

## IDENTIFICATION, BELONGING AND THE CATEGORY OF DALIT

K. Satyanarayana

The question of Dalit as a political identity seems to be facing a crisis in the recent times. Is Dalit simply a caste identity which is based on biological differences and therefore, it is natural? Is Dalit a position articulated in the diverse historical and cultural experiences of caste subordination? Dalit Panthers proposed Dalit identity as a pedagogic identity open to social groups subjected to caste and other forms of discrimination and subordination. They pointed out that “the Dalit is no longer merely an untouchable, and he is a Dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian.”<sup>1</sup> They further claimed that “the caste nature of the term Dalit is breaking down.” It is important to note that Dalit is not “merely an untouchable.” Dalit is a political position which is shaped based on a set of identifications in the context of struggles for equality.<sup>2</sup> Sociological caste identity is one of the several identifications in the making of Dalit. Dalit critic Baburao Bagul extended and revised the meaning of Dalit. He discovered the legacy of Western enlightenment, humanism of Buddha and Christ to the category of Dalit and reimagined Dalit as a human figure. He criticized and rejected the Hindu identity that denied humanity and dignity to the untouchables.<sup>3</sup> In the course of history, Dalit identity remained the identity of untouchable castes and more recently, it was attributed to the identity of specific sub-castes in the Scheduled caste list.<sup>4</sup> I argue in this paper that “Dalit” is a category of political identification and belonging than merely a natural and birth based identity and that it is built on the multiples legacies of democratic struggles. I turn to two contemporary debates to understand the political significance of Dalit identity: first, the literary discussions on “Dalit” in contemporary Telugu Dalit literature and second, the public debate on Rohith Vemula’s Dalit/caste identity in the recent struggle of the students of University of Hyderabad.

The category of 'Dalit' was at the centre of the discussions on Telugu Dalit literature in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Literary critic G. Lakshmi Narasaiah reviewed Dalit literary works and made fresh proposals about the category of Dalit literature in the mainstream forum, *Aadivaaram Andhra Jyothi*, a special Sunday supplement of *Andhra Jyothi* daily. Many Dalit writers and critics responded to Lakshmi Narasaiah's analysis and proposals. These debates and controversies described as 'Dalitavadam' (Dalit critique) continued in small journals and public debates. Dalit poet and critic Satish Chandar contested Lakshmi Narasaiah's construction of Dalit as an omnibus category of SC, ST, BC and minority social groups. I would like to revisit this debate between Lakshmi Narasaiah and Satish Chandar.

Lakshmi Narasaiah proposed that birth and experience of writers would be an essential condition to define the categories of Dalit and Dalit literature.<sup>6</sup> He refuted arguments such as literature is primarily a reflection of social consciousness of writers irrespective of their social origin. He countered views that supported the claim that there is no connection between social existence of the poet and the content of her poetry. He asked a revolutionary Marxist poet Siva Reddy, "why the poet who responded to several issues in life is not able to respond and write about Dalit issues. There is not a single poem on caste issues in this book of 120 pages."<sup>7</sup> It was argued by some readers that the poet should not be questioned why he/she did not write about caste atrocities but he/she should be judged based on what is written, Lakshmi Narasaiah rejected this theory of literature as self-expression of creative individuals. He rightly rejects this view, arguing that "a poet is not a dictator" and that the critic is a guide who has the responsibility to evaluate poets with discretion.<sup>8</sup> In other words, literary activity is a self-conscious activity that shaped form, expression and ideas. He emphasized the social role of the writer and social of function of literature. If we have to identify one key issue in the debate, it is the category of Dalit in Telugu Dalit literature that was formulated by Lakshmi Narasaiah and other interlocutors in the Dalit literary debates.

In a series of polemical essays, Lakshmi Narasaiah argued for a distinctive Dalit identity based on social origin, Ambedkarite ideology and unity of the oppressed castes and minorities. In the "Preface" to the first published anthology of Dalit poetry, *Chikkanavutunnapata* (1995), G. Lakshminarasaiah, the editor declares:

The truth is that “the progress” proposed by hitherto existing progressive literature known as people’s literature did not recognise the fundamental social reality, the specific problems of the majority people. The well-known writers portrayed abstract oppressed (Amurta peeditulu) and proposed abstract progress (Amurta Abhyudayam)...As per this abstract progress, oppressed are those who were subjected to economic oppression and inequality and denial of rights....<sup>9</sup>

Lakshmi Narasaiah defined the new category of Dalit poetry as poetry written by oppressed castes and minority poets. He specified the oppressed castes as S.C., S.T., B.C. poets and the minority poets as Muslim poets. He further proposed that the category of Dalit is an omnibus category of SC, ST, and BC social groups based on their caste identity, as also Muslim minorities based on their religious identity and “Deeseeya” (indigenous) Marxism, a combination of Ambedkarism and Marxism, would be the ideology of Dalit poets. He observed that the upper-caste writers could only play the role of mediators in Dalit literature.<sup>10</sup> He counter posed Dalit literature to the Marxist oriented Revolutionary literature and constructed Dalit as a different and distinctive identity in contrast to Hindu, Brahmin, Marxist and Feminist identities.<sup>11</sup> The Dalit as a collective identity of SC,ST, BC and Minorities enabled the mobilization of Dalit writers and consolidated the field of Dalit literature in Telugu. Many Dalit writers and critics identified with the position outlined by Lakshmi Narasaiah. Lakshmi Narasaiah emphasized sameness and ideological unity of SC, ST, BC and Minorities to construct a unified and singular Dalit identity. While the unity based on caste and religious identities and Ambedkarite ideological leanings provided the foundation to the authentic Dalit identity, the axes of differences based on sub-castes, genders, religions and ideologies posed a challenge to the politics of the authentic Dalit identity. In this debate, the adversaries of the authentic Dalits are not just the Brahmins and upper castes but also Marxists and Feminists. For example, writing about Dalit life from a Marxist perspective is not accepted as part of Dalit literature. Balladeer Gaddar’s song ‘Dalita Pululamma’ (Dalit Tigers), written in the context of Karamchedu Dalit massacre, was criticized for its Marxist perspective. Gaddar, who is from an untouchable caste, wrote ‘Dalita Pululamma’ from a new perspective in response to the Karamchedu massacre in 1985. Similarly, a small number of Dalits in the Marxist literary organizations began to write about Dalit life after the Karamchedu massacre.

But there were some dissenting voices in this debate. Lakshmi Narasaiah’s categorization of Dalit and Dalit literature was contested

by many other writers and critics. They did not accept Lakshmi Narasaiah's bounded notion of Dalit literature. The premise of 'pure' Dalit as was challenged. Among others, Dalit poet and critic Satish Chandar contested Lakshmi Narasaiah's idea of Dalit among other issues. I would briefly revisit the debate between Lakshmi Narasaiah and Satish Chandar to understand the complexity of the question of Dalit identity and its multiples legacies.

The ideological battle between Lakshmi Narasaiah and Satish Chandar appeared as a personal dispute as the polemical debate began with Lakshmi Narasaiah's criticism of Satish Chandar's poetry. Lakshmi Narasaiah reviewed Satish Chandar's collection of poetry *Panchama Vedam* and criticized him for his imitation of Revolutionary literature and use of sanskritised Telugu.<sup>12</sup> He described Satish Chandar as a poet with two faces- one revolutionary Marxist and the other Dalit. In reply to Lakshmi Narasaiah, Satish Chandar wrote a series of essays criticizing Lakshmi Narasaiah's idea of authentic Dalit.<sup>13</sup> The immediate context of this debate was the wide appreciation of Satish Chandar's poetry as a powerful expression of Dalit identity. K. Srinivas, a well-known Telugu literary critic, observed that the distinctive feature of Satish Chandar's poetry is its representation of a discernible Dalit identity.<sup>14</sup> Chandar recalls, "This appreciation put me in a difficult situation. My fellow dalit poets wrote articles saying that I was claiming to be an adikavi and dalit Nannayya (Nannayya is regarded as the father of Telugu literature)."<sup>15</sup> Lakshmi Narasaiah analysed the same set of poems when published as a collection and criticized the limitations of Chandar's Dalit poetry and his authentic Dalit identity.

Lakshmi Narasaiah's redefinition of Dalit attracted a lot of criticism. It was pointed out that that the very categories of SC, ST, BC, and minorities are problematic; too broad and vacuous. One of the powerful voices of Dalit poetry, Satish Chandar, who was a Marxist turned to Dalit politics, put forward this view forcefully. He argued that the experiences of the BCs and the SCs are dissimilar. Making a distinction between 'Ooru' (village) and 'wada' (ghetto outside the village), Chandar argued that the problems of those who live in the village (BCs) and the wada (SCs) are quite different. Similarly, he pointed out that the poetry of Muslim minorities does not deal with caste annihilation.<sup>16</sup> He along with several others contested the new inclusive category of Dalit as SCs, STs, BCs, and Muslims and the ideology of these Dalit poets as indigenous Marxism (redefined in the light of Ambedkarism).

Satish Chandar questioned the idea of authentic and singular

Dalit identity based on mere birth and Ambedkarite ideology. Following Marathi critic Arjun Dangle's view that "Dalit is not a caste but a realization," Chandar emphasized conscious identification with the untouchable community, displaying the wounds, social discrimination, humiliation and self-respect as constitutive elements of Dalit identity.<sup>17</sup> Satish Chandar claimed the legacy of Marxist ideology as well as Ambedkarite thought.<sup>18</sup> He declared that he is both a Marxist and a Dalit. He contested the exclusive identity based on sociological caste identity and Ambedkarite legacy. Dalit is a position that allows some members of the Scheduled castes to identify with the Dalit identity but also draws on the legacy of Marxist, Ambedkarite and other ideologies. He was equally critical of the Marxist critics who have reiterated the primacy of the category of 'class' and are unwilling to acknowledge the category of 'caste' as constitutive of the literary imagination and critical analysis. Papineni Sivashankar, a Marxist critic and a short story writer, observed, "What is there and visible is the consciousness of the middle class and the lower middle class. We have to recognize the power of that consciousness and the special identity questions that it is bringing to the fore."<sup>19</sup> In this comment on Dalit literature, the category of 'Dalit' is described as middle-class; thus caste identity, which is at the core of the category of Dalit, has been obscured.<sup>20</sup> The elision of caste identity in the construction of "Dalit" obscures experiences of caste discrimination, social stigma and violence.

Lakshmi Narasaiah's view of Dalit identity was also challenged by the Feminist critics for its masculine character. In a response to the debate on the *Nishani*, a collection of Dalit poetry, Feminist critics Volga and others observed that Dalit poetry is poetry of struggle. It is the poetry of Dalit men and women. They further said, "If we have to flourish as Dalit poets and Feminist poets, we have to invent our own voice and style that does not obscure, hurt and prevent the specific identity and distinctive existence (with all the minor aspects) of all the oppressed groups."<sup>21</sup> They strongly objected to the language that is humiliating, insulting and abusive to women. Sharing the Feminist anger, Satish Chandar rejected valorization of abusive, feudal and patriarchal language as Dalit language and Dalit as uncivilized and patriarchal person.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the masculine Dalit identity as the identity of Dalit poetry is exclusive, sexist, and undemocratic.

In this debate, Satish Chandar asserted his right to lay claim to the ideological legacies of Marxism, Ambedkarism and Feminism to construct Dalit identity. The bounded and fixed Dalit identity, based on axes of mere sociological caste difference and Ambedkar ideology,

is an essentialist identity that does not accommodate differences and negotiations within the Dalit. Chandar conceives a democratic and inclusive Dalit identity.

## 2

The controversy surrounding Rohith Vemula's Dalit identity brings several issues to the fore.<sup>23</sup> Is Dalit only a sociological and legal identity based on caste identity? Is Dalit a natural identity based on the patrilineage of a nuclear family? Are caste endogamy and bloodline the basis of Dalit identity? Does "Dalit" has a social, moral and political content? Vemula's case poses a problem to the received understanding of Dalit identity and its conflation with caste identity.<sup>24</sup>

Vemula was declared as a "Dalit PhD scholar" when his death was reported. Both Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and Vemula mentioned their identities as Scheduled Caste in their memorandums to the University of Hyderabad authorities. Following Vemula's death, the issue of Dalit identity and caste discrimination assumed importance in all the resulting campaigns and debates. The ASA filed a police complaint under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act against Vice chancellor Appa Rao Podile, Union minister of state Bandaru Dattatreya, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad leader Susheel Kumar and others. The complaint was accepted on the assumption that Vemula was from a Scheduled Caste. The BJP and several Hindutva organisations, however, began raising doubts over Vemula's caste identity in an apparent bid to derail the debate on caste violence, as also dilute the police case under the SC/ST Act.

An anonymous video released online which shows Vemula's paternal grandmother stating that the late scholar's father, Mani Kumar, and mother, Radhika, were of Vaddera, a Backward caste (BC). Subsequently, the media too began raising doubts about Vemula's identity and the focus shifted to the issue of unscrupulous parties politicising the Dalit identity of Rohith. Another document, an affidavit Radhika submitted to register the birth of her second son, was released where Vemula's mother declares herself a Vaddera. The ASA later released a caste certificate issued by the tahsildar of Guntur that shows Vemula as Mala, a Scheduled caste (SC). Vemula's father, who had deserted the family more than 20 years ago, was brought in to announce his son's caste identity as Vaddera. The Vaddera association now demanded an enquiry to ascertain Vemula's caste identity.<sup>25</sup>

When the character assassination of Vemula reached an

unacceptable level, his mother and her two other children declared at a press conference that they belonged to Mala caste. The mother clarified that she was a daughter of migrant Railway labourers from Mala caste and she was informally adopted by a Vaddera family and later married to Mani Kumar. She mentioned her caste as Vaddera in the affidavit register the birth of her second son, based on the logic of patriarchal law that a married woman inherits her husband's caste. When she separated from Mani Kumar, she moved to a Mala colony with her children. They were subsequently declared themselves as Mala caste by the Tahsildar, Guntur and issued certificates.<sup>26</sup>

It is evident now that Rohith Vemula, belonged to a single parent family. Rohith was born to parents of inter-caste marriage. Rohith's father is a Vaddera a Backward caste and mother belongs to Mala, a Scheduled caste. After the separation of his parents, Rohith was brought up by his mother who lived among the untouchables in the Mala colony. He adopted his mother's caste identity as his own identity and experienced caste discrimination and prejudice in society. He wrote in his Face book page that he followed the footsteps of the famous Telugu Dalit poet Jashuva (1895-1971), who claimed his mother's Madiga caste (SC) identity instead of his father's Golla caste (BC). Clearly, he exercised his choice in favour of matrilineage. He identified himself as a Mala and as an untouchable and suffered social stigma and discrimination. He applied for a scheduled caste certificate and got it from the Revenue Department. But he never used his certificate to claim state benefits and concessions for his admission o for his scholarship. He consciously chose to work in the Ambedkar Students' Association and lived as a staunch Ambedkarite. He was one of the five students who were punished by the University by imposing social boycott.

The controversy did not end here. It is repeatedly claimed in mainstream media, Parliament and Telangana state Assembly that Rohith is not a Dalit. Following the logic of patriarchal law, it is argued that Rohith inherited his father's caste and therefore, he is a Vaddera. It is assumed that caste identity is pre-determined by birth and patrilineage and therefore, his caste identity is his Dalit identity. It was also contended that Rohith was a Maoist Dalit and therefore he is not an authentic Dalit. In other words, the authentic or pure Dalit is a non-Marxist who is born to parents of the same untouchable caste. Both Christian and Muslim untouchables are not legally eligible to get Scheduled caste status. Following this logic, authentic Dalit is Hindu.<sup>27</sup> It is nothing but the rationale of the *Manusmriti*. Rohith and his mother have no role to declare their caste.



Rohith consciously discarded the inherited savarna caste status based on patrilineage. He identified himself as a Dalit. He believed that the accident of birth does not exhaust possibilities to imagine a new identity. His life and political practice outlined a new set of principles such as lived social life, experience of social discrimination, political choice and conscious self-identification to define one's own identity. Rohith wanted to go beyond the imposed identities and questioned the reduction of individual to a number or a thing. He desired to have freedom to choose or reject his given identity and to live as a deracinated individual.

It has been argued that the legal status of a SC person is not a defining aspect of Dalit status and "the status of SC is nothing more than legal nomenclature and it decides whether or not we avail reservations, and whether or not we avail protection under legislation like the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989." The distinction between the legal status as SC and the political status as Dalit is useful to understand Rohith's politics of self-identification. Rohith is both a SC and Dalit who desired to be a person with no identity. Rohith has a certificate to prove his legal status as a SC and also he has lived experience of discrimination and indignities to claim Dalit status. The general view that the children of an inter-caste marriage would take his/her caste from the father was questioned and set aside by the Supreme Court of India in 2012. The court in fact recognized the right of the child to provide evidence of suffering "deprivations, indignities, humiliations and handicaps like any other member of the community to which his/her mother belonged."<sup>28</sup>

It is attempted to collapse caste identity and Dalit identity by invoking the patriarchal and Hindu lineage. But Rohith's life story and the struggle for justice opens up the possibilities of the category of Dalit as a democratic and pedagogic identity based on diverse self-identifications and positions of the marginalized castes, genders and other minorities.

The category Dalit is productively employed to consolidate the marginalized untouchable caste groups and its literary cultures. But the fixing of the meaning of Dalit in terms of the unity of caste identities, patrilineage and certain ideologies undermines its emancipator potential. Dalit is an open ended and democratic category to mobilize diverse sections of the marginalized communities to imagine a new human person.



## NOTES

1. See Joshi, Pp.141-147.
2. I have benefitted from reading Stuart Hall's essays on the question of identity politics.
3. Bagul, 271-289.
4. The Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti criticized that the category of Dalit is occupied by the dominant Scheduled castes like the Malas in Andhra Pradesh.
5. A collection of essays from the debate are edited and published. See Satyanarayana, S.V. 2000.
6. Satyanarayana, S.V., 2000.
7. Ashcroft, Bill et.al., 462.
8. Ashcroft, Bill et.al., 462.
9. Narasaiah, "Preface".
10. Narasaiah, "Preface".
11. Satyanarayana, S.V., 217-221. Narasaiah emphasized the Phue- Ambedkarite philosophical outlook, centrality of caste assigned status and values, occupations and graded respect as the constitutive aspects of Dalit perspective which is different from the Revolutionary Marxist perspective in Andhra Pradesh.
12. Satyanarayana, S.V., 61-64.
13. Satyanarayana, S.V., 68-72; 73-80; *Also See* Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu for a summary of Chandar's views, 559-565.
14. Srinivas, 79-84.
15. Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu, 563.
16. Satyanarayana, S.V., 68-72; 73-80.
17. Chandar, 303.
18. Chandar, 325.
19. Cited in Ashcroft, Bill et.al., 461.
20. Cited in Ashcroft, Bill et.al., 461.
21. Satyanarayana, S.V., 119.
22. Chandar, 297-301. Rejecting the claims of exclusive Dalit language and criticisms of his brahminical Telugu, Chandar argued for inventing modern literary expression using all Indian languages including Sanskrit as a common resource. He argued for inventing new literary expression, special language, artistic way of writing poetry.
23. For full details of Rohith Vemula 's death and the conditions of caste discrimination in University of Hyderabad, see a report at [https://www.academia.edu/28717795/Report\\_of\\_the\\_Peoples\\_Tribunal\\_on\\_Caste\\_Discrimination](https://www.academia.edu/28717795/Report_of_the_Peoples_Tribunal_on_Caste_Discrimination)
24. Some of these questions were raised by the the Hindutva organisations and certain caste associations.
25. K. Satyanarayana's "Crossing Caste Lines" recorded some of the local discussions on Rohith's identity in Telugu news papers at <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/the-politics-over-rohith-vemulas-caste-is-meant-to-thwart-the-identity-he-chose-for-himself/article8163342.ece>
26. Sudipto Mandal presented a detailed story of the family in his "Rohith Vemula: An Unfinished Potrait" at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/>
27. BJP leader and Central Minister Venkaiah Naidu writes: "The Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA), which is a frontal outfit of the ultra-left, is known

- to have indulged in fascist politics and intimidated political rivals. ... It needs to be pointed out that the plight of Dalits in general and the activities of the ASA are two distinct issues. Talking against the ASA cannot be construed as talking against Dalits.” See Naidu. at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-congress-left-bulldozer-jnu-jnu-row-hyderabad-central-university/>
28. Rameshbhai Dabhai Naika vs. the State of Gujarat (2012) at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/197038546/>

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