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The Discrimination of Dalits in Indian Society with reference to Harish Mangalam's *The Light of Darkness*

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Abstract

Indian society is made up of different castes and various religions. India was identified as Hindustan as Hindus have been living here since last many years. Since the advent of *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, Indian society has been categorized into four divisions which is called as Varnashrams. This is the basic root of discrimination in Indian society. As per this system, Brahmins were highly respected in society and so they were allotted the work of teaching, Kshatriyas were supposed to fight the war and protect the society and kingdom, Vaishyas were supposed to do the activity of trade and commerce and last the Shudras were given the work of cleaning and removing the garbage and other waste as they were considered as lower caste in Hindu society. This was the beginning of discrimination in Indian society. Because of this Varnashram system the Dalits are being discriminated at every level in society. Social, educational and economic discrimination towards Dalits can easily be

seen in Indian society. This social imbalance gradually affects the overall growth of the society and nation. The upper caste rich people become richer day by day and the oppressed Dalit people who are poor since last many years have remained poor even at the present time. They have been intentionally marginalized in the society by other upper caste people. The evil of untouchability still prevails in Indian society.

Keywords

Harish Mangalam; *The Light of Darkness*; Gujarati Dalit Literature.

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Introduction

The injustice, cruelty and inhumane attitude which are observed against Dalits in Indian society is the central message through this paper. Even in an age of technological advancement in 21st century, while meeting a stranger first time, an Indian first asks his/her name and caste which signifies that still we give major importance to caste and religion rather than humanity. This paper is a humble attempt to represent the social imbalance in Indian society because of racial discrimination towards Dalits. The paper represents the bitter reality of pathetic condition of Dalits as they are oppressed and marginalized by the upper castes. The idea of untouchability itself is inhumane and cruel. When the Almighty God has not made any difference like upper caste, lower caste, untouchable etc., then the individuals who practice and believes in untouchability must be the monsters on the earth.

To expose the real scenario of Dalit discrimination, here few stories from Harish Mangalam's *The Light of Darkness* have been selected for discussion in detail. Harish Mangalam is a well known Gujarati Dalit writer who has exposed the discrimination being practiced in Indian society towards Dalits through his remarkable poetry, short stories and novels. Presently he is working as the

Secretary of Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Academy. *The Light of Darkness* is the English translation of his Gujarati short story collection *Talap*.

Representation of Discrimination in Harish Mangalam's Short Stories

Harish Mangalam has given poems, stories, novels, dramas and criticism related to Dalits. He has written about Dalit's exploitation and victimization. His autobiographical novel *Aganzal* is a detailed account of Dalit discrimination. Mangalam is of the opinion that Dalit's emancipation can be done through Dalit's empowerment. Dalit can be made a powered class by providing education. Quality education is the primary urgent requirement of Dalits. The children of Dalits are not properly cared by the teachers of the rural area due to caste based orthodoxy. Mangalam signifies that education is the only solution to come out from this darkness. Mangalam is inspired by writings of Dr. Ambedkar and other rationalists. He revolts against the issues of injustice and cruelty towards Dalits. In his works, he shows the bitter reality where Dalits suffer and upper castes exploit them. He is deeply affected by the cruelty and injustice done to Dalits in India. He writes in the Preface to *The Light of Darkness*,

I have been an eye-witness to people who are frequently victimized by the malady of untouchability, a catastrophic scourge present like a leech in Hindu society. A system which justifies the oppressive and exploitative attitudes, one which is undescribably and unimaginably inhumane.

He adds,

Incidents triggered by burning issues of existence and of survival tormentingly rend my heart and cause my tears to evaporate. I find it difficult to breathe, difficult to bear. All around are discrimination, inequality, varnashramas of high and low. The stench of ghettoization is all over the place. The fragrance of

humanity is missing. It seems to be a hollow word, burdened with the feelings of emptiness and absence.

The stories in this collection are the representation of different sensitive and unbearable Dalit issues of Gujarat.

The Realistic Picture in “Dalo Alias Dalsinh” and “Whooping Cough”

The first story ‘Dalo Alias Dalsinh’ is a description of social reality of the first half of the 20th century. From later decades of 19th century, Gujarati Dalits have started to migrate from their villages and settled down in Ahmedabad to get work in textile industries. Ahmedabad, having so many textile mills, was known as the Manchester of India. In Gujarat the Dalits were engaged as weavers and did the work at their houses. Earlier their life was comparatively better to their relatives of their villages. But in early 20th century due to decline of textile industries Dalits became miserable and helpless. In the textile mills majority of the workers were Dalits. As they had no income source in their villages, they did not go back. Being helpless they were forced to live in adverse situation. Dalo is a brave and bold Dalit youth who is the protagonist of this story. By looks he does not seem a Dalit. As described in ‘Dalo Alias Dalsinh’,

With what great difficulty the cart of life had been set rolling, only to be brought to such an unfortunate standstill. A die-hard struggle for survival had begun once again. There was hardly any way out.....And so, children having dropped out of school and wives, with a tattered gunny-sack thrown over their shoulders, set out to pick waste paper, broken pieces of glass, rags, plastic waste and iron scrap.

Survival was the main issue for Dalits during this critical condition. Almost each and every Dalit family was affected. Gandhiji’s Sabarmati Ashram was established in Ahmedabad. The term ‘Harijan’ was used for Dalits at that

time. But no one was willing to keep 'Harijan' as a worker. The upper caste people prefer workers from other castes than Dalit even today.

To move out from critical time Dalo changes his name, from Dalo to Dalsinh Parmar. In Gujarat 'Sinh' is only used by Kshatriya. Dalo looks like a Kshatriya. Now he easily gets the job of a watchman in Dhansukhlal Mehta's shop on Anand Bazar. He performs his job sincerely, catches a person who stole a saree from the shop. The owner Dhansukhlal becomes satisfied with Dalsinh's duty. Satisfied with his commitment to duty Dhansukhlal assigns him the duty at Kirtidham Jain Tirth. Bhavanisinh and Ratansinh, both the Kshatriyas, become Dalo's enemies as he catches them red-handed stealing the idol from the temple. Dalo's village is near the Tirth. Once Dala's relative identifies him as Dalo, a Dalit. Bhavanisinh and Ratansinh go to the Tirth to harm Dalo by informing others about his reality. But Dalo has already safely escaped from the place before they reach.

The story signifies Dalit's tragedy and adjustment through changing their names and surnames. Even today, in Gujarat the Dalits try to mix with the main stream by changing their names and surnames but the people from the upper caste identifies them and treat them as unwanted beings in rural as well as in urban areas.

The second story "Whooping Cough" brings social reality of rural Gujarat. This is a story of Kachara and his wife Ratan who live at the outskirts of the village. They drag the dead animal and sell the skin and bones of the dead whenever any animal dies in the village. In the village untouchability was practiced but when the upper caste children were affected by whooping cough, parents brought them to Kachara's place and made him touch the water of the pit. The pit was a tannery where Kachara dipped the animal skin. Upper caste people do not go near traditional tannery of Dalit due to untouchability. In the story an old woman gives advice to go to the pit and have drops from the water. The parents bring their children affected from whooping cough to

Kachara's place. Kachara shoves his fingers deep into boy's throat and finally the child gets cured. Orthodoxy and blind faith are still followed by the people in rural India on the name of miracle.

Dalits are not treated with a sense of humanity. In the story Kachara gets a part of land from Hargovindbhai's land under the Land Ceiling Act. Hargovindbhai Patel is a leader in the village. A Government employee informs Kachara and tells him to give a thumb print on the concerned papers. Kachara and his wife Ratan are anxious because the villagers are not ready to give the land from Hargovindbhai's land. Ratan advised her husband to avoid conflict with the villagers. The villagers attack on Kachara and kill him as he does not give up his right on the land given to him under the government policy. The villagers present the reason that the boy who had suffered whooping cough was polluted. To commit injustice on Dalit, many times, ordinary reasons are found out and then they are attacked and removed forever.

Social Discrimination in “The Midwife” and “Abortion”

“The Midwife” is the story that tells truth about rural Gujarat. Benima, a Dalit widow, works for sorting and selling the mangoes. She has also the inborn knowledge of midwifery. The Upper caste women call her when a pregnant woman is in labour because her skill was well known among the village women. In the story Pashi, a Patel woman gets labour pain. Doctor has already given her an injection but the medicine did not work. Then they call Benima who helps the woman and at last a male child is born. The mother and child both are healthy and free from danger. Benima is given nothing for her service except a coconut. When Dalit's help was essential then untouchability was not considered. But as the work is finished again the Dalit is treated as an unwanted being as is seen in following lines,

Benima was going on her round of the village, carrying the basket of mangoes on her head. On the way beneath the shade of the banyan tree, some little boys were playing. As Benima passed they

shouted at her, Hey, you scavenger woman, go away. You will pollute us. Can't you look where you are going?

The story "Abortion" presents a struggle of Dalit couple, Dinesh and Indu. Indu completes her study and becomes a school teacher. Both husband and wife have job so they do not have financial crisis. After sometime with consultation of a doctor, Indu becomes pregnant. At that time a housemaid was required but because of their caste no one agrees to work at their house. The women who work as housemaids, they think it an inferior job to work at Dalit's house as a housemaid. Upper castes do not call them to work in their houses because they are considered degraded who have worked as housemaids in Dalit's house. And housemaids, due to their castes, also think that they are superior to Dalits. Generally housemaid's job is done by a person from other backward class (OBC). They are also exploited but they do not show any concern or sympathy for Dalits. On the contrary, this story shows cruel reality of other backward castes' hatred for Dalits. Indu gives birth to a male child but the couple could not enjoy the happiness properly because due to untouchability based hatred as no one comes as a housemaid to their home. A Vaghari caste woman Monghi says,

Those people have a picture of Jesus Christ in their house. Back in our place, dhedhs have converted to Christianity. We won't send our daughter to work in their house...He may be a big man but they belong to the lower caste! How can we work for them? They are dhedh Christians.

"The Foot-Track"

"The Foot-Track" is the story which tells about the Dalit youth's struggle to set new identity as human beings in the village community. The story talks about controversy between a Dalit and a non-Dalit in rural Gujarat. Labour in farms is the only option for Dalits in rural Gujarat. Majority of Dalits earn their livelihood by doing farm labour even today. In farms of upper castes like Patels,

Kshatriyas etc. Dalits generally work on daily wages. After the attack on Bahechar Patel, dominating castes start to behave properly with Dalits. The story indicates a Dalit youth's protest to obtain social equality and social justice.

Factors Responsible for Pathetic Condition of Dalits in Indian Society

There are many factors responsible for the marginalized condition of the Dalits in India. The first major factor is the varnashram system implemented in Hindu society before ages. The discrimination done by the upper castes is the major concern for worry. The second important factor is the literacy rate which is very low among Dalits. Because of not having proper education they are deprived of better life standard and respectful job, business and profession in society. Because of illiteracy they are helpless and live a poor life. The third factor which affects their poor condition is the politics and corruption. Government reserves funds for the marginalized and oppressed through different schemes. But the government schemes are not completely fruitful due to corruption in various departments of government. Politics also affects the Dalits as political parties utilize the Dalit mass for getting their votes. They treat them as their vote bank. As the election is over, Dalits once again are marginalized and deprived of benefits.

Conclusion:

Because of varnashram system and caste consciousness of upper and castes, Dalits are cheated of their space in every walk of life. They have been intentionally boycotted by the upper castes. Even the reservation system is not completely successful in providing social equality to Dalits. During the time of election political parties take advantage of different castes in the country. They give ticket to Dalit candidates only in the reserved constituencies. But after winning the election the elected candidates, instead of starting attempts for the betterment of Dalit community, they involve in the activities of making money and political advancement. Secondly, the literacy rate in the Dalit community

is very low. We must provide maximum education to Dalit children. Sufficient number government schools and colleges of quality education in Dalit locality is the prime need of the time. Furthermore, ghettoization is largely seen in almost all cities and villages in India. That is not a mark of standard life system in society. There are separate localities of separate castes which again strengthen the gap between upper and lower castes.

The ultimate solution for oppressed Dalits is to create a social awareness among Hindus regarding the injustice done to Dalits. A social campaign may be started in the society to raise the awareness in the public. The people must be informed about the dangers of social imbalance which will create negative effects on social and national development.

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