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UNDERSTANDING THE ASPECT OF EQUALITY AND FREEDOM THROUGH GITHA
HARIHARAN'S *I HAVE BECOME THE TIDE*

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan has been a pioneering voice of the oppressed and depressed. This article critically analyses the aspect of equality and freedom through the characters of Chikkiah, Satya, Ravi, Asha and Professor Krishna. It shows how the caste acts like a monster and hovers around the lives of these characters. It also examines the success of the various affirmative actions like the caste based reservation system taken with the aim of the betterment of the downtrodden. This article acts like a mirror and reflects the extent to which we are experiencing freedom and equality in the contemporary society and the various factors constraining it. It brings forth the role a society plays in the perpetuation of the caste system. They portray that still now, after years of independence we are fettered in chains by our own prejudices and age old traditions which should be reformed and remodeled according to the changing times.

Keywords- Equality, Freedom, Caste, Dalits, Society

Freedom and equality are the two cornerstones of human existence. These concepts have evolved through ages through the works of philosophers and thinkers like Aristotle, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau, Kabir, Nanak, Tukaram and many more. Without freedom and equality the human existence loses its significance.

The novel at the same time depicts two time space. One is the plot of Chikkiah and the poet Kannadeva of the 12th century and the next is that of the contemporary times. The plot moves like a fluid between the two time frames and simultaneously brings forth the two contexts with the caste as the linking factor. It questions the state of equality, the people of lower castes have experienced throughout the centuries.

The freedom fighters shed their blood for the ideology of equality and freedom. Our country freed itself from the rule of the Britishers but we have not yet been able to break the shatters of the age old social practices which has spread its tentacles deep in the society and in our minds like cancer. Our Law of the Land, The Constitution, provides us with the Right to Equality which ensures Equality before Law (Article 14), Prohibition of Discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15), Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16), Abolition of Untouchability (Article 17) and Abolition of Titles (Article 18). We are also endowed with the Right to Freedom which lays down Protection of certain rights regarding Freedom of speech and Expression etc.(Article 19), Protection in respect of conviction for

offence(Article 20), Protection of life and personal liberty(Article 21), Right to Education(Article 21 A)and Protection against arrest and detention in certain cases(Article 22). However, still today, there is a mammoth gap between the rights provided and the rights experienced.

The caste acts like a monster, a spirit following Satya, Asha and Ravi and devouring them. We find Chikka, the son of a cattle – skinner with his lowered shoulders in dread of getting flogged .He is a social outcast and his life too stinks like the pond which is the only resource of survival for people like them. Amid this hopelessness Chhikiah’s father beats his drum and keeps hoping for a land where water flows free.His hope for such a land is a thread of optimism in the state of dread and despair. Chikkiah through his odyssey of life realizes that the land where water flows free is in him and everywhere. The village of Anandagrama is an utopia. However it is crushed with its residents under the wheels of caste based exploitation.The priests and the king blame the Dalits of Anandagrama responsible for the dearth of the rainfall and all their miseries. Even in the midst of the antipathy, Chikkiah never turns away from the source of life. He expresses his life spirit through his verses. They speak of the philosophy of the soul. In his journey of aloofness he finds solace in the embrace of the river with the thousand faces.

The next narrative of the three students brings us back to the present times. It communicates the struggle of the three students Asha, Satya and Ravi to give a frame to their dreams. The aspect that makes their turmoil discordant is their caste. This shows that even in today’s society caste is the genesis of exploitation and agent of death. The three students put their all in stake and prepare for the Medical Entrance Test. Its only Satya who qualifies it and gets admission to the Medical College. Asha commences on her journey to become a nurse. Ravi seeks admission to a college in zoology. Previously, we find that Chikkiah had no option other than doing menial jobs to lead his life. But now the possibilities have broadened. Different affirmative actions have been taken like the caste based reservation system. However it is questionable that to how much extent it has ensured the progress of the deprived class. A study shows that jobs reservation has increased in only 5% increase in the representation of the SC and the ST in regular salaried and wage employment. Such reservation has been confined to the urban areas and has assisted people who are in the least need of the help. The policies have also placed little attention to the enhancement of the attributes required for procuring the job.

Positive alterations and adaptations are needed in the opinion of the masses regarding the people belonging to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Inferior disposition towards them dehumanizes them. Satya prefers death over life because his Professor Dr. Sharma constantly unnerved him, compelled him to believe that he cannot succeed. The empty seat beside him, the abasement he faced for the scholarship by Murthy at the counter,all of these murdered his spirit thousand times. He interacted with the countenance of death numerous times in his life. His life became stagnant and confined to the bigoted perspective of the society. The authority of the Medical College hold Satya incapable of bearing the pressure of academics and cited his low caste as its causal factor.

Asha is embarrassed before all in class and is assigned to the task of sanitary annexe by Mrs. Kumari. She was the only one who is asked to clean the bedpans and urinals thoroughly and then the walls and floors of the bathroom. She is intentionally humiliated by none other than her teacher. She bears the burden of all of it and remembers her parents who have bestowed their hope on her. She is optimistic even while she is struggling. She finds that there are problems which may cast their shadow in various forms. She finds that her roommate Priya prefers to be in the hostel when she is seriously ill .She has faced sexual harassment by her Auntie’s Father-in-Law. Though their struggles are different yet she finds a common thread that links them.

Ravi on the other hand wants to bring before all the struggles faced by the people of the lower castes.He under the leadership of their Physics Professor Senthil embarks on a journey towards bringing a change to the prevailing conditions of the society.He joins the Bhim Shakti Group. He also plays an active role in the social media in bringing out before all the injustices done to the Dalits in different parts of the country. He secures books from his Professor and takes interest in knowing much more about the history of the depressed classes and their conditions and struggles throughout.

The characters of the novel faces the brunt of the caste system. Yet they show an indomitable spirit to achieve their goals and fight for their rights. Ravi continues the strife to bring some changes to the existing circumstances. Asha accepts the humiliations and tries to focus on her dreams and goals. Satya too tries his level best. But he is not able to shoulder it any more and tries to find peace in the lap of the stars.

The next narrative is on Professor P.S. Krishna. He is highly respected by his students. He researches on the local versions of epic poetry which he calls people's epic poetry. In this connection he inquires about the writings of the 12th century saint Kannadeva and argues the dissimilarity in the writing style of the poet. He says that the work is not only authored by Kannadeva but it has been the contribution of many more authors. To prove this he sets out to find the truth. Gradually he came to know that poet Kannadeva is the son of the cattle - skinner Chikkiah. Many of the poems of his works were actually written by his father Chikkiah and mother Mahadevi. He also remarked Kannadeva's Jal Samadhi as suicide. This revelation of the low origin of the Saint Kannadeva and his death hurls danger to his life. He gets threat calls from some Hindu Fundamentals. They took the low descent of Saint Kannadeva as an attack on their religion. Every religion speaks of equality. However the fact that Saint Kannadeva was not a Brahmin was not acceptable to them. They are not able to fight over their narrow-mindedness and they themselves go against the values of self-realization and equality which their worshiped Messenger of Peace sermonized. The Hindu Fundamentalist (Sri Sri Sri) Guru Santosh calls him as the Rakshasha Kavi for finding the bitter truth and plans for his murder.

Though our Constitution provides us The Right to Equality and The Right to Freedom, they are not more than illusion for the people of the lower castes. According to Census 2011, Dalits or The Scheduled Castes comprise of 16.6% (201 million) of India's population, up from 16.2% in 2001. The Scheduled tribes or the Adivasis form 8.6% (104 million) of the country's population, up from 8.2% over a decade. According to an IndiaSpend analysis of 2016 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, over the decade from 2006 to 2016, crime rates against dalits rose by 25%; from 16.3% crimes per 100,000 dalits reported in 2006, to 20.3 crimes in 2016. Cases of crimes against SCs pending Police Investigation have nearly doubled (99%) from 8,380 cases in 2003 to 16,654 cases in 2016.

This novel has presented a mirror of the prevailing society through the lives of the characters. Even the affirmative actions and the protection by the Law have not been effective. The students Asha, Satya and Ravi, seeking admission through the quota are treated as estranged. They never feel integrated. Their quality and efficiency are always put to question. The attitude and mindset of the people have not allowed them to breathe in the air of independence. They have been always and are still now suppressed by the chains of prejudices and humiliation.

The novel through the characters depicts the fate of those who struggled for equality and freedom. The people of Anandagrama are butchered. Satya strikes such a level of depression that he finds no way except suicide. Professor P.S. Krishna is shot dead for his true words about the low origin of a poet. The society of which the characters are a part become their oppressor.

This novel reveals the response of the society to the acts of injustices done. People heave a sigh of relief and order is restored after Anandagrama is demolished. The news of the death of Satya is easily forgotten. At the death of Professor P.S. Krishna, people comment that the society must be cleaned of such pollutants who questions the norms of heritage and culture.

Freedom and Equality have been provided to us by the Law of the Land but we are far from achieving the freedom of mind and equality in the true sense of the terms. It is we who can establish or demolish a system. We as a society have to come forward as a whole and give shape to the dream of our Constitution makers of constructing an egalitarian society. This novel brings forth the lacunae of the society before us and what we could do as responsible citizens in bringing positive changes in the society. The positive actions in bringing the change should come from the society. Mere policies can never be effective without the social initialization and active participation.

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