

## **Dalit Experiences and the Discourse of Caste: A Theoretical Reconsideration**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It has been noticed that mainstream academic debates have reduced caste issues to “Dalit atrocities”, indicating that caste problems are essentially “Dalit victim stories”. Such reduction neglects the complexity of caste analysis and has produced inaccurate accounts and improbable representations of Dalit experiences, making a significant theoretical reconsideration imperative. This paper understands unearthing the ground rationale of this reduction as a significant theoretical problem to be evaluated. To fulfil this objective, firstly, apart from examining “what is Dalit experience” and “how it has been analysed”, the “status and position of Dalit narrations” is investigated in the course of my argument. This paper further explores how Dalit experiences exist(ed) in the earlier and current discourses, how Dalit narrations emerged and how they have been perceived, and above all, what theoretical positions are required. The final segment, answering the question of reduction, addresses the lacuna in academic discussions of caste issues that are limited to Dalit atrocities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Caste, Dalit experience, victim stories, Discourse*

### **Introduction**

Explaining Dalit experiences theoretically in the caste debate is a significant problem to be addressed. Our mainstream academic confrontations have often reduced caste issues to Dalit atrocities by claiming that caste problems are essentially Dalit victim stories. Since the discourse of caste is reduced to “Dalit’s victim stories of atrocities”, it is argued here that Dalit accounts and representations are to be carefully assessed. For this reason, it has become a theoretical necessity to excavate not only what Dalit experience is, but

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also how it has been viewed in the hitherto caste discourse. A need has risen for reassessing the evaluation of Dalit experience in the context of the complexities of caste issues and relocating them in the discourse of caste as a significant theoretical issue. Our discussion primarily invites a theoretical explanation of the status and position of Dalit experience in the hitherto caste discourse as an immediate concern. Secondly, to locate Dalit experiences in the caste discourse, questions such as how Dalit narrations came to exist and are viewed and what theoretical stands they have taken have to be discussed in our theoretical examination. Thirdly, an attempt has been made to delve into the plausible cause for the reduction of the caste issue to “Dalit’s victim stories of atrocities” and why a theoretical reconsideration is needed is further evaluated in our debate.

Our discussion consists of four sections that are interrelated though each of them is independently examined. In the first section, the characteristic features of earlier and later caste discourses are examined. It, by doing so, also explains how the Dalit narrations have been viewed in the hitherto caste discourses. The second and third sections, however, are intended to evaluate the status and position of Dalit narration by locating the Dalit experiences in the earlier and current caste discourse. By excavating the Dalit experience in the heretofore caste discourses, the last section examines how caste issues have been reduced to Dalit’s victim stories of atrocities or why other complexities of caste are neglected in our academic debate. Elaborately pondering over them, our discussion suggests that a theoretical reconsideration is needed. Though the research paper elaborately studies the narrations of Dalit experience, it examines only their discursive characteristic features.

### **Earlier and Current Caste Discourse: Mapping the Domain**

For the convenience of our research questions under consideration, I take earlier and current caste discourse as the domain of my theoretical explanations. By the earlier caste discourse, I mean the period from early 1960 to 2000. The current caste discourse, however, denotes the period between 2000 to our present days. One might ask why these two periods or discourses have been taken for the study explicitly, even though caste discourses have existed prior to this time frame. Since our concern is about

explaining Dalit experience, these two periods are significant in our discussion for mainly two reasons. The primary reason for terming earlier caste discourse, traced from 1960 to 2000, is because it has marked the emergence and development of Dalit literature in mainstream narrations. It is also a period in which Namdeo Laxman Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble founded the Dalit Panthers in 1972. This organisation is considered one of the significant change bringers in the Dalit revolution, impacting Dalit writings on nuanced grounds. However, after 2000, a significant discussion about caste and Dalit problems emerged, particularly in academic confrontations. Our current discourse on caste is the continuity of this radical change, particularly its academic confrontation on theorizing caste and Dalit experience. The primary reason for this radical departure in thinking and debating on caste and Dalit issues is the implementation of Mandal commission report on other backward communities (OBC) reservation in the education sector in 1990. The reservation of OBC has created a representation of backward communities in the higher education sector, creating a space for the emancipation of subalterns and other oppressed people. The implementation of this policy of reservation has challenged the hegemony of upper-caste academicians in the intellectual endeavours of the country because it has offered a new way of understanding and revolt from the marginalized voice. It would not be an exaggeration to claim after this historical change that Ambedkar became the *influential academic resource* for oppressed communities, namely OBC, SC, ST and other oppressed people. Comprehending this historical change, one could understand that though Ambedkar was a great social reformist and thinker in India, he has not been an influential source in academic space for at least five decades after his death. Through the OBC reservation that Ambedkar became an independent thinker in the Indian academic space. Eventually, it paved the way for theorizing Dalit and caste issues for oppressive communities with novel academic tools and theoretical terminologies. Through the implementation of OBC reservation, many people from the marginalized section have been allowed to study in Indian higher institutions for the first time. However, though they were represented in the higher education sectors from 1990 onwards, their writings, especially theorizations, became prominent only after 2000, and their significant contributions emerged particularly after 2010. For this reason, in

our discussion, the later or current caste discourse represents the period from 2000 to our present days as it signifies the representation of the oppressed class in the academic space of Indian intellectual endeavours and the emergence of Dalit theorization.

Introducing these two historical periods as two significant caste discourses, namely earlier and later or current caste discourses, two noteworthy evolutions can be noticed: the emergence of Dalit literature and the theorization of Dalit issues. Dalit literature, traced roughly from 1960 to 2000, mainly includes three categories: poems, stories and auto-narratives. This literature, without any doubt, has given an appropriate account of the violent and oppressive experiences of the Dalits. Poems such as *Vidyapith* (university) by Narayan Surve, *Kondwada* (suffocating enclosure) by Daya Pawar, *Golpitha* (The red light zone) by Nandedo Dhasal, *Utkhanan* (Excavation) by Keshav Meshram, *Surung* (Dynamite) by Triyambak Sapkal are some of the best examples for Dalit poems during the earlier period of caste discourse. The contributions of Dalit folk poets such as Vaman Tabaji Kardak, Bhimrao Kardak, and Vitthal Umap are also to be considered along with the written poetic works of Dalit literature during the early caste discourse. Similarly, short stories and novels are a significant genre of literature that expresses various exploitative experiences of Dalits during the early caste discourse. The stories like *Fakira* by Anna Bhau Sathe, *Daundi* by Shankarrao Kharat, *Jehnva Mi Zaat Chorli Hoti* (When I robbed a caste) and *Maran Swast Hot Aahe* (Death is becoming cheap) by Baburao Bagul, and *Red stone* by N. G. Shende are some the best examples of Dalit stories by Dalit writers. Moreover, Dalit writers also interpreted their experiences of social injustice in their autobiographies. *Karukku* by Bama, *Ooru Keri* by Siddalingaiah, and *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki are some of the well-known Dalit autobiographies in the early caste discourse. History of Dalit resistance and stories of caste oppression are also depicted in other well-known works in the early caste discourse (they are also partly semi-biographical works), such as *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* edited by Arjun Dangle and *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar. Evaluating the early caste discourse, which consists of Dalit literature of poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies, one could find that at the discursive operative level, it is grounded on subjective experience of oppressive. There is hardly any attempt

to theorize Dalit experience in terms of philosophical, sociological or any other academic tools. Discursively speaking, in the earlier caste discourse, Dalits have been oppressed subjects who reveal only subjective experience and the desire to revolt.

The current caste discourse, however, has witnessed a *discursive change* in narrating Dalit experiences. The early caste discourse consists of works of literature on the subjective experiences of Dalits in terms of poems, stories, novels and autobiographies. These narrations have been grounded on personal experiences and accounts of oppression. However, from 2000 onwards, Dalit experiences have been studied theoretically by various Dalit thinkers and other backward communities. Discursively speaking, it has marked a transition from the subjective experience of Dalit literature to the theorization of Dalit experiences. As I noted above, in the early caste discourse, there was hardly any attempt at Dalit theorization, but in the latter, studying Dalits theoretically got prominence. It does not mean that poems, stories and autobiographies do not have any significance in the later caste discourse in narrating the Dalit experience. Recent autobiographies such as *Strike a Blow to Change the World* by Eknath Awad, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar and *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family* and *The Making of Modern India* by Sujatha Gidla are exceptional pieces of literature capturing Dalit experiences. Similarly, recent poems, *Love after Babel and Other Poems* by Chandramohan S. and fiction such as *The Toss of a Lemon* by Padma Viswanathan and *Seasons of the Palm* by Perumal Murugan are landmark texts of Dalit literature. However, unlike earlier discourse, an attempt to theorize Dalit subjectivity and experience has been seen in the later caste discourse. Works such as *Dalits: Pasts, Presents, Future* by Anand Teltumbde, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* by Chinnaiah Jangam, *Spotted Goddesses: Dalit Women's Agency-Narratives On Caste and Gender Violence* by Roja Singh, *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* by J. V. Pawar, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory and Experience and Caste, and the Everyday Social* by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai could be seen as examples of such attempts. Representation of Dalits and other backward communities in the academic world, especially after the implementation of OBC reservation in 1990, could be one of the significant reasons for this change. Discursively speaking, whereas

the early caste discourse had provided Dalits as a *discursive subject*, revealing the oppressive experience, the latter produced both the discursive subject and *discursive objects*. The current caste discourse provided Dalits as discursive objects because, for the first time, they have become the object of study or theorization. Without considering this transition at a discursive level, understanding the Dalit experience seems to be difficult. For this reason, the discursive difference between these two discourses is essential in our discussion to plausibly examine the Dalit experience.

### **Status and Position of Dalit Experience in the Caste Discourse**

The question of how Dalit experience has been constituted is a core theoretical problem to begin our discussion. However, analysing this question, how Dalit experience in the caste discourse has been located and viewed is also important for our analysis. It is to be noted that the noun, Dalit refers to several distinctive experiences which have meanings and significance *only* in the discourse of caste. To put it another way, the narrations of Dalit experiences are *constituted* only within the caste discourse because they do not exist outside the framework of caste discourse. If it is true, to call particular experiences Dalit experiences, the caste discourse must identify specific *characteristic features*. Similarly, Dalit experiences, though diverse in their specificities and severities, ought to share some common and unified features to be defined as Dalit experience. This points to two serious issues: firstly, it asks for an illustration of the *discursive features of Dalit experiences*; secondly, it inquires about the *unified discursivity constituting attributes of the same*. The former signifies how Dalit experiences have been *viewed or represented* in the caste discourse, whereas the latter denotes how Dalit experiences have been *constituted*. Though these two issues are independently posited, they are complementary and have overlapping applications in the caste discourse. That is to say, distinguishing the unified features of Dalit construction, especially of its experiences in the caste discourse, one could show how they have been represented. Unearthing these two vexed issues could offer an explicit picture of the status and position Dalit experience in the caste discourses.

Let us excavate how the term Dalit has been constituted in the discourse of caste. Strictly speaking, the term refers to the experiences of lower castes, especially the lives

of untouchables. Though experiences of untouchability had obviously existed before, the term Dalit was not coined earlier to denote those experiences. To illustrate, social reformists and thinkers in the Kerala renaissance in the beginning of nineteenth century, such as Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, and Kumaranashan, had written and fought extensively against caste oppression. However, they, the untouchables of that period, belonged to other backward communities and were generally known as social reformers, not Dalit thinkers. Similarly, even though social activists and reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Yohannan fought against caste, they were also not known as Dalits (reformists) as such. Even though the term Dalit was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century in the context of the oppression faced by the lower castes, Dalit as the identity marker for the oppressed people was not widely adopted. That is to say, social reformists and thinkers before 1960 could be termed Dalits only in the minimalistic sense of that term, not informed by the complex connotations we use today. The primary reason for this lies in the fact that *Dalit as a discursive concept* was not developed in the mainstream cultural narrations during that time. Even though the term Dalit was coined earlier, Dalit as the discursive subject or identity marker for the oppressed people was not established in the early caste discourse, particularly before 1960. However, the term Dalits came into prominence in 1972 as the cultural instruments of resistance, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded Dalit panthers during the eminence of Dalit literature. It gained cultural status discursively, indicating the resistance of subalterns against caste oppression, only with the emergence of Dalit literature in the early caste discourse between the 1960 and 2000. During this period, the term Dalit was constituted by evaluating various experiences of oppressed subjects in the caste system, aiming at the annihilation of the caste. For this reason, the caste discourses before 1960 are not considered in our discussion because there was no concept of Dalits as such discursively.

One might be ask that, though Dalit as a discursive subject got prominence only after 1960 with the emergence of Dalit literature, how had their experience been presented in the mainstream narrations earlier? Though caste-subaltern experience had obviously existed earlier, it was not majorly documented in the mainstream narrations of Indian culture and knowledge productions. Their voice was absent because the

dominant upper caste intellectuals, who were the chief contributors and authority of knowledge for a long time, neglected the experiences of the lower castes. As a result, Dalit's arts, rituals, philosophy, morality, and so on have been marginalised as "subjugated experiences" beneath the abyss of history for a long time. Since they were not considered as *(proper) subjects in the mainstream knowledge production and cultural status, having autonomy and agency, to articulate experience* in the first place for a long time, their world had been buried under the power structure of caste stratification in history. It does not mean such experiences have not existed,<sup>2</sup> but those were viewed by the elite Brahminical intellectuals and academia as worthless. Through various upper caste practices, moral codes and religious texts, their experiences have been put at the edge of social normative boundaries like a shadow that has existence but is not indeed real.<sup>3</sup> Their experiences have not been recognised and recollected because they were neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong but deemed to have only *(un)real existence*. In short, the Dalit experiences and lives have been deliberately silenced in the mainstream Indian knowledge productions. For these reasons, subaltern experiences were absent in the mainstream cultural knowledge, epics, and philosophical texts. Even though narrations about them had existed, such depictions have always been retrogressive and subject to the hierarchical dynamics of caste. For instance, the subjectivity of the subaltern, described by the theory of Cāturvarṇa, concurrently solidified the lower caste as the "glorified slave," serving society. The "ideal bhangi" of Gandhi, probably, is one of the latest narrations in this tradition, available to us.

However, the absence and deliberate silencing of Dalit voices signify only fewer Dalit subjects or writers are documented in mainstream Indian culture and literature. To put it bluntly, Dalits were denied exercising their autonomy and agency as articulating subjects in knowledge productions and cultural narrations through caste

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<sup>2</sup> Few Dalit thinkers existed in Indian history earlier. Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler-saint from the 11th century and the father of Vachana poetry, is among the earliest known Dalit writers. Dalit Bhakti poets such as Guru Ravidas (15th-16th century) and Chokhamela (14th century) are also known to be fought against caste oppression. However, these germs are the exceptions to Indian history, and their works are not given significance or gained only less attention from the dominant upper-caste Indian intellectuals.

<sup>3</sup> The analogy of shadow is only suggestive. Strictly speaking, a shadow does have real existence, but since it is a reflection of an object, its existence depends on the same object. For this reason, as the shadow is a reflection of the "real object", it exists but does not have the "existential reality" an object does have. It is only in this sense that "shadow analogy" is used in our discussion.



oppression. Though a significant number of Dalit writers, having agency and autonomy as subjects in knowledge production, were missing in the mainstream Indian literature does not mean *Dalit characters* were also absent. Ekalavya in the Mahābhārata, the untouchable in Tagore's *Gitanjali*, Dukhi in Premchand's *Sadgati*, and the scavenger's son in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Thottiyude Makan* are some of the major Dalit characters who articulated the caste-based humiliation in the mainstream literature. Unquestionably, subaltern characters had some notable narrations in Indian history, but they were portrayed mainly by the upper-caste writers. For this reason, such narrations have been questioned for their authenticity because they have described the subalterns in terms of sympathy, charity and objectification.

The modern understandings of Dalit experience have come into existence as the reactionary opposition against the power structure and the brutality of caste hegemony by narrating "their own experiences" through a deconstructive process. As a result, these experiences are no longer viewed as *the other or inferior*. To put it bluntly, the term Dalit gained serious significance when the experiencer started talking about themselves as a meaningful agent with an authoritative emphasis. It has marked a transition from the subjugated experiences, which are meant only to be viewed, to a position of revealing experiences as liberating in the caste discourse. Dalit experience, therefore, is not a mere collection of experience one could find in the caste discourse but are deconstructed experiences emphasising how their experiences should be viewed and recorded in history. To reiterate, the term Dalit gains significance when a subject, having agency, reveals the experiences, which not only reconstruct the discourse of caste but also provide a permanent, visible subjectivity to them, namely the Dalits. In the process of revealing, one is not only deconstructing the way experiences have to be recollected and viewed but also identifying clearly what they are in actuality. That is to say, they have to debunk the Brahminical narrations, on the one hand, about how they are to be viewed, whereas, on the other hand, they have to constitute themselves as a meaningful agent, namely Dalit. In short, the term Dalit emerges when their experiences have been deconstructed as *the experience* providing a *real existence* in the caste discourse. It has two-fold functionalities, namely, deconstructing the existing narratives of subalterns

given by Brahminical accounts and reconstituting their position as a meaningful agency as Dalits in the caste discourse.

### **Locating Dalit Experiences in the Earlier and Current Discourses**

The modern understanding of the Dalits, which is the by-product of Dalit literature of early caste discourse between 1960 and 2000 and current discourse of Dalit theorizations, has provided specific discursive features to narrating Dalit experiences. They are narrating “their own experiences” through a deconstructive process, becoming a meaningful agent with an authoritative emphasis and providing real discursive existence to subjective experience. Similarly, in these two discourses, Dalits have a unified discursive attribute: narrating the oppressive subjective experience. However, the earlier and the current discourses attempted to define Dalit experiences with fixed connotations without considering their different meanings. By attempting to evaluate them, the earlier and present caste debates, which have assumed coherent unity of meaning to various and diverse experiences of Dalits, have neglected its complexities. Though the experiences of Dalits are unique in their specificities, they have been conceived with a fixed meaning as “oppressed feelings” or “stories of atrocities” in the caste discourse. In the discourse of caste, eventually, it made an assumption that *Dalit experiences* are unreal, and there is only a singular kind of *Dalit experience*. In short, the hitherto caste discourses have presented only a particular experience of Dalit, namely the experience of atrocities. Even though hitherto Dalit narrations have been a revolt against caste atrocities, in the caste discourse, its *discursive status* has been “oppressed feelings” or “stories of atrocities”.

The hitherto caste discourses have characterised “plurality of Dalit experiences” as fixed, assuming they have only single, homogeneous characteristics and narrations, that of the voice of the oppressed. Their plurality has been reduced and termed as the “single, uniform Dalit experience” because they have been the *stories of victim narrations*. It does not mean that there have not been many different subaltern experiences in the Dalit discourse which excavates the questions of gender, region, and language and so on in the complex configuration of caste issues. Though these narrations have distinctive features and critical remarks apart from repressive accounts,

their central framework has been “victim narrations of atrocities”. It projected the Dalit as submissive subjects and a site of oppression.

As indicated already, the fundamental problem of Dalit experience in its discursive narrations is the inadequate representation. Explaining this issue, the questions such as “are Dalits only the site of oppression alone” and “why their critical remarks have been victim stories” need to be discussed. It does not mean that Dalit narrations have been victim narrations exclusively, lacking revolutionary movements in the caste discourse. Dalit narrations do have revolutionary critical remarks and deconstructed observations, but they have not been *discursively appropriate* in the caste discourse. By evaluating discursive conditions of Dalit narrations, it seems Dalit experiences have not been considered “true experience” yet but has been viewed their truth as “victim feelings”. Taking truth as victim feelings, the Dalit has not been an “experiencer” yet but only a site of revealing experience as a “receiver” and “the point of application”. Being a “receiver of experiences”, their role in the caste discourse is to be a mere site of various atrocities to be performed. Similarly, in the brutality of caste discriminations, Dalits have been a point of application as they were the outcome and target of the repressive outrages of power exhibited in the caste system. Being the “receiver of experience” and the “point of application”, Dalit experiences desperately lack objectivity and deconstructive interpretation. Since narrated experiences are solely subjective victim descriptions of atrocities, and they are valid only to the “experiencing subject”. As pointed out by Gopal guru, the Dalit narrations were often considered “as absurd and idiosyncratic at worst, and emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical at best” (Guru 110) in the caste discourses. For these reasons, the experiences of Dalits have been considered neither true experience nor adequate representation in the early caste discussions. In short, though being constituted through revealing experience in various ways, the term Dalit, in the early discussion of caste, exhibits only *the fixed meaning of victimisation*.

Based on the detailed description above, it can be suggested that the emergence of earlier caste discourse has offered Dalit experiences a theoretical shift from “being viewed as the other” to “revealing experiences themselves”, having provided the experiencer with a subjectivity, namely Dalit. In this sense, it has been a deconstructive

process as it has rejected and reformed the dominant ideology of Brahminical narrations of the subalterns. As I noted before, the earlier and current caste discourses have provided Dalits with a unified discursive constituting attribute, namely narrating the oppressive subjective experience. However, its discursive status in the earlier caste discourse is associated with what theoretical stand the deconstructed experiences have assumed. The deconstructed experiences claimed to have characterised “talking themselves” as an “experiencer” with a “meaningful agency” because, for the first time, Dalit voice has been heard and recorded in the caste discourse. Though it has triggered new ways of conceptualising “marginalised experiences,” it has two significant aspects: debunking the dominant narrations of Brahminical accounts and having authentic narrations of themselves. The earlier caste discourse, nevertheless, has given much importance *to dismantle and negate* Brahminical accounts rather than emphasising narrating themselves. To put it another way, it is by debunking the dominant narrations of Brahminical accounts that self-assertive experiences of the Dalits have been presented in the earlier caste debates. The earlier discourses have concentrated only on the total rejection of Brahminical narratives, and remained all its accounts in the debunking processes exclusively. For this very reason, the earlier Dalit narratives did not wide-open “what Dalit experiences are” responsively, but focused exclusively on “what Dalit experiences are not”. It does not mean that the Dalits did not talk about themselves in the earlier caste discourse, but all they attempted to show is that the existing narrations about them by upper caste were wrong. The strong emphasis on subjective experience and revolt against the Brahminical narrations about them in the earlier discourse signifies why they should be a meaningful subject primarily. The narrations of subjective experience, which are oppressive accounts of their lives, show the Brahminical narrations are misleading and retrogressive. This discursive features of earlier caste discourse entails that the deconstructed Dalit experiences have constituted *circuitously* as the *indirect by-product* in the process of debunking narrations of Brahminical accounts. Therefore, it can be said that though claimed to have authentic experiences, the earlier Dalit narrations *discursively lack appropriate narrations of deconstructed experiences as it has rejected mainly Brahminical narrations*. For these reasons, the earlier caste discourse provided Dalits only with the status of *discursive*

*subjects*, capable of revealing the oppressive experience, for narrating the Dalit subjective experience.

However, unlike the earlier caste discourse, the current caste discourse not only focused on discrediting Brahminical accounts exclusively but also concentrated on narrating themselves. The current discussions have questioned the assumption that “some are born with a theoretical spoon in their mouth and the vast majority with the empirical pot around their neck” (Guru 108) in describing subaltern experiences theoretically by formulating academic tools. For this reason, the current caste discourse produced two discursive aspects of Dalit narrations: Dalit as discursive subject and Dalit as discursive object. The discursive subject, as I explained earlier, denotes the subjective narrations of oppressive experiences in the discourse. The discursive object, on the contrary, signifies the theorization of Dalits as the object in the discourse. Though the former is based on the subjective experience of caste atrocities, it lacks objective narrations. The latter, however, provided objective narrations, which claimed Dalit experience could be theorized as they are not mere subjective experiences.

The later caste discourse understood that discrediting the Brahminical account alone is not enough to narrate Dalit experiences. It, for this reason, concentrated both on debunking Brahminical narratives and deconstructed narrations of Dalit experiences, unlike the earlier Dalit discourse. However, though having taken deconstructed process as authentic narrations of Dalit experiences, the current discourse has also suffered from narrations of victimization. It does not mean that stories of atrocities do not have true Dalit experiences; but what ought to be questioned is reducing Dalit experience to victims’ descriptions exclusively. It made the impression that caste issues are essentially the atrocities against the Dalits. Equating caste issues with Dalit atrocities has been the fundamental ground of all caste discourses because Dalit narrations have been the stories of victimization. Dalit experiences have assumed *not meanings in the plural, but only meaning in the singular* by providing the Dalit with a victim card. It implies that unearthing them *discursively* is not only a significant theoretical reconsideration but also an immediate need in the academic world.

## **Dalit Experiences and Caste Discourse: A Theoretical Reconsideration**

Let us excavate the ground rationale of the reductionism in the caste discourse as follows. The primary reason lies in the fact that the hitherto explanations of power relations in the caste system has been grounded on hierarchical model by assuming the binary structure between Dalit and upper castes. In the academic discussion, it has triggered two theoretical compartments, namely the “empirical Sudras” and the “theoretical Brahmins” (Guru 107). Rather than taking this binary distinction as *suggestive*, the heretofore caste discourse has taken them as *fixed* by presuming that the power relation between them is *essentially hierarchical* functioning from the top to the bottom. As a result, the Dalit narrations have addressed power relations in the caste stratification as a homogeneous exertion from upper caste to lower caste. For the same token, they have taken two theoretical assumptions: a) caste issues are essentially Dalit problems; b) Dalit and upper caste are *fixed binary opposites*. For this reason, their account presumed that the effect of power is ultimately repressive, and that the Dalit has been conceived as the oppressed subjectivities and as the application point of power exertion. As a result, it has *failed to show how power functions among upper castes*. Presuming fixed binary relations between Dalit and upper caste, it has neglected to demonstrate repressive aspects and the complex functionalities of power among upper caste. Similarly, the reduction of the complexities of caste into the binary opposites has projected Dalit as the victim and the upper castes as the antagonist. Since the picture of the antagonist has been given by Dalit narrations through the victim stories, *they failed to show why upper castes should go for the annihilation of caste*.

Similarly, since heretofore discourses *reduced* the complexities of caste into the binary opposite and oppressed account, it assumed power functions only through hierarchical model. For this reason, the upper caste identity, described by Dalit narrations of victimization, has been suspected as an “alleged construction” in the caste discourses. It has two significant consequences to be noted in our discussion. Firstly, it has made the impression that Dalits are the vehicle and source of the perpetuation of caste mechanisms. Secondly, it has, on the contrary, made the upper castes situate having “speaker’s benefit” as caste free beings in the caste stratification. These two processes do not function one after another but simultaneously because both came to

exist and function as two sides of the same coin in the caste discourse. To this unanticipated outcome in our so far debates, there are two significant reasons to be noted in the discourse of caste. Firstly, caste issues have been reduced to stories of atrocities as caste questions have been viewed as “the problem of untouchability”. Secondly, by limiting the caste analysis into the atrocities of untouchability as the stories of victimization, the analysis of power has been reduced into binary opposites between Dalit and upper caste as a repressive account. Reducing the questions of caste issues into binaries exclusively, and taking Dalit as the oppressed and upper caste as the oppressor, the hitherto discourses, therefore, made two impressions. Firstly, it solidified Dalit atrocities, narrated by victim stories, as *the only significant caste issue*. Secondly, it reduced analysing the complexities of power mechanisms into binary opposite and repressive aspects exclusively by being negligent to its various subtle aspects and different directions. It eventually, indirectly declared that Dalits are the carrier of caste mechanisms, and the privileged upper castes are “casteless”. As Satish Deshpande rightly pointed out, in the endeavour to elucidate the mechanisms of caste, the underprivileged lower castes have to intensify their caste identities whereas upper castes as casteless citizens (Deshpande, “Caste and Castelessness” 32). To put it bluntly, hitherto caste discourses have made the lower caste identity engraved hypervisibility and the upper caste having indelible invisibility to identifying and theorising caste issues (32).

As I noted above, the question of untouchability, examined by the fixed binary of oppressed and oppressor, has been the ground rationale for hitherto caste discourses because *Dalit problems have been perceived as the only significant caste issue* to be debated and narrated through victim stories. It does not mean that describing the atrocities of untouchability does not have any significance, but what should be questioned is reducing them to the stories of victimization and equating caste exclusively with untouchability. Since caste has been evaluated by the atrocities of untouchability exclusively, the early discourses have mistakenly postulated caste as untouchability. Rather than taking untouchability as “performative end” and “pathological feature” of caste practices, the hitherto caste discourses defined mechanisms of caste in terms of atrocity of untouchability alone. Since untouchability

has been disqualified by law and its severity has been reduced in the current society, it made the impression that Dalit narrations, described through victim's stories, are subject to question. Since the visible form of untouchability and the noticeable marks of caste have become least observable in the present social conditions, the deconstructed accounts of Dalit descriptions have become "fabricated narrations" lacking truth. For this reason, the Dalit narration of caste has been alleged to suggest Dalit as the perpetuator of caste, whereas the upper caste acquitted as casteless. Therefore, in the current discourse, the antagonist picture, portrayed through Dalit narrations, has been considered as fabricated and negligible, and it has made the Dalit narration of experiences, i.e. victim stories "elusive deconstructed experiences". To put it bluntly, in the existing discourse of caste, it makes one believe that Dalit narration of experiences lacks objective truth and authenticity, and the picture of upper caste, provided by Dalit victim narrations, as antagonistic and erroneous. In the present discourses, it has interestingly triggered that caste issues do not have considerable significant academic worth as it is presumed to be an obsolete issue.

Similarly, since untouchability has been considered acted on by a person over others, caste issues have been reduced into a personal affair. It has led to analysing caste in terms of a "personal issue" rather than a "social structure". Rather than thinking as a social structure, in which we all are situated and share specific values, caste has been considered as personal affairs, an issue to be confronted in one's own private, individual spheres. As the severity of untouchability reduced in the current Indian society and issues of caste considered as personal, it has made the problem of caste, on the one hand, the obsolete issue, whereas, on the other hand, it has doubted whether the existing Dalit narrations are genuine. It has eventually made the theoretical foundation of hitherto caste discourse, which was the victim stories based on the binary opposition of oppressed and oppressor, subject to question as groundless. For this reason, in the ongoing debates, the binary opposition has been perceived as superfluous or fabricated, and Dalit narrations have been viewed as the perpetuator of caste rather than efforts at annihilating caste. It has also made present academic discussion believe that caste as a significant socio-political issue does not exist, and if atrocities of caste exist, it would not be a hate crime or social crime but an individual crime. It eventually made us believe



that caste issues are the questions of the mind-set of a person or caste exists in the wicked mentality of people, not in the social structure. In other words, it finally made a belief that caste is merely a question of “mentality” and “attitude” of an individual, and therefore, annihilation of caste is the endeavour of mental purification as the case of an individual effort. Dealing Dalit experiences by the fixed binary opposite in the current discourse of caste, therefore, made three consequences: Firstly, it has neglected to analyse the complexities of caste mechanisms and their various subtle aspects. Secondly, it has reduced analysing the complexity of power relations into fixed binaries and neglected its various other functionalities and directions by overlooking the repressive aspects of Dalit issues solely. Thirdly, it has made caste an issue of an individual rather than a social structure by neglecting how caste privileges regulate people’s lives. As a result, the current discussion did not pay much attention to analysing the significance of caste privileges such as economic, social, cultural, political and symbolic capitals functioning among upper caste and how caste practices such as untouchability made them morally vulnerable. Similarly, it has avoided analysis of how the complexity of power relations function among upper castes, for example, between men and women, and why should they go for annihilation of caste. Furthermore, neglecting caste as a social structure and social issue but analysing only the repressive aspects and fixed binary opposites of power, the current caste discourse has sidestepped examining the foundation, complexities, mechanisms, development, consequences and functionalities of Indian society on various grounds. For all these reasons, it brings to our notice that a theoretical reconsideration is indispensable to deconstruct the hitherto Dalit narrations and their theoretical status in current caste discourse.

## **Conclusion**

In the above discussion, we have examined the characteristic features of hitherto caste discourses by analysing how the Dalit narrations are viewed and analysed in the academic world heretofore. In this endeavour, locating Dalit experience in the caste discourse is debated on various grounds. As illustrated, by unearthing the status and position of Dalit experiences, it is noted that the Dalit narrations have been the stories of victimization in the hitherto caste discourses. For this reason, locating Dalit experiences, their characteristic features and political status in the caste discourse is not

only a theoretical issue but also a political necessity to understand the academic position of Dalit narrations plausibly. Being the stories of the victimization exclusively, Dalit narrations have not been authentic deconstructed experience and accurate representation yet. Since the hitherto Dalit narrations are based on the binary opposite of oppressor and oppressed and the repressive account of power exclusively, the Dalit experiences have been focused on stories of atrocities. Similarly, since caste has been viewed as the problem of untouchability, and hitherto caste discourses are negligent to analyse its subtle aspects and complex mechanisms, Dalit narrations have been considered as stories of victimization. For this reason, caste problems have been reduced to Dalit issue, namely, the victimized stories of atrocities. Similarly, since the severity of untouchability is reduced in the current society, Dalit narrations, which has been the victimized stories of atrocities, have been viewed as the perpetuator of caste rather than annihilating caste. As a result, in the ongoing debates, the binary opposition has been seen as superfluous, and it made lower castes as the perpetuator of caste and the upper castes as caste free and casteless. Therefore, it is suggested here that a theoretical reconsideration is necessary to locating Dalit experience, both its status and position in the current caste discourse.

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