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THUS SPOKE THE MOUTH: PROBLEMATIZING DALIT VOICE IN SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

Dalit writing is the interventionalist voice of the dispossessed subaltern in the cultural economy of the society. As such, Dalit writing, including Dalit poetry, considers the contradictions that permeate the socio-cultural structure historically allocated and religiously sanctioned in the Indian subcontinent. As an epicenter of all Dalit experience of trauma and violence, the poetics the Dalit body is deeply rooted in the peripheral space socially assigned to it by anachronistic caste-based litigation. An appraisal of Dalit creative-critical work by writers like Sharan Kumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Om Prakash Valmiki, Muktibodh and others underscore the conjunction of the physical, psychical and the psychological in their interpretation of Dalit consciousness. They put forward the idea that Dalit poetry is begotten by the trauma of societal oppression and therefore Dalit language and its revitalization are two elements obdurately linked to Dalit poetics. The present research paper seeks to read the problematization of the Dalit agency through the conduit of the Dalit voice wherein the anatomical category of the mouth is closely related to the question of Dalit identity. Theoretically aligned to Heidegger's notion of language as the house of being and Bachelard's assertion of a house as an ideal metaphor of poetic imagination and Dylan Trigg's view of the coeval existence of space and body, the paper examines a series of selected poems by Dalit poetic voices to examine how their distinct Dalit point of view underscores Dalit speech and directs our attention to the historical abstraction of it. The paper further examines how speech as a category in Dalit writing places the Dalit somatic entity as a site of contestation with the 'Mouth' as a loaded symbolic category inspiring rebellion and resistance. And as the quintessential purpose of Dalit literature is the unleashing of Dalit voice from the anti-verbal domain of social decrepitude, Dalit poetry needs to be critically read based on the experience of the mouth and the patois.

Keywords: Dalit, Poetry, Speech, Mouth, Marginal, Subaltern, Minority, Exploitation, Space

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- **Dr. Barnali Saha**

"I am of a race inferior for all eternity…I am a beast…" (Rimbaud qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari 105) writes Rimbaud echoing perhaps the incontrovertible problematic surrounding the deterriorialized Dalit in the socio-cultural and historiographic topography in the Indian subcontinent. Silently communicating to us the voluptuous upsurge of social repression meted out to them by virtue of caste-based segregation, the Dalit voice dwelling in the societal periphery has long experienced a strategic break in its resounding flow. Etymologically estivating in the Sanskrit root of the word dal, signifying, cracking, splitting, tearing apart, the word Dalit is gender-inclusive, and in the words of A.P. Nirmal, the pioneering voice of Dalit theology, refers to the 1) the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; 2) the opened the expanded; 3) the bisected; 4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; 5) the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed; and 6) the manifested, the displayed" (Kumar 3). As such, a historical analysis of the Dalit discourse suggests a stupefying axiomatic sublimation of the moral world order experienced by the Dalits at the behest of an apparently victorious Brahmanical caste system founded in ancient India.

The Iconography of the Caste System

"For the welfare of humanity the supreme creator Brahma, gave birth to the Brahmins from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet" (Manu's code 1-31)." The stringent socio-cultural conditions mandated by the traditional caste system was unequivocally linked to politico-economic hierarchy. According to the deified structure, the patriarchal or phallic-authorial status was granted to the Brahmin. Begotten from the mouth of Brahma, the creator of the world and the quintessential vitalizing force in the Hindu holy trinity comprising of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as the three respective vertices, the Brahmin is the Jungian Sage archetype inundated in the sea of knowledge for good.

Therefore, ascribing the Brahmin as the ultimate custodian of language, and we must remember that language IS power, the caste system establishes the semantic limit of language as a cultural device. The laws of Manu demonstrate the incontrovertible

connection between speech and power when it says that "[the] meaning of everything is controlled by speech. Speech is the root of everything. Everything is set into motion by speech. A man who robs speech robs everything," (Laws of Manu, 97).

Considering the importance given to speech as a referent to the supremacy of the Brahmin, born out of the mouth of Brahma, the mouth in the configurated structure of the caste system naturally acquires a powerful positional symbolism where " the mouth gives judgment and so symbolizes the word" (Mitford 73). In fact, when we critically analyse the symbolism of the mouth as the egression to Brahminic (read divine/universal) knowledge, we realize that the whole machinery of the caste system is immanently rooted in a symbolic synthesis. Here the birth of the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra too are illustrative.

Figure 1Mars, Roman God of War; Pic Courtesy Fontana 72.

Universally regarded as the symbol of justice and authority, the arm "symbolizes action…In Eastern religious iconography arms represent power. Thus the many-armed deity represents the many-powered nature of the god" (Mitford 72). Notice in this context the picture of the Roman God of War, Mars. Arms upraised in military prowess; Mars is might embodied. As such, the Kshatriya, begotten from the arms of Brahma signify regal and militant authority, powers needed to safeguard the oracular zone of the supreme entity, the Brahmin.

The Laws of Manu dictate that the body the waist above is purified and the anatomy below the abdomen is a zone of contamination. Intrinsically, therefore, the two classes that follow the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, the Vaishyas and the Shudras, born out of the thigh and the feet of Brahma respectively signify servility, service and labour. Considering that a "bare feet is a symbol of humility and poverty," the Shudra born from the "most lowly part of the body" (Mitford 75) embody eternal servitude to the other classes.

As the structural segmentation of the human order ceases to function beyond the unit of the Shudra, the Shudra being the fourth category, the organization of the ati-Shudras or Dalits in the dialectic of the caste system becomes problematic. Since four is the number signifying completeness in ancient Hinduism, there being four elements, four cardinal points, the four faces of the ultimate patriarch, Lord Brahma, it can be naturally assumed that four castes or four segments of the community intrinsically rooted in the biology of the supramundane agency was planned. Nevertheless, the organization of the structure suggesting completeness and divine harmony becomes paradoxical when the tertiary beings, the ati-shudras, or the Dalits are considered.

Variously referred to as "Dasyu", the alien, and the "dog-cooker" (Laws of Manu :92; 52), although the untouchable category of Dalits share their cultural genealogy with the Shudras, unlike them their presence does not penetrate the casteist superstructure. As such, they are looked upon as inextricably related to "[a]ll those races of the world which are outside the pale of the people 'born of the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet,'—speaking the 'barbaric' or the 'refined' language—[and] are called 'Dasyu.'—(45) In Manu, therefore, the Dalit presents itself as a "dasyu" (Doniger 113) "a person of no caste at all, somehow outside of the entire caste system" (ibid).

What strikes us as unique in the codes of Manu is the general erasure of the untouchables from the scheme of things as well as the magnified opprobrium connected to their existence or appearance. What seems most confusing is why the people who are disregarded by the caste system since Manu had said that "The Brahmana, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya are the three twice-born castes; the fourth is the one caste, Śūdra; there is no fifth.—(4)—should be normatively caught up in the socio-cultural discourse legitimized by the Hindu caste system.

The answer to this lies in the economic dependency of the untouchables on the three upper castes. Here we must note that "[t]the work of the Dalits is essential for maintaining the upper caste Hindus' purity" (Mukherjee 2-3) and yet it is the very process of performing those activities that the Dalits become "an object of revulsion" (Mukherjee 2-3) an "untouchable" (2) occupying the "lowest place in the Hindu hierarchical order"(2) their "subaltern status…sanctioned by sacred authority [becoming] eternal and unalterable," (Mukherjee 3).

The situation of the Dalit, therefore, "circumscribed by rigid caste rules…and treated worse than animals by Hindus…[dictated] that they remained illiterate, poor and downtrodden through most of Indian history," (Kumar 1). The role of the caste system in Dalit life, therefore, cruxes upon two fundamental acts of segregation, one of which was the act of "territoriality through the fixing of [Dalit/untouchable] residence"(Deleuze and Guattari 196) outside the periphery of non-Dalit settlement, thus making sure that the Dalits were "'unseeable,' 'unapproachable' and 'un-hearable' by most castes" (Kumar 1) and, the other, was a lack of availability of independent economic opportunities.

The contingency of the protracted caste-based repression is dramatized in "Poisoned Bread" by Bandhumadhav wherein we encounter normative prescription of caste-based dialectics applied to insult, subjugate and violate Dalit fundamental rights. What is strange in the story is the constant transmogrification of the Dalit as a demon, a thief, and an evil incarnate, and by extension, the other. The Dalit Everyman Yetalya Aja in search of employment applies to the landed proprietor Baburao Patil. When Patil insults the old

man out of habit, despite the fact that after Indian independence caste discrimination has become unconstitutional and legally offensive, the young grandson of Yetalya Aja reacts with fitting rebuttals. The disinclination of the younger generation of Dalits to accept upper class violence without protest angers the powerful Patil who avenges himself by refusing to give the promised share of food to the old man. Desperate and weak from hunger with no access to monetary or land rights and living on the mercy of the upper class, the old man, a representation of the larger Dalit community, resorts to eating food discarded by the cattle. The bread, poisoned and stale, unfit for human consumption seals the fate of the old man who dies realizing that the only means of exit from the hermetically sealed caste based discriminatory system is to educate Dalits and enable them to become vociferous. The iconoclastic disintegration of normative Dalit anti-verbality which makes Dalits the natural ground for victimhood is problematized by Dalit creative and critical voices alike.

In the poem "Suno Bhrahmin," for example, the poet Malkhan Singh seeks to subvert the regularized subalternism inherent in the Dalit situation by inviting the voluble Brahmin to listen to the Dalit for once. The fact that the Dalit may have something to say may come as a jolt to the savarna community who made sure through strategic spatial and somatic separation that the Dalit remained untouched, that their voice never polluted the complacency of their latent hegemony. The position is echoed by Dr. Ambedkar as well who felt that the caste system was an anathema and even burnt the Manusmriti as a mark of protest.

Sharatchandra Muktibodh in his essay on Dalit literature remarks that "Dalit literature is one which is produced by out a Dalit vision" (Muktibodh 273) born out of the crucible of Dalit trauma. The view is echoed by other noted Dalit critics as well like Sharankumar Limbale who in talking about the form and purpose of Dalit literature directs our attention to the trauma inlaid in Dalit personal experience. He says that "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, the tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits," (Limbale 30). Here we may consider Heidegger's assertion that "[t]he language of [a] dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about," (Heidegger 5) and "[a]ssuming that the languages of the two," the voluble Brahmin and the subaltern Dalit, in this case, "are not merely different but are other in nature, and radically so…a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible," (ibid). As such, non-Dalits may echo a deep-rooted sympathy; nevertheless, for a writing to be qualified as Dalit work, it has to come from Dalit person experience. And such experiences of trauma abound in the lives of Dalit creative writers who "make their personal experience the basis of their writing. Always prominent in their writing is the idea that certain notions have to be revolted against,

some values have to be rejected," (Limbale 33). Dalit writing, therefore, is written out of "Social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist," (ibid). Limbale's view is echoes by other Dalit writers as well including M.N Wankhade who unequivocally agreed with Jean Paul Sartre that "[w]riting is not simply writing, it is an act, and in man's continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon. It is necessary that he understands this, " (Sartre qtd. In Wankhade 324).

The task of a Dalit writer seen as an "activists-artists who write while engaged in movements," who regard their "literature as movement," their obligation being to the "Dalits and the exploited classes" (Limbale 33) cannot find "peace other than what he finds in the heart of the combat," (Camus qtd in Wankhade 332) against the caste system and its socio-cultural and economic repercussions. Consequently, a Dalit writer who is "in the forefront of the battalions ushering in a new and revolutionary era of literature," (Wankhade 333) cannot be "irresponsible" (ibid) because he has to "make every word he speaks draw blood. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom" (Whitman qtd in Wankhade 326), the caste system in this case, and its result normativity and segregation for Dalits is problematized by him in his work.

Considering the immense potential of Dalit creative writing as a trope of activism, we can case that the purpose of Dalit writing is twofold. First. Thus Dalit literature has a two-fold purpose: first, the psychical relief brought about by sharing the experience and second the consciousness it garners in Dalit society first and to the society at large in general.

We know that that "trauma and time alter the way we recollect significant events" (Carey & Hoffman 2018) and "psychoanalysis believes that crucial to recovering from an experience of trauma is the capacity and willingness to incorporate that traumatic event inside one's self as an indispensable piece of personal history and identity" (Horovitz 6). Dalit literature does just that it that allows a writer of the literature to make sense of their personal experience of trauma of caste-based discrimination, incorporate it in her life and help her readers to make sense of their own experience as well. This is possible because "sufferings of the Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social," (Muktibodh 270. We can say, consequently, that Dalit personal experience follow a teleology of tessellation wherein one experience echoes the experience of another person. In such an atmosphere of shared trauma, the role of the Dalit writer becomes even more pervasive and potent.

Research in mental health proposes that "people experiencing psychological trauma" can make sense of their experiences by "sharing … [their] personal stories with others" which result in "meanings being shaped and refined through dialogue" (Long and Casey 2003).

And for this purpose the people of the Dalit community rely on the voice of the "activist-writer" (Limbale 33) to problematize the present, the past and to invoke a change in the future.

Having established the importance of the Dalit writer, the paper now reads a series of Dalit poems to see how the idea of Dalit speech is problematized in the texts. How in Dalit creative writing the metaphor of the mouth, as an echo of the supramundane oral cavity that begat the Brahmin, is a somatic area of contestation in Dalit creative thought that occurs as a leitmotif in several Dalit creative and critical pieces. How Dalit poets in order to question the historic subjugation and erasure of Dalit speech often refer to the mouth as the ultimate telos, the conduit to power, power being speech.

The paper reads a series of Dalit poems and concentrates on the metaphor of the mouth as leitmotifs in Dalit literary iconography applied to underscore language of the subaltern as a historic area of contestation. Before embarking on a critical reading of the literary texts, it is imperative that the mouth, far from being an anatomical aperture of acarpous cultural importance is established as a zone of critical inquiry.

A Case for Symbols

Symbols, we know, "are profound expressions of human nature," (Mitford Introduction i) that are universally apparent in cultures throughout the word. Carl Jung defined symbols as "terms, names, or even pictures…[which] imply something vague, hidden and unknown to us," (Jung qtd. In Mitford i). Far from being simple cultural artefacts, in appropriate contextual situations "symbols speak powerfully to us, simultaneous addressing our intellect, emotion and spirit," (ibid) such that "their study" ultimately becomes "the study of humanity itself," (ibid). Here we may recall Saussure's Structuralist notion that the "bond" between the "signifier and the signified" is "arbitrary" (Saussure http://faculty.smu.edu/nschwart/seminar/saussure.htm) and Roland Barthes' idea cultural connotation which suggests an incontrovertible cultural association between words and their meaning. Following them we may put forward the idea that human communication is largely sign-based depending largely on "written or spoken words, images or gestures" (Mitford i) which act as illustrations of reality or "recognizable echoes of objects, actions and concepts in the world around us" (ibid). Although generally designed to be precise for unequivocal and universal communications, an important aspect of symbols and symbolism is their intrinsic psychological quality: within our "inner world, a symbol can represent some deep intuitive wisdom that eludes direct expression," (Mitford i). The paper desires to amplify the significance of symbols in the study of Dalit creative work in general and the importance of the symbol of mouth as a symbol in Dalit poetry in particular.

Mouth as the Symbol: Voice as the Power

Indian civilization "has recognized the power of symbols" (ibid) and has widely used them in religio-cultural texts, myths, rituals and artistic creations. An appraisal of the Vedas and the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, essential Hindu texts, that is, suggests an overarching presence of symbols used with utmost intellectual perspicacity to communicate a point. The inner significance of such symbols that recur "subliminally and cynically" (ibid) in our cultural texts and are deep-rooted in our awareness of our world and our perception of it. The symbol of the mouth as one such expression deserves critical attention.

Figure 2 Mural from The mural of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha

In the current context, the incident of Surasa, the sea ogre, in the Hindu epic The Ramayana is significant. In the epic, Surasa is depicted as a violent and grotesque sea monster who tries to swallow Lord Hanuman when he is on his way to Lanka as an emissary of Lord Rama. The demoness Surasa, mother of the Nagas, tries "to save her relative [Ravana] by swallowing Hanuman bodily. To avoid this Hanuman distended his body and continued to do so, while she stretched her mouth till it was a hundred leagues wide. Then he suddenly shrank up to the size of a thumb, darted through her, and came out at her right ear," (Dowson 339). Unlike Jonah, who embarked on his prophetic mission only after he was engorged by a great fish and subsequently disgorged, Lord Hanuman, the enlightened son of the Vayu, avoided such contingency. Here we must remember that " the mouth gives judgment and so symbolizes the word" (Mitford 73) and Hanuman's avoidance of "descend into darkness and ignorance" (Mitford 95) is suggestive. The inside of the mouth which signifies "the all-devouring earth or a door into the realm of the unconscious" is a zone where words dwell before they are pronounced and heard. As such, the Rig Veda says "Brahmnoasaya mukhamasit" meaning Brahmins were born from the mouth of the supreme divinity, being born here is equivalent to travelling from the depth of the unknown inside to the all-illuminated world of light and luminescence, the binary of the "all-devouring earth" (Mitford 95), the exposed ether, a zone of spiritual enlightenment and knowledge. And it is the mouth the zone which begat the Brahmin that becomes conspicuous in this case as a conduit between the dark inside and the enlightened outside, between anti-verbal ignorance and voluble knowledge.

Figure 3 Vishnu issuing from the Mouth of a Fish. Picture courtesy Fontana, The Secret Language of Symbols

Myths as symbolic narratives narrating tales of supramundane agencies and astonishing events act as "Stylised models for human behaviour" (Fontana 26) and they provide a "logical model of explaining life's apparent contradictions" (ibid). Therefore, symbols in myths are important cultural. In Satapatha Brahmana we come across the legend of lord Vishnu taking the shape of a fish and informing the progenitor of the human race, his devotee, the seventh Manu, of an impending deluge. In an episode that echoes the Biblical myth of Noah, Manu too builds a boat and embarks with the "rsis, and with the seeds of all existing things" (Dowson 55) and thus saves humanity.

Manu who ultimately composed the laws of the caste system, it may be noted, also helped the preserver of the earth, Vishnu, in demolishing the demon Hayagriva who stole the Veda, "which had issued from Brahma's mouth" (Dowson 55) while he was sleeping. As such, the contingency of the stealing of the Veda, the sacerdotal doctrine issued from Lord Brahma's mouth, assumes utmost importance in Indian religio-cultural texts and Shudras, the last of the four varnas is, in the opinion of Manu, "is unfit to receive education. The upper varnas should not impart education or give advice to a Shudra. (Manu IV-78 to 80)…A Shudra, who insults a twice born man with gross invectives, shall have his tongue cut out; for he is of low origin," (Manu VIII. 270).

Dalits, lower than the Shudras in the caste setting, therefore, have a more equivocal situation and they are conspicuous by the absence in the caste system. And this equivocation is best echoed in Dalit creative writing where the mouth as a metaphor assumes utmost importance.

From the aforementioned discussion it is evident that the Mouth as an agency of Power assumes an autonomy when placed within the field of the caste system. Surely because of its independence by virtue of the casteist nature of socio-economic production, the mouth of the upper classes perform a despotic abstraction of voice from the Shudras and the ati-Shudras such that their mouths underlie with voicelessness. Resuscitation of voice is apparent in Dalit poetry where the abstracted voice of the subaltern, faltering, stammering, demands for a democratic reterritorialization of Dalit voice with Dalit mouth, the biological with the vocal.

A Case for the Mouth: A Demand to Listen

Dalit poetry directs out attention to the immanent regularity of the Brahmanical mouth as a voluble machine, an agency of axiomatic despotism that disinherits and defenestrates other human production of speech issuing from Shudras and untouchables. The juxtaposition of the Dalit mouth loaded with Dalit voice assuming a filiation with the autonomous and politically identified loud mouth of the Brahman is important to note in

Dalit poetry. In "Suno Brahman" for example, Malkhan Singh opens the poem with ideas suggesting a complex system of corporal trauma disfiguring and decrypting and dislocating the represented order of the caste system which "made sure that the Dalits could not speak in the tongue (emphasis mine) of the upper caste. Having determined that Dalits were impure and polluted, it legislated that they were not to read Sanskrit, the language of the gods and so, the ultimate trope of Brahmanism," (Limbale 4). The poet's railing against this sinister repressing order, the caste based "despotic apparatus" (Deleuze and Guattari 217), that is, intervenes the profound cultural interiority of organized Dalit segregation. The following lines seeks to superimpose the Dalit voice in the exploitive social apparatus. Addressing the revered paterfamiliases of Hinduism, Malkhan Singh says:

So, listen Vasishta

Dronacharya , you too lend your ear,

We abhor you

And on your past, on your doctrines of faith,

We spit. (Translation mine)

The act of spitting of a Dalit institutes a ritualistic interlocking of the binaries, wherein both the Brahmanical mouth, regurgitating socially approved codes of Dalit exploitation, and the Dalit mouth unequivocally dismissing the said litigations by spitting on them, concentrate on the cultural latency of the mouth. The metaphor of the mouth is deliberately used by the Dalit poet to reclaim the agency of the Dalit mouth as part of an inestimable debt the poet feels he owes toward his community and his self.

It is also interesting to note that Malkhan Singh initiates his poetic discourse with the image of the sweat projecting it through an olfactory lens. Addressing the Brahmin who finds the smell of a sweating Dalit odious, the poet confronts the normative opprobrium by focussing on a juxtaposition of a Brahmin and a Dalit body with perfect parallelism. He directs our attention to the somatic problematic through graphically redolent "realist description, the realism conveying the material and corporeal harshness of everyday Dalit lives," (Nayyar 4). The poet seems to lead us to the question that why should "after centuries of exploitation…still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved?" (Deleuze and Guattari 29).

Malkhan Singh is at his reflective best when he underscores the determinate labour conditions for the Dalit to be the perverse formulation fundamentally connected to Dalit corporeal realism.

Listen, Brahmin

the smell of our sweat

offends you

Why don't you

one day

send your woman

with my woman

to collect filth?

And you! Come with me

We shall sit together

and cure leather

With my son

send your son

in search of a daily wage

("Listen Brahmin," Malkhan Singh. Translated from the Hindi by Pratik Kanjilal)

The representative register of bodily labour seeking to territorialize the Dalit and the non-Dalit is incumbent upon the liquified residuum of labour: sweat. In fact, sweat becomes the unsolidified miraculous fluid in place of blood that unites people, Dalit and non-Dalit alike, in exertion and labour. The poet deliberately over-codes the idea of Dalit labour as polluting and bases his whole discussion around the dichotomy surrounding Dalit physical labour and "the upper caste Hindu's" (Limbale 3) raving paranoic preoccupation (an idee fixe, more likely) with purity and hygiene. HE points out in unequivocal terms that the "work of the Dalits is essential for maintaining the upper caste Hindu's purity. If they did not clean latrines, skin dead animals, and remove carcasses, the social life of the upper castes will be unclean, polluted and diseased…[As such] [t]his society needs the Dalit's labour , indeed, depends on it for its survival, but does not wish to be reminded of it," (Limbale 3). The poet merely problematizes the upper caste

abstraction from corporeal labour and the concomitant discreditation of Dalit voice to avoid the contingency of Dalit protestation against the established caste system.

The ending of Malkhan Singh's poem strikes a disturbing tone when the voice of the Dalit (equilibrium of Mouth and Voice) reminiscing its parched history declares:

Remember that now

the working man's shoulders

are no longer ready

to bear your weight

ever again.

(Listen Brahmin," Malkhan Singh. Translated from the Hindi by Pratik Kanjilal)

It is important to note here how "the pain of caste that drips from…[the Dalits'] lips" ("Portrait of My Village," Sukitrharani 2013) retains its liquified volatility for the sweat of exertion, the salty stream ... pressed from [their] heart" (Hurtson 58) encounters a transmogrification of sorts. The Dalit voice is no more an example of vacillation but vociferous and ready for action:

Look out of

your fortress shut tight

the ice is melting

…

and Eklavya is burnishing

old, rusted arrows

in the fire.

(Listen Brahmin," Malkhan Singh. Translated from the Hindi by Pratik Kanjilal)

The defenestration of the archaic and the repressive social order of the caste system is complete when the poet declares that the Dalits now "despise [and]…spit on [Brahminic] past…and on [their] beliefs" (Listen Brahmin," Malkhan Singh).

The disjunctive reshuffling of the social order undertaken by Malkhan Singh captures the unspeakable depths of Dalit existential trauma, often remaining unvoiced because the Dalit mouth is still economically, politically and culturally chained. As such, the Dalit mouth much more than a simple conduit of Dalit verbality carries the inscribed weight of the "dripping pain" of dreadful social reality. A point that is further problematized, literally and metaphorically, in the following poems.

Mouth in Dalit Poetry:

The exigency of the untouchable outsider ensnared in the dialectics of the caste system is echoed in the poem titled "White ants" by Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy:

The Hindu religion is

a big tree.

Brahmins are the roots,

Kshatriyas the trunk

Vaishyas, Shudras and the rest

Branches and twigs.

Not related to the tree,

But still obliged to stay here

Are the white ants,

The untouchables.

The "aesthetic of suffering" (Nayyar 1) inherent in the poem suggests the condemned intermediary status of the subaltern Dalit. In the quantum mechanics of the caste system, the Dalit is but an infinitesimal importance such that like white ants they are disregarded as molecular elements. Nevertheless, the hermetically sealed social order that underline the material reality of the everyday for the Dalit. The central focus of the poem is on the white ants, anachronistic beings, associated with ants because of their sociality and nothing else. The image startingly demonstrates the inhumanity of the upper castes that had made white ants of the Dalits.

Here we must note that Dalit poetry is mostly image-driven. Images of fire, darkness, ashes, death, dirt, garbage, motherhood, the Buddha, insects, etc., are used to register and communicate the trauma of Dalit body. As such, Dalit corporeal experience as a contested zone of socio-cultural violence is established unequivocally in Dalit poetry. Thus Dalit poetry is "bound to survival" (Rothberg, 2000, p. 140) where in "[m]etaphorisation and symbolisation—the literary styles, so to speak, of the Dalit poetry discussed—amplify and extend the documentary–real because of the realist's seeming inadequacy to capture the unspeakable horror that lies beneath the corporeal trauma of everyday lives" (Nayyar 1).

In Bhimsen Dethe's poem "Song" the Dalit labourer mouths songs laden with poetic aestheticism, nevertheless, when alone, the tune of realism intervenes his consciousness and he realizes his inability to grasp the tune. Here, we realize that Dalit realism underscores the critical discordancy of beautifying the Dalit discourse with the circumstances of labour in which the singer/Dalit worker and his body is positioned. The physical certainty of Dalit lives estivating in hunger and suffering defy poetic beautification and aesthetic norms of traditional Indian poetry. The poem ultimately focusses on the gritty realism of Dalit life that no flight of poetic anesthetizing could beautify and which, consequently, remains out of reach as an aesthetic of trauma that needs a different cultural tool for analysis, appreciation and application.

The hypocrisy of the hegemonic Brahmanical society is imagined by poet Suresh Kadam in his open "No Entry for the New Sun" where he talks about the lability and volubility of the Brahmin tongue. Religiously blesses with "the stamp of approval/on their own garrulous tongue" words flow without cessation as opposed to the Dalit tongue which the "protective cover" of cast–based "commandments" render as silent, unprotestingly mute. And if the Dalit deigns to cross the line and invite the Brahmin to listen, the society "bound by rituals of age" (Kadam "To Dear Aana") transmogrifies into a demonic masticating device and "chews up chunks of human flesh in blind fury" (Kadam "To Dear Aana").

The 'pain of caste' (Sukirtharani 'Portrait of My Village' 2013) is resonated in Dharamraj Nimsarkar's "Experiment" where the verse resonate with the unspeakable depth of Dalit trauma. The poet here sees himself as a violently enrolled volunteer in a series of ceaseless and grotesque socio-cultural experiments which seek to amplify his wounds and would only rest when the sodden pain of the Dalit body is exposed, defiled and discarded as collateral damage for the greater good of the society. The moans of the subject in this this case are laden with silence since his "protests are wordless and complaints have to voice" (Dharmaraj "Experiment"). The images in the poem "conveying the material and corporeal harshness of everyday Dalit lives" (Nayyar 5) is a startling tale

of the contingency of the Dalit mouth forcefully chained by the dictates of caste-based politics.

The poem "Which Language should I Speak?" by Arun Kamble focusses on the cultural economy surrounding the Dalit tongue using a particular language. The Dalit tongue here is trapped between two linguistic binaries here unable to decide which tongue should approximate its purpose of communication because the subtexts of both the language, the traditional Brahminic language laden with the syntax of segregation is imbued with casteist and racial prejudiced that has been deterritotializing and otherising the Dalit for centuries. The Dalit language, on the other hand, carries the memory of Dalit corporeal violence and has been a witness to Dalit distress such that the memory of the same is hard to abstract from its semiotic depths. Here we may remember what Fanon says in Black Skin, White Masks: "To speak is to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization," (Fanon 38). Therefore, "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." (Fanon 18). The Dalit poet is encountering an unfathomable dichotomy wherein he cannot decide which language, by extension, which culture he should uphold and perpetuate: the trauma laden language of the Dalits, the language of the victim or the language of the sacredly anointed language of the Brahmins that ruled the Dalits as polluted untouchables. The eventuality is hard to solve, hence the poet applies to his readers for illumination. He asks "How do we taste milk in these town/ where trees are planted of venom? Enemies invite nothing but enmity/How can we share a drink of friendship?" (Panchbhai "How?")

The Dalit poet's tongue is not only a site of contestation, but also an issue of social opinion, excoriation and slights. Although the poet is not ready to choose his language at the end of the poem, he is forced for his survival to choose and as C. Ayyappan's short story "Madness" indicates that the choice is more often than not the language of the enemies, the Brahmins, for survival's sake.

The Dalit mouth, however, is not without its power and in Sharankumar Limbale's "White Paper" we see the words uttered by the Dalit mouth setting off "a violent trembling in [Brahminic] texts and traditions/…hells and heavens/ fearful pollution," (Limbale "White Paper"). The Dalit mouth here demands not "the sun and the moon" or the "farm" or the "land" from the exploiters but his fundamental "rights" guaranteed by virtue of birth because even if the Dalits are beaten and broken, looted and burnt, the Dalit Voice is omnipresent. The poem directs our attention to the maturing of the Dalit voice now conscious of his rights and liberties asking how the casteist social order "will tear down

[his] words/planted like the sun in the east?" (Limbale "White Paper").The prospect of a Dalit revolution being imminent, the Dalit voice has assumed a new vocal quality.

Conclusion:

In my preceding examination I have demonstrated how Dalit poetry is a creative-critical endeavour rooted in Dalit social experience and the corporeal trauma experienced by the Dalit body. The natural incommunicability of trauma entails the use of a host of images, symbols and metaphors to communicate the Dalit point of view. It is by virtue of the imagery laden with realism that Dalit creative thought gains its potency and reaches its audience. The paper has examined the contingency of the Dalit mouth as problematized figuratively and literally in select Dalit poem. Since Dalit language or the presence of the metaphor of the Dalit mouth retains the imminence of Dalit experiential trauma, it becomes an important metaphor that needs through critical appraisal. Historically imagines as the consecrated zone that begat the Brahmin as an echo of Lord Brahma, the mouth as part of Dalit corporeality is approximated as a symbol of Dalit social exactitude.

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