

MULTICULTURALISM VS. CASTEISM: A READING OF SHARAN KUMAR LIMBALE'S HINDU

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Multiculturalism emerged in the developed countries like America, Canada and Australia as a cultural and political concept in the wake of globalization. It was the need of the hour to recognize the cultural identities of the immigrants who had participated in large scale in economic growth of these countries, and thus, to create a social and political space for them was seen obligatory. Multiculturalism as a concept recognizes an individual's equal rights and opportunities with the dominant domicile, irrespective of an immigrant's racial/cultural identity, on the other hand, it legally creates spaces for all ethnic and cultural practices enabling a social and political system for „an open and equal dialogue“. The impact and application of such concept by any country and culture can never be under estimated, especially in a country like India where numerous cultures and ethnic groups have lived and survived through long periods of history. The present paper attempts to read Sharan Kumar Limbale's novel Hindu in the background of Multiculturalism and seeks to examine how Multiculturalism can be applied to Indian scene or to a literary work, it probes what kind of intricacies does it involve and what insights can be drawn to understand a cultural and political context. The exercise, in a way, delineates the limits of application of a concept like Multiculturalism on one hand, and exposes, on the other, the hollowness of a social and political system where caste plays a pivotal role, in general drama of human weaknesses and power dynamics.

Before relating Multiculturalism to Indian context, it would be worthwhile to look at the basic

tenets of Multiculturalism as it has been conceived and practiced in the countries of its origin, so that we can cross check India's cultural scene and be benefitted by this. Multiculturalism as defined in the developed countries like America, Canada and Australia, if it can be unified in some way, stresses their cultural diversity, ethnicity and national interests – economic and political. They recognize the need to create conditions under which all groups, irrespective of race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender or place of birth, can work together and contribute to the overall advancement of their nation. In their Multicultural policies and programs, an individual or a group is never prioritized over the national interest. For example, in the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affair Commission Act 1980, the three dimensions of Multicultural policy are –

- Cultural Identity: The right of all Australians to express and share their cultural heritage, including language and religion.
- Social Justice: The right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender or place of birth.
- Productive Diversity: the need to maintain, develop and utilize effectively the skills and talents of all Australians.

Even a cursory perusal of this policy formulation of Multiculturalism in Australia makes the domicile or the immigrants come to certain assumptions, even though they are generalizations:

- I. Multiculturalism, as visualized in most of the developed countries, is more a state policy than a social/cultural movement.
- II. Multiculturalism, as Bhikhu Parekh rightly argues, cannot be equated with racial minorities "demanding special rights" thus prompting "a thinly veiled racism".
- III. Multiculturalism is not centrally focused on „minorities“ but as Bhikhu Parekh says "is about the proper terms of relationships between different cultural communities".
- IV. In a large and significant way, Multiculturalism sets the trend that „Principles of Justice“ must not come from one of the cultures but must come „through an open and equal dialogue between them“ (Bhikhu Parekh:GoogleBooks)

When we come to relate this concept to Multiculturalism in India, we realize that like all other concepts, Multiculturalism does not specify how it can be applied to a particular nation or culture, its insights have been used and can be used by countries/nations/cultures according to their specific needs, interests and urgencies. When one tries to apply this discourse of Multiculturalism in India, to its national policies and more importantly to its cultural artifact – literature, one is bound to reflect India's history of 5000 years, marked by the „inclusions“ and „exclusions“ of various religions, sects, ethnic groups and communities, their mutual confrontations and mutual harmonious actions often engineered by power dynamics has the answer for India's rise and fall. In India, the spirit of Multiculturalism can be traced back to the Vedic period when the call for

„SANGACHH DHVAM SAMVADA DHAVAM, SAM VO MANANSI JAANTAAM,

DEVA BHAGAM YATHA PURVE, SANJANANA UPASATE“S (Tripathi, 2010, 33)

(Let us all walk together, let us all speak together, and let us all work together, just as Gods did in the past by knowing the minds of all)

This spirit echoed and re –echoed in Vedic mantras such as this:

„SARVE BHAVANTU SUKHINA, SARVE SANTU NIRAMAYA, SARVE BHADRANI PASHANTU, MA KASCHIT DUKH BHAG BHAVET“

But the Rigveda Samhita PURUSH SUKTA, 12 informs:

“BRAHMANOASYA MUKHAMASEEDBAHU RAJANYA KRITA URU TADASAYA YAD VAISHYA PADABHAYAM SHUDRO AJAYAT“

(After the making of Purush, the Brahmins originated from the head, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thigh and Shudras from the feet).

(Tripathi, 2004, 216)

Thus laying the foundation of the caste system that prioritizes birth of a man to his Karma or profession. This stigma of caste bifurcated Hindus into four categories and, on massive level, divided Hindus into „Swarnas“ and „Aswararnas“ entitling the former to exploit, disgrace and be inhuman to the „latter“. No appraisal of Multiculturalism can be complete if it does not take into account the caste phenomenon in Indian cultural scene, as it concerns the majority religion Hinduism, as the goal of Multiculturalism is to find „proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities“

Sharan Kumar Limbale's „Hindu“ (2010), translated from Marathi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee is a literary novel that portrays the complexities of an age old caste system in the present political scenario of India and presents a brilliant critique of caste atrocities on one hand and the inner contradictions of the Dalit movement on the other. Sharan Kumar Limbale writes in "Straight from the heart", introducing the Novel:-

“The fabric of Hindu society, interwoven with inequality and the disfigurement of the caste system – „Hindu“ has been written to perform a postmortem of these two. Our country cannot become beautiful until the stain of caste system is washed away from its face. To speak against caste

system is to speak the language of national unity, of aesthetic beauty.” (XI – XII)

The claims of Sharan Kumar Limbale’s as a writer with a social mission deserves to be scrutinized by a close reading of the novel; it, in a great way, highlights what multiculturalism in India has failed to achieve and pin points the success and failures of Dalit movement that has aimed at the common goal of multiculturalism “to find proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities”. The translator of the novel, Arun Prabha Mukherjee too acknowledges that Limbale’s novel is different from traditional novels in many ways “.... Hindu provides us a good gauge for measuring the process of change and the price these extract from those who are struggling for their human rights.” (XXVII, Introduction)

Sharan Kumar Limbale novel *Hindu* moves around a Dalit Tatya Kamble’s murder by angry high caste mob; ironically it takes place on 14th October, an important date in Dalit history as it was on 14th October 1956 that Ambedkar turned to Buddhism to fulfill his resolution that though he was born a Hindu, he would not die as one. Tatya Kamble is a Dalit activist who organizes Jalsa, a dramatic performance in maharwada, a segregated part of the village dominated by the Swavarnas, his impassioned speeches to awaken the Dalits against their inhuman treatment by the upper caste Hindus are not tolerated by the swavarnas of his village.

Arousing the spirits of his fellow Dalits, Tatya Kamble says: “Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you to enter a temple? Why do you stay in a religion which does not acknowledge your humanity? Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you even water? A religion that forbids the treatment of humans as humans is not a religion but naked domination. A religion in which touching of animals is permitted but touching of humans is prohibited is not a religion but an insanity. A religion which tells a group of human beings not to get education, not to amass wealth, not to carry arms, is not a religion but a mockery of human values.”(50-51)

We come to know about Tatya Kamble’s plan to contest the village Patil’s post in the coming elections through a roadside conversation of Dalit friends. Almost immediately after, within less than two hours, we see Tatya Kamble is taken away by a group of high caste people to the village square (from the Dharmachakra Parivartan celebrations where the Mahar community has gathered together to listen to speeches exhorting them to convert to escape the curse of untouchability) and is murdered. We see the brutal murder through the eyes of one of Tatya Kamble’s friend – Milind Kamble who is riding in the car of two corrupt high caste „power brokers“ – Manikchand and Gopichand, going towards their farmhouse for a night of drinking and womanizing. Neither the car stops nor its occupants inform the police, but go on to their farmhouse where they enjoy mutton and then drag and rape a Dalit woman who had hidden in their fields with other Dalits in the aftermath of Tatya Kamble’s murder and the burning of Dalit basti. The whole scene is narrated in first person by the Dalit character – Milind Kamble, who is often stung by a guilty conscience but is too weak to revolt because of his lust for money and women. To Limbale, he represents the weak link in the Dalit movement. Limbale artistically shifts Milind Kamble’s first person narration to omniscient narration that shows us things Milind Kamble does not know or come to know. When Milind and his high caste friends leave for the city after a night of debauchery, the omniscient narrator takes us back in time and space, and this time when we see things through the eyes of Sonali, the wife of the murderer, Prabhakar Kavale, Sonali, herself a victim of gender oppression. We, as readers, see through Sonali, the murder from Bara’s roof, see her husband and his friends butchering Tatya Kamble. The horror stricken Sonali is later ordered by her husband to wash his blood stained clothes in the bathroom. Tatya Kamble’s blood flows on the bathroom floor and makes the readers frozen with fear. It has been Limbale’s great success as an artist that through the voices of Milind Kamble and omniscient narrator alternately, we experience the multilayered nature of events as they unfold and become public. Events just after Tatya Kamble murder, well exposes the

hypocrisy and the devious manipulation by Dalit leaders and power brokers: Tatya Kamble's funeral becomes an opportunity for gaining political mileage for some Dalit leaders, planted stories in newspapers spread tension and divide the village for consolidating vote bank. Power brokers Manikchand and Gopichand, manipulate things by devious means and exploit Dalits for their own selfish gains, they turn Tatya Kamble's murder into a money making business.

Limbale's best technique is to convey the most important things through their effects. We do not see the fire that burns the Dalit Basti directly, but through the light that drenches the massive outer walls of the home of the village Patil, Rambhau Kavale, the murderer's father. In the same way, the capture of murder suspects and their acquittal are described in a newspaper style, Tatya Kamble's widowed wife Savita Kamble's nervous breakdown after her husband's murder is communicated through the defence lawyer's questioning of her testimony, on grounds of her mental instability. Limbale is keen to register not only the plight of the Dalits but also to debunk the „personalities“ within the Dalit fold who have weakened the movement at large by playing into the hands of upper caste power brokers for their selfish ends. Milind Kamble's murder and the burning of Dalit Basti by upper caste Hindus fetch money to power brokers Manikchand and Gopichand, they field their watchmen Sadanand Kavale, the brother of slain Tatya Kamble, for village Patil and get him elected as they are pretty sure that they can still reap the fruits of power as long as selfish Dalits like Milind Kamble and gullible Sadanand are there. This pathetic reality of the Dalit movement is well demonstrated by the beautiful symmetry of the end and the beginning of the novel. We see Milind Kamble is once again picked up by Manikchand and Gopichand in their car on their way to farmhouse for other night of womanizing. This time they are in a more expensive car, apparently purchased through their profiting from Tatya Kamble's Murder. If in the first car ride, Milind had seen Tatya Kamble's murder, this time he sees Dalit activists burning the copies of judgement on Tatya

Kamble murder case. The novel ends with Milind Kamble's self-loathing, his fear that he is being metamorphosed into a woman, his fear that he has lost his manhood. His much abused wife Lakshmi's words are echoing in his mind, "You have sold yourself and want to sell babasaheb as well." Limbale's beginning and ending of the novel with a compromising Dalit's internal conflict highlights his purpose of exposing the enemy within. The novel ends with Prabhakar Kavale's murder by Kabir Kamble, a Dalit who danced in the victory procession of acquitted murderers, dressed as a woman.

Limbale's novel Hindu though directly concerns Dalit exploitation. It cannot be read as a plain statement of a Dalit's agenda for Dalits. He himself has admitted in an interview that he wanted to assess the success and features of Dalit movement, to do an „X- ray“ to „diagnose“ the „disease“ that plagues it. He says:

“To move forward, we need to take stalk of what has gone wrong..... We cannot blame everything on outsiders. We have to look at our own faults.”

This humble submission of the author of „Hindu“ is an eye opener for readers too. The novel exposes the inhuman treatment of the upper caste Hindus towards their own fellow human beings termed as „Untouchables“. The novel equally exposes the system where all Dalits do not receive the same relief, Mahars get new homes, but Matangs/Mangs are left to live in all wretchedness because their houses were not been burnt by the swavarnas. The novel shows that the women cutting across the line of caste and Baras, are exploited, it may be Laxmi, the wife of Dalit Milind or Sonali, the wife of a high caste murderer Prabhakar, or it may be Surekha Mane who sells her body for a living or Draupadi Mang who is disrobed and publicly humiliated. Limbale's novel „Hindu“ rises up to universality in its portrayal of human weaknesses that deter a man to do the do-able. It is best exemplified by the character of Dalit narrator Milind.

When all is said ,it is to be remarked that Multicultural society of India must take serious considerations of the caste/gender discriminations

and inequalities prevalent in the present society, the issues well raised in Limbale's „Hindu“ a literary work of note or the debate of Multiculturalism will remain incomplete. Multiculturalism stands for the co-existence of multi-cultures, there is no place for one culture dominating the other or denying the existence of the other, degrading all humanity. Applying it to Indian cultural context means an overall re-structuring of its social/religious and cultural institutions, and elimination of caste is not an exception but the first step to be taken, if we wish to realize the ideals of multiculturalism.

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