

SUBALTERN EXPERIMENTAL WRITING: DALIT LITERATURE IN DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the experimental features of three contemporary novels produced by Dalits in relation to the way in which these novels address caste, national and international audiences. Bama's novel *Sangati* (1994), Sharankumar Limbale's novel *Hindu* (2003) and G. Kalyana Rao's novel *Untouchable Spring* (2000) create fragmented, innovative and complex narrative structures that are experimental both in the way in which they try to reflect oral narrative structures in order to validate the unique communal legacy of Dalit culture and in the way in which they seek to produce narrative strategies that are radically new in order to evoke a world free from caste discrimination. The paper also explores the novels' complex positioning of multiple readers and the distinctive features of the English translations. The three translations both re-code the texts for international consumption but at the same time try to keep the novels 'strange' to some extent; in the attempt to replicate the innovative features of these Dalit novels, the translations are emphatically experimental.

KEYWORDS: subaltern experimental, dalit, culture, novels, strange

INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiographies are influential texts of self-reflection that express caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, injustice, poverty, and structural inequalities. Some of the Dalit autobiographies are popular subaltern literature in contemporary India. There is, however, an inadequate presence of such literature in social work education, training, and pedagogies. Drawing upon *Murdahiya*, *Manikarnika*, and *Joothan* (part I & part II), famous Dalit autobiographies of Tulsi Ram and Omprakash Valmiki, respectively, and their experiences as social work educators, the author argues that subaltern literature has significant relevance to social work

pedagogy, education, training, and practice. The paper highlights the pivotal role of language in Afro-American and Dalit movements, emphasizing identity affirmation and resistance to dominant aesthetic structures. It examines language's dynamic role in shaping subaltern experiences and fuelling revolutionary movements. While there is some analysis of the significance of literary trends and intellectual current in these parallel movements, a few scholarly inquiries integrate the linguistic and stylistic aspects comprehensively. The study addresses this critical gap by comparing and contrasting the selected study of these two movements to see their convergences and divergences. We employ the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies and Distributed Language (DL) to understand socio-political motifs of pre- and post-production of a particular kind of language. The selected poems are closely read and analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis, with close reading as a key technique.[1,2,3] It allows for an exploration of the intricate relationship between the linguistic structure, use of lexical items, emotive use of language, connotational significations, and compositional semantics. While selected Black literature poems experimented with internal morpho-syntax and everyday language, Dalit literature bluntly presented harsh facts using multilingualism, a unique Indian linguistic trait, and everyday vocabulary.

DISCUSSION

As in many colonized or formerly colonized contexts, the call for realism in India has always been politically motivated. However, Indian realism is never simplistically mimetic or propagandistic. Focusing on three seminal moments in the history of Indian realism, this chapter argues that Indian realism's political project to represent the subaltern has always also been an epistemological question about how literature can contribute to political change. While many Indian writers since the foundation of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association in 1936 have been politically

committed to representing marginalized or oppressed characters in their literature, their writings have simultaneously registered the difficulty of such representation through metatextual techniques such as narrative estrangement, frame narratives, and bifurcated texts, among others. Indian realism, then (and postcolonial realism more broadly), can be understood as a set of questions about what it means for literature to do political work. The importance of literature for a social movement like the dalit liberation movement was clearly perceived by Ambedkar in the years before his conversion and death (1956). A movement can not become strong and last till it has not generated its own literary tradition. Ambedkar saw as a deficiency of his movement the fact that in the 50s the dalit movement had not yet paid attention to literature and built up its own literary assets. He clearly wished to launch such a literary drive, and felt somehow frustrated of not having been able to achieve this too. In the 60s, at Aurangabad, where he had created educational institutions for the dalits, his dream began to take shape in circles of young dalit professors and newly educated middle class youth from untouchable castes. We use to read in the press critiques stating that later, vz., during the last two decades, the dalit literature movement in general has lost momentum and has no future, being repetitive and confined to limited personal testimonies, short of wide human and social perspective, having not contributed to the growth of Marathi literature with significant works.

I feel grateful to the organisers of this seminar, because the unexpected wide review of dalit autobiographies that we had to make with a team of young social activists to prepare this contribution, convinced us, on the contrary, that dalit literature, far from shrinking, is growing in volume and quality, and remains a powerful asset of socio-cultural action in Maharashtra. We hope to

contribute to fulfil the directive that Ambedkar was giving on May 2, 1954 to Brahmin Pandits, writers and representatives of literary circles, in his address to the Vidarbha Literary Conference; he was in particular happy to see in the audience, sitting in front of him, close to one another, representatives of Brahmin and Mahar associations:[4,5,6]

We are neglecting our lives, our duties and our culture. If we do a little of introspection, we will discover a horrible picture of how our life-values and culture are getting burnt up. Whatever the reasons may be, we will find that we are going on a downward path of degradation. That is why, writers should immediately take notice and should make an effort to conserve the life-values and culture, give them lustre, and make them grow. The Sita in your novels and stories is now crossing the 'Lakshmanresha' - the forbidden line. Draupadi's clothes are being taken away in the court of Duryodhan - Dushyant does not recognise Shakuntala, she is getting exiled. That is why I earnestly want to tell the writers "manifest in your literary forms the noble life-values and cultural values. Do not have a narrow, limited horizon. Enlarge it. Do not keep your relations restricted within four walls. Let them expand. Do not restrict your pen only to your problems. Make your pen spread its glow to dispel the deep darkness from the villages. Do not forget that the world of the exploited, dalits, sufferers in our country is immense. Try to understand their suffering, their problem and strive to bring about improvement in their lives through your literature. There lies the real humanity.

Within this context itself, it is also significant to remember that the dalit literature did not first appear in the form of life narratives but mainly in the form of short poetic writings, life testimonies and

short stories. We may even consider that the autobiography emerges as an extension of sorts of the very widely spread practice of short stories. Many autobiographies actually look like a series of short narratives. We cannot deal with such formal aspects here; nor with a few biographical novels which have recently started appearing.

Our concern is with the figures of self-assertion and protest, and the ways of a quest and construction of an identity of one's own, on the part of those who have been denied a full human dignity, and whose consciousness was made to forcibly internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social subalternity. This is a field of investigation upon which social scientists have ever hardly focus their attention. What the following quotation says about Andhra does not any more hold good for Maharashtra, where a number of academic studies and critical reviews have given serious attention to the dalit literature. Still this interest dates from the 60s only.

In the existing historical literature on Modern Andhra the emergence of a Dalit consciousness and of a distinct Dalit sensibility did not receive adequate attention. What the Dalits themselves thought about their conditions, in their own terms has also not been properly analysed by scholars. The fact that Dalits have the intellectual ability to creatively reflect on and analyse their conditions historically, sociologically and in their own language has been missed out. Most scholars tend to characterise Dalits as a set of passive and mute social forces without possessing any initiative and self-assertion. Thus, the efforts of dalits and their self-perception to represent "themselves to themselves and to others" in their own terms needs explanation and elucidation. Furthermore, the emergence of well informed Dalit thinkers, commentators, etc.

affords ample opportunity to examine the way in which Dalits symbolise their experience of oppressive subjugation and struggle to create new socio-cultural identities and ideological bases for autonomous reflection and self-action. It must be stressed that the literary representation of Dalit resentment and anger towards upper caste dominance as the manifestation of their self awareness, consciousness and imagination has been a historical phenomenon. The emergence of a distinct Dalit poetry, literary participation and the creation of "texte of resistance" and "protest" literature" only reflected changing consciousness but also symbolised the intensification of the Dalit quest for dignity and social justice (Satyanarayana 1998: 42).[7,8,9]

RESULTS

Dalit autobiography raises these questions epistemologically within the context, and polemically within a critique of, the Hindu social dispensation. Dalit autobiography should be understood against this theoretical background, much better than with reference to a definition of the western literary genre of auto-biography. It is therefore essential to locate our concern by displaying a short but comprehensive formulation of the Hindu social order. We shall present it in the key terms coined by B.R. Ambedkar himself of Graded Inequality. Olivier Herrenschmidt (1996) underscores them as the most significant sociological concept at the basis of B. R. Ambedkar's theoretical interpretation and construction of the Hindu social system. It is essential to keep this in mind to measure the historical significance and semantic difference of the dalit literature in general and dalit autobiography in particular with regard to the Marathi literary establishment. This is all the more appropriate as together with the texts, movement and example of Mahatma Phule, the comprehensive socio-cultural critique that Ambedkar made of the Hindu social order is the fundamental reference and source of dalit literature as well as dalit movement. In

this section we follow and all along quote the talk of O. Herrenschmidt (1998).

A basic formula of Ambedkar is magnificent : "Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers" (Annihilation of Caste, vol. 1: 47). To this crucial definition, two other propositions are equally essential to qualify that social division :

No society has an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt. The scheme of the Purusha Sukta is unique, inasmuch as it fixes a permanent warrant of precedence among the different classes, which neither time nor circumstances can alter. The warrant of precedence is based on the principle of graded inequality among the four classes. (Who are the Shudras)

It is within that conceptual framework that we should conceive of untouchability and explain why it persists and why one could not get rid of it soon and easily. Ambedkar strongly states that Brahmins have succeeded "to idealize the real and to realize the ideal" (vol. 7: 31-32). "Caste is divine", "Caste is sacred", and the practice of Untouchability is a dharmic conduct, nothing of a sin. It seems that the new concept<8> of graded inequality was first defined in What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables (1945, vol. 9: 170, 215). Henceafter, it becomes very frequent<9>. In Revolution and Counter-Revolution (unpublished, vol. 3: 320) Ambedkar remarks:

Students of social organization have been content with noting the difference between equality and inequality. None have realized that in addition to equality and inequality there is such a thing as graded inequality. Yet inequality is not half so dangerous as graded inequality.

"Graded inequality" is "the soul of caturvarna" (Who are the Untouchables, 1948, vol. 7: 307). It is dangerous because every one --every caste-- has internalised it. It gives to every one social advantages, expressing its difference from the others, constituting its identity, its uniqueness. Here is the reason why Hinduism has survived for millenia. Ambedkar always answered to the unconditional admirers in the West as well as in India of that wonderfully long life of Hinduism, proof, for them of its unique quality: "There are many modes of survival and not all are equally commendable" (this was addressed to Bertrand Russel, in reviewing one of his books in 1918 (vol. 1: 487).It is a kind of in-built mechanism, which guarantees the perpetuation of the social system and "prevents the rise of general discontent against inequity" (vol. 7: 307). The best description of it is in the unpublished Untouchables or the Children of India 's Ghetto (vol. 5: 102).

All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. [...] The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely underprivileged class except the one which is at the

base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system.[10,11,12]

These are important propositions of a sociological nature which go much farther than any model which has been proposed till now. They take us also where Ambedkar might have been reluctantly ready to go. Ambedkar is here thinking in terms of varnas, a sociological holistic model with a finite number of elements in clear and well defined relationships of a linear hierarchical type<10>. But we may also think in terms of jati, caste<11>. If Untouchables are avarnas, they are not a-jatis. And the "graded inequality" is a very good model to describe and explain their relationships among themselves. Every one knows it --Ambedkar more than anybody-- but he is reluctant to admit it. Still he did it, sometimes. In october 1928, for the Simon Commission: "The Caste Hindus have spread the poison to the rest" (vol.2: 489, he admits that there is no intermarriage between Mahars and Mangs). He could not deny it, having described in 1916 the role of imitation for the cultural unity<12> of India, even if he spoke already of "the infection of imitation" (vol. 1: 18). It is clearer in the unpublished Held at Bay (vol.5: 266, very likely written in 1946)

The Untouchables [...] are a disunited body, they are infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as does the Caste Hindu. This caste system among the Untouchables has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and it has made common action impossible.

It is of course the whole of the political action of Ambedkar which is questioned here, its limits, and maybe his own ones (Burra 1986). That "graded inequality" --with its sacred sanction-- helps to understand many things: the perpetuation through the centuries of the Hindu social order; the impossibility of thinking of a real social revolution uniting all the down-trodden and exploited, and a specific mentality which is the result of it. For that social order implies or rather creates a social psychology. "Untouchability is an aspect of social psychology: it is a sort of nausea of one group against another group" (Who are the Untouchables?, vol. 7: 370). "Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind" (Annihilation of Caste, vol. 1: 68), but it is too "a disease of the mind." Ambedkar repeats this every where and all his life: in 1936, in What Path Salvation (p. 38) and lastly, maybe, in the Rajya Sabha, on September 6, 1954: "Untouchability is a kind of mental disease of the Hindus", repeating again: "Every Hindu believes that to observe untouchability is the right thing. [...] Untouchability is a most sacred thing" , with no answer other than of Dr. P. C. Mitra: "Untouchability is only a custom and usage" (vol. 15: 909 - 910).

With regard to dalit literature, it is worthwhile to insist and comment upon the sentence of Who were the Shudras (1946): "an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt." The formula is present through out Ambedkar's life but with a significant variation. In January 1919, with the Southborough Committee (vol. 1: 257), he says that "the gradation of castes" creates in the minds of all an "ascending scale of preference and descending scale of hatred". Here the word "preference" is directly related to choices made in elections. In November 1930 (1st Round Table Conference, vol.2: 506), he speaks of reverence and contempt. "Hatred" has quite logically disappeared of the "descending scale": how could you "hate" the ones it is your dharma to consider "filthy"

and inferior to you: there is nothing "inhumane" in the behaviour of the Caste Hindu with the Untouchables --it is then a stupidity to say that Untouchability is "an ugly blot on the fair name of Hinduism" (What Path Salvation, page 30, 1936). Of course, you cannot either "love" them --and therefore he considered the (Gandhian) social worker "as a professional" with "no inner sympathy", because, as he said in the Rajya Sabha on that same day, September 6, 1954, quoting the most revered Tolstoy, "before you serve, you must learn to love" (vol. 15: 910).

Those two terms (reverence and contempt) will reappear several times: Mr. Gandhi and the Untouchables, 1943, Who were the Shudras, 1946. But Ambedkar, keeping always contempt in the "descending scale" will very often prefer another word to the one of reverence. That word seems to appear for the first time in February 1933 in a public declaration where Ambedkar refuses to participate in the campaign for the opening of the Hindu temples to the Untouchables (quoted in What Congress, vol. 9: 112). There we have "an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt". Hatred is present in the last published book, Thoughts on Linguistic States, 1955, and in two of the unpublished essays (likely dated from the fifties), The Hindu Social Order and Philosophy of Hinduism. It is in any case the formulation which is the good one for Ambedkar. The one he will retain for his last and posthumous book, The Buddha and his Dhamma.

Several gender characteristics of the dalit women autobiographies are worth stressing.[13,14,15]

1. The narratives exhibit the double discrimination which singles dalit women out for repression: caste untouchability and gender instrumentality (Poitevin 1993: 182-184). The testimonies show

with evidence that neither of them is ordained by nature or inscribed in genes. Untouchability and machismo are shown with a wealth of concrete daily events as two social and cultural systems bound together to crush a woman's destiny to the benefit of a patriarchal dispensation. They mark out woman body as a privileged space for all types of control and oppression to coalesce. This gives women's autobiographies a particular anthropological relevance.

2. Women's memoirs do not display laments, resentment or shame of oneself. They denounce frankly, each in its own style. But they do not beg for pity or put the blame on someone in particular. Judgement and condemnation do not turn into noisy verbal outbursts, out of inner weakness or rancour. Women wounded by life and overpowered by the strongest are seen drawing upon internal forces, in order to die with dignity, survive with self-respect, possibly conquer without bitterness and eventually triumph without bragging. Dignity adds to the greatness of the grief. Misfortune does not nurtur literary morbidity.

3. These memoirs historically confirm the enthusiastic participation of country women in the dalit liberation movement started by B.R. Ambedkar, who deliberately addressed his sisters and requested them to come forward fearlessly. The autobiographies show also that often brothers, husbands or male friends very effectively support women's efforts. After the death of Ambedkar, the leadership in the untouchable communities has not dared to give women with humble origins the place that Ambedkar was constantly trying to give them. Being always masculine, it has maintained under its thumb –and enfeebled it– the promising potential displayed by the audacious response of women from

remote Mahar communities to the call of their charismatic leader<20>.

4. Women's testimonies make us discover a female world of hidden feelings of dissent and moves of subdued revolt under the yoke of endured humiliations as memories drift back and past days and years are recreated. Specific ways and motives of a shared feminine sensitivity and cultural creativity are highlighted, as nowhere else.

5. Women's humdrum everyday becomes a space of knowledge. As a woman can have no bearing whatsoever on the institutions of the social systems, her efforts remain a matter of individual confrontation with all the limitations which on this account are bound to mar hopes and defeat attempts. The literary form of a life-narrative proves the most appropriate way to observe a cruel game of hide and seek as between a battered mouse and a wild cat. The focus put on minute particularities of women's life defies the category of trifling under which most of women's daily chores and moves remain unnoticed.

6. Testimonies of feminine resistance suggest three remarks.

Firstly, the women's autobiographies are specific in identifying forms of strength and revolt in fields far from the male domain of socio-economic and political systems of power. The repressive control of male hegemonic dominance is the central substantive issue, which is significantly confronted within the sphere of the private and family life, women's mutual rapports, religious rituals and female trance, daily labour relations, rapports with children.

Life stories only could reveal hidden attempts of resistance usually unaccounted in the annals of historians. They moreover substantiate the rationale behind the claim that subordinate consciousness is no dead subjectivity, no purely repetitive prescribed consciousness, no quiet consensus. External constraints smother wishes and enforce silence. But deep within, preserved and latent, hidden and simmering, internal motions of dissent are stirred up by struggles for basic survival.

Secondly, the women's memoirs are the only ones capable of showing in a positive light the particular forms of resistance such as violent religious rituals and collective practices of possession, usually derogatorily written off as crass superstitions. These modes of dissent and defiance do not fit into rationalist diagrams of progressive militancy, class consciousness and 'scientific' struggle. They originate from a subjective spontaneity, which remains to be understood for itself. Baby Kamble hints at this when she describes and comments upon apparently nonsensical rituals to which series of generations have succumbed, offering and sacrificing their lives to gods made of round stones only. This was truly the way that women found in their down-trodden condition to keep themselves alive. A Human being ought to keep his mind engaged in some pursuit in order to find joy somewhere and grow shoots of hope. While nourishing these shoots of hope with all the strength of their soul, they surely made them grow.[16,17]

Thirdly, as documents of social and ethnographical history, such women's autobiographical testimonies mark a break with the conceits of elitist historiography and academic ethnography. They focus on people who apparently make no history. None could be viewed as the scrap of history more than down-trodden women from

untouchable castes. Still, claims Baby Kamble, All the enjoyment of your prosperity is founded on the pith and marrow of the Mahar women."

CONCLUSION

Memory: A Faculty of Cognitive Reconstruction

Dalit autobiographies are recollections with a motive. They are no mere chronicle for archives of social history. Events are retained selectively, i.e. intentionally. The Self is narratively reconstructed in a performance of identification. Each narrative is a remake of life through a travelling back which originates in a decision to break away with the prescribed socio-cultural models of interpretation. This decision originates in a will to henceforth exist for oneself. The alienated self is done away with. The narrative reconstruction is nothing less than a creative assertion of one's identity. Memory inaugurates a radically different temporality. The active process of reconstruction of oneself is equally a remaking of history (Brunner, 1987: 11-32) to the extent the previously ostracised individual emerges as the subject or foundation of an inverse history. Let us underscore a modality of the process: the inversion is a retroactive restructuring as it goes from the end to the beginning. The past is revisited, re-composed, re-assessed and re-recognized in the light that finally shines at the moment of fulfillment. That light re-veals, viz., takes out the veils that overshadowed the "real" history. The accomplishment of the end holds the key to a renewed insight into history, and shows the way for a genuine reappropriation of oneself. In that new light the "true" appears "false" and vice versa.

Reassessed History: Promise of a Future

The reconstructed past and redeemed self stand as stepping stones and guarantees for a conscious and purposeful control of one's

future course of life. No secure or meaningful future is viable without roots in the past, shared experiences and values, and a definite self-image received as heritage. The capability to project an integrated picture of an entire span of life with due scrutiny of the past hold the key to a future (Ricœur, 1985, 1988). Autobiographies prove to be a historical achievement to the extent that they lay the foundation of the future on a critical examination of the past. This is what Baby Kamble (Our Existence, 1986) and professes loudly. The present generations are alien to their roots. Unilaterally directed towards the future, they are, as a matter of fact, spasmodically bent on the modernity of the present. Anxious to tune themselves to the messages of the present times, they cut themselves off from their roots and blindly deny their past. As a result they not only lose their roots, but also miss their future and relapse in the deadly traps of the past (Sharankumar Limbale, Twelve Months). The cognition of one's future history cannot but be based on the critical self-recognition of one's own past condition. One needs a reassessed memory of the past to draw from.

From Subjectivity to Reality: the Test of Truth

A crucial question addresses the passage from self-assertion as an event happening in the biographical space opened up in the time of memory to the chronology of actual history outside the time and labour of commemoration, viz., the social transformation to be brought about in the society at large. Engrossed in the labour of memory, how does each author transcend the limits of his critical subjectivity towards actual history? We cannot but stress in this respect an unfortunate fact, which seriously affects that passage, viz., the trap of official recognition through awards and prizes bestowed upon a number of dalit literature productions. This may

toll the knell for Dalit literature instead of securing for the Dalit voice a better and effective listening.

Moreover, the social establishment and valorization of critical canons of style and aesthetics are highly privileged exercises, hegemonic by nature, and reflect power structures. For instance, for centuries, cutting across nations and races, women's literary styles have been criticised by critics, almost always male, and certain characteristics of women's narratives found in men's writings termed, weak, soft, feminine and so on. The writer of the biography of Vithabai Mang, Queen of Tamasha, has tampered with words and reality. Baby Kamble's narrative becomes problematic for the classical canons that dominate critical appreciation and is also evidently judged for being an enrelenting witness to the injustices of the Brahmanical orders which produce these critics. Still, if passion is valorised as a quality in literary production, Baby Kamble's *Our Existence* can be rescued. We know of one manuscript (Babanrao Chavan) which remains unpublished for reason of serious threats to the life of the author made by local religious authorities denounced as continuing with rules and practices of untouchability despite discourses to the contrary.[17,18]

A Horizon of Crisis as Anthropological Topos

Epistemologically, the anthropological topos of dalit autobiographies is a wide-open horizon of crisis: crises of survival, denial of social status and cultural dignity, breaches of social consensus, contestation of repressive norms and degrading values, defiant practices in the everyday life, dissident behavior, latent discontent, inner emergence of counter-culture, protest and conflictual relations, access to empowering opportunities, etc. on the part of individuals or small groups acting in defiance of or at variance with,

the established codes of conduct and systems of values. On this horizon, the focus is not directly on the structures and institutions as such but on the individuals involved in them as victim, protagonist, simple actor, common man, enforcing authority. The particular relevance of the dalit autobiographies is the creative burst of the individual striving to assert himself, lest he disappears swallowed up by the alleged necessity of systemic orders and the divine truth of cultural dispensations imposed on him by dominant social actors. When a human subject realises that he has been alienated from his Self, dialectical processes do stir up a new consciousness and prompt to remake history.

Holistic and coercive anthropological models find strong arguments in usual studies of Indian society. Micro-scale biographical analyses show that the static configurations of such abstract constructs speak from without for the permanent triumph of the dominant collective actors and factors which wield control and power. They unduely give exclusive importance to the permanent components of the system. The latter is wrongly construed as the substantive reality, when it is just a reference to measure the actual substance of human history. Existential approaches such as the biographical method, are meant to reveal the dialectics which to day as yesterday cut through the entire system, but which often remain purposefully repressed, ignored, covered up, cornered in the dark, kept under a coating of silence, enervated or absorbed by several kinds of manipulative cognitive and behavioral mechanisms. The subject as alternative dialectic reason gives biography its anthropological relevance.

Biography is more than a mirror. When an individual sits in judgment upon his whole existence, environment and society, his

biographical testimony obtains the status of a particular synthetic standpoint: that of a subject reading through his private destiny the crossing and interweaving of the social structures and dynamics which run right through him. From this vantage point, the particular reaches the status of a universal concrete subject, keystone of a social analysis. The (auto-)biography provides fields of mediation between the generality of a structure and the historicity of an individual's practice and cultural innovation. The biographical approach becomes a social hermeneutics by focussing on the singular as a centre of social-cultural re-interpretation and re-structuration.

Epistemological Implications

Our scholarly interest for the biographical approach is not born out of an academic choice. Our example is a case in point where the phenomenon could be roughly identified as a wish to focus on the importance of the individual in the study of the dynamics which pervade a given social fabric. Our interest in dalit autobiographies grounds itself on the perception that, especially with reference to Indian studies, the minority and the ostracised, or in general all those individuals or small groups whose particularities bubble over general statements or stay altogether on the sidelines of the mainstreams, can and ought to be apprehended also as valid sources of anthropological knowledge. We assume that biography with its profusion of minute details is the proper locus for the discovery and assertion of alternative rationalities if not even counter-rationalities. Here is an antidote against the hegemony of any given --that is, established and dominant-- knowledge and its perils.[18,19,20]

The interest in biographical approach is no sickly taste for the rubbish of history. It rests on the conviction that it offers the common man, the foot of history, a chance to test, for instance, the propriety of the established orders in which he is forcefully coopted, the strategies of change devised for him but without him, the validity of historical judgments passed on him by experts who read his destiny without his consent and his knowing. In general it is an opportunity offered to the marginalised to voice their appeal against the systems which throw them on the side-lines of humanity and outside of the systems of social knowledge.[21,22,23] In other terms biography offers a space for displaying the limitations which cripple the production of knowledge in human sciences and the obnoxious effects of cognitive systems imposed by force on human beings.

The biographical approach is a device for getting a deeper insight in the complexity of the dialectics which agitate human societies especially those which operate underground, on a minor scale, with limited import or with an import whose meaning has not been duly acknowledged. The biographical writing helps promote those who otherwise would remain the mute and unconscious objects of history to the status of subjects reading for themselves their own destiny with their own open eyes and critical capacities. This approach may even assume that the roots of history lie hidden in that secret place of free determination which marks the place of the individuals and small groups. In any case, autobiographical accounts prove one of the best ways to explore these secret roots of the future that no necessity can foretell and no law foresee. The approach assumes here that the individual is the mainspring of history and that it can not or should not be otherwise. The Individual is epistemologically given the status of a space of freedom and creativity. A biography is sociologically relevant to the extent it projects a universal-concrete symbol of the processes involved. A

symbolic and typologic logic plays here the role that the concept of representativity and procedures of sampling fulfil in the quantitative survey methods.[24]

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