

Treatment of Dalits in the God of Small Things

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The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of some socio-religious movements which questioned the rigours of caste system and untouchability. Brahman Samaj in Bengal, Prarthana Samaj and Satyashodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and Arya Samaj in Punjab for a better attitude towards the lowest sections of society on spiritual grounds. A similar approach to social questions was adopted by Chattampi Swamikal (1854-1924), Shri Narayan Guru (died 1928) and Swami Agamananda (1896-1961) in Kerala. The first two of them belonged to the untouchable Ezhava community. Shri Narayan Guru, known as "The Great Guru" was the author of two works in Tamil, eight in Sanskrit and over thirty in Malayalam.

"He rejected the distinctions of caste and religion which divided men and fought all through his life for a unity based on equality, mutual reverence and love."

That seems to be a positive development but we need not conclude from the above that everything is okay for the dalits. Even Shashi Tharoor who draws a rosy picture otherwise has to concede the following in his book "India from midnight to the millennium."

"Despite fifty years of freedom, well trained and enlightened administrators, and politically correct-rhetoric at all levels, caste continues to enslave village society. Each week brings a new horror story into the national press. A Dalit woman is stripped and paraded naked through the streets of her village because her son dared to steal from an upper caste Thakur, she is then forced to have sex with the offending boy before a sneering audience of Thakurs. A high born Jat girl falls in love with an untouchable boy and is caught trying to elope with him; they and their accomplice, another untouchable are caught, beaten, tortured in front of their families, and hanged, and their bodies are then burned (the girl is not immediately killed by her noose, and is still alive when the fire is lit, she tries to crawl out but is thrown back into the flames.)

In one village, twenty-two untouchables are gunned down in an upper-caste massacre; in another, four hundred dalit families are burned out of their huts for daring to demand the legal minimum wage for their labours. These are not isolated incidents, in that dozens like them are reported every

Such incidents represent resistance to change no doubt but not the impossibility of it. Shashi Tharoor finds the condition of the

"A combination of enlightened rule by the far-thinking Maharajahs, progressive reform movements within the

untouchables in Kerala better than that in other parts of India. Hindu tradition (specially that of Ezhava, Sage Shri Narayan Guru), and changes wrought by a series of left

dominated legislature since independence have given Kerala's scheduled castes a place in society that other Dalits (former untouchables) across India are still denied."

In the democratic India, at the end of the 20th Century, still untouchability exists this truth. Arundhati has brought before the world "The God of small Things", the prestigious "Booker Prize" awarded novel, depicts the cross caste and sub caste based social divisions we find in the Hindu society since long untouchables are only found in the Hindu religious works, not in Islam or in Christianity. Christianity is worldwide known for universal "brotherhood and humanism" but here, in this novel Arundhati has described the intense cross caste conflict, the conflict is not taking place between Touchable Hindus and untouchables, its between Syrian Christians and untouchables. It shows that untouchables are not only suffering torturing and harassment from Hindus but also from other religious communities in this democratic India. Thus is sandwiched between the Hindu majority and other religious minority.

Arundhati Roy's presentation of the dalits has provoked a lot of controversy. She is often accused of drawing a gloomy picture of the dalits which is related to their past rather than present in Kerala. It is also said that she has underplayed the role of the communists for the uplift of the dalits in Kerala. For sake of brevity we have to observe that the militant image of a party does not remain unchanged when it comes to power. A party in power becomes more and more concerned with retaining power and concedes more and more to the prejudices that prevail for appeasing the electorate. That is what Arundhati seeks to make out in the novel. The novelist's presentation of the dalits is constantly blended with irony. People well-placed in society attempt to be kind and sympathetic to them but their deep-rooted prejudices and the fear of losing their supremacy undermine their professed liberal or revolutionary aims. A gentleman wants to educate the untouchables but dares not place them in the same school with the Touchable. A leader talks about social revolution but dreads an untouchable who holds the party-card. An employer recognizes the merits of her employee but attaches more importance to his caste.

We come across three characters in "The God of small Things" which belong to the category of the downtrodden. They are Vellya Pappan and his two sons Kuttappan and Velutha. They belong to an untouchable caste called Paravan. They are toddy trappers according to the tradition. Arundhati Roy gives a lot of information about the untouchables of Kerala in this connection. She also gives a generally perfect picture of the dalits with their varying responses to the caste oppression through the device of trio. Vellya paappan, Kuttappan and Velutha constitute the trio which depicts the three types of the dalits in Indian society namely, the docile conformist, discontented paralytic and the rebel who moves for equality and stakes his life.

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The Novel mentions only the name of three untouchable castes, namely, paravans, palayas and pulayas. They were not allowed to enter into the house of Touchable.

"Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their foot prints. In Mammachi's time. Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. "

Even earlier than the days of Mammachi's girlhood, there were liberal people who wanted to enlighten these poor fellows. However, they could not even think of a common school for children of all castes. That is why they had to build separate schools for untouchable children. The great grandfather of Estha had done so far them. That seems curious to us as we have heard more about separate schools for girls only.

Conditions have changed since then. They do not have to carry brooms during the childhood of Estha and Rahel. They use public roads. They are also learning skills other than their traditional occupations. Though that does not bring as much monetary gain to them as to the Touchable folk. For example, Mammachi pays Velutha more than she normally does to a Paravan but less than that to a Touchable. Neither the orthodox Mammachi nor the 'Progressive' Pillai Permit them to step inside their houses. The untouchables are becoming members of the communist party and trade unions and marching along with others in processions wearing shirts. The presentation of the dalits is ironical as pointed out earlier. Untouchables having become aware of the stigma that is attached to their castes demand now "that untouchables no longer be addressed by their caste names."

Arundhati Roy does not fail to inform us what Christianity has done to the untouchables in Kerala Syrian Christians of Kerala are converts from higher castes "by and large, the wealthy, estate-owning feudal lords" who "had always voted for the congress party". Christianity did not prove a boon to the untouchables. When the British came to Malabar, some of them converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church. Velutha's grand father, Kelan was one among them. They hoped to escape the scourge of untouchability. They were also given some food and money and so came to be known as "Rice Christians". They realized soon that "they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. " They got separate churches, separate services, separate priests and even their own separate pariah Bishop. Because they were deemed casteless as Christians officially, they got no benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates. To sum up, Christianity has not removed the prejudices and arrogance of the converts from the upper castes, nor ameliorated the lot of the converts from the untouchable communities. It has kept the social hierarchy inherited from the past intact. She seems to imply that conversion is no remedy for people subjected to social discrimination. Secular factors are likely to prove more helpful to them. Mammachi admits velutha to her house

when there is something to mend or to instal and he is admitted to the factory because of his mechanical skills.

Vellya Paapen, the oldest of the three untouchables in the novel is an "old world paravan" as the novelist puts it. Born and brought up in the age when paravans had to crawl backwards, he takes for granted the social disabilities imposed on the untouchables by tradition. He dares not question or violate the caste rules. Obviously he believes that it will be sinful to deviate. That makes him a defender of social status quo, a zealous guardian of conformity, highly fearful of change.

Vellya, the old man fails to explain to velutha what bothers him and as his son thinks he is grudging his training and natural skills, nagging and bickering begin. So velutha avoids going home. Then, he disappears from the village for four years. When he returns, his mother chella has died of tuberculosis. Vellya finds his younger son's manners even more worrying but he keeps quiet to avoid quarrel. He breaks his silence only when the Terror takes hold of him.

Kuttapen is the elder son of vellya papen. He lives in a little hut down river from the Ayemenem House with his father and younger brother. He is not educated and pursues traditional jobs of his caste until he becomes disabled. That happens when he falls off a coconut tree and his spine is damaged. He has become Paralysed and unable to work since then. While his father and younger brother go to work, he lies flat on his back. A black hen in the hut is the only company he has Paralysed from chest downwards, he has lost sensation in his feet and cannot use them. He keeps a stick to defend himself against snakes. For his requirements like water to drink and towel to wipe the grit off his face and neck he depends on others, mostly his brother. Infact, Kuttapen's physical immobility might be interpreted as being symbolic of his mental State. Unlike his younger brother he has not moved times and grasped no progressive ideas. His Paralysis in body corresponds to his immobility of mind, that is, his fear of the new, his fear of progress.

Kuttapen remembers how his mother chella suffered and died and misses her much. Lying on his bed, he coughs like his mother and the upper part of his body bucks "like just caught fish. " In the small hut he shares with his father and brother, one corner is reserved for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls. That leaves the other corner where his mother died. That corner he has chosen for himself as he believes it is reserved for dying in.

Velutha, the younger son of Vellya Paapen is not a conformist likes his father and elder brother. He is not a mirror which reflects the image of the dominating section of the society. He is not and can not become "Laltain" needing oil from outside as he does not belong to the class of exploiters. He is a 'Mombatti' (candle) burning by himself. He is self illumined and self confident and has got the selfesteem the qualities which make a man remarkable.

These are the very qualities that frighten his father. His father is fearful because such qualities in a Paravan are not appreciated "while these qualities were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable in Touchables, Vellya Paapen

thought that in a Paravan they could be constructed as insolence. "

Velutha's name is rather ironical because the word means "white" in Malayalam but his complexion is black. This conflict between the name and reality seems to be indicative of other conflicts in the novel of the same type. As M. Dasan remarks in his essay "Arundhati hits the social political Ball".

"Velutha is placed on the borders of society, caught in between right and wrong; sanity and insanity; morality and immorality. This untouchable master craftsman floats on the periphery of society yearning to be accepted confided and recognized like O'Neil's Black protagonist, Yank, in The Hairy Ape. "

Velutha is about three years younger than Ammu. He is not illiterate like his father and elder brother because when he was about eleven, Maamachi noticed his natural skills and persuaded his father to send him to the untouchable's school founded by her father-in-law, Punyan Kunju. Besides he has got natural skills to prepare intricate toys with dried Palm reeds, tapioca stems and cashew nuts. He has learned carpentry from a German carpenter, Johann Klein and knows a lot about Machines.

"Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an As a matter of fact, Velutha has served Mammachi and chacko well both at their and at the factory with the various skills. So he deserves the praise. It is ironical, however that his remuneration does not correspond to this Praise and his abilities are not duly rewarded. To his employers and even to his party leaders, he remains only a paravan. engineer. "

Velutha has been working as a factory carpenter Mammachi rehired him after his return and put him incharge of general maintenance. That did not please the Touchable factory workers. Mammachi puts that situation to a profitable use by paying.

"Velutha less than she would to a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a paravan. "

He is allowed to enter the house of Mammachi to mend or instal something only and she thinks he ought to be grateful that he is allowed on the factory premises and permitted to touch things that Touchables touch.

If that appears inhuman to us, the novelist hastens to inform us what the people in power are sure to say about it:

"Unlike the custom of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of Darkness the posse of Touchable policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. . . . After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an out break. "

They were defending social norms, the traditional caste rules, the "love laws" which did not permit a paravan to love

a Syrian Christian. They had their own defence of what they did and the novelist puts it ironically as follows:

"If they hurt velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature-had been severed long ago. They were not arresting a man, they were exercising fear. "

How can one behave well with Touchables if they are believed to be not human beings but animals to be feared? Most of the critics speak highly about the character of Velutha.

Twinkle B. Manavar who has studied him at some length reaches the conclusion:

"Velutha stands out as a very tall figure in the novel. It

was his desire to 'relive as a Touchable which resulted in

the tragedy. . . . His place is certainly nearer to a

Shakespearean tragic hero. "

K. V. Surendran finds a 'rebel' in Velutha and says: "Velutha, the brave is one of the very well drawn out characters in the novel".

Only Vinita Bhatnagar finds fault with Velutha. Always, he is acted upon. Never does he act or question the status quo. . . . The of Velutha in Roy's novel is a good example of what happens when an "upper caste Christian" of mixed Bengali Brahmin descent attempts to capture a Dalit life story in literature. The learned critic has her own reasons of dissatisfaction with Arundhati Roy whom she deems anti-communist. Her criticism, however, proves a disservice to the cause, she proceeds to serve. Ms. Vinita Bhatnagar has every right to be proud of her pure U. P. Kayasth blood, but is it not a strange kind of Marxism that looks down upon the inter-marriages between religious, linguistic or ethnic groups?

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