
Does 'Dalit' include the Mangs? : Contextualizing Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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Once, in summer, as usual I was playing with Arjya, a Mang. Thirsty, we entered my house and I drank water first before giving the cup to Arjya. Sanatami shouted, 'Why do you play with that boy? Is there no one else in the village to play with? Don't give him water in that vessel. If he touches it, he will defile it. Go away.' I was upset because I couldn't give water to a friend. Is one's caste more important than one's friend? Is caste more important than thirst? Wasn't Arjya a human being? If so, how could he make water impure by merely touching it? Arjya and I kept walking towards the river. The ground was too hot to walk on and we felt as if our hearts were being roasted. Different parts of the river bank were reserved for Mahars and Mangs. Where were we to drink water from? Even water was its own enemy here. Our minds were divided like separate reservoirs of water. No, our minds were not only divided they were also contaminated. (Limbale19-20)

The extract above is picked up from Sharankumar Limbale's novel *The Outcaste* originally published as *Akkarmashi* (Marathi) in 1984. Throughout the text, Limbale talks about the injustice meted out to the *Dalit* or untouchable by those superior to them in the social hierarchy as laid by the 'Varna' system. The dominant narrative in the novel depicts the discrimination faced by an illegitimate child born out of the union between a Lingayat Brahmin and a Mahar woman.

But the excerpt forces the reader to reconsider his opinion. It is also a scathing attack on the internal fissures among the Dalits. It raises suspicions over the assumption of 'Dalit' as a unified identity. While sympathizing with the Mahars as they endure various hardships, Limbale has also simultaneously critiqued the treatment received by the *Mangs*, who are at a lower rung in the social order. Mangs were traditionally rope makers. In this view, one observes that the novel is also the author's plea for the Mahars to be self-reflexive.

In addition, one cannot but ignore that this malady of casteism is sown in innocent minds right from childhood. This rearing is a part of the social conditioning children are subjected to. It also calls for serious thinking over methods of parenting which encourage inequality. Children also have minds of their own and have their own way of analysing things. Though the protagonist, now a grown up man, is looking at his childhood in hindsight, he still remembers this minute incident and the discomfort this scenario brought is clearly expressed. Even a small child finds it illogical to deny water to a friend simply because he is born into a lower caste. This is a slap on the centuries-old tradition which claims to follow the revered scriptures suggesting such prejudice. Here, Professor Paul Ghuman¹ can be quoted:

Infact, children learn at an early age (1-8 years) not only that they are black, white or brown (Asians), but also the rank ordering of ethnic/racial group to which they belong. Likewise, in India, caste consciousness is instilled in children from the day they are born through religious rituals and later on in childhood through special initiation ceremonies. (564-7)

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There are other sub castes among the untouchables apart from the Mangs, like the Dhors or Chambhars, but since Mangs are specifically referred to in *The Outcaste*, hence their issue would be addressed here. The paper would try to locate the place of the *Mangs* among the untouchables and try to find the reason behind a huge gap.

Let us begin by tracing the history. The Dalit Panthers was a social organization founded in 1972 comprising Marathi literary figures like Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble and Raja Dhale. They came out with Dalit Panthers Manifesto in 1973 claiming to be the representative of all the exploited sections of the society like agricultural workers, industrial workers, small peasants, the unemployed and even women. But according to an article, “Dalit Panthers: Another View” (1974) published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, “There is a yawning gap between what the Dalit Panthers claim to be and what they actually are. Right now they are quite simply an organization of the Mahars, which is one of the Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra.” Dr B.R. Ambedkar was a Mahar and his efforts could only politically assimilate the Mahars among the untouchables. The divide between these two sub-castes was pretty evident when the call of denouncement of the Hindu religion and subsequent conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was followed only by the Mahars. This proved that Mangs did not feel their inclusion among the Dalits as they felt it did not represent their cause. What is more noteworthy is the fact that now these neo-Buddhists have formed the Republican Party of India (RPI) which is active only in Maharashtra and particularly among the Mahars. The resentment among the Mangs grew further as the educational benefits in Maharashtra among the Dalits have been availed mainly by Mahars while the Mangs were left far behind. This made other political parties gain support of the Mangs which, over the years, has weakened the Dalit Movement.

Furthermore, educational backwardness persisted among the Mangs which meant that they also lagged behind in obtaining job opportunities under reservation. Thus, Mangs became the ‘Dalits’ among the Dalits which has continued till today. Mangs were also classified as a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) of the British Raj. This stigma is still attached to them. This taint also adds to the various reasons why the Mangs do not easily get jobs apart from their caste imposed profession.

The Dalit Panthers was initially formed as a rebel force against the corrupt and nepotistic politics of the Republican Party of India (RPI). But one observes that it failed to benefit the Mangs. They feel detached from the ‘Dalits’ as a unified community due to the belief that Ambedkar favoured only members of his sub caste and left out the other sub castes. This meant that the Dalit cause lacked solidarity.

Reference to NeeraBurra’s article “Was Ambedkar Just a Leader of the Mahars” (1986) is crucial to the discussion at this point. She elaborated on the WatanInam Issue. Ambedkar’s efforts towards the abolition of the ‘Watan Inam’ added to the woes of the Mangs. This was a gift of land given to the village servants in lieu of their services yielded to the state. Ambedkar revealed how it drastically affected the Mahar community as he or his entire family could be called any time of the day to offer his services. According to Burra,

The first source is the *Inam* land and the second source is what is called the *baluta* or collection of grain by the Watandar Mahars from the villagers. These Inam lands were not given by British government but they were given to these Mahars by the ancient Emperors of this country... The Mahar population has increased enormously and the land assigned to the Mahars is divided and sub divided to such an extent that the income these people get from the Inam lands is absolutely not worthy of being taken into

consideration. The main part of the remuneration which these people get comes largely from the second source, namely, the baluta (429).

In this view, the socio-economic position of the Mangs was slightly better than the Mahars as they seldom confronted upper caste Hindus. Ambedkar talked about the economic exploitation of the Mahars at the hands of the *zamindar*. Ambedkar emphasized that the abolition of the Wataninam would emancipate the Mahar from the slavery of the landlords. Mangs felt that Ambedkar never stressed upon their economic liberation as they too were forced to live in penury. Rope-making was not a lucrative profession and never became one. Apart from Mahars, few Mangs also were involved in the watandari system. Abolition of the watandari rights meant that lands would be snatched from the Mangs too. They wanted to hold onto it as even after economic exploitation as for them it meant some kind of income even though it was inadequate. Mangs could not afford total economic liberation.

Moreover, Burra also mentions the eating of the dead animal, an issue taken up by Ambedkar which was particularly a Mahar activity (as also described about by Limbale in *The Outcaste*). This was abhorred by the other untouchable castes including the Mangs who stayed away from this activity. Ambedkar continuously accentuated the need to consolidate the 'Depressed classes' and the relevance of integration among all the untouchables but it failed. He constantly warned the Dalits that the upper caste Hindus might take advantage of their internal conflicts which eventually did happen as the Republican Party of India has split into various factions today. It went unheeded as the distances between these sub-castes kept increasing. This distance is pretty obvious as Mangs (also called as Matangs) began forming their own associations like the Matang Society (1923) and the Matang Samaj (1932) to voice their problems.

In order to ameliorate the alienation among the Mangs from the Dalit cause, Ambedkar used to attend various Mang conferences to gain their support. Burra talks about how Ambedkar had attended the 1936 Bombay Presidency Mang Conference. He had assured them equality by offering 15 percent reservation among the seats allotted to the Dalits by the Bombay Presidency. He even opened hostels for them and strove to secure government jobs for them.

The question of conversion further complicated the caste politics. As mentioned above, Mangs had refused to adopt Buddhism after Ambedkar. They believed that conversion would not yield equality for the untouchables. They would still be looked down upon by high caste Hindus. They even appealed to bring together all the distinct sub-castes among untouchables.

Thus, Ambedkar's notion that Buddhism would make untouchables escape the perils of casteism since centuries has actually widened the chasm. Even after converting to Buddhism, the Mahars, like the Mangs, are labeled as the Scheduled Castes. Though both are united by the governmental recognition 'Scheduled Castes' but interaction among these communities is restricted and they still maintain this distance. Dalithood therefore, is a complex identity. To get a complete insight into the Dalit life means to inspect each and every sub category of this caste. *The Outcaste* has unveiled this mistrust amongst these sub groups and forced us to confront this ambivalence. These endeavours need to be followed up by interested litterateurs to present a reliable analysis of the Dalit selfhood.

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