A SENSE OF ASSERTION AMONG DALITS: LITERATURE AND IMAGES OF DALIT ICONS

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ABSTRACT

Punjab has been witnessing the rising consciousness and assertion among Dalits through literature and images of Dalit icons. It has been helpful to create a distinguished identity and self-respect among them. Dalit literature and images of Dalit icons have succeeded to create an impact on their lives and they have become assertive through these means. Dalit literature, images of Dalit icons have played a major role in the essence of socio-religious as well as cultural assertion in the lives of Punjabi Dalits. This paper tries to analyse various developments in order to know the importance of Dalit literature in the lives of Dalit people and also how these images and literature have become the ray of assertion for these people with a special focus on Punjabi Dalits.

Keywords: Assertion, Dalit literature, Dalit icons, Images, Ad Dharm movement, Deraism and consciousness

Introduction

India is a heterogeneous country where people from multiple groups based on caste, creed, language, and religion etc, live together. But it is also true that there is a hierarchal structure on the basis of caste exists with the notion of purity and pollution. It results in an oppressive, painful and discriminatory life for the marginalised sections of society who are called Dalits. The salvation from the stigma of caste is the only aim of the Dalits where they try to get relief from the clutches of this stigma with the help of different ways like participation in social reform movements, by gaining rights in democratic setup and gaining political power. In some parts of the country, Dalits have become conscious of their rights and thus have assumed an assertive role. With these developments, Dalits have, to some extent succeeded to assert themselves in some parts of the country like in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In Punjab, it is called socio-religious assertion and in Uttar Pradesh it is called cultural assertion.

Cultural assertion in the form of literature, images of icons, books, statues is useful for creating awareness. Bama (1999) called it as cultural politics. Literature and books have their own worth and quality. This is the main source of developing the understanding towards life as well as art in order to enjoy it. It assumes further importance, when it helps to create space for marginalised communities. In the case of Dalits, consciousness is highly important discounting the means through which it develops. Undoubtedly the images of Dalit icons that have been placed in the minds of Dalit people and a large amount of literature produced on this subject is the main reason behind this awareness. Literature has an important role in this respect. It is the mirror of society. That is why nowadays, Dalit literature has become the main source of creating consciousness in Dalits. This paper analyses the importance and impact of Dalit literature as a source of assertion in Dalits with special focus on Punjabi society.

Academic Development and Importance of Dalit Literature

Literature is the main source to produce books which becomes the way to gain knowledge and develop perspective. Dalit literature is always considered as liberation literature like the black literature and the feminist literature. Many Dalit writers have written on the issue of caste and discrimination. Moreover, autobiographies by Dalit writers are considered as revolutionary works. These are not merely stories of their tragic and oppressed life but, their struggles and the courage to challenge the rigid

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1 Dalit is a term which refers to oppressed and broken people. It is used for the Depressed Classes as Hindi version which are now called Scheduled Castes. Hence it is politically correct as Dalit is inclusively used for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Backward Castes. And exclusively used for the Scheduled Castes.
traditional structure of caste and to get liberation from it. Literature of Dalits is not only limited to one
language but has developed in many languages like English, Hindi, Punjabi etc which tends to cater to people
at local and regional levels in order for them to understand it. In this regard Omprakash Valmiki's
autobiography *Joothan*, Baby Kambale's *Prison We Broke*, from Punjab, Lal Singh Dil's *Dastaan* and
Balbir Madhopuri's *ChangiyaRukh* are most recognised works. All these works witness the tragic and oppressive
life experiences of these people as being Dalits. There is huge literature available on Dalit issues. A lot of
research is being carried out on Dalit issues through many courses every year in various universities not
only in India but also abroad. Moreover, every year, many academic activities are being performed on Dalit
issues like seminars, conferences etc and some especially focus on Dalit icons and Dalits problems. In some
universities, there have been organised special lectures on Dalit issues. Separate departments for Social
Justice have been set up. Dr. Ambedkar Centre and Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusion
policy are examples in this regard. Some universities have also named hostels after Dalit icons so that one
can easily understand their importance and get empowered with this development. A series of seminars
dedicated to Dr. Ambedkar has been organised by six Government as well as private universities of Punjab.
In many colleges, a special chair has been set up on the name of Dalit icons such as Dr. Ambedkar chair on
Social Change. At the national level many universities have been named after Dalit icons. Another
development in this context has been Punjab Government's order regarding organising of seminars and
celebration of Dr. Ambedkar’s 125th birth anniversary in the universities. In this regard, Punjab Government
has given Rs. 5 lakh to each university (P.U. Chd, Pbi. Uni. Patiala, G.N.D.U., Amritsar). More importantly, in
recent years an Ayurvedic university established in Doaba region of Punjab on the name of Guru Ravidas
who was a Dalit saint of Bhakti movement. Another important development in this regard is literature
festivals. Writers, intellectuals and book lovers always wait for literature festivals. It is a strong platform for
providing space to people for developing their understanding towards society. Many types of literature
festivals are organised all over India. These festivals cover vast range of issues that not only focus upon
general issues but also Dalit issues as an important component of the discussion. Recently, maiden Kerala
literature fest has provided a vital example in this regard where it covered almost all contemporary issues
along with the burning issue of Vemula suicide case. A whole session was organised on Dalit issues with the
title 'Dalit literature: Past and Present' and a lecture on 'Consciousness of Indian Religion and the Suicide of
Rohit Vemula' was discussed. In a new development, first Dalit literature festival was held from 6th to 8th
December 2016 on the occasion of Dr. Ambedkar’s 62th death anniversary.

Use of Dalit Literature and Images of Dalit Icons as Political Agenda

Dalit literature is not only limited to academics and literature festivals but 'political rallies' is
another place where it is easily available. There is a unique link between Dalit literature and political rallies.
This is especially true for the rallies which are organised by BSP as well as rallies and seminars organised by
non Dalit political parties with Scheduled Caste delegates. In BSP rallies, book stalls displaying Dalit
literature are setup at venues of rallies before the start of speeches of the leaders. Dalit people purchase
these books with easy and readable language at an inexpensive price. Most of the books are available in
regional languages in order for them to be understood by the local people. Not only Dalit books but also the
pictures of Dalit icons are also available in these rallies. One can also get newspapers and magazines
focussing on Dalit issues which are published by Dalit publishers. There are many Dalit newspapers e.g. 'Lok
Leader' etc which have been introduced in BSP's rallies in Punjab. Political parties organise seminars,
meetings, festivals in the name of Dalit icons to appeal to their vote bank. However, this step really works
positively because people participate in such occasions and these occasions create upon them, a positive

work published 1982).
9 Madhopuri, Balbir. ChangiyaRukh "Against the Night: An autobiography". Trans. Tripti Jain, New Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 2010. Print
10 The Tribune 3August 2016
11 The Hindu, 5 February 2016: http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kozhikode/literature-fest-to-focus-
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12 The times of India, 16 April, 2016: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/Dalit-
literature-festival-to-be-held-in-December/articleshow/51853124.cms
impact regarding these icons. In the recent times, the most important step that has been taken by every political party is to celebrate the birth anniversary of Dalit icons. Congress party celebrated Dr. Ambedkar’s 125th birth anniversary throughout the year. It described this celebration as an opportunity to highlight the real relationship of Baba Sahib Ambedkar and Congress party as its leadership feels that other parties mislead the people with showing Congress as an enemy of Dr. Ambedkar. Aam Aadmi party (AAP) has been celebrated the birth anniversary of Babu Kanshi Ram in Ropar district, the birth place of the leader, while Babu Kanshi Ram’s sister also attended this occasion.

**Religious formation through Images of Dalit Icons**

Religion always takes importance in the lives of people with faith and devotion. This is especially true of the Dalits. With the influence of Bhakti movement on Sikhism, Islam, Sufism and Hinduism, the Dalits tried to find new space for peace so as to get rid of all burdens and miseries arising from the caste. This is reason that many movements like Arya Samaj movement, Singh Sabha movement, Ad Dharm movement etc emerged for Dalits’ welfare. And the most remarkable movement in this regard is Ad Dharman movement that succeeded in creating not only socio-religious but also political awareness among Dalits in Punjab. Under the strong leadership Mangoo Ram, it created such symbols, literature and principles that helped the movement become successful. The followers of this movement adopted the path shown by Saint Guru Ravidas as the former considered him as a religious Guru. Guru Ravidas is a Dalit icon who is considered to be the inspirational source of entire Dalit community. Punjabi Dalits worship him and celebrate his birthday with huge enthusiasm not only in India but also in aboard. Another most iconic personality, Dr. Ambedkar who is considered as Messiah of Dalits, devoted his life to the cause of the Dalits and struggled his entire life to get salvation for the Dalit community. The three visits of Dr. Ambedkar in Punjab have not been forgotten by anyone. In the last years of his life, Dr. Ambedkar left Hinduism and adopted Buddhism for salvation and gave message to his community for adoption of Buddhism to get salvation from all miseries of life. During my field work, it has been found that in a state like Punjab, although Sikhism is the most profound religion, however many respondents registered their religion as Buddhism. The number of such subjects may be less, but it has made its presence felt in the minds of the Dalits. It also notable that although, Dalits of Punjab get inspired by and worship Dalit icons or even give respect to Buddhism however they may not adopt Buddhism in its entirety, the way it was adopted by Baba Sahib. However they follow the path given by Guru Ravidas. Guru Ravidas, a Dalit saint, and his writings along with his images succeed to create space almost in every Dalit house, political rallies and functions etc. Even Buddhism could not create space in Punjabi culture much enough however nowadays the images of Mahatma Buddha and his writings have become the source of knowledge for Dalits. Some Dalits have even adopted the Buddhism and we can even say that a newer development has taken place in this regard. Most importantly, all these religious movements serve as a platform to provide Dalits with literature and books based on the philosophy of their leaders. The images of Dalit icons also serve great importance in Dalits’ life. With Dalit icons as symbols of great importance, Dalit people become assertive. Nowadays, Dalit literature and pictures of Dalit icons are being sold at every religious occasion of Dalits. They celebrate anniversaries of Guru Ravidas, Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar and even Mahatma Buddha etc. On these occasions, selling Dalit literature, books on Dalit issue and on lives of Dalit icons are very common. It has great impact on their lives. Talking about images of Dalit icons, one can easily spot the pictures of Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar, Guru Ravidas, in Dalit Gurudwaras along with the pictures of Saint Valmiki and Mahatma Buddha.

Many studies revealed that Punjab has been witnessing a socio-religious assertion in the lives of Dalits on account of socio-religious movements and Deeras. Deras become new centres for the development of Dalits by trying to create change in their lives. Dalit Deras become the social and spiritual

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centres for Dalits. These centres not only work on spiritual growth of but also take steps to provide self-respect, identity and improve the status of Dalits. Dalit deras have great impact in the Doaba region of Punjab as compared to other two regions-Majha and Malwa. Doaba region is also politically active because of the impact of Ad Dharm movement and BSP’s initiatives. Dalit saints of Deras become the motivational spirit for Dalits and moreover Deras also produce literature that helps them to create awareness. Ronki Ram (2008) argued that Dera Ballan is the new platform for Dalits which not only works for Dalits’ spiritual salvation, but in educational progress, it provides literature on Dalit issues. Most importantly, it spreads the teachings of Guru Ravidas. This Dera has been working on mobilisation and assertion by spreading the message given by Guru Ravidas to create space for Dalits. It established a rich library in Dera Ballan having lots of books and reading material on Dalit issues. It contains books which especially relate to Dalits history and issues such as Ad Dharm movement and Guru Ravidas’s teachings, Bhakti movement, biographies of Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar and also books related to mission of saints of Dera Ballan. Along with preserving books, it is also working on publishing work in many languages. Many books and papers have been published by Dera. Its weekly magazine 'Begumpura Shehr' deserves special reference and has been really famous in Dalits. For its efforts in creating awareness in Dalit community by publishing work, the Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Academy (Indian Dalit Literary Academy) honoured Sant Ramanand, who was its Chief Editor, with the Twentieth National Dalit Literary Award (2004).

**Efforts from below to create Dalit Assertion**

Punjab has always been the centre of new developments and change. With essence of the Sufism, Sikhism and Bhakti movement, many Saints and Gurus had developed philosophies through poetry to create equality and brotherhood in society and particularly worked for abolition of the stigma of caste. Due to these developments, Punjab has always been considered as a distinguished state as compared to other states of India where caste boundaries are more rigid. Punjab has highest Dalit population (31% as per 2011 census) and second position in Dalit literacy rate (56.22% census 2001) in India. Dalit assertion is a phenomenon of Punjabi society on many fronts; socio-economic, religious and cultural etc. People of Dalit community are the part of this development as they are assertive and conscious. This is reason that makes Punjab as a distinguished region from other parts. For assertion among the Dalits, people’s participation and Government’s policies are two strong means for empowerment. As Judge and Bal (2009) argued that combination of efforts from below as well as from above are important. People’s participation is important as well as necessary for empowerment especially in Dalits’ case. Unless Dalits do not participate in movements to change the society, they cannot get salvation. This has been proving as in all movements for Dalit upliftment, Dalit people give strong backup and support to their leaders. In this regard, a very important incident is related to Ad Dharm movement; Dalit people under the leadership of Mangoo Ram sent letters in favour of Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar in the round table conference in London. Nowadays, this type of assertion is developing in a new form. Dalit people in assertive manners use the images of Dalit icons in their houses or even at working places. One can see pictures of Dalit icons i.e. Guru Ravidas, Baba Sahib in Dalit houses or even the pictures of Buddha, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati also get place in some houses. Dalits belonging to sub castes like ‘Balmikis’ worship Swami Valmiki and celebrate his anniversary with much fanfare along with Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar. They worship them in the morning, celebrating their anniversaries as festivals.

**Dalit Literature, Icons and Organisations**

In Punjab, there are many caste based social organisations are actively working for creating consciousness in Dalit community. The role of social organisations is highly important because they have links with common people as well as political parties. They serve the interest of their community. These organisations are based on ideologies of their icons such as Guru Ravidas Sabhas, Dr. Ambedkar Welfare Organisation, Mulniwasi Front etc. All these social organisations, named after their respective icons, are spreading their philosophies by using the images of these icons. Foremost important work in this regard has been done by Rashtriya Mulniwasi Sangh which has many branches all over India. They provide Dalit


21 Interviewed with BSP President Punjab (self field work).

22 Mulniwasi Sangh is a socio-cultural organization of Mulniwasi Bahujan Samaj. The word mulniwasi means original inhabitant. [http://www.mulnivasisangh.net/index.php/organization-mulnivasi](http://www.mulnivasisangh.net/index.php/organization-mulnivasi)
literature, books and organise seminars on Dalit issues in collaboration with BAMCEF. It is not a recent phenomena but its roots lay in Ad Dharm movement. The said movement also had some organisations that basically worked on creating awareness in community by publishing work. Ad Dharm movement had its own newspapers i.e. Adi Dhanka, Adi Ujjala etc.

Effect of Dalit Icons across Boundaries

Dalit assertion and importance of its literature as well as icons has not been limited to India but the fame of Dalit icons can be seen across boundaries. The most suitable example of this is celebration of 125th birth anniversary of Baba Sahib by United Nation Organisation (UNO). For the first time in world history, UNO has celebrated Baba Sahib Dr. Ambedkar’s 125th birth anniversary as ‘International Equality Day’. They considered this Indian social reformer as a Global icon for deprived and marginalised sections of society. With regard to the context of literature, Dalit international conferences have been organised by the Dalit Diaspora with a focus on increasing the communication through internet services to unite the international and national institutions for serving the rights of marginalised communities.

Concluding Notes

With reference to the above, this discussion concludes that Dalit literature and icons have always been envisioned as a source of awareness in Dalit community. This creation of awareness is only possible through strong sources. Dalit movements and life struggles of their leaders always become the torch bearers for these communities. Dalit literature and images of Dalit icons have also gained impact in recent years. Dalit leaders have always given stress to education among Dalits. In the same context, all Deras, Political parties and Dalit organisations provide literary sources to Dalits for creating consciousness in them. The academic world has also been playing vital role in this regard.

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