



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



An Interview with Sharan Kumar Limbale

Mahuya Bhaumik

Sharan Kumar Limbale is an Indian Dalit activist, writer and literary critic. He has more than 40 books to his credit and is best known for his highly acclaimed autobiographical work Akkarmashi (The Outcaste). Limbale's critical work Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature is considered to be one of the seminal works on Dalit Literature.

This interview was conducted during the interviewer's visit to Mumbai in May 2016. Limbale had been extremely cooperative during the interview which stretched extensively. He answered all the queries with immense patience. The interviewer extends her sincere gratitude to him for sparing so much time for this interview.

Q. Do you think that the representations of Dalits by upper caste writers are 'discourse of pity?'

A. The upper castes can be broadly divided into two categories – orthodox and progressive. The orthodox upper castes are prejudiced against the Dalits and are of the view that the latter are born to serve the upper castes. Hence they have no inhibitions to suppress the Dalits. The progressive upper castes consider the people of the lower castes as their brothers because all are human beings. They show sympathy towards the Dalits. I protest both of these views and approaches. We do not want sympathy; we want rights as human beings. We are not beggars; but at the same time we do not want violence. Our literature is a movement for social cause and a struggle for humanity at large. Our words are our weapons and we aspire to change this society through our words. I acknowledge the contribution of the progressive upper caste writers who, through their writing, introduced us to the world. It is without doubt that people started to rethink about the Dalits because of upper caste writers like Mahasweta Devi and the Naxalites who waged war for the Adivasis (tribals). Their contribution is huge and crucial in providing the Dalits a platform. But at the same time their pity is definitely not the aim that we aspire for. We want dignity as human beings and equality with others.

Q. What is the unifying factor that links up the various regional Dalit literatures of India?

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A. Our Indian mainstream culture does not allow dialogue amongst the different regional cultures. Diverse regional specificities like languages, customs and festivals are hindrances for us to unite with each other. In this situation English translation of literary works provides a unifying link amongst different regional Dalit literatures of India creating awareness about the presence of Dalits all over the country and enabling everyone to listen to each other's voices. Another significant factor which acts as a unifying agent is electronic and print media which help us convey our pain and struggle not only to the Dalits but to the society at large.

20 years earlier I thought only Marathi Dalits were there. But now, because of translations and the active role of media, I have come to know that Dalits are not only present in our country but also in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, UK, USA and the Caribbean Islands. During the colonial period British sent Indians to serve their settlements in their colonies around the world. Ironically it is the same social fabric that has emerged throughout the world because both the upper and lower castes of the Indian society migrated to these countries. So it is the same story of hatred and neglect that can be witnessed abroad.

This sameness of pain, struggle, ideology and demand for rights is another unifying factor which inspires us to be together. Our education and our urge to get democracy in the true sense of the term are other factors which bind us together.

Q. How is Dalit Literature 'distinct'?

A. The first feature which makes Dalit literature 'distinct' is the usage of language. It is the language of the ghettos, an unsophisticated and unrefined language which is termed defamatory by the upper castes. The latter thinks it unsuitable to be the language of literature since it is a slang and dirty language. However, we hate the standard literary language that is used by the upper castes since it is not the language spoken by us. Dalit literature is a testimony of the lives lived by the untouchables and the uncouth language spoken by them.

The next feature which gives our literature distinctness is the portrayal of our heroes. Since the time of the Ramayana the heroes of mainstream literature have always been upper castes and the untouchables have been portrayed as thieves, slaves, servants or people involved in menial work. At the most they have been depicted with pity. But in Dalit literature, the Dalits are the heroes. Upper caste characters are delineated as villains, oppressors or people with negative shades. So here there is a role reversal that makes our literature quite unique.

Since our literature is based on a social movement and is inspired by Ambedkar, social commitment and ideology are strongly palpable in our literature which is not that prominently found in the literature penned down by upper caste writers. Our writing has nothing to do with entertainment. It has a clear objective and that is to change the society.

Q. How do you locate yourself as a 'writer-activist'?

A. I view myself primarily as an activist. Then only comes my identity as a writer. My source of inspiration is our movement. It is our movement that has taught us how to struggle against all odds and oppressions of caste system. It is a revolutionary movement and it is itself our literature. It provides us with the attitude, tone and insight to see through the gruesome reality of an essentially casteist society. It is a kind of activism that has given us our manifesto, keynotes, confidence to speak and has helped us understand the problems of and be sensitive to the

problems of all Dalits together. This activism has distinguished us from the upper castes and has given us the focus to speak about the deprived lot of the society. Hence I am an activist first and I have chosen to be a writer to give expression to this activism.

Q. How far are your childhood memories responsible for you being a writer?

A. My childhood is not one which can be suitable material for writing since there is nothing sunny or bright in it. It is a tale of oppression, denial and brutality. In fact, my life is nothing different from the life of my community because we all are co-sharers of the same torture and humiliation. My childhood is an example of how every move, behaviour, what to wear and how to talk – everything was dictated by the upper caste people. My childhood is a mirror of my community and provides a reference point to all the Dalits so that they can revolt against this torturous life, get united and achieve independence and democracy. My childhood is also a message to the upper castes that by exploiting the Dalits they are exploiting majority of the population and thus not only depriving us, but also causing harm to the nation. It is a national damage that the upper castes are causing by exploiting us and by not providing us with proper opportunity.

Q. Do you approximate yourself with the protagonist of *Akarmashi*?

A. *Akarmashi* is my autobiography. Truly speaking, it is the autobiography of the entire Dalit community. Whatever experience I have shared in the book, I have written on behalf of my community. The very essence of Dalit literature is community feeling. We talk in chorus as representatives of a community. The word 'I' is insignificant in Dalit literature. It is 'we' that matters. Thus *Akarmashi* is not only my story, it is the story of every Dalit.

Q. What is your take about Dalit representation in Indian mythology?

A. In Hindu religious scriptures like *Manusmriti* Dalits have always been portrayed as untouchables with no rights of their own. They were ordered to live outside the premises of the villages inhabited by the upper castes, they were not allowed to live in decent homes and not permitted to wear gold ornaments. They had to stay in deplorable huts and wear clothes which were put on dead bodies.

Dalit characters have always been defamed in our epics. Shambuka, in *Ramayana*, was a Shudra *rishi* who was beheaded by Rama because he started to do *tapasya* (worship and meditation) which, being a Shudra, he had no right to do. In *Mahabharata* Ekalavya had to part with his thumb as *gurudakshina* (homage to the teacher) to Dronacharya which the latter did not even hesitate once to claim as Ekalavya was a prospective threat to the Kshatriya prince Arjuna. The ancient social structure always favoured a higher caste more than a Dalit, overlooking and disregarding the talent of the lower caste.

Q. Do you think that Dalit writing has provided the much-needed self-respect to the Dalits?

A. Certainly. Dalit literature has become a part of the syllabi in several schools, colleges and universities. Thus the new generation is becoming aware of both the toils and the protests of the Dalits. Though we are considered untouchables by the elites of the society, our books are making inroads into the spaces inhabited by the upper castes. They are becoming aware of our lives and

our books are compelling them to recognise our presence in this democratic country. Thus our literature gives us the scope to engage in a dialogue with the upper castes. Our literature is a discourse of debate and plays a crucial role to provide respect to us. It plays a dual role of making the upper castes know about the brutalities hurled on us unjustifiably and also acknowledge our talent and potential. At the same time our literature makes all the Dalits aware of the oppression that their co-brethren are inflicted with over the ages and thus inspires them to raise their voices against all social injustices and inequalities.

Q. How do you identify yourself as the Hindu Other?

A. Though we are Hindus, we have always been relegated to the margin and disrespected to the extreme. The social fabric taught us to be obedient slaves. We used to sit outside the doors of classrooms in schools, not allowed to enter Hindu temples, not permitted to share the same bathing 'ghat' along with upper caste Hindus. Even our burning 'ghats' were different. I remember that in my childhood I had to sweep the school and do all kinds of petty menial jobs at our teachers' houses along with other students of my caste. We were not allowed to wear slippers and had to give way to an upper caste Hindu if I came across one on the road. Thus, though Hindu by religion, we had never been considered an integral part of this religion. We have always been considered outcastes, the Hindu 'Other'.

Q. What is the present mindset of 'mainstream' writers regarding Dalit literature?

A. It is unfortunate that mainstream writers never recognise our literature and appreciate our work. If a Dalit writer gets an award then the mainstream writers are critical about it saying that the respective government is trying to develop vote bank by promoting Dalit literature. It is a typical casteist mentality which I personally became a victim of at literary festivals and programs. However, the insult and humiliation could not curb my spirit since I work for the upliftment of a community and has a specific mission in my mind. Since mainstream literature is primarily meant for entertainment, the writers never pay heed to our kind of work. But there are a handful of pro-Dalit writers who show us respect and give us due recognition and honour.

Q. Criminals and economically backward people are also considered Dalits by you. What is the rationale behind this?

A. If a change has to be brought in the society, then all the deprived people should come together and sing the song of equality in unison. This is the only way by which social evils can be eradicated. People suffering from any kind of oppression, according to me, are Dalits. Hence all the socially oppressed people, the Adivasis, the criminal tribes, the poverty-stricken, the labourers, the women – all should be unified together to usher in a change in the present social structure.

Q. How are your writings based on realistic aesthetics?

A. Imagination is hypocrisy to me. I cannot write anything based on figment of imagination. Again, writing for entertainment is a crime to me. The central issue of Dalit literature is to address the threats towards Dalit existence and the deprivation faced by the Dalits despite they being citizens of a democratic nation. If I have to write keeping these issues in mind, I have to base my writing on

hard-core reality and address the pains and problems faced by the Dalits day in and day out. Thus realistic aesthetics is the only option to do justice to Dalit writing.

Q. Do you really think that Dalit Literature is univocal? If so, can it engage attention of readers for a long time?

A. Yes it is univocal. But it is an irony that when for thousands of years people have written about love nobody said that it is a repetition. When we talk of human rights and social cause, it is said that we are carping upon the same issue over and over again. Till the point caste system is there, inequality is there, oppression is there, there is need for Dalit literature. It is our historical responsibility and national duty to envision a changed society with equal rights and respect for every citizen irrespective of caste.

Q. Do you agree that Dalit writings lack the literary merit when measured against universal criteria?

A. Never ever do I agree with this view. To me mainstream literature is not true literature because it does not address social causes and prefers to remain silent, in most of the cases, without addressing social malice and injustice. Dalit literature is the literature of humanity. I am not rejecting the importance of entertainment but that should not be the only focus of literature. The elites, with all their resources, should address these social issues. But, unfortunately, they behave like *Shamurgas* (as referred to in Marathi, an Indian regional language, folk literature) avoiding all social crisis and escaping the harsh truths of real life. According to me Dalit literature is the kind of literature which serves the right cause and possesses all the merits to be called true literature.

(*Shamurgas* hide their heads inside sand during tempests and thus show their escapist nature to avoid danger rather than confront those with courage and boldness).

Q. What is the future of Dalit Literature?

A. I envisage a very bright future for Dalit literature. I, along with all other Dalit members of the society, am eagerly awaiting the future of equality and brotherhood. I have strong conviction that Dalit literature will change the nation and the mental make-up of the upper castes. It is a dream of 'Mahaan Bharat' (Great India) that we dream of and our literature will turn our dream of India being a beautiful nation into reality.



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