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## Dalit Awakening and Fostering Collective Solidarity

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### Research Article

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *The paper focuses on the Dalit awakening in the Telugu-speaking region taking into account social, political and literary aspects. The mainstream Indian history often misses out on Dalit resistance or the Dalit cosmos in general. Becoming conscious of their social status and economic hardships, the Dalits of the Telugu-speaking region displayed an early spirit of organization that developed alongside the Indian independence movement. Thus, to recover the lost history and to give a new understanding to the history of the marginalised is still an unfinished project. Therefore, the paper addresses this lacuna and constructs the history of Dalit awakening in Telugu speaking region.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The paper follows Dalit historiographical approach as it takes into consideration the primary and secondary texts of Dalit writers, anthologies, and research papers. The paper base itself on qualitative textual analysis.*

**Outcome:** *The mainstream history and narratives often overlooks socio-political history and the literary history of Dalits and the marginalised in general. This paper throws light on the forgotten history of Dalits in Telugu speaking region as it is instrumental in fostering narratives on counter-history.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *History plays a vital role in construction of identities and counter-identities. Particularly, marginalised communities such as Dalits who have been struggling to recover their histories should rely on the oral and autobiographical narratives of the community. These writings from the periphery not only enriched the Telugu Dalit literature but they extended their imagination to narrate the stories of the ostracised of the ostracised.*

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The nomenclature Dalit encompasses all the socially, economically and politically marginalised communities. The term is revolutionary as it was constructed in opposition to the hitherto existing vocabulary that was considered ill and shameful. Further, the term has been popularised by the Dalit movement and Dalit literature, which sought to furnish agency on the part of the marginalised hand in hand. Apparently, that led to the formation of Dalit consciousness among the oppressed. Dalit consciousness is a socially and culturally constructed reality which expresses, initiates, and engages social protest as a form of empowerment and emancipation discourse (Kamlesh and Jyoti 5065). It furnished Dalits with collective solidarity as it brought them under one roof. The present paper focuses on the socio-political, cultural and literary elements that are claimed to be the cornerstones in the formation of Dalit consciousness among the Dalits and other marginalised communities in Telugu speaking region. Those events are considered critical as they awakened Dalits from their devastating conditions and taught them the language of protest.

Awakening themselves to their social condition and economic plight, the Dalits in the Telugu-speaking region had seen an early organisational zeal hand in hand with the Indian independence movement. The plight of Dalits in India has been in an utterly devastating condition over the ages; though the governments sought to alleviate their condition, the problem persists as ever. As Clifford Bob notes:

In rural India, where the bulk of India's population continues to live, Dalits are excluded from village wells, temples, and tea shops, forced to subordinate themselves before upper caste neighbors, discriminated against in land and housing allocation, and prevented from participating in local government institutions. Throughout India, Dalits continue to occupy the lowest rungs of the economic system, often living in dire poverty. Most have little or no land. (Bob 173)

However, the colonial gift of education assisted the first generation of Dalits to grapple with the aforementioned hegemonic caste dominance. Malas and Madigas are the two major castes that comprise the Dalit community in the Telugu region. Hierarchically, both the castes are considered low, socially untouchable, and

religiously impure. Traditionally, Madigas were assigned to tan leather to prepare footwear, dispose of dead carcasses, serve cremation activities, and make agricultural tools using leather. Besides, they should also perform all official and unofficial announcements around the village, beating the *Dappu* - artistic leather instrument (Ratnam 6). Beating *Dappu* is nothing short of an art and the Madiga community inherits this skill by birth nevertheless this activity is considered impure and even believed to be a bad omen if people witness the announcer crossing their neighbourhood. Through ascribing impurity and negativeness on the part of Madigas' beating *Dappu*, the casteist hegemony discredits the cultural capital of the Madiga community. On the other hand, the Malas were traditionally not assigned to any such occupations, but they were mostly involved in agriculture-related activities. Consequently, through these traditionally sanctioned occupations, Madigas have been, even in their Dalit community, considered low and branded as polluted and subject to the micro-level hierarchy. Scholars on the Dalit movement in Andhra have analysed reasons for the inequalities between the aforementioned dalit castes in all respects, and we can see the causes for the upward mobility of the Malas notwithstanding their inferior status:

Malas have proportionally overcome their social barriers since they geographically stretched out across the coastal part of Andhra, which is equipped with fertile lands and irrigation facilities. The missionary activities carried out mostly in the areas of health, education, and Christianity also helped them rise within the coastal region because it was under British rule. Madigas outnumber Malas in Telangana, which suffered from oppression and economic crisis under feudal rule. Due to a lack of water resources and facilities, the Telangana region is known for barren lands. Due to this, the Madigas lag far behind the Malas in all aspects, including literary production (Purushotham 62).

Despite the geographical as well as social differences, activists belonging to both castes have come together and articulated their resistance through social mobilisation and literary echoes of their pains. One of the early signs of the Dalit awakenings can be traced back to the *Jagan Mitra Mandali*, founded in 1906, which stood to enlighten the illiterate and ignorant untouchables of their plight

through exploiting *Harikatha* - one of the popular art forms of Andhra Pradesh (Bharathi 53). Since most parts of the dalit community were non-literate, *Harikatha*, that stress on the orality, happens to be an effective form of spreading awareness into the huts located in the periphery.

Bhagya Reddy (1888-1939) was one of the leading spokespersons of Dalits born in Hyderabad. His engagement with modern education and new ideas was a fascinating story. At an early age, he lost his father, and in no time, he left home because he had arguments with his mother, who criticised his quarrelsome behaviour. Subsequently, he joined as a butler in the house of two Roman Catholic barrister brothers, as he received sponsorship for his education from the elder catholic brother, Francis Xavier Dos Santos, who was very kind to him (Rawat and Satyanarayana 106). Given the heyday of social reform movements, his engagement with the aforementioned men helped him to learn about newly constructed ideologies and prevailing anti-caste thoughts.

Dalits, with the force generated by the Adi movements in other colonial regions and with the assistance of some social reformers and nationalists, founded the Adi-Andra Mahasabha conference in 1917 in Vijayawada (Murthy 2). Bhagya Reddy, presiding over the conference, gave a call for dalits to use the term 'Adi-Andra' instead of *Panchama*, which was used as the representative word for dalits (Bharathi 53). Labelling untouchables as the original 'sons of the soil', he pushed all the original Indians to the south and detaching Brahmins as outsiders (Omvedt 119). He believed the nomenclature - *Panchama* to be lifeless and brought into discourse only to fulfil administrative requirements, hence to assert themselves, they would have needed the word nearer to their land and their existence. Even he calls upon the dalits to stand firm and assert their identity strongly in his writing:

We are seven crore people, Beware!

We are now empowered...

The stream of reform flows swiftly in favour of Schedule Castes.

Who can swim against this tide?

You should adjust yourself like the reeds do in swift currents,

Or else you will find it difficult. (Purushotham et al. xv)

Bhagya Reddy's ideological framework prioritised the social mobilisation of the Dalits through a lens of self-reform and internal empowerment. His approach was considered radical as he advocated for a total rejection of the established social hierarchies. Further, part of his grassroots activism, he made a sizable intellectual contribution to the Telugu public sphere through the establishment of a newspaper *Bhagyanagar Patrika*. The paper operated as a critical platform for Dalit discourse and was a reflection of the increasing political consciousness among Telugu speakers regarding their language and regional identity (Rawat and Satyanarayana 112). Besides, the Adi-Andra Mahasabha, which was founded under the banner of Dalit identity, aimed at the annihilation of untouchability, obtaining some educational opportunities that had been shut for them for ages. As part of securing economic capital, it also fought for valuable resources, including land and jobs, with social status and finally political space to represent their community.

During the 1930s, Dalit activities ignited by the influence of Dr. Ambedkar were well underway in Marathi regions. Dalits of Andhra were invited to the 'Maharashtra Asprishya Youth Conference' organised by the Depressed youths of Poona, as this conference amplified the ongoing dalit organisational activities to a great degree (Bharathi 56). Consequently, to hand assistance to Ambedkar's anti-caste mission, and to organise and enlighten the dalits on the evils of Hinduism, the Youth League of Ambedkarites was launched in 1936 (56). This initiative by the emerging dalit leaders' genuine efforts helped the emergence of Ambedkarite ideology into the social as well as political sphere of Andhra (Ratnam 5).

The Dalit literary movement in Andhra Pradesh also played its part in awakening dalit consciousness, which then would be worked as a mechanism for the emancipation of the dalits of their condition and mobilise under the umbrella term Dalit. Dalit literature did not emerge instantaneously but as a result of exploitation, protest, and revolution, which made possible the Dalit literature what it is. Kusuma Dharmanna Kavi, the first Dalit writer to emerge from the movement, was an ardent Ambedkarite activist and revolutionary poet founded the *Jayabheri* - a weekly journal that voiced for the emancipation of the oppressed

(Bharathi 62). He was courageous with his pen and critical of the anti-Dalit hegemony. Purushotham, in his research piece 'Evolution of Telugu Dalit Literature', analyses the phases of Telugu Dalit literature:

The Telugu dalit literature movement from its genesis to the present may be classified into four phases, though it may not be possible to demarcate the phases in terms of accurate periodisation. Dalit poetry - the novel was not yet on the scene - of the early period can be classified under the humanist phase because it opposed untouchability and caste without questioning the religious and social sanction given to these practices. The nationalist and the pre-nationalist dalit writing may be termed the harijan phase, as most of it was an outcome of Gandhian influence during the nationalist movement. Dalit poetry (by Dalits) and novels on dalits by non-Dalits were written during this period. The writings of the post-independence period by first-generation educated dalits could be termed the scheduled caste (sc) phase (Purushotham 56).

As the scholar observes dalit literature has evolved over the years, changing its character and concern according to historical necessity, which played a significant role in shaping the dalit consciousness around the ideology of anti-caste thinkers and, more importantly, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Unlike the previous dalit writers who at the start imitated the mainstream caste Hindu writers, Gurram Jashuva, arguably the first modern Telugu poet representing the Dalit voice, questioned various tenets of mainstream literary aesthetics which were self-serving, detached from contemporary socio-political reality and busy reviving traditionalism (Purushotham 55). Exposure to social and literary movements happening around the world, coupled with modern education, came as a boon for Dalits and as a result, the first generation of educated Dalits who benefited from Constitutional reservations fathered a myriad of socio-political movements on the grounds of self-respect and equality. Apparently, these young Dalits contributed profoundly to the nascent Telugu Dalit literature with their newfound identity. As we earlier discussed, there were socio-economic disparities between the Malas and Madigas, and arguably, the same phenomena had translated into the literary production as well. For instance, the writers who hailed from the Madiga community failed to

get the instant attention unlike their counterparts as their presence in the Telugu literary sphere was not felt convincingly. However, over the years, they have overcome the social barriers that have stopped them from finding a place among the political as well as literary spheres. The reason that took the Madiga community a while to present themselves fully was they had to compete and confront multiple hegemonic dominances - one was of the upper caste, and another was of their own community.

The Karmchedu incident played a vital role in awakening the Dalits of their unfinished, in fact, ever-started project of emancipation. The Kamma caste, which had availed the benefits of non-brahmin politics, entrenched their socio-political dominance in Andhra and became a dominant land-owning caste among Reddy and Kapu, the other Shudra castes, which now became the most powerful. The Karamchedu incident would be sufficient testimony to the presence of their power. Six Madiga men were brutally killed, and three girls were raped (Balagopal 1378) because of a trivial issue - a Madiga boy reprimanded a Kamma boy for bathing his buffalo in a tank that dalits used to fetch water to drink. The next morning, hundreds of Kamma members launched a brutal attack on the Madiga colony as people were tortured and chased, houses were set on fire, and Dalits fled the village in large numbers (Berg 107). The incident laid the foundation for new beginnings and stressed the question of caste immensely. Most importantly, “the massacre destroyed the myth among committed social activists that caste was a thing of the past” (107).

Despite years of activism and caste Hindu social reform movements atrocities against the dalits were casual and happened constantly over time, but the Karamchedu incident proved the point that dalits need to address the caste issue with their Independent dalit movement, as the non-Brahmin politics, left movements and other pseudo Dalit parties were not efficient in mitigating caste atrocities, as they were concentrated on class rather than on the question of caste. It is obvious that the new dalit movement had started around the Karamchedu incident, and it was only in the 1990s that the Madiga community began to assert their “Madiganess” and represent the doubly marginalised voices. One of the significant aspects of the writers from the Madiga community is that writers like

Yendluri Sudhakar, Vemula Yellaiah, Nagappagari Sunderraju and Madiga women writers like Jajula Gowri, Jupaka Subhadra and Gogu Shyamala, among others, have proved the potential to produce the literature that voices the narratives of ostracism, oppression and rebellion coupled with their yearning for liberation, dignity and equality (Purushotham 62-63). These writings from the periphery not only enriched the Telugu Dalit literature but they extended their imagination to narrate the stories of the ostracised of the ostracised.

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