

Research Paper

Inequality, Inequity and Contemporary Education in Hindi Dalit Stories

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Constructs such as nation and nationalism emerge as a result of numerous historical processes and operate at various levels. However, they are generally realized by the masses when there is conflict between two states, or when cultural and social boundaries are changed. The selected Hindi dalit stories “Ghuspaithiye” [“Infiltrator”] and “Aarakshan” [“Reservation”] help in understanding the idea of nation and nationalism through the lens of caste. Om Prakash Valmiki’s story “Ghuspaithiye” within the framework of nationalism reveals that the treatment meted out to dalit students is hostile to the effort being made at the policy level, which can supposedly transform them from the dominated subject, to ‘respectable citizens’ of the nation. Thus the story is a grim reminder of the fact that nationalism as a positive lived reality is outside the bounds of dalits. Ajmer Singh Kajal’s story “Aarakshan” critically looks at the underlying politics behind anti-reservation movements. The ‘political goondas’ disguised as student leaders leading the students, represented these anti-reservation movements as nationalist activities, and labeled the Others or Dalits as anti-nationalists and thus served their own interests. Therefore this paper makes an attempt, by critically evaluating these stories, to see how the policy of reservation and its impact on dalits sustains or vitiates an integrative concept of nationalism.

Keywords: Reservation, caste, nation, nationalism, Dalit.

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INTRODUCTION

Construct such as nation and nationalism, are a result of historical processes which try to involve and include all natives of a particular territory as a single union. For Benedict Anderson, the term nation does not have any ‘scientific definition’; it is more an imagined community which is created through conscious efforts. To further explain, he quotes Ernest Gellner, who claims that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist” (quoted in Anderson 1983:49). What is noteworthy here is that a nation is invented, and does not pre-exist as an entity. Moreover, it is invented at several levels: the discursive level, policy level, legislative level etc.

In the Indian context, nationalism is a harbinger of the

colonial rule. And dominant Hinduism has been a mainstay in constituting the concept of nationalism (Aloysius 1997, Jaffrelot, 2007, R. Swamy 2003). Scholarship in the area of nationalism suggests that Hinduism being a dominant religion, enforced its ethnic ideology on the conception of nationalism which “. . . instead of giving birth to one national society, seems to have delivered a whole litter of communities divided from one another in terms of language, religion, region or caste” (1997:1) as Aloysius observes. To be more precise, he calls Indian nationalism as ‘upper caste Brahminic nationalism’ (1997:2).

Gopal Guru, while explaining the workings of nationalism, elucidates that the hagiographic construction

of a nation, particularly in the Indian context has failed to resolve the conflict that exists between *Purushkrut Bharat* and *Bahishkrut Bharat*. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out the existence of two nations within the nation of India: a *Purushkrut Bharat* (ideal, pure India) and a *Bahishkrut Bharat* (actual, polluted India), and the upper castes fall in the former category, while the dalits fall in the latter category of the conceptualization of the Indian nation. And this division ensures a strict segregation based on caste. This division of purity and pollution marks the boundaries which dalits are not allowed to cross. Using these concepts, Gopal Guru demonstrates how they still exist in newer and subtler forms.

Gopal Guru further also argues that mainstream historians and dalit writers did not raise this issue in their writing. He is critical of the hagiographic construction of nations, explaining that “. . . the hagiography of nations subordinates the normative question of self-respect to self-rule” (2016:39).

A Critical Analysis of the Story “Ghuspaitiye”

In the story “Ghuspaitiye” the word ‘Ghuspaitiye’ evokes the feeling of being secretive and unwanted in a territory. Here the territory refers to the institutes which have actually been marked for the so called meritorious students, and entry of dalit students in such spaces is being projected as a matter of concern to the prevailing order of merit as they are not on a par with the students from the general category. The title of the story, as well as its content reveals that the title ‘ghuspaitiye’ (infiltrators) functions both literally and metaphorically. Institutional spaces traditionally have been the marked territory of upper caste Hindus, and entry of dalit students by way of the reservation policies is seen as an encroachment in the territory. This begs the question whether a nation is indeed an imagined community in which people of different colors / caste / religion/ cultures truly share a relationship. At the level of a shared identity, the relationship between upper castes and dalits fails to develop this bond of community-hood.

A closer look at the story reflects that certain methods are used to lessen the effect and scope of reservation policies in the story. These methods resemble primitive social methods employed by caste Hindus to relegate the dalits to the lowest position in the social order. The regulatory mechanism to keep the dalits at the margins subtly creates boundaries between caste Hindus, and the dalits. This mechanism involves spatial untouchability as one of its primary methods. What it means is that there are marked places for dalits, and they are not allowed to visit or live in the areas marked for upper caste Hindus. In the story, hostel number - 2 has been marked for dalit students. And when they enter hostel number -1 which is wittingly allotted to caste

Hindus, the dalit students are beaten and abused. The administration lends unsaid support to the students of the upper castes by adopting an indifferent attitude towards Dalit students. This is reflective of the social attitudes people have, towards reservation policies. It is generally not seen as a means to the end of ensuring social justice, but rather a transgression into their territory. In the story, when Rakesh and Ramesh Chaudhari meet the Dean of the college regarding the problems of Dalit students, he expresses his loathing for reservation policies. Valmiki writes:

Without listening to them, the Dean complains against the damage being done in the name of reservation. His belief was that if ineligible people infiltrate medical institutions through state intervention, then the conditions will get worse day by day. What about those students who pass with good marks?(18)

Therefore it is the intentional attempt of the administration to stigmatize dalit students to sustain their intellectual and social ascendancy.

Dalits historically have been seen as morally polluted. They are still perceived in the same way. Morally devaluing dalits is a method to belittle their self-respect. Gopal Guru in this regard observes that “the upper caste, in their desire to remain ritually pure and socially superior, seek to insulate themselves from public institutions that are exclusively created for dalits. In the upper caste perception, Dalit presence in these institutions becomes at the symbolic level a source of repulsion and therefore sociologically/ ritually dangerous” (2016:105).

Upon critical examination, it emerges that repeatedly calling dalit students ‘ghuspaitiye’ creates a feeling of stigma which is being made to work in the same way as the stigma of untouchables or pollutants for the upper castes to perpetuate their domination and exercise their social power on the dalits. It has merely changed its name. Stigma is a social tool that society uses as its internal mechanism. According to Goffman (1963: 3), stigma is an attribute that extensively discredits an individual, reducing him or her “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” This definition shares the assumption that people who are stigmatized, have (or are believed to have) an attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others. The means and methods deployed, apparently seem to launch a counter attack on the effects of reservation policies, however a critical analysis reveals that there are numerous sociological and political issues at play which are symptomatic of the social attitudes of the society towards the dalits in general. Many textual evidences indicate that there exists a tension between caste Hindu students and dalit students which cannot

simply be understood in terms of the debate: able versus unable, deserving versus undeserving, etc. Underneath this tension lie bigger problems which have historical reasons. Another story directly tries to provide a socio-political snapshot of the implementation of the reservation policy.

Critical Analysis of “Aarakshan”

Ajmer Singh Kajal's story “Aarakshan” [“Reservation”] is situated in the period of the anti-reservation movement against the Mandal Commission report for the extension of 27% reservation for the OBC category. The story places the idea of nationalism in the contemporary scenario. Though on the one side there is rage among the people against the reserved category castes and the State, on the other side, the politicians are shown as taking advantage of the socio-economic condition of the public by projecting the anti-reservation movement as a fight for the nation and social justice.

The story opens with the commotion in the society against the Mandal Commission report extending reservation to the OBC category. News of self-immolation by upper caste students is splashed in the newspapers and educational institutions are closed for one month to lessen the rage among the public. But still the situation remains the same. The State government and law support the anti-reservation movement with their silence. The political goons in the guise of university students are shown participating in the movement for their self-interest. There are two groups: one which supports the reservation and the other is against the reservation. The leader of the supporters of the reservation in this story is Shilpriya, and the other group is led by the political goon named Gundan Singh.

The problem arises when the anti-reservation group attacks Shilpriya and his supporters in the university hostel. The police play the non-cooperative role and see the entire scene silently. After beating Shilpriya and others, the anti-reservation group is projected as nationalist. The projection of the anti-reservationists as nationalist can be seen critically. The reservationist group relates to the Dalits, and the anti-reservationist group belongs to the upper castes. The provision of reservation has been provided to the Dalits because they are marginalized for a long time. On the other side, following the four Varna System in the Hindu scriptures, the upper castes have enjoyed all the privileges and dominated the Dalits by practicing endogamy. Though Dalits are the members of the same country/ nation, they are excluded from the society. They have been labeled as untouchables and have been confined only to the occupations of lower status. This division between the upper castes and the lower castes does not reveal any shared identity among them, instead, it complicates the

whole idea of nation. Steven Grosby defines nation as “a social relation of collective self-consciousness”. He suggests that this shared consciousness is constructed among the people by their everyday contact (10). Gopal Guru also says, “A sense of belonging to the nation emerges from the thick socially interactive and democratically associational life of the different classes that inhabit the nation” (36). But the historical understanding of the caste based society of India informs that the dalits have not been just untouchable physically; they are rather kept away metaphorically. This untouchability is regulated by methods such as spatial, linguistic, and sartorial regulation. Spatial regulation means that they are denied the right to cross the territory where upper castes live; instead they are forced to live on the margins of the villages and cities. Linguistic regulation implies that there is no linguistic uniformity between the dalits and the caste Hindus. A strict linguistic distinctness is observed to maintain caste distinctions. Sartorial differences refer to differences made on the grounds of clothes. This regulatory mechanism derives its legitimacy from the text- Manusmriti. In the contemporary scenario, it is difficult for caste Hindus to continue this mechanism. It is being dismantled. However, newer forms and methods are being put in place to maintain caste hierarchy. For instance, caste based reservation is seen by the upper caste people as a potential harm to the nation. For example, attack on Shilpriya and his supporters in the University hostel by the anti-reservation group is tacitly supported by the law enforcing body i.e. the police, and when the anti-reservationists set fire to the rooms of Shilpriya's supporters and stalk out shouting slogans, it is as if, the narrative tells us, they have conducted a ‘great act of patriotism’. It is as though, the text goes on, they have planted ‘flags of victory’ like some ‘great fighters’ from the nation's history and added to its luster and glory. The textual evidence at the hospital further suggests that the state machinery holds the same attitude against reserved category students and its sense of duty is heavily influenced by caste.

CONCLUSION

A close analysis of the stories evidently reveals that dalit students and reservation policies are not welcomed by upper caste Hindus. The policy is dubbed as anti-nationalist by upper castes. Besides, a number of means and methods are used to vitiate the effect of these policies, and the enforcing machinery of these policies is impaired by caste based attitudes. Moreover, when forced to implement the policy, it designs subtle strategies to counter it. This is suggestive of the fact that there is steady opposition from caste Hindus to socially assimilate the dalits. Caste Hindus wish to maintain social hierarchy for various reasons. However, inclusive

policies and the changing social and democratic scenario is challenging and compelling them to maintain status quo. Looking from the perspective of nationalism suggests that this opposition coming from upper castes is inimical to nation and nationalism. It is noteworthy that nationalism mainly incorporates dominant ideological values of Hinduism which is strictly founded on the Varna system, and the Varna system assigns the dalits, the lowest position in the social hierarchy. Historically, the dalits have never been part of mainstream Hinduism. They have been systematically socially and politically boycotted, and now when political provisions are trying to upgrade them socially and politically, resistance is being offered from the caste Hindus. Therefore, in this changing scenario, the constructs of nation and nationalism now need to be reconfigured in order to accommodate the historically boycotted dalit society, and confer them respectable citizenship.

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