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Representation of Dalit Middle-Class in Hindi Short Stories of Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria

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Abstract:

Representation of Dalit identity in the post-modern scenario is an open debate in Dalit studies. My focus is on the emerging Dalit middle class and their representation in Hindi stories. In this paper, I am proposing for a Dalit identity which undercuts the appropriation and stereotype by Caste-Hindus and at the same time, keeps them rooted to their roots. I will specifically focus on the short stories of Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria to understand the psyche of Dalit individuals who reached this new space of money, power and influence. The characters in these stories comes to an understanding that caste is all pervasive and leaving their identities behind will never dismantle the caste structure from its roots. The only way to achieve this is to follow what Dr Ambedkar said in *Annihilation of Caste*: “It is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it, the caste system, is founded”.

Through a sociological lens, I intend to analyse how they feel in the government and private spaces and how they tackle obstacles of casteism in the urban spaces. I will also try to explore the term Brahmin Dalits and its significance in creating new hierarchies within the existing caste structures.

Keywords:

Dalit middle-class, Brahmin Dalits, Dalit identity, Valmiki, Navaria.

The emergence of the Dalit middle class is a new phenomenon. They differ from the traditional middle class because their journey of struggle, mobility, social status and economic security has been distinct from the former group. This newfound space has been achieved mainly via the reservation system. They first found voice under the British Raj as the rulers permitted them to work in the public sphere. This could materialise due to the educational support provided by the missionaries which gave them a chance to hold clerical and copywriter posts. These stable jobs allowed them to migrate to urban centres and escape the rigid casteist and feudal structure of Indian villages. The minute development realised under the British empire was at threat of being lost had not Ambedkar, Nehru and other progressive leaders introduced positive discrimination. Post-independence, the first jobs availed by the Dalits were mainly Type-IV and Type-III (now Group-D and Group-C respectively). There were only a few Dalit literates in the first-generation government jobs, but they realised that the only way to earn respect and secure their lives was through education. The current community of the middle-class Dalits is mainly formed of second and third generation literates. As patriarchy has permeated all the spheres of society, we find that Dalit women being doubly marginalized have not been able to claim this new space as well as Dalit men. Mostly, either they are employed in low-end jobs or they live as home makers. This new phenomenon of the lives of the urban middle-class Dalits, has

recently found light in Dalit fiction, mainly short stories. My aim in this paper is to explore and understand this concept and its contemporary impact. I will compare Hindi short stories of Om Prakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria to understand how this new middle class is manoeuvring its identity; forging new ideology; fighting caste discrimination, while dreaming about a better life in the urban setting. I will also explore the term Dalit Brahmin and the connotations associated with it.

To understand how Dalits became the most exploited and discriminated against community, we must understand what the term outcaste means. According to Aiyappan, the term untouchability designates “the socio-religious practice by which the Hindus keep a large number of lower castes from touching or coming near persons, houses, tanks and sometimes even public roads.”¹ Ambedkar also observes:

“the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma.” (Nagraj,12)

The caste system in India is not only about inequality of birth, it is also about unequal distribution of property and power. This continuous repression led to illiteracy, utter poverty and inferiority complex among the Dalits. Various policies initiated by the British government and later the Indian government helped them climb the social mobility ladder. The upward movement has also incurred aggressive backlash from the upper-caste Hindus as they are loosening their grip on the system. The hegemonic belief that high-caste Hindus had cultivated over generations that Dalits should remain the lowest-rung of the society and it was their karma to serve the former had started to crumble. In the village set-up, the upper caste can indulge in physical, mental and social violence to ensure subjugation. This is possible because the upper caste is consolidated in the rural area as they have a stronghold over all the public aspects of life including economic security. They lose these powers in the urban setting because they are not the complete overlords anymore. As the caste-Hindus cannot use their muscle power anymore to show their superiority, they taunt and discriminate via words and networking. They continuously use casteist slurs to vent their anger in office place and try to keep Dalits out of the work as much as possible. Some of the techniques to do the latter is to show that there are no suitable candidates for the reserved posts or filling those seats with upper-caste people in deputation and contracts. The struggle of a Dalit individual does not end after getting a government job as the workplaces are still dominated by upper-caste Hindus. Though they attain economic security and middle-class status, they are frequently harassed and teased by their colleagues, superiors and sometimes even juniors. Even if they are capable and meritorious, justifying their claim at the position, they come across insults like ‘quota guy’, ‘son-in-law of government’ and many more. They are constantly undermined in office-space as everyone assumes that they are in good positions only because of reservation. In the short stories of Omprakash Valmiki and Ajay Navaria, we will be able to explore these power equations and work dynamics. Their short stories on the Middle-class Dalits allow us to enter the psyche of these mobile individuals who are carving a place of their own in a place where they are most hated. We also realise that the new middle-class is dealing with caste and discrimination in different ways. Some of them are fighting it headlong, while others are trying to hide under the cloak of anonymity. For some, acceptance into the traditional middle class is most important and they try to go to any extent to achieve that social status. Whereas, many of them are involved in NGOs and SC/ST/OBC

welfare societies in which they are fighting for their rights. One thing which is common to most of the stories is the fear of revealing one's caste identity. The theme of identity crisis is haunting most of the protagonists. Apart from R.B. (from Valmiki's *The Web of Intrigue*) and Narottam Saroj (from Navaria's *Yes Sir*), everyone is hiding their Dalit identity in the beginning. It's only at the end that they realise that one can not escape from their roots. It is also emphasised by the writers that owning up to one's identity and then becoming proud of it is of paramount importance. Without it, the Dalit community cannot flourish but in no way, the authors are negating the constant desire among the emergent Dalit middle-class to become "normal". It has been treated as a behavioural pattern common to human beings.

In Valmiki's *Storm*, the protagonist Sukkar appropriates his name to S. Lal when he joins the science institute as a researcher. It is evident that he does so to hide his Dalit identity. From the background story, we are made aware of the discrimination that Sukkar has faced during his academic years. This small abbreviation becomes his stepping stone into the normal life. We know that he was a talented student from the beginning, which made Deepchand chacha push his father into letting him pursue education. In his primary years, he smelled of pork as he had to work in the morning before going to school. No one sat next to him because of this. His loneliness became one of the prime stimuli for the rejection of his identity. Even when he goes to college, he never hid his family occupation and finds out that the degradation of his past has followed him to the present. The impulse of being treated as normal pushes him out of Deepchand's house during his Masters. Moving to a new city, gives him an opportunity to forget his "low" past and take up a new identity. His decision to sign his name as S. Lal instead of Sukkar also tells us how even, first names can be low-brow. Although, he earns respect and recognition in the scientific community, he is always scared of the fact that his status would crumble. His own upper-caste friends with whom he is intimate will hate and envy him once they know his caste. He will become one of the "quota guys" and his scholarship will be undermined. Though Avinash in Ajay Navaria's *Sacrifice* has a different reason to change his name, the link between caste identity and name remains rock-solid. Avinash justifies his change of name by saying that his original name stinks of slavery. According to him, names like Ramsahay or Ramesar reek of their dreaded past. He tries to prove a point by naming his son Kushan, as it means king or ruler. He tries to emphasise or at least dream that his son's future shall not be marred by his father's past. In stark contrast to his zeal of moving upward, we see that his father and his brother have not only resigned to their fate but are also vocal members in strengthening their existing place in society. His decision to marry a S.C. girl from another faith reiterates his rebellion from the Hindu caste hegemony. He is aware of caste-politics and is willing to take a stand for himself which we do not find in S. Lal until the very end. S. Lal disassociates his family from their maternal relatives because he feels that he is shielding his children from the muck he rose from. It is a ploy to avoid facing his Dalit identity. He deliberately avoids seeing his SC colleagues and when he does he avoids discussing topics revolving around their caste. He further, goes the extra mile to blame the members of his own community for their poverty. He says:

"they are responsible for their own condition. They blame others. The government has turned them into bigger idlers by giving them the crutches of reservations. No one discriminates against us. We live on intimate terms with others. We are well respected." (Valmiki, 140)

One observes a similar strain in Dinesh, the protagonist of *Fear*. The fervour to hide his caste identity matches Lal's but its manifestation is milder. His need to be accepted by Tiwari and the others in the well-respected society makes him listen calmly to Tiwari's harsh slurs about the low castes.

Dinesh and Lal are also alike because they are stuck in limbo. With all their might, they are trying to move forward but they never feel secure. They can neither carve out an honest space for themselves in the city nor can they return to their roots as they themselves, have severed them off. It can be inferred, that Lal found redemption in the end when that letter gets him face to face with his forgotten past and he learnt what he owed them. Whereas, Dinesh never finds such solace as he is a second generation alienated Dalit. He inculcated escapism from his father which further tore him away from his own community. He respects his mother's wishes but cannot fathom the need for such rituals. His mother also never dared to follow her family rituals till his father was alive. It is only after his uncle arrives that his mother starts pressurising him for Mai Madaran's puja. His uncle is proud of his Dalit identity and in no way willing to hide it. There is a strain of activism and awareness in his part as he replies very heatedly to Dinesh's argument about not performing the puja in the colony. Dinesh says: "All this mamaji cannot be done in the colony. We have to live with others. If someone notices it, what will he say?" (Valmiki, 69) This statement again emphasises the point that how a section of educated Dalits is trying hard to become good in front of caste-Hindus. If it was proving them wrong by breaking stereotypes, then it would certainly reduce discrimination in society but people like Dinesh and S. Lal are afraid of doing it. They would rather lie about their caste identity and live in constant distress and suffocation. Dinesh gets a fitting reply from mamaji as he replies: "With all your education you still remain as foolish as ever. Does it make sense that we change our ways of worshipping just because others don't like them...?" (69-70) This response also voices many concerns which the lower-class Dalits have against a segment of Middle-class Dalits. Dinesh's desire goes deeper than just getting acceptance from the upper caste. He wants to imbibe the upper caste culture and traditions. He becomes a prototype of those Dalits who have undergone the process of Sanskritisation. For him doing puja with *halwa puri* and flowers is far more suitable than sacrificing a piglet to the goddess. In the modern world, this need for appropriation among the Dalits has further helped the upper caste sustain the status quo.

The modern term which is being widely used for Dalit individuals like Dinesh and S. Lal is Brahmin Dalits. Anjali Rajoria defines herself, in her essay "What it Means to be a Brahmin Dalit" as: "I claim to be a Brahmin Dalit because I was born with the label "lower caste". (In fact, that label is given even before one is born, but let's keep that aside for a while.) However, today I am a relatively well-off, educated and an accomplished Dalit, hence the epithet, 'Brahmin Dalit'." (1) Some choose to define those individuals as Brahmin Dalits, who have successfully gained economic security, social status and recognition but have taken steps to forego their community. In the process of appeasing their upper caste colleagues, they slander or keep mum when someone else ridicules Dalits.

In the short story *Fear*, when Dinesh and Kishore go to a basti, to purchase a piglet, Kalu -the butcher- treats them as upper-class outsiders. Dinesh tries to play the caste-card but fails, miserably. Once Kalu realises that they are also Dalits but trying to pass off as upper caste he angrily sneers at them: "They are pant shirt wearing babus. They have come here because they are in dire straits. Or else they wouldn't come to these *bastis* even to piss. After studying, they are now intent on getting to be *baamans*. But

these 'in-laws' can't even be *baamans*." Likewise, the relatives of S. Lal hold the same perception about his behaviour towards his community and his well to do lifestyle. They jeer at him: "'They live concealing their caste'; 'They will introduce their father as a servant,'; 'That is how all educated people are'." These statements give us an insight into the psyche of the poverty-stricken Dalits. These simple sentences open multiple facets regarding the new power structure within the Dalit community. The paradox is quite wry, as on one hand the poor relatives respect and show-off their successful relatives who have made it to the good life, but on the other hand they feel hatred and envy towards them. This envy could have simmered down in a few places had the effectively migrated Dalits given back something to their poor relatives.

Gurram Srinivas finds in his research on Dalit middle class that 32.4% of the interviewed segment had completely disengaged with their community and did nothing to ensure their financial or social welfare. Most of the middle-class Dalits who want to give back to their people are involved in political mobilisation (40%). Only 13.4% took serious measures to provide financial, educational and economic development support to their community (mainly relatives). He also observes that lower middle-class Dalits tend to give housing and food to their relatives while upper middle-class Dalits provide direct financial aid. Deepchand, an illiterate *safai karamchhari* in the municipality who belonged to the lower middle-class strata provided shelter to his friend's son as a token gesture of giving back to his community. Though uneducated and living on a meagre income, he knew the importance of education and its subsequent fruits, he made sure that his daughter and niece went to school.

In contrast with these two characters we find, R.B. from *The Web of Intrigue* who is politically aware and unafraid to stand up and shout out at the hypocrisy of the upper caste. He doesn't feel the need to hide his caste. R.B. personifies Ambedkar's, Dalit Panthers' and Pantwane's understanding of Dalit identity. E. Zelliott quotes Pantawane who expresses the term Dalit as:

"Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in Humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution." (268)

It appears that R.B.'s character has been etched out of this definition. He knows that he is being discriminated against because of his caste but it does not make him feel inferior. He is a hard worker and does not compromise with his work ethics. Everything seemed to run smoothly until his name features in the promotion list. Nishikant, who works with him in the same section starts to envy his upcoming success. He starts spewing venom against him and his caste-based promotion. R.B. doesn't respond the first time he hears the caste brewed slander. It is not because he is afraid of others or believes in this. He thinks that if he replies, the office atmosphere will become tense but when he realises that everyone, whether senior or junior is jealous of his promotion, he vents his anger. His response to Nishikant's hypocrisy is appropriate as he cuts the latter short and sarcastically says:

"Yes, Mr. Nishikant, my abuse seems unbecoming... and the abuses that you were hurling yesterday standing in front of Sharmaji- those were alright. They were true and pure and beautiful." (Valmiki, 169)

He has reached his status not only because of reservation but also through the commitment he has shown to his work. This point is proven by V.K.'s utter surprise at

R.B.'s caste identity. Though, R.B. is a brave and courageous soul, he finds no support from his colleagues (neither upper-castes nor lower-castes). He is a lone wolf fighting against caste discrimination in his office and by his daring attitude it seems that he must be active in Dalit activism. Srinivas' survey observes that more than one third of Dalit-middle class individuals are active in political mobilization. They are also members of many NGOs and welfare societies. R.B. tries to raise awareness among the S.C. employees of the institute and he was indeed successful in close door meetings. It is mentioned that they were quite aggressive in private discussions but did nothing to stop the "false propaganda made against them". (168) Like Dinesh and S. Lal, all the other employees of R.B.'s office were ashamed of their caste. They were embarrassed to publicly defend their jobs. This fear stems out from their inferiority complex and shows just how deep, Brahmanical hegemony runs in our society. Even though Nishikant, V.K. and the other upper caste employees were trying to undermine his work record which would adversely affect his promotion, he jumps at the opportunity to help Nishikant, consequently saving his life. The story begins and ends with R.B. in a lockup cell. The author intentionally structures the story in a manner which is shaded with Dickensian hues throughout, but the ultimate message he wants to leave with the reader is that, even an abysmal end for the protagonist shouldn't deter his steps towards bringing change in the system as every revolution demands sacrifices.

Another character who doesn't succumb to pressure, into feeling inferior is Narottam Saroj from Navaria's short story *Yes Sir*. He doesn't fall for any caste related unspoken rules governing the workplace. He is respectful and only exercises power based on his designation. He simply expects people to do the work they are getting paid for. In extension, it is interesting to note how power structures vary with not just culture or caste-based hierarchy but also more poignantly with money. For a change, here a Brahmin peon is trying to appease his Dalit superior. Even though he is constantly chiding himself for his "low" behaviour - a trait long associated with the lower-caste-, as he is running errands for a Dalit. He takes a complete one eighty once money enters the equation. The recommendation letter and a pay hike of almost two thousand rupees miraculously dispels his inner Brahmin. In conjunction with the current scenario, Tiwari's conversation with Durgadas adds a foreshadowing element to the story. When Tiwari contemptuously tells Durgadas to kick aside his pig farming business Durgadas promptly replies: "Work is work, how can it be dirty or lowly? *Money doesn't smell...* (emphasis added) When you do sweepers' work on a large scale, there is no shame in that either." (Navaria, 56) Towards the end, Tiwari volunteers to unclog the toilet claiming that everyone does this sort of work in their own homes. He says so, at the behest of Narottam who allows him to take care of the problem, the following day. In this moment, no inner voice sneers at him unlike the entire story. This indeed proves that "money doesn't smell".

Another pertinent component of the story is where Tiwari tries to establish caste brotherhood with Mishra while undermining Narottam's hard earned position and respect. he only mentions how Narottam passed in third division and omits the rigorous preparation he put into his subsequent studies. He tries to capitalise on Mishra's hidden frustration, who didn't get promoted even after working for twenty years in the department. He plays along with Tiwari for a while, but he jolts back to reality when he recognises that nothing can be done about his current predicament. It reminds us of the camaraderie between Nishikant and V.K. which is strictly caste based camaraderie.

Caste based conundrums also run deep in Navaria's *New Custom* where the Dalit protagonist wishes to be a *Darbar*, i.e. Thakur or Khastriya. He secretly rejoices when

he is addressed as an upper-caste rich man. Even though he is a professor at a famous university, education has been unable to pull him out of caste-based hegemony. The shopkeeper shares his analysis with the protagonist saying that he recognised him as Darbar because of his clothes and commanding presence. He believes in the stereotype as it gives him the opportunity to act like a member of the ruling class.

My objective in writing this paper was primarily to portray the struggle of upward mobility among the urban middle-class Dalits. Though it is a newly emerging class, it has already become fractured with multiple identities. It is the need of the hour for this, beginning to be disjointed, class to come together as a whole for the upliftment of their caste. It is known social fact that the poor look up to their prosperous relatives for motivation and hope. In this post- modern scenario, it is pertinent that the growing section of successful urban Dalits not just give back to their roots but also remain connected with them. Financial aid isn't the only way to contribute to the welfare of their community; educational, ideological and political support can also go a long way. Most importantly, they should learn to be proud of their struggle against caste-based hierarchy as it isn't easy to break centuries' old customs. Valmiki's Kishore can act as beacon for all those Dalits who are struggling to find space in the new urban space. Kishore belongs to the new clan of middle class Dalits, but he hasn't gotten alienated from his traditional cultural practices. An evolving hybrid identity can steer every Dalit's journey towards stability and independence. This struggle has already borne fruit as we have seen progress in the revolution in terms of economic independence and educational power. Furthermore, it is important to appreciate that upper caste would never offer accommodation, the rebellion must target the destruction of caste. The only way to break the hegemony of Brahminism, much like "Darbar", is to break the tea glass in open defiance of caste-based discrimination, realising that absorption within the caste Hindus is a myth. As Ambedkar wrote in *Annihilation of Caste*: "It is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it, the caste system, is founded." (1)

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