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A HISTORICAL STUDY OF DALITS AND THEIR OPPRESSION IN BABURAO BAGUL'S  
FICTIONAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Baburao Bagul's Marathi novels from *Pavsha* to *Kondi* record the pitiable conditions and the harrowing pangs of Dalit people and women in the pre and post independence era. His novels mirror the Hindu society and its connection to the Varna system which results into the division of the society and poses serious threats to unity and the sovereignty of the country as a nation. He records the rigidity in the Hindu culture, customs, traditions which fracture the psyche of the Hindu people and result into the severe problems. His novels probe into the reasons of the enforced segregation, discrimination, subjugation and the degradation of the women and the depressed classes. This paper is an attempt to explore how the Varna system critically affects the lives of Dalits and relegate their existence to the lesser human beings. Bagul highlights caste oppression, sexism, classism, orthodoxy, religious violence and terrorism, poverty, illiteracy, and superstitions having its origin in the exploitation of Dalits by the upper castes in Hindu religion. The present paper explores this reality depicted in the fictional world of prolific Marathi writer Baburao Bagul and voices the voiceless to expose the extremist elements and fascist forces in Hindu society.

**Keywords:** exploitation, patriarchy, feudalism, conversion, liberty, social justice, Buddhism, democracy

Introduction

Baburao Bagul is a prolific Marathi Dalit writer. He is known for his two short story collections: *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* and *Maran Swasta Hota Aahe*. His fictional world reflects the life of the downtrodden outcaste people and their conflict with the upper caste people. His fiction captures the historical repression of Dalits. One of the Dalits, he himself has experienced and lived in the countryside and the metropolitan slums in Mumbai, that is the financial and commercial capital of the country, he depicts to portray Dalits. His novels primarily focus on Dalits as the victims of caste, class, and gender chauvinism. The most common people never appeared in the canvass of Marathi literature become the subject matters in his fiction and narrate their tales which have either been ignored intentionally or never been told before with the authentic voice and the crude realities in their lives by the mainstream writers. Bagul's fiction provides the broader spectrum to the marginal voices and captures the fractured psyche of the Indian society which dejects the broken people and intimidates them to

remain on the periphery of the mainstream society. Sukhadev Dhanke's opinion regarding the degradation of the despised class is significant as it captures the stark realities in their lives. He notes,

The representation of the life of people, their tendencies, mental states, the dammed life in the filth, ignorance, poverty, helplessness, addiction to drugs and wine, cruelty and violent behaviour of the ruffians, women's dreadful conditions and humiliation, scandalous events stagnating humanity, casteism, exploitation, murders, and the commotion in the slums in Mumbai are represented realistically in Bagul's fictional world. (171) (Trans. by the Researcher)

Bagul's fictional world does not reflect the outcry of Dalit people only but also highlights the pitiable conditions in women's lives whose voices have long been eliminated and silenced in the casteist patriarchal social order. In his five novels, Bagul makes effective use of the social customs, the countryside life, the cultural background, and the power dynamics of the socially, culturally and economically dominant upper caste people, the traditions, conventions and the superstitions to narrate the harrowing pangs and the pitiable conditions in the lives of the suppressed people. His fiction is known for his use of poetic and metaphorical language, the pictorial quality of words, the simple day-to-day language of the unsophisticated people, the realistic and sensible representation of the Dalit and Non-Dalit people and the conflict of the deprived and dispossessed and their struggle for liberty and social justice.

### Oppression of Dalits in Baburao Bagul's Novels

In *Pavsha*, the novel pictures the exploitation of Dalit men and women in a caste and gender-based society. Pavala and Janki stand as the victims of patriarchy whereas Shitaram and Kashinathbuwa fall prey to the social customs. Through Pavala and Janki, Bagul highlights how patriarchy exploits women in marital institution. When Gopalbuwa engages himself in religious duties, he ignores his wife Pavala and deprives her from her sexual rights. She lives under constant threats from her father, brother and her husband's relatives who suppress her feelings and humiliate her. Though, she aspires to go against the tradition by taking a lover, she does not summon her courage to act bold and thus, remains oppressed in her position as a submissive wife. Janki, the other victim too suffers in the sexist patriarchy. Her husband, Kashinathbuwa is a worshiper of gods. He denies her sexual rights and makes her suffer inhumanly. Through this novel, Bagul also exposes the Hindu religion and its spurious religious ideology. He states, "To support the inequality and the social disparities, the ideas of Karma, rebirth, deeds and misdeeds in the previous births have been propagated in Hindu ideology." (Bagul, *Dalit Sahitya* 29) (Trans. by the Researcher) Kashinathbuwa is a victim of Varna system that makes him superstitious. He does not regard *Manusmriti* responsible for his degradation in a lower caste and blames himself for the sins, he committed in the previous birth. A. D. Raut rightly comments, "The Varna system is man-made. It is based on exploitation. His miseries would be over after destroying the Varna system, but he fails to understand this reality and starts hating his wife to gain control over his sexual passions" and thus oppresses her feelings and contributes in her sufferings. (164-165) (Trans. by the researcher) When the Brahmin officer tortures him ruthlessly, he does not revolt and rather feels complacent to think that he saved himself from the sin of killing a Brahmin. Through Kashinath's condition, Bagul highlights how the Brahmin social order frightens the ignorant people with the theory of Karma and threatens them of the serious consequences if they fail to act as per the Hindu doctrine of Karma.

Kashinathbuwa is trapped in religious conventions. Shitaram, an untouchable wrestler is subjected to brutal violence and atrocities. He is blamed for poisoning an ox by Shinde Sarkar, an upper caste and endures the relentless beatings humiliatingly till it is endurable. Though, he overthrows Shinde Sarkar, he is thrashed later relentlessly by the mobs of the upper castes people. As he does not know how to use his strengths against the caste oppression, he remains helpless and powerless in the caste institution. Through Shitaram, Bagul implies the urge to literate Dalits young men. Once they become aware of their degradation, they will overthrow the entire caste institution for ruining their lives. When Butler, a Dalit soldier realises that Brahmin feudalism and the caste hierarchy is the ultimate fate to which Dalits are destined, he advocates conversion to Christianity, a solution to free the victims from the humiliation and insult in Hindu society. He expresses his contempt against Hindu social order and appreciates the English officer for treating him equally: "The officer is the lord in the

world. He is the king in the country. He treats human beings with respect. He suggests wearing shoes. He offers food and wine, but the headman living in the dilapidated mansion turns violent for the reason, a Dalit soldier has put on shoes. The headman is trying to kill the Dalit wrestler. Where is the law?" (Bagul, *Pavshya* 38) (Trans. by the Researcher).

The next novel, *Pashan* focuses the conflict between the upper castes and the educated Dalits in a village where Dalits always remain more vulnerable to the caste oppression, violence, and atrocities. Buwa, Janki and Pandurang are from the barber community. They often witness humiliation and become the victims of casteism. Pandurang becomes a teacher and aspires to change the discriminative order through education. He tries to change the society and Janki, his mother too assists untouchable women to get the water from the public well. Bagul's fictional world captures the segregation and ban on Dalits which prohibits them from entering the villages and claim their natural right to water. Janki becomes a victim of the casteism and dies in the eruption of the violence on the occasion; she helps the untouchables in taking out the water from the public well. The upper castes attack untouchables ferociously. As Dalits are deprived of their natural right to the water and subjected to atrocities, they come together, protest and raise their voice against their oppression. Through this protest of educated Dalits, Bagul suggests, education, persistent resistance and the realisation of enslaved conditions and the awareness of human rights can only make Dalits empowered and sustain their fight against the Varna system that has denied their rights for centuries.

*Sardar*, the next novel highlights the religious terrorism of the caste Hindus. They follow the scientifically disapproved notions of untouchability and humiliate Dalits. Sakha, the protagonist belongs to *Mang* caste. He stands a victim to fascist tendencies of Hindu people. In the words of Bagul, the caste institution is nothing else but "Fascism" that strongly supports the Varna system of the upper castes Hindus. ((Bagul, *Dalit Sahitya* 33) (Trans. by the Researcher) He endures the miseries and humiliation in a Hindu society but does not want his son to suffer the heartless discriminations. He educates his son to escape the roots of inequality and poverty. When his son passes the exam, he is excited with his son's success and enters the temple. As he is a Dalit, he is abused and beaten cruelly by Ramdev, an upper caste and the mob for his venture to worship god in a temple. The young generation of educated Dalits supports him and resolve to fight the atrocities legally. Despite their legal battle against Ramdev and the upper caste Hindus, they fail in the legal battle due to the strong hold of the upper castes in the government machineries. Though, the educated Dalits lose the legal battle, they have no alternative except to protest and resist without the pitfall in their own power and community to withstand the relentless cruelties in the country. Through Sakha and the young Dalit brigade, Bagul insists on resistance which is the ultimate weapon to emancipation and survival.

A metaphorical novel, *Aghori* throws light on women's subjugation, superstitions and the exploitation of the villagers. It is a story of the conflict between Patil, the headman of the village and Aghori sadhu. Through Patil, Bagul presents the world of countryside India where the headman of the village maltreats and exploits villagers. He usurps their lands forcibly and keeps Dalits on the outskirts of the village. He tortures his stepbrother and dominates his wife, Pakoli. Towards the end, Aghori sadhu turns out to be his stepbrother who was humiliated, oppressed, and victimised by Patil. He reappears on the scene in the disguise of a sadhu to avenge Patil, who destroyed his family, humiliated Pakoli and killed his brother. As Aghori claims Parvati, Patil's daughter-in-law to gain the divine power, Patil is frightened and shares the blind faiths of the villagers:

He controls the ghosts with his power, the snakes follow his orders, he burns the houses just with the wrath of fire in his eyes, and if he just looks at the woman with lust, she takes off her clothes and appears before him. When the husband of the woman or any other woman tries to stop her, he turns impotent, and the other woman becomes barren. ((Bagul, *Aghori* 29) (Trans. by the Researcher)

Through, Patil, Thakubai, Dharma, and the illiterate villagers, Bagul highlights the countryside superstitious people. Patil dominates the villagers and Dalits but when the time comes, he uses Suka, a Dalit for his selfish motives to kill Aghori. Aghori, Pakoli and the villagers act vengeance on Patil due to his exploitation and oppression. Thakubai and Pakoli suffer miserably as Patil dominates them with the power of his gun and sword. Thakubai, Patil's wife is subjugated and used as a sex object and a means to give Patil, a son. Pakoli too

becomes a victim of his cruelty. As her husband turns out impotent, she wants an heir to the property and thus, commits adultery. It is for the greed of property; Patil forcibly makes his step-brother to leave the place, while he humiliates Pakoli in public, wounds her seriously and even kills her husband's brother

At the end, Patil dies in the stampede when he tries to save cows and buffalos from fire and Thakubai, in fear of Aghori and his destructive powers. Dharma, Patil's son and Parvati confine themselves in the house which is burnt by the violent villagers who act vengeance and pelt stones at Patil's mansion. Ultimately, Thakubai, Dharma and Parvati suffer and meet tragic end due to Patil's exploitation of Pakoli, her husband and the villagers. Through Patil, Parvati, Dharma, Thakubai and Suka and the villagers Bagul reflects the life of country folk who constantly live under the threat of superstitions which are nurtured and sustained in Hindu society. Pakoli goes *sati* at the end after her husband is killed by Patil but she succeeds in taking vengeance on her enemy. She puts Patil's mansion on fire and causes his death in the stampede of the animals.

In his last novel, *Kondi*, Bagul highlights the problems of the lower caste people in the metropolitan slum. Through Pavan and Sushila, the protagonists, he presents how the educated couple confronts the miseries, pains and troubles in the slums of Matunga labour camp. Though, reluctant Sushila is about the people in the slum, she supports Pavan in his resolution to change the situations in the labour camp. Pavan, a rebellious activist and a spirited educated young man with his poetic sensibilities, is disheartened to witness the pathetic scene where he confronts the illiterate, poor, ignorant, rough, violent, jobless, and labour class people who often get in clash and suffer miserably. The girls and women are abused and seen standing in the queue for long hours at the public tap to get water. It often results in violent clash and fights. Through the labour camp, Bagul captures the unhygienic environment where the slum dwellers live miserably, even in an open land and suffer from the sanitation, drinking water, electricity, and the school facilities. Gangadhar Pantavane rightly states, "The expansion of the slums in the Metropolitan city, Mumbai and the people therein, the deplorable states of their existence, the manipulation of the labour of Dalits and their suffocation have been portrayed bluntly by Bagul. (63) (Trans. by the Researcher)

Pavan raises the issues and problems of these people and approaches the municipality authorities and the bureaucrats. He starts getting support from the people but the day, he expresses the need of Dalit organisation against the caste and class oppression and exploitation, the local Dalit leaders from his own community oppose him as they take it a threat to their existence. Despite the strong opposition from the Dalit leaders; Pavan continues to mobilise Dalits and fights the injustice done to them in the Metropolitan city where the slum dwellers are not recognised as the citizens of the country and the government machineries, the capitalist employers and politicians remain insensitive and biased towards their problems. Pavan, a staunch Buddhist makes Dalits aware of their rights but the selfish Dalit leaders and the anti-social elements in the locality oppose him fiercely. Through Pavan, Bagul points out how the educated, devoted and committed people who are honest to the Dalit movement find themselves trapped in the snare which they want to break to establish a democratic society but before they could fight against caste and class oppression, they have to tackle their own people and the anti-social elements which oppose the change and equality in society.

Through his fictional world, thus, Bagul's reveals the pains and problems of the Dalit people and exposes the hypocrisy of upper caste Hindus and the religious scriptures which degrade their position in Hindu society. His characters resist the caste oppression, class exploitation and gender oppression and raise their strong voice against the autocracy of the upper castes in Hindu social order. As they dig out the roots of their oppression and degradation in the religious scriptures and the Hindu religion, they reject the social order and rebel against it to claim their rights and reinstate the rational social democracy which is must for the betterment of the entire civilisation and the mankind.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Bagul does not just discuss the issues and problems of the caste segregation, oppression, sexism, class exploitation, illiteracy, poverty, superstitions and the conservative tendencies but he also hints and provides the absolute solutions through the power of education, the unity of the depressed people, the need of strong organisation, the non-violent resistance movement and the conversion to Buddhism to liberate and

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emancipate Dalit communities from the present state of slavery. Butner in *Pavsha*, Pandurang and the educated Dalits in *Pashan*, Sakha, Devram and educated Dalits in *Sardar*, Pavan and Sushila in *Kondi* resist, struggle and revolt against the established order of the Varna system through the power of education and the awareness of their human rights. Butner in *Pavsha* suggests of conversion to get rid of the caste oppression during the period of the British rule and Pavan in *Kondi* is a Buddhist and wants to replace the social orthodoxy with the democratic values of freedom, fraternity, equality and social justice which is the only way to reinstate dignity and respect to the entire mankind in any civilised society.

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