
Struggle for Existence in B.Kesharshivam's the WHOLE TRUTH and Nothing but the Truth

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ABSTRACT:

Dalit literature generally focuses on the problems of Dalit. Dalit autobiography is a genre in Dalit writing which also becomes the testimony of the subjugated communities. The paper would focus on B.Kesharshivam's autobiography The Whole truth and nothing but the Truth as the testimony of Dalit moholla in Gujarat. This text is considered to be the first Dalit autobiography in Gujarathi written in the form of buildungsroman presenting the story of writer from his childhood at (Dalit moholla) to a Mamlatdar (Revenue officer) in the Government. Even after a great struggle where the writer attains a significant posting still the identity as Dalit torments him wherever he goes. The paper will therefore try to explore how at every point of Kesharshivam's life he is not seen as a human but as a Dalit and as a separate entity in the society. The paper would also give further scope in reading Dalit autobiography as an emerging trend in literature in the post independent era.

Keywords: Autobiography, Testimony, Buildungsroman, Struggle, Existence

Dalit literature is the literature about the oppressed Indian caste, which has now become an Integral part of our Indian literature. This form of literature emerged and gained its authority in India only after 1960's, so it can also be referred as "Second Freedom Struggle" in India. After 1960's the suppressed communities voiced out their problems in the major Indian languages like Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam, However in Gujarati the literatures of such kind did not appear till 1980's.

The origin of first Gujarati Dalit writing is unknown. The first publication of poem "Aakrosh" (fury), a poetry journal of Dalit panthers on 14th April, 1978 was a milestone in Gujarati Dalit writing. The anti-reservation agitation in 1981 and 1985 generated awareness about Dalit rights among people and many writings on Dalit problems followed in Gujarati only after 1980's.

The major milestone in Dalit writing is to find its voice in the mainstream literature which was always brahmanical trying to marginalizes the subjugated classes. This voice is part of the major literary movement in post-Independent India, which is known as the Dalit literary movement. This movement originated in 1960's in Maharashtra as a social movement claiming for equality and justice, and by 80's the movement firmly established itself not only in Marathi literary scene but in other Indian states like Hindi, Tamil and Telugu. The impact of such writings was felt at national level only through translation into English. Over the years this has produced enormous

literature: namely poetry, fiction, autobiographies, and short stories, in almost all major Indian languages and has gained much attention of the readers as mainstream literature.

Autobiography is a genre in Dalit writing where the story of the 'self' represents not only the individual but also about the collective community. The most marginalised voices have found it easier to express their anguish and pain by narrating their own life experiences. This genre has given them the scope of asserting their identity as "Dalit selfhood". They have also used autobiographical narratives as a form of 'political assertion' to create a powerful group by voicing a shared experience to fight against caste discrimination.

The paper is on one such Dalit autobiography written by B.Kesharshivam *The whole truth and nothing but the truth*-(purnasatya) originally written in Gujarati which means the whole truth. The book was translated in English by Gita Chaudhuri. This autobiography won the Dasi Jivan award of the Government of Gujarat, 2003. The book is written in the form of bildungsroman, narrating the journey of the writer from his childhood in a Dalit moholla in Kalol to the position of additional collector (Class I) officer in the state's administrative service. In a way this autobiography is praiseworthy as it does not fit into the traditional stereotypical representation of self pity in writing. This story presents the condition of the writer from the eyes of a child where the story is narrated from a child's eyes. The young Bhikha innocently explores the painful home truths about our society. The Humiliations and the shame he underwent is not because he is poor, but because he happened to be born in a caste that has traditionally been violently suppressed by the upper castes of Hindu society.

India won its freedom in 1947, but even in the post independent society the desires of a Dalit is not considered. To young Bhikha right from the time of birth the stamp of being an 'untouchable' haunts him. Though he became a class I officer, the struggle as untouchable did not change. As a small boy he was denied even the basic necessity of water and even if it was given somebody would pour water in his cupped hand. His leftover food would not be touched by the beggars. Even the beggars, who are supposed to be the lowest in hierarchy, did not eat food given by Dalits. This condition is exactly the curse on every Dalit.

As he mentions it in the beginning of the text as, "I was about to be born with a curse of epic proportions. Perhaps some sage had pronounced a curse on me, 'Go, henceforth you shall be born a Dalit.'"(1)

After great struggle, even after becoming a Class I officer in government he was denied house, promotion and accused of bribery. However he did not stop his good work but tried his maximum effort to help the marginalised communities and made differences in the life of Dalits wherever he was posted. He was the great admirer of Dr.Ambedkar and tried to follow the principles of Ambedkar throughout his life. The incidents in the novel describe how he succeeded in teaching the rural Dalits Ambedkar's mantra: "get educated, get organised and then revolutionise"(xxvii). All through his life he followed the ideals of Ambedkar and Gandhi.

Young Bhikha was born in Kalol on 28 Sep, 1940 in a house with tiled roof and mud-baked floor. He was not the first son so his birth was also not a significant event in his family. Bhikha was born in subjugated India, so his oppression is double than the others. From the birth till death the only similar experience that every Dalit faced was "segregation". The cremation

grounds were also segregated for Dalits and even if they convert to Christianity the graveyards were segregated. The place where they stayed was referred as “Dalit moholla” which is at the periphery of the village. As villages are often away from the city, Dalits are also away from the society.

The toy that young Bhikha played in his childhood was with a wooden doll. It was the only toy his family had and all his brother and sister played with the same doll. There was no question of buying a new one as the economic condition was also very worse since his father was just a contractor. The economic condition is always another problem for Dalits. As “segregation”, “poverty” is another aspect that could be found similar in a Dalit’s life. As a child he had to find toys around the place where his parents worked for their livelihood. In bone meal factory, in fields, with mud and drain water was the play things that entertained every Dalit.

As a child he witnesses every ill practice followed in his place in the name of caste. Dalits were even denied to get the basic necessity “water”. In the village where Dalits did not have separate wells, one had to beg for water from the upper caste people. Even if the water is given the upper caste person would pour water into the pot, avoiding any physical contact with Dalits.

“Only one fourth of the earth island, the rest is water, and yet for a share of this free bounty of nature Dalit women have had to suffer so much.” (32)

He recollects one such incident from his life experience about a Dalit woman Harima. On a hot summer afternoon Harima had gone to collect firewood. When she returned she was desperately thirsty and looked all around for water to quench her thirst. Her throat was so parched that she could not breathe. She could not find water anywhere and if she goes to a farmer and ask for water she would be pushed out and beaten. Then she suddenly spotted a cow urinating. She cupped her hand and drank the urine. Mother cow drenched her thirst. Though for some this incident seems to be a disgusting one still this is the condition of Dalits.

As he was growing up, Bhikha became a studious student in the class and also started writing short stories. He published his first short story “Rati Rayan ni Ratash” (the anger of a beautiful woman) with native rural dialects and this brought many controversies, but this indeed made him to enter the literary circle. To create Dalit literature one has to face lot of oppositions- “Tremendous courage is needed to create Dalit literature” he declares (xxx). He also became active member in enacting plays. He participated in every competitions held at school and banded prizes. One such incident he remembers participating in elocution competition in topic “There should be no discrimination on the basis of colour”. The topic gave him all personal feeling and spoke as,

“How can I speak of discrimination on the basis of colour in a land where people discriminate on the basis of caste?” (127)

At every level in school, and higher studies he pursued only with his efforts. After he completed his B.A and M.A he cleared his public service commission and was posted as Mamlatdar in the government. After becoming a government officer he started toiling himself for the welfare of the rural, downtrodden and Dalits.

After completing his training programme as probationary Mamlatdar in Vadodara, on December 1969, he was posted as Mamlatdar in Dholka. Even in the first posting Bhikha had to face lot of oppositions as Mr. H.M. Mehta the outgoing Mamlatdar tried hard to extend his stay. Everybody supported him because nobody in the taluka wanted a Dalit Mamlatdar. Finally Mehta handed over the charge and Bhikha took charge as Mamlatdar. Again here he was restricted to get residence. He was neither given residence by government nor in the taluka, even after becoming a government servant residence was denied. He boldly fought against the atrocities that happened in Dholka, however the officers of other castes joined together in the battle and sent a petition to suspend him. Finally, they found some insignificant case against him and the secretariat of the revenue department sent him suspension order. When this was the condition of even a government official, people in Dholka had to face various atrocities. The women are even raped in their native land but the person responsible was never found guilty as the victim was always a Dalit.

At various levels Kesharshivam fought for the welfare of Dalits. He fought for the land rights which were often usurped by the upper classes. One such incident happens in Sahij village where Patel had usurped a large portion of land that belonged to the Dalits and the government. However, Kesharshivam proceeded legally and made Patel to vacate the land and got rights for the villagers. Another incident he narrates at Kharanti village where the well used by Dalits was dumped with kerosene, crude and other filth so that Dalits could not utilize the water. He did not hesitate but went straight to the spot and brought the issue to the sarpanch and demanded him to clear the well. After the work got over the villagers invited him for dinner but Kesharshivam did not eat and told the villagers,

“Do you ever ask yourselves why doesn't anyone dump kerosene and crude oil in the main village well? Why does filth get dumped only in your well? Try to muster up some courage.”(173)

Thus he did not stop with helping Dalits but he also tried to revolutionise their minds and bring change in their lives.

He extended his services to the villages namely Bagodara, Valthera, Chandisar and in many parts of Gujarat. In most of the places he found the upper caste treating Dalits so badly but the same upper caste men did not bother to draw water from the Dalits well during night. In most of the places the problem was with water and the denial of water to Dalits. When the basic necessity is denied other things are not to be questioned. In every point of his life he was transferred from one place to another not because it is part of the government profession but his good deeds could not be tolerated by the upper caste people even at the working environment.

Kesharshivam could always remember the words of Ambedkar, “Those who consider themselves strong and capable find only a goat to sacrifice. why don't they dare to sacrifice a Lion?”(231)

It was only Dalits who became the victims of this caste ridden society. Kesharshivam did not however stop his good work seeing the obstacles but got posted at various levels by proving himself. He became Deputy Secretary in Energy and petrochemical division, where at 1994 he founded Dalit Sahitya Sabha in Gandhinagar. He became the Deputy Development Commissioner in Sarvodaya project, as a joint director to look after the cottage industries,

Executive Director in Gujarat Tribal Development Corporation and finally a Class I officer . Though he achieved more and did services to the subjugated, still his thirst to serve the community does not stop and still he thrives to enlighten Dalits and bring them to limelight through his writings.

The book gives further scope in understanding the text not just as a story or about one person's life story, but it records the trauma of a collective community. In a way the text is a testimonio of his collective community, where he records his painful experiences as, "All my life I have had to walk on the sharp edge of the sword." (xviii)

As the truth is always simple the language is also simple as even an ordinary Dalit can read, understand and try to revolutionize. The struggle for second independence would continue until it is achieved.

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