



Daxa Damodara's Savitri : A Socio – Feminist Reading

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Abstract: *Since times immemorial, ancient India had been dominated by a patriarchal caste system. The discourse of the Indian society was controlled by the powerful center comprising of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The Brahmins controlled the knowledge discourse, the Kshatriyas controlled the political discourse and the business discourse was controlled by the Vaishyas. These three "Savernas" comprised the core of Indian society and the Shudras – labourers, farmers, workers who supported the core or the center, remained on the periphery. In a patriarchal set up, women were also marginalized. These marginalized groups, the dalits as well as women, remained "voice less" and "identity less" for ages. However with the arrival of torchbearers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Phule, a new era dawned for the marginals – the dalits as well as women. Gujarati dalit writer Daksha Damodara's "Savitri" written in 2008, delineates the real life journey of this Maharashtrian dalit couple who withstood all odds to relieve the plight of the dalits, especially women. My paper attempts a socio feminist reading of the novel from the perspective of modern dalit, and feminist critics. It also leads us to the fountainhead of the gender and caste (Dalit) liberation movement which started a century before the country gained freedom.*

Keywords: *Annihilation of Gender; code of conduct of Hinduism; collective consciousness, identity and sisterhood of Dalit women; radical feminism; alternative discourse of Indian womanhood.*

"You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be whole."

- Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has mentioned this in the Annihilation of Caste and this statement is equally applicable to "Annihilation of Gender" when it concerns the unequal and exploitative treatment meted out to the Dalits and Women in Indian Cast-based Patriarchy. This paper attempts to discuss the background of the initiation of the Dalit movement against caste based and gender based oppression, ten decades before India attained independence.

Since ancient times, Indian Society has been controlled by the Varna System and so also its "discourse"(Foucault) was governed by higher caste patriarchy. As mentioned in the Rigveda:

ब्रह्मण्यस्य भुजम आसीत्

ब्राह्मणं रजस्यः कृत

उरु तद यस्य तद वैश्य

पदाभ्यांश्च शुद्रो अजायत (ऋग्वेद पुरुष सुक्त 2 मंस०)

As is evident from the above statement, it was the Brahmins who dominated the knowledge discourse, the Kshatriyas, dominated political discourse and the Vaishyas governed the commerce and economy discourse. Together they comprised the core of Hindu society and the Shudras - thousands of labourers, farmers and other dalits including women who were the main support system contributing with all their mite, stood at the periphery from where they lend their support. In spite of their endeavors, they were the voice less, face less and identity less mass.

The traditional caste system (Varna System) that has enslaved the soul of our nation through this marginalization of the Shudras and women enjoyed a religious sanction and its effectiveness depended on prohibiting these marginals, i.e. Shudras and women, any access to education. This was perpetuated over the years because it brought benefit to the center of the Hindu society that comprised its majority population.

In fact the Britishers, through their liberal thinking and practice of religious equality, should be credited with the idea of questioning of the Varna system by the Dalits and the initiation of elimination of casteism in Indian Society. The British world view of equality and brotherhood ingrained in Christianity led to the first realization that none is born unequal by birth, at least according to other religions. In a sense it was the exploitation and oppression of the marginalized by the Hindu society, which prohibited movement from the periphery to the center that was responsible for the religious conversions of yesteryears.



In the early 19th century, the torch bearers of the Dalit Women's Upliftment movement in Maharashtra were Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827 - 1890) born into a Mali family of Pune, and his wife Savitri Phule (1831 - 1897). Penning his ideas on the issues of the downtrodden, Jyotiba has written numerous books to spread his message. Greatly influenced by these books Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891 - 1956) the father of our Indian Constitution has called Jyotiba his Guru.

These social leaders are our unsung heroes in dalit history and Daxa Damodara, contemporary Gujarati Dalit writer, has paid a fitting tribute by picking up a character like Savitri Phule from the annals of history, and writing a heroine centric bio-fiction highlighting dalit feminism. "Savitri" (2008) is her second novel on dalit feminism, while her first novel "Shosh" (2003) was a social novel on feminism for which she received Gujarat Sahitya Parishad Award.

In Savitri, Damodara cites historical incidents that happened in Maharashtra about 100 years before independence, delineating the journey of the Phule couple who withstood all odds to relieve the plight of the dalit women.

Jyotiba was orphaned as a child and it was his "Tai" Sugunntai, who became the surrogate mother and brought him up. Sugunntai often took him along with her to John saheb's house where she worked. Through interaction with John saheb's children and family and by attending school run by the British Missionaries, Jyotiba gained exposure to the English - their culture, society, religion, language - and compared it with Indian Society. He was also exposed to the developments happening in Germany, Britain and America through books which he read avidly.

Once, eight years after his marriage, Jyotiba returned from his friend's wedding rankling with anger and pain under the insult of being driven away due to his dalit background. How ironic it is that he who was driven away and had been called a Shudra (untouchable) was from the family gardeners – those who nurture flowers and make garlands which are used by the Brahmins for performing puja and as offerings to Gods. He vents his anger on "social slavery" which he considers worse than "political slavery". It was then Savitri that tells him

"Swami, channelize your anger to light the torch for a revolution against inequality ----Go to the foundation of your pain and eliminate it, not by destructive means, but by taking the constructive path."
(Savitri:9-10 My Translation).

At this time Jyotiba realizes that the traditional discourse of speech and writing i.e. education is "logocentric" and the upper caste had never allowed the Dalits to have access to education to keep them "voiceless" and "identitless".

"શુદ્રો અંત્યજો માટે શિક્ષા પ્રપતિના માર્ગ જ બંધ રાખવાને ધર્મ કહે છે." (Savitri: 12)

He is convinced that education is the only means through which he can vanquish the demon of inequality. He decides to educate his family and then his fraternity. In fact Dr. Ambedkar, 100 years later had given a similar war-cry to the dalits "to unite, educate and agitate."

Sugunntai, his surrogate mother and Savitri stand by him and became his students. A brahmin friend Tatya Saheb, chips in to support the cause. He assigns a room in his palace to start a Kanya Shala saying "Please accept this tiny weapon offered with love by a brahmin friend, in your battle against Brahmin Supremacy." (Savitri: 19). Jyotiba responds thus "I have often said that I consider "Brahmanvaad" and not Brahmins as my enemy and so I have many brahmin friends who support my endeavors, considering it as social work." When the school bell tolls on the first day, Jyotiba says "નારી મુક્તિના ભાવિ આંદોલનની નાંદી બની રહે આ ઘંટનાંદ" (Savitri - 19).

Brahmins like Keshav Shivram, Anna Sahastra Buddhe and Krishna Shashtri lent support to the dalit upliftment movement, but others feel threatened and they withdraw support. At this crucial moment Savitri takes up the responsibility of teaching the dalit girls against all the odds. "હું ભણાવવા જરૂર જઈશ ----- મારી સંગાથે તમે છો, સત્ય અને જ્ઞાન છે." (Savitri – 30). In an India where women were not permitted to cross the threshold of their homes, she became the topic of hot discussions by taking on this challenge of educating dalit girls. The Brahmins used all tricks in the book, like using foul language and pelting muck and stones on her, to deter her from her task. Savitri braves it all, infact, she carries an extra saree on her mission to school daily. Once on her way to school, she slaps a teaser and thereafter she did not require to carry an extra saree to school.

The success of the Phule couple's mission angers the staunch brahmins who threaten Govindaram (Jyotiba's father) with dire consequences if he does not deter the Phules from their mission. Fanatic Brahmins successfully use three brahmastras to ensure that father goes against his son.

1. "Your ancestors will not be propitiated and will not rest in peace." (Savitri: 37-38)
2. "If you don't stop your son and daughter in law, your soul will not rest in peace even after death."
3. "If you are ostracized, you will not even have four men to carry your body to the funeral pyre."

Thus by wielding the code of conduct of Hinduism, they were able to threaten Govindram into not supporting Jyotiba. This incident reminds us of "Black's going against Blacks, to defeat the cause of Afro American unity" in Maya Angelou's **A Song flung upto heaven** when the blacks are involved in the killing of their own leader who is fighting for their emancipation.



These brahmastras are effective and Govindrav drives Jyotiba and Savitri out of the house. They find shelter with a friend. The Kanya Shala closes down due to lack of resources and funds and later the couple restarts the school with help of other brahmin friends and Shagunntai's small savings.

Savitri is the torch bearer who illuminates the path of education. She evokes among the dalit girls what Shiela Rowbotham has termed as the “collective consciousness” in her book “Woman's Consciousness in Man's World” when says: “તમારા પગલાઓથી કંડારાયેલી સ્ત્રી શિક્ષાની આ નાનકડી કેડી મારી બહનો, ઈશ્વર કરે ભવિષ્યમાં વિશાળ રાજપથ બને અને આ દેશની કોઈ પણ બાલિકા ક્યારેય શિક્ષા ના વરદાન થી વંચિત ના રહે.”

She appeals to the sisterhood, “the collective identity” of Dalit women and it is cry for “female bonding” among Dalit women on the lines of the “sisterhood of Black Women” (Yelling)

There are parallel incidents found in the autobiographies and novels of Black male as well as female Writers. Stephen Butterfield in his book Black Autobiography in America says “Black writers have been using the autobiographical mode (their writing) to examine their position and voice their feelings in order to narrate their unique experiences - - - - The cultural power of black writings echoes a collective myth of identity and freedom, the search of self-esteem and self-affirmation.” The Black African struggle against American racism was somewhat similar to the Dalit struggle in India. The literature of the marginals in India express the social marginality as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms. It challenges the traditional discourse and aspires to set up an “alternative discourse.” As Prabhakar Mande observes:

“The event of development of Dalit Literature is not just a literary event..... Unless..... This is seen from a sociological perspective against the entire background of the changes happening in the society, its significance will not be grasped.” (Valmiki XI).

Through Savitri, Daxa Damodara has challenged Indian history. She has shredded the ex parte perspective of historians who belonged to the Indian cast based Patriarchy and rewritten history from the Dalit's perspective.

When the government honoured Jyotiba's endeavours for the dalit women's empowerment, he gave all the credit of this achievement to his wife thus revealing his radical feminism. He calls her “મમ પરાક્રમીય શિલ્પકાર” (The sculptor of my achievements - 56). This was a time when dalit women were suffering from triple oppression that of “caste and gender discrimination from savern men, caste discrimination from savern women, and gender inequality from dalit men.” They were at the bottom of the caste and patriarchal “mountain”.

In this world of oppression the voiceless have finally found voice, “the subaltern is finally speaking”. Savitri has created a space for herself, A Room of her own through her actions and words in a male dominated world. (Virginia Wolf's Room of One's Own). She affirmatively answers the questions posed by Gayatri Spivak “Can the subaltern speak?”

Although Savitri's "Public Identity" is that of a successful woman as far as her "Private Identity" is concerned, she considers herself as an incomplete woman as she cannot bear children. Jyotiba once again reveals his radical feminism and gives us a "new perspective" of "motherhood" when he says "Don't curse yourself for being unable to bear a human being of flesh and blood. You have mothered a Renaissance.” (Savitri 93 My translation).

Savitri's personal pain caused by infertility translates into universal concern and she decides to open an orphanage there by becoming a “Yashodamaiya” to numerous children. Her adoption of the son of a brahmin widow Kashibai, who was born out of wedlock, is a message to a caste and gender riddled Indian Society. Her adopted son Yashwant becomes a doctor through her nurturance. The adoptive parents want him to marry a “mali” girl in order to break the the tradition of caste based marriage. After the death of her husband, she single handedly continues her work. Her legacy lives on in her adopted son whom she has taught “Service to children of God is service to God.” Jyotiba on his deathbed pays a fitting tribute to Savitri “હિન્દુ શાસ્ત્રમાં સ્ત્રી ને અર્ધાંગના કહે છે પણ તું મારી પૂર્ણાંગના છે----- ઓલવાઈ ગયેલા જીવન માં શિક્ષા અને જાગૃતિની જ્યોત જે જગાવી છે તેને પ્રજ્વલિત રખવાનું દાયિત્વ તારા શિરે છે.”

Together they achieved the success and central to this tale is the fact that Savitri performs her wifely duty in a manner that gives us an “alternative discourse” of true Indian Womanhood, in contrast to the self-effacing door-mat image. This “new consciousness” (Sheila Rowbotham, 1973:26-46) delineates a woman who does not walk behind her husband but who partners in his responsibilities as an equal celebrating their differences. (Gynocentricism of Elaine Showalter). Savitri is a સહધર્મચારિણી/અર્ધાંગીની meaning one who shares and walks along with her husband.

Savitri's life is full of struggles but she fulfills her goal. She represents all the phases of feminist theory. By lighting the lamp of knowledge she has empowered all dalit women. Savitri leads by example reminding us of what the Mahatma Gandhi said decades later while relentlessly attempting to eliminate the caste system.

“Be the change you wish to see.”



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