

The Bhakti Movement in India and the Negro Spirituals of America: A Discourse of Faith v/s. Ideology.

Prof. Preeti Oza and Prof. Maria Syed

All over the world now a days people are discussing the problems of marginalized groups -their social, ethnic, economic and cultural problems. Marginality with all aspects is indeed a major problem to be reckoned with in the world.

By and large, most of the marginalized groups constitute minorities-religious, ethnic, linguistic or otherwise- in different countries. There are sub-cultures in the main stream cultures or religions. Invariably they are impoverished people constituting o minority groups. They suffer from economic, social or political impoverishment and find themselves estranged from this main stream.

Their marginality may vary in degree, extent or intensity. Most countries and cultures have empowered groups at one pole and impoverished groups at the other and between the two, there are graded levels of power and poverty. The empowered people enjoy greater degree of freedom, social status and security of life. The impoverished people are not free from fear, insecurity and injustice.

The form and nature of marginality depends upon the degree of impoverishment-economic, social or cultural. Marginality based upon caste, creed, religion or race is a kind of disability or affliction.

The Dalit Movement can be called as a collective agitation of Dalits against the exploitation both in the form of class, caste, creed, cultural and social exploitation in society. This exploitation is due to the discrimination followed by age old caste hierarchical tradition in t Hindu society. This hierarchy has been the cause for oppression of dalits in each and every sphere of society since centuries. It has subjected the Dalits to poverty and humiliation. The Dalit movement is a struggle that

tries to counter attack the socio –cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is a movement of the masses that craves for justice through the speeches, literary works, dramas, songs, cultural organisations and all the other possible measurers. So it can be called as a movement which has been led by Dalits to seek equality with all other castes of the Hindu society.

Dalit as a concept and as an issue has been treated differently throughout history. Some prominent isms which tried to attach themselves are Marxism and Gandhianism. Indian Marxism has always seen the Dalit problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It basically defines Dalit as landless labourer. But land and economic reasoning are just not enough to arrive at a holistic understanding of the Dalit problem.

The word “Dalit” takes an interesting turn when the British in the Government of India Act 1935 used its English translation as ‘Depressed classes’ to mean downtrodden people of India who were hitherto referred as ‘Harijan’ by Mahatma Gandhi.

But Dr. Ambedkar sensed the multiple nuances of the word and gave it a more respectable identity by calling them ‘Dalit’. In the post-Ambedkar era, it became a part of political activism and got a new found awareness which is stressed to the extreme inclusiveness to all those depressed people who are the historical victims of both class and caste exploitation.

The second approach, the Gandhian approach, looks at the Dalit problem as a problem of value structure. The roots of this approach are in the Bhakti movement. In recent times, this approach has been the most powerful and relevant to understand.

The term bhakti is defined as “devotion” or passionate love for the Divine. Moksha or liberation from rebirth was not in the following of rules, regulations or societal ordering, it was through simple devotion to the Divine. Within the movement at large, useful distinctions have been made by contemporary scholars between those poet saints who composed verses extolling God with attributes or form, namely, “saguna” bhaktas, and those extolling God without and beyond all attributes or form, “nirguna.”

The imagery of bhakti poetry is grounded in the everyday, familiar language of ordinary people. Women bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. In many cases, they rejected traditional women's roles and societal norms by leaving husbands and homes altogether, choosing to become wandering bhaktas; in some instances they formed communities with other poet-saints. Their new Caste status and even masculinity were understood as barriers to liberation, in essence a rejection of the hierarchy laid out by the Law Books of the Classical Period. focus was utter devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands.

The Bhakti reformers preached against ritualism, sacrifices, and unnecessary religious rites, equality of all men and superiority of none. In this way the Brahmins received a great set-back to their superiority. The ideas of unity of Godhead and brotherhood of man greatly appealed to the low caste, among the Hindus and consequently they began to embrace Islam with a rapid speed. The Bhakti reformers adopted the common language of the people and preached in it instead of preaching either in Sanskrit or in Persian.

In this way a great impetus was given to the development of the vernaculars. Most of the Bhakti reformers laid a great emphasis on the equality of all the religions and preached the principle of co-existence. As a result of their teachings much of the bitterness between the Hindus and the Muslims was removed. The Hindus began to worship Muslim saints and the Muslims began to show respect for the Hindu Gods.

Though opposition to untouchability and the demand for basic rights for Dalits had existed earlier, they attained great strength during the Bhakti period. The Bhakti Movement with its emphasis on spirituality struck at the roots of untouchability, which is the sanction granted by Hinduism. The Bhakti Movement preceded the modern Dalit Movement by around 600 years.

It was a reaction to Orthodox Hinduism, which caused unnecessary apprehension in the minds of caste Hindus and compelled them to rethink

over the religious orthodoxy. These provided the means to protest against orthodox Hinduism for future generations of Dalits. The same currents of thought of Bhakti, armed upsurges, and conversions were rejuvenated in the shape of new waves respectively of sanskritization.

Maharashtra or the land of the Marathas produced a large number of saints, but those born between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries are famous in its social and cultural history. Among these Maratha saints, the names of Sant Dnyaneshwar, Namdeo, Eknath, Tukaram and Ramdas are the most prominent. Kabir made the most earnest efforts to create a spirit of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism was another great preacher of the Bhakti message. Vallabhacharya of South India and Mira Bai of Rajasthan were some other prominent exponents of the Bhakti cult in the medieval period. All these Bhakti reformers preached the principles of brotherhood of all men and emphasized the equality of all religions.

“The Negro spirituals are...the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas”. (Jefferson Cleveland and William McClain, *A Historical Account of the Negro Spirituals*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1981.)

One of the first critics to pay attention to the Negro spirituals was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who called Negro spirituals as “a startling flower growing in dark soil.” (*Afro- American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, Edited by Richard A Long, Eugenia W Collier, Eleventh Printing, 1997). The flower that Higginson talks about is indeed hybrid as it grew in Africa and America but has its own uniqueness and beauty. The writings produced by Negroes seem to possess originality, artistic conception and are truly universal in its appeal. Yet these poets were considered as American products as they had sprung from the American soil.

Of the vast avenue of literature produced by the African Americans, one very significant branch was the “Spirituals”. Spirituals or slave songs are religious, generally Christian, songs that were created by enslaved

African people in the United States. The term first appeared in “Slave Songs of The United States” in 1867. These songs were spontaneously composed when these slaves met at the camp meeting during the “Second Awakening” and sang the songs without the hymnbooks. The “spirituals” are more than just religious songs, for in them the Negro sounded the depths and were relevant to their condition. With the slave songs the Negroes not only gave America folksongs, but a mass of noble music. In the preface of “The books of the American Negro Spirituals” James Weldon and J. Rosemond Johnson states “Although the spirituals have been overwhelmingly accredited to the negro as his own, original creation, nevertheless, there have been one or two critics who have denied that they were original either with the Negro or in themselves and a considerable number of people have eagerly accepted this view.” However, they further state, “Indeed it can be traced, ultimately to a prejudiced attitude of mind, to an unwillingness to concede the creation of much pure beauty to a people they wish to feel absolutely inferior”. In general these compositions were concerned with how to live life with the Spirit of God. It was full of hope and faith that God will not leave the slave in this condition all their lives. Though their condition was hopeless, their faith in God never died out. These songs were often sung outside Churches; they were used to express personal feelings and were used to cheer one another. So, these songs often had secret messages, which only a Christian Slave would understand and reflected the personal relationship of the slave with his God.

While using simple language the words were coded. For example, a “home” is a safe place where everyone can live free. So, a “home” can mean Heaven, but it covertly meant a sweet and free country, a heaven for slaves. The terms used to refer to a fugitive running to a free country were riding a “chariot” or a “train”. The Negro spirituals “The Gospel Train” and “Swing low, sweet chariot” which directly refer to the Underground Railroad, an informal organization who helped many slaves to flee. Thus, they expressed faith and endurance of longing for freedom. It is evident that the opening lines of “Go Down, Moses,”

When Israel was in Egypt's land:

Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand,
Let my People go.
Go down, Moses,
'Way down in Egypt land;
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

The Israel in the song refers to the African American, and Egypt and Pharaoh refers to the White slave masters. The Moses of the song stands as a symbol for the activities of the abolitionist Harriet Tubman who was called the Moses of her people. The repetition, "Go down, Moses" could refer to Tubman's repeated trips from the North back down to the South to guide more people to freedom. Thus, the poem is beyond the events described in the Books of Exodus in the Old Testament. The refrain "Let my people go" refers to the efforts of Tubman to free the slaves and also the personal desire of the slaves to live a free life.

Yet another well-known and often quoted Negro spiritual is the The Balm in Gilead which has an interesting covert meaning.

Here is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

If you can't preach like Peter,
If you can't pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus,
And say He died for all.

The “balm in Gilead” is from the Old Testament but here it refers to the New Testament. In the Old Testament The balm of Gilead does not cure the sinner, but according to the New Testament anyone who comes to Jesus will be healed. It refers to salvation through Jesus Christ. Gilead is a balm which is believed to have healing powers and could heal the original sinners (the Israelites). The lyrics is a mingling of hope and anguish, with faith as the core, and strength to face all trials and tribulations. The haunting beauty of the lyrics is a reminder of people who suffered great injustice and terrible exploitation. But the lyrics talk about God who is bigger than anything else who had sacrificed his life for others. Utmost faith is shown in God who shall do nothing wrong with the slave and “heal the sin sick sol”, in this case the white masters, and shall free them from any kind of bondage. If nothing, the lyrics echoes that a Christian who feels the Spirit must share the faith and “preach”, like Peter and Paul, which the slaves are doing through their songs. Thus, the song does show a lot of faith in God and hope to see a better tomorrow.

Some Negro spirituals such as “The Gospel Train” and “Swing low, sweet chariot” talk about the efforts made by informal organization that helped them to flee from the chains of exploitation.

Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home
 Swing low, sweet chariot
 Coming for to carry me home
 If you get there before I do
 Coming for to carry me home
 Tell all my friends, I’m coming too
 Coming for to carry me home

Passed down orally from generations to generations, the song ostensibly enunciated slaves’ hopes and expressed comfort to be found only in the heavenly home. The “chariot” in the song refers to the Underground Railroad which will lead them to “home”. The reference to home for the Negroes meant any place where they can be free, where they can practise

their will and therefore, is heavenly for them. Apparently the coded message of the spiritual, according to many critics, was that Tubman will be arriving soon to carry them with her and will lead them on the path of freedom.

Some spirituals did a lot more than offer a promise of eventual redemption; it also offered specific strategies and even maps needed to escape. For example, “Wade in the Water” taught runaway slaves how to throw off the bloodhounds sent to track them down. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” provided slaves with an elaborate coded map that would lead them to the North and freedom: the refrain told them to keep their eye on the Big Dipper (the drinking gourd) as the stars marking the edge of its cup pointed to Polaris, the North Star; the line, “The river ends between two hills,” taught runaways that, by following the Tombigbee River through Mississippi, they would reach the twin-coned Woodall Mountain; from there they would see “another river on the other side,” the Tennessee River, which would lead them to Illinois and freedom.

“Follow the Drinking Gourd” was a song created by enslaved African Americans. The song was actually a code of directions explaining how to escape from the southern slave states. The code told people who understood it when to leave, where to travel, and how far to go on each part of the journey. Each lyric has a specific meaning. “The drinking gourd” was the Big Dipper, a constellation that points the way to the North. The “old man” and “peg foot” was someone from the Underground Railroad who met escaping slaves at the Ohio River. “When the sun comes back and the first quail calls” meant to begin the journey in the winter. Enslaved people passed the directions along by singing this song to each other.

Dr. Isaac Watts was an English Minister who had published Hymns and Spiritual Songs in 1707 and The Psalm of David in 1717. It is believed that the slaves in the post 1800’s adopted the hymns of Dr Watts. Dr. Watts “When I Can read My Title Clear” is one of his highly recommended hymns. According to Charles Colock Jones : “One great advantage in teaching them (slaves) good psalms and hymns, is that

they are thereby induced to lay aside the extravagant and nonsensical chants, and catches and hallelujah songs of their own composing". Thus, a sense of rhythm and tune came into picture and were sung in tune, melody, and tempo and with a certain pitch. James Weldon and J Rosamond also observe about rhythm and music in Negro spirituals: "Spirituals possess the fundamental characteristic of African music. They have striking rhythmic quality, and show a marked similarity to African songs"

In the 1900's the Negro spirituals, passed down through the oral tradition were continued to be sung and new gospel songs were also created. However, one witnesses a shift in the subject matter of the spirituals of this era. This was the era when the Civil Rights Movement took place and the Negroes were now in a better position. The songs were religious and not only dealt with praising the God but also talks about the personal improvement, the feeling of brotherhood, social problems and the community life. For the struggle for Civil Rights, spirituals like "We shall overcome", "Oh Freedom" and "This Little Light of Mine" were immensely used to be sung. Sometimes, the songs were also secular in nature.

References:

1. Ghosh G.K., Ghosh Shukla, 'Dalit Women', A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1997.
2. ElenorZilliot, 'From Untouchable to Dalit', New Delhi, Manohar Prakashan, 1992,
3. Barbara R. Joshi, ed., 'Untouchables: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement, New Delhi, Selected Book Service Syndicate, 1986,
4. BaburaoBagul, 'Dalit Literature is but Human Literature' in Dangle, ed., 'Poisoned Bread', Bombay, Orient Longman,19192
5. Zelliot Eleanor, 'From Untouchable to Dalit: essays on the Ambedkar Movement, Manohar Publishers and Distributers, New Delhi, 2010
6. Rai Amodkumar, 'Dalit Literature: Origin, Nature, Definition and Scope', Creative Books, New Delhi, 2009.
7. Zelliot and Punekar, 2005. Untouchable Saints:An Indian Phenomenon. New Delhi : Manohar.

8. Jefferson Cleveland and William McClain, *A Historical Account of the Negro Spirituals*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.
9. James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of the American Negro Spirituals*, The Viking Press Inc., 1926.
10. Edited Richard A Long and Eugenia W Collier, *Afro- American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, Eleventh Press 1997.
11. Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
12. www.negrospirituals.com
13. www.authentichistory.com/1600-1859/3-spirituals/
14. www.theatlantic.com/post/docs/issues/1867jun/spirit.htm