affected them psychologically. The trauma and stigma of humiliating experiences are sometimes too deep to be healed. In such condition resistance is usually out of question, but Pawde, here, emerges as a fighter; she fights back and shows her resistance to discrimination. The incident of thread ceremony for one of her classmate’s

brother is a good example of her resistance at a very tender age when she ought to be playing and enjoying. But she was thoughtful and quick in response. She had curtly responded to Brahmin lady when she was offered *laddoo* and asked to leave the place-

“What do you take me, for a beggar? Giving me a laddoo! Can you see injuries on anyone just because I watched them?”

She seems conscious and aware of the upper caste society who panic on the presence of a low caste untouchable on such auspicious ceremonies, resulting from that long deep rooted notion of ‘impurity’. The negation she received from the lady to watch the ceremony, is in fact one of the means to disallow lower castes the opportunity of being fascinated by Vedic mantras and rituals which had been the domain, accessible only to upper castes. And thus the gap and segregation persists between Sanskrit, the *Devvaani* and the low castes or untouchables.

In the second phase, when she adopts Sanskrit as a subject for higher studies, the way to her success was not smooth rather mixture of ups and downs. She was often discouraged by educated people and her teachers. The member of her own community made fun of her ambition. It was actually an unimaginable event for them that a Dalit woman would ever dare to step into Brahmins’ territory and not just studies Sanskrit but gets command on it. It is a common knowledge that whenever a scholar from marginalized society excels in studies he/she is suggested to pursue such studies which could be practically applied in human life and which would benefit the society especially to which he/she belongs. Similar was the case with Pawde. Her teacher Hatekar had suggested her-

“...you can become a doctor, can’t you?”

“Won’t you be able to help the afflicted? That’s what’s needed among your people.”

Gokhale guruji had a significant impact on her life. She was highly impressed by the kind and humanistic behavior of Gokhale guruji and his family members. However, in spite of their generous hospitality she was constantly haunted by the fear of her caste being exposed to his family members. As she writes-

“...the older boy came out bearing plates full of cooked poha. I became nervous, fear crept over my mind. Suppose this lady were to find out my caste? Along with sips of water, I swallowed the lump in my throat as well as mouthful of poha. I couldn’t concentrate on what anyone was saying. My only worry was when and how I could escape from there. Suppose someone from the Buldy area were to come here?”

In the third section, she documents her struggle to get a job in which her distinction and qualification did not help even a bit. Wherever she went her identity as a Mahar came into her way to success and people questioned her position. The very sentence- “so now these people are to teach Sanskrit! Govt. Brahmins, aren’t they?” forces us to assume the insensitivity and irrationality of traditional minds of which lower castes were also the holders. People were envious of a girl, belonging to lowest of the castes, teaching Sanskrit. Her approach to political leaders was of no use. Even the Govt. couldn’t help her get out of her confining identity and get a job. Political power kneels down in front of tradition. Her caste stuck to her all the time and she couldn’t secure a job of her choice till she was ‘Kumud Sonkunwar’. Her dream comes true only when she sheds her true self at least at the surface level and adopts a new identity i.e. of Kumud Pawde. ‘Pawde’, a surname she got from her husband- Motiram Pawde who belonged to Kunbi Maratha caste. Her inter-caste marriage proves to be a way out from her deprived state of life, a chance to escape from her past identity.

From several instances, we get to know that though author was often humiliated by Brahmins, she had a fascination towards Brahminical mode of living. The way she describes the look of Gokhale guruji and his sons and the brimming godliness in his wife’s face gives us a sense of awe she had for Brahminical mode of living. She herself has adopted those Brahminical standard of culture in her thought and action. Although, she was aware of the fact that caste cannot be cast off, even by death, in the story, there is a constant struggle to suppress that identity. She discourage her students’ admiring words because she knew that such admiration would lead to

provoke clerks and others in office to beat the drum of her caste. This suppression of one's real identity and adoption of a socially prestigious identity indicates towards what M. N. Srinivas calls Sanskritization. Sanskritization suggests a process whereby people want to improve their status through adoption of names and customs of culturally high-placed groups. To gain position in this process, a lower caste copies the habits and behavior patterns of the dominant caste in the area. He/she will change its name to one of a higher caste, adopt vegetarianism, observe more orthodox religious practices, build a temple, and treat its women in a more conservative way in order to become acceptable among upper castes. And thus, Sanskritization has become a means of way out for lower castes from their oppressed status in society. In 'The story of my Sanskrit', Pawde also tries to escape from her caste-identity i.e. of Mahar by studying Sanskrit and adopting refined culture of upper caste people like Gokhale Guruji. Her marriage to Motiram Pawde brings a significant change in her life; she becomes Kumud Pawde from Kumud Sonkunwar and thus, she escapes from her low caste identity by hiding her own surname. In this case Pawde willingly surrenders to Sanskritization. However, in some cases, it is imposed indirectly but forcefully. In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's story 'They Eat Meat', Biram Kumang and his family had to pretend to be the follower of Hindu culture in order to secure the respectability of the majority living in Varodara. They pretended to be vegetarians and worshipped Hindu god and goddesses, so that people won't question their real identity and of course they didn't want to reveal their tribal identity.

The author draws two contradictory images through the personalities of Gokhale guruji and the HOD in the university (a scholar of all India repute who didn't like author's learning Sanskrit and made it clear that he didn't). These two persons were exactly the opposite of one another with an exception that both were upper caste Hindus and scholars in their subjects. In his appearance Gokhale guruji was orthodox. He wears Dhoti, long sleeved shirt, black cap, and a sandalwood paste mark on his forehead. But he is modern in his outlook. He welcomes author as a pupil irrespective of her caste. HOD on the contrary, has been exposed to modernity. He prefers modern dresses but is orthodox. He lets author get wounded and bleed with his sharp taunts and venom filled words. In author's word- "He had been shriveled by tradition, while Gokhale guruji was enriched by it like a tree weighed down with fruits." These contradictory image forces us to perceive that impact of education varies person to person and that is to an extreme degree. However, they both were under the influence of Caste; while HOD was inwardly influenced, Gokhale guruji was outwardly. In their own way they both were the carriers of Caste-culture, who do not want to liberate themselves from the clutches of Caste while others cannot, even if they want.

Conclusion

From the reading, the impression I get is that consciousness of caste and politics is deeply rooted in the Indian minds. Whatever we do or how hard we try to shed it off we are brought back to our basic identity i.e. our caste; economic status, religion, political orientation and qualification are of lesser value. What actually matters is the Caste one belongs to. Thus, we can put it in this way- in India a child is not born free rather born with his/ her caste. Pawde's herself exhibits the similar opinion when she writes – "...although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying-that is caste.'"

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