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**Dalit Pamphlets Narratives of 1857 Revolt: Alternative Narratives?**

Tanya Singh

**Abstract:**

The paper discusses Hindi Dalit Pamphlet literature focusing on the narratives of 1857 revolt. It draws a comparative study of the works of Badri Narayan and Sara Beth Hunt and addresses the question of the reading the narratives as 'protest' or 'counter' narratives.

**Keywords:**

Hindi Dalit Literature, Dalit Pamphlet literature, Dalit literature, counter culture, alternate history.

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The origin of Dalit literature in the Hindi belt of north India is rooted in Dalit pamphlets which started in the pre-independent India in 1920's. The printing and distribution of these pamphlets is still in practice. A study of these pamphlets allows an understanding of the development of Hindi Dalit literature and the political awakening of the Dalits in north India. These pamphlets are generally low budget production printed on inexpensive paper, meant to be sold in *melas* and other social gatherings which are predominantly meant for the grassroots Dalits. These pamphlets or booklets are often referred by scholars like Badri Narayan, Charu Gupta and Sara Beth Hunt as "Dalit dissenting culture" (24), "alternate forms of knowledge" (1740), "Dalit counter public" (26) respectively. These pamphlets have sufficiently been argued as a challenge to the 'metanarrative' and provide an alternate history, an idea which cannot be contested against. These arguments suffice the popular academic criterion of studying the narratives emerging from the margins under the label of 'counter culture'. This paper attempts to look at what constitutes as an 'alternate' piece of writing and how is it validated so? The paper is divided into following factions: (a) a comparative study of Badri Narayan and Sara Beth Hunt's reading of Dalit pamphlets (b) an analysis of the popular themes of pamphlets produced in 90's and onwards. Addressing the same, the paper argues that Hindi Dalit pamphlets that are seen as 'protest narratives' are actually heavily influenced from the same narratives, literary and religious, that they are trying protest against and ask if in doing so the whole idea of 'alternate' literature becomes problematised.

**A Comparative Study of Hunt and Narayan's Reading of Dalit Pamphlets**

Sara Beth Hunt in her book *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation* (2014) presents a hermeneutics of Dalit pamphlet writing in which she traces the stages of the emergence of themes of these pamphlets. According to her study Dalit pamphlet literature is not a recent phenomenon but has been in practice since 1920's, initiated by Dalit activist Swami Achutanand who is also known as the founder of Adi Hindu movement. Hunt discusses the rise of a new educated Dalit class in the 20's and 30's and their aspiration to "participate in the burgeoning sphere of Hindi public debate" (Hunt 35). However this new educated class of Dalit writers' inaccessibility in the

'mainstream' journals is recorded by her as one of the prominent reasons why Dalit activists such as Achutanand started their own printing press that discussed issues related to caste. She argues that it is the "Adi Hindu movement which determined the basic institutional and discursive structures that later came to define the field of Hindi Dalit pamphlet literature" (Hunt 27). Hence it is the Adi Hindu movement that triggered the circulation of Dalit pamphlets starting in 1920's. Hence the foundation of Hindi Dalit literature can be said to be laid on the Dalit pamphlets which eventually gave way to other genres that marked the evolution of Hindi Dalit literature. On the premises of Hunt's study, reading of Adi Hindu movement is significant for three aspects: initiation of Dalit pamphlets; creating the discourse of "jati histories"; forming a parallel literary sphere alongside Hindi journals and newspapers. As already discussed, it is with these pamphlets under Adi Hindu movement that Hindi Dalit literature was conceived. These pamphlets comprised a "reinterpretation of the theory of Aryan race, by subverting the main categories of 'indigenous' and 'foreign' and by positioning the Aryans as foreign invaders...Adi Hindu activists laid claim to the powerful category of indigeneity, naming themselves the original inhabitants of India" (Hunt 32,33). The period of 1920's in the history of Indian independence struggle is very crucial since with the emergence of Indian National Congress as an important political party, in alliance with Mahatma Gandhi, it marked the rise of pivotal movements like non-cooperation in 1920. All the Hindi newspapers and journals were occupied with the reports for the same. The entire fervour of nationalism also found an expression in the literature of the times. In the matrix of all this, the issue of untouchability was dismissed with the prime focus rested on the debates concerning 'nationalistic' discourse. Commenting on the same Hunt argues:

"'Untouchable' writers were already at a strong disadvantage, since their caste identity excluded them and their concerns from what were considered issues of national interest. The issues raised by 'untouchable' writers and activists, such as the practice of untouchability, caste discrimination and the historical origins of the lower caste communities, seemed distinctly 'particular' and were, therefore, excluded from the mainstream Hindi public (35).

The exclusion of the Dalit writers from the literary world and the repudiation of their views translated into the need to create their own space and medium so as to be able to express themselves. There is also a significant shift in the core of their opinions as articulated later with the development of Dalit public. Earlier, Dalit writers and activists followed the same enthusiasm of delivering their commentary on the 'nationalistic' discourse. However with the initiation of the formation Dalit public by Achutanand, their concerns shifted to the discourse of caste along with the discussion of socio-political issues. The primacy of the issue of caste as their foremost concern indicated it as a deviation from the Hindi journals and newspapers. At the same time it also provokes a need to study this deviation, whether it is to be seen as a deviation or an unacknowledged part of the larger discourse brought to notice.

The legacy of Adi Hindu Movement and the narratives produced during it, as reported by Hunt, was furthered by Chandrikaprasad Jigyasu in 30's. Swami Achutanand and Chandrikaprasad Jigyasu are seen as the pioneers of Dalit pamphlet literature. Hunt records the alliance of both the activist's with the 'mainstream' Hindi public at one point of time and their persistent subordinate status resulted in their gradual dissociation from it. This necessitated the formation of Dalit literary space as a "counter public

sphere” (Hunt 32). A detailed analyses of the formulation of “Dalit counter public” in response to the exclusion of Dalit writers from ‘mainstream’ allows one to fathom the politics of the deployment of the term “counter”, which now clearly implies that it was created with the objective of (a.) contesting the hegemony of Hindi ‘mainstream’ run by ‘upper’ castes (b.) to create a space for themselves where they could express their concern over matters of caste, otherwise not covered in ‘mainstream’ journals. Both the points earmark the aspiration of these writers to overcome cultural subordination in terms of literary as well as social space. Hence the foundation of these pamphlets lies in the trope of ‘protest’.

While Hunt provides a history of the rise of Dalit pamphlet literature, Narayan’s works focuses on the “invention, reconstruction and representation of the myths and memories of the role of Dalits in the 1857 rebellion, and their use in electoral mobilization by the BSP in gaining the support of Dalit communities” (Narayan 25). Narayan explains these narratives to be charged with cultural assertion with the employment of folk culture, myths and legends. These resources are transformed as cultural capital by their extensive use in the pamphlets so as to build a “collective memory” (Narayan 29) for the Dalits.

Hunt foregrounds these Dalit pamphlets and booklets as an “alternative means of literary production and distribution to establish a separate space for public intellectual exchange amongst members of their own community. Thus from the very beginning, this field of Dalit pamphlet literature was established as a counter public” (Hunt 26). Hunt’s analysis of Dalit pamphlet literature lays emphasis upon a need to create a separate literary space in response to Hindi mainstream. Scholar Badri Narayan, on the other hand, in his book *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India* (2006) contests these pamphlets/booklets to be “cultural narratives of identity and self [which] are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression” (Narayan 40). Narayan views this pamphlet literature as more than just a creation of literary space but underscores it as a means of cultural assertion. This can be further substantiated as he says “The reaction of the Dalits to the oppression and suppression of the members of their community and the lack of awareness about their tradition and culture may be cited as the reasons that prompted them to write their own caste histories” (Narayan 31). This is in contrast to Hunt’s analysis, as discussed above, which contends the exclusion of Dalits from Hindi public as the reason behind the development of Dalit pamphlet literature. However, both the interpretations share a close proximity and are potent for understanding of the emergence of Hindi Dalit literary sphere. Each of the reasons, creation of Dalit literary space and cultural assertion, forms the ground for these narratives. Also, both Hunt and Narayan share a similar view of these narratives to be a dissenting voice raised in order to counter the dominance of ‘mainstream’ literary and cultural presence.

The pamphlets produced from 1980’s onwards intensify the claim of these narratives of being ‘protest narratives’ or ‘alternate histories’. The period of 80’s in north India, especially the region of UP witnessed a robust circulation of these pamphlets with a direct intervention of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit political party formed by Kanshi Ram in 1984.

This paper focuses on the popular Dalit narratives on 1857. The production of these narratives, as the study of both the scholars show, started in the 60’s however it was popularised in the 90’s with rise of BSP. These narratives comprise a retelling of the

revolt of 1857, a pivotal episode in the history of Indian nationalism that marked the first attempt of Indian rebellion against British colonisation. These pamphlets articulate an active participation and contribution of Dalits in the revolt of 1857 which has not been registered in the official histories. This comprises a revival of Dalit heroes and heroines extracted from folk narratives, oral histories, myths and legends which are shaped up in the literary format through these pamphlets. The absence of these heroes and heroines in the recorded history of Indian nationalism is etched out in these narratives followed with a glorification and celebration of their contribution. Commenting on the same Narayan argues that “The narratives of the 1857 Rebellion helped them not only to establish their own heroes, but also to dethrone the existing higher-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives” (87). Resonating the same idea Hunt comments, “By replacing established heroes and heroines of the nationalist movement with Dalit ones, biographies of Dalit heroes and heroines of 1857 proclaim the invaluable role the Dalit community played in the national freedom movement” (111). A collective view of both the interpretations earmarks a dethronement of the ‘upper’ caste heroes then replaced by the Dalit heroes and heroines. This solidifies their previous argument as mentioned above that Dalit pamphlet literature functions as “counter” narratives.

The objectives of these narratives of revival of history is outlined by Hunt as “reconstructing the community’s identity” (86), whereas Narayan views it as “democratisation of history” (88) and also to support their demand for an “appropriate share in the power structure of state and society” (88). The motives of registering the Dalit history are embedded in meeting the contemporary needs for the Dalit community.

Hunt’s painstakingly done study of Dalit pamphlets outlines a history of pamphlet literature beginning from 1920’s. She argues that these pamphlets reinterprets historical moments and asserts a share in the mainstream historical discourse. Grounding his research on same, Narayan presents the multiple layers of these narratives; deconstruction and reconstruction of history; translation of myths and oral history in cultural capital; political mobilisation of Dalits and the symbolic capital of these narratives.

### **Pamphlets Narratives of 1857 Revolt: Alternative Narratives?**

As established in the previous section, the narratives of Dalit histories of 1857 revolt are seen as a “deconstruction of the legitimacy of history” (Narayan 88) and a formation of “historical counter narratives” (Hunt 86). Mandal commission, which was implemented in 1990 and secured reservation for socially backward classes, is argued by Narayan to have precipitated the publication of these pamphlets. He argues that by depicting the significant contribution of Dalit in the making of nation these narratives validate their “demand for reservation, as recommended by Mandal commission” (Narayan 32). This section addresses that even though these narratives are built on the foundation of ‘protest’, they are the emulations of the very narratives that they are countering. In that case, how to determine the ideology of literary ‘protest’ that these narratives are often viewed with?

These pamphlets on 1857 revolt use the same historical narrative but concentrates on the Dalit heroes and heroines and their active share in it. It is worth



highlighting that these narratives largely focus on the women heroes and this is explained by Narayan as an attempt to put them along with the mainstream nationalist heroes like Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal” (29). Male Dalit heroes also appear in the pamphlets such as Matadin Bhangi who is seen as the one to have inspired the 1857 War of Independence and not Mangal Pandey that the elite history claims (Narayan 97). The narrative for Matadin Bhangi published by D C Dinkar in “*Swatantra Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan*” (1990) is given in the following words:

There was a factory in Barrackpore where cartridges were manufactured. Many of the workers of this factory belonged to the untouchable communities. One day one of the workers felt thirsty. He asked a soldier for a mug of water. That soldier was Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey refused him water because the worker was an untouchable. This was very humiliating for the worker. He retaliated to the Brahmin soldier saying...you claim to be highly respectable Brahmin, but the cartridges which you bite, are all rubbed with the fat of cows and pigs...That untouchable was none other than Matadin Bhangi, who opened the eyes of the Indian soldier and ignited the first spark of India’s independence in the cantonment. The words of Matadin Bhangi spread like wildfire through cantonment. Very soon the torch of independence was lighted. On the morning of 1 march 1857, Mangal Pandey broke the line during the parade. Accusing the British of spoiling their religious sentiments, he started firing indiscriminately at them. This was the moment when the first battle lines against the British were drawn. Mangal Pandey was arrested in an injured condition. He was court-martialed, and in 1857 he was hanged from the gallows before all the soldiers. On 10 may 1857, the floodgate of the independence movement burst in Barrackpore in which many brave sons of India became martyrs. In the chargesheet that was made, the first name was that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested. All the arrested revolutionaries were court-martialed. Matadin was charged with treason against the British (quoted in Narayan, 97-98).

There are few things that are brought to notice through this narrative. It reflects on the social condition and the position of untouchables in the pre-independent India. The subtext of Matadin Bhangi being denied water by the upper caste soldier Mangal Pandey is a source to depict the hierarchy existent in the society. Water has been a consistent motif used in Dalit narratives to depict the inhuman treatment and injustice inflicted upon them. Also, by describing this denial of water makes the Dalit audience of these narratives to identify themselves with Matadin Bhangi’s experience on the basis of caste based discrimination that they too face in the society. The most significant aspect of this narrative is that it is the same untouchable individual who was earlier denied water acted as a catalyst in the breaking out of the Revolt. The institutionalised histories portray Mangal Pandey as the crusader of the revolt. These histories bear no mention of Matadin Bhangi. But here he is shown to be as the torch bearer for all the orthodox soldiers, awakening them to the facts unknown to them and hence inspiring them to fight against colonial rule. By doing so the narrative subverts the recorded history and shows Matadin Bhangi to be the real reason for the Indian Rebellion. This fits partially into Narayan and Hunt’s arguments of ‘dethronement’ and ‘replacement’, as discussed previously, of upper caste heroes filled in by Dalits.

However, the question, raised in the beginning of the chapter, how are these narratives to be validated as ‘alternate narratives’ or ‘protest writings’ is still to be

looked into. The framework of the already existing narrative, as discussed here, is not changed. The difference lies in the introduction of a Dalit hero, Matadin Bhangi, in the narrative. The focus is shifted from Mangal Pandey to him. He is portrayed as very much similar to the image of Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey is depicted in the elite histories as a courageous soldier who sacrificed his life for the nation. Prioritising nation before life is constructed as the basics for the spirit of nationalism. Matadin Bhangi, here in the narrative, is also shown to have not only triggered the revolt but also to have sacrificed his life for the cause of nation. Both the credentials render him as a 'nationalist hero'. This sacrifice of an untouchable is emphasised and as Charu Gupta says, "it was actually Dalits who fought for independence in 1857, while the upper caste Hindus and Indian rulers only fought to restore their rule" (1740). Hence the contribution of Dalit heroes is shown to be much intense than the upper caste heroes. However, the characteristics of Matadin Bhangi resonates that of Mangal Pandey. The conception of 'heroism' or a 'nationalist hero' here appears to be a borrowed one. The set ideas are not changed and the narrative follows a similar trajectory as the elite histories. Also, he is not shown in the narrative to have 'replaced' Mangal Pandey by 'dethroning' him, but seems to have been assimilated in the narrative with the focus lying on him.

The pamphlets produced on the lives of Dalit women heroes and their participation in 1857 Rebellion further deepens the idea of borrowed narrative structure as discussed in the case of Matadin Bhangi. Dalit women heroes occupy a larger space in these pamphlets that narrates the history of the Dalits in the Revolt. The pamphlet centred on Jhalkaribai of Jhansi appears to be a restructuring of the popular narrative of Rani Laxmibai. The narrative published by M R Vidrohi, "Dalit Dastavej" (2004) is as follows:

There was a *dasi* (maid servant) named Jhalkaribai in the palace of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. She was a low-caste woman. When the British besieged the fort of Jhansi and started firing from all sides, Jhalkaribai suggested that the Rani should leave the place after securing her child (who was the heir apparent) to her back. She, on her part, would hoodwink the British by assuming the appearance of the Rani. The Rani accepted this advice and made good her escape with the child. The ruse worked and for a long time the British were uncertain about the true identity of Jhalkaribai who was posing as Rani Jhansi. It was much later that they learnt that the 'Rani' was in fact the maid Jhalkaribai. But by then it was too late and the Rani had already covered a considerable distance (quoted in Narayan, 117).

Similar to the narrative of Matadin Bhangi, here too, the narrative of 'mainstream' is sustained, which however is inserted with a Dalit woman hero. Focus of the narrative is directed to Jhalkaribai, the maid servant of Rani Laxmibai. Laxmibai is known for her struggle against the British which is not only reiterated in the recorded histories but also in other forms of literature that has contributed to the popularisation of her image as a hero. Subadhra Kumari Chauhan's poem is another example beside the history books that valorise Laxmibai, as is captured in the following words:

*Bundele Harbolon Ke Muh Se Humne Suni Kahani Thi,*

*Khoob Larhi Mardani Wo Toh Jhansi Wali Rani Thi.*

(It is from the people of Bundelkhan we heard her story

The one who fought bravely like a man, was Rani of Jhansi) (Translation mine)

Laxmibai here in the poem by Chauhan is glorified and valorised by emphasising upon her warrior skills. Her courage is equated with masculinity in the poem that is shown have come from her fearlessness. In the narrative on Jhakaribai, she too is shown as a self-sacrificing, courageous and fearless woman. These characteristics get highlighted when she offers to disguise as Laxmibai in order to fool the British so as to help her. These are the very features that are used to describe Laxmibai. Hence it can be argued that both the women are celebrated as heroes and are modelled on the same paradigms. Jhalkaribai's contribution is shown to be more significant since she selflessly offered her life to save Laxmibai so that the latter could venture out on her endeavour of fighting against the British and secure her kingdom. Hence, as it appears, the illustrious history of Laxmibai rests on the bravery of Jhalkaribai.

In another discourse on the contribution of Dalit women in the rebellion, published by D C Dinkar in "*Swatantra Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan*" (1990), the narrative discusses the role that Udadevi played in the 1857 revolt:

[Udadevi] belonged Ujrion village near Lucknow. Her husband Makka Pasi was also a soldier in the army of Hazrat Mahal. He laid down his life while fighting the British at Chinhat... Udadevi suddenly shuddered on seeing the dead body of her husband, Makka Pasi, and wept bitterly. It was then that Udadevi vowed to avenge the killing of her husband, and this resulted in the killing of 36 British soldiers from the top of the tree and her subsequent martyrdom (quoted in Narayan, 141).

Here, in the narrative, the presence of Hazrat Mahal is pushed to margins and Udadevi, a Dalit woman, is concentrated upon. She emerges as a true warrior. Unlike the previously discussed narratives on Dalit heroes, Udadevi not only sacrificed her life but was also instrumental in killing British soldiers. Her bravery is escalated as she is recorded to have killed 36 British soldiers, all by herself. Her revenge for the murder of her husband by the British army is yet another feature that compounds her character as she is shown to be a loyal wife and a nationalist hero.

All the three narratives discussed here; Matadin Bhangi, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, appears to be an attempt to register the marginalised histories. In order to do, they have interjected Dalit nationalist histories in the history that is already established and institutionalised through the means of school education, literature and visual symbols. These discourses do not deny the metanarrative but tries to get assimilated in it. This can be analysed through the selection of the episode of 1857 Rebellion for the purpose of delineating Dalits' contribution in the nationalist struggle. By associating their caste histories, the popularity of which is restricted to a certain caste and region, with a narrative that has been put to national prominence, the idea is not reject or counter these narratives. Rather it seems to be an effort to be integrated within the same narrative. However these narratives subvert the metanarrative by bringing the Dalit characters to the centre and pushing the upper caste heroes to the margin. The Dalit history is weaved along with the popular history. This also can be interpreted as an attempt to authenticate their history by trying to incorporate it within a narrative which is widely known and accepted. Although this further complicates the idea of protest since it appears to be moving in two distinct directions: rejection and assimilation.



The question here is not whether these narratives are borrowing from and henceforth attempting to assimilate within the established macro histories. Instead an active engagement with these works compels to rethink the notion ‘protest narratives’ or ‘counter narratives’ and the necessity to view them within the confined spaces of such academic criterions.



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### BIO-NOTE

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Tanya Singh has taught in Kalindi College, University of Delhi, 2013-2018. She finished her MPhil on Hindi Dalit Literature from University of Delhi, 2014.

E-mail: [tanyasingh441@gmail.com](mailto:tanyasingh441@gmail.com)