

THE SOUND AND FURY OF ANNA BHAU SATHE'S WORDS: AN ICON OF MAHARASHTRA'S DALIT LITERATURE

Prof. Pradeep Ingole

Assist. Prof. in English,

Bahirji Smarak Mahavidyalaya, Basmath, Hingoli.

“Forge ahead! Change this world with a big blow. This was what Bhimrao said. You are as strong as an elephant. Why are you then trapped in the morass of slavery? Shun lethargy, shake up your body, come out and pounce (on your enemy).”

– **Annabhau Sathe**

Under the norms of the caste system, Dalits were denied the pen. Before the advent of Dalit literature in India, much of Dalit history was oral in nature. Their lives were not available to them in written form, and even when available, it was a depiction by those who had no experiential connection with Dalits. It was Dr BR Ambedkar who stressed on literary assertion as a means to struggle against the caste system. Thus began the ceaseless movement of literary assertion by Dalits, who went on to write powerful stories about their lives. It marked a resurrection of their experiential world, which had been appropriated by the pens of Savarnas.

Poems, stories, novels, biographies, autobiographies produced by Dalits established a new body of literature in which, for the first time, the downtrodden took centre stage. People who had been denied what humanity considers the ‘basics’, started to transform the lives of others like them, through the written word.

As this movement of literary assertion by Dalits grew stronger, the unseen side of India — the side that is brutal and inhumane — became visible to the world. Maharashtra was at the forefront of this revolution that has, over the last six decades, helped transform the worldview about Dalit lives. Almost all of the writers who shaped the early theoretical discourse of Dalit literature were from Maharashtra and in this series, we revisit the lives and works of 10 distinguished Dalit writers from the state — and their impact on the literary world.

Baburao Bagul, a brilliant short-story writer and one of the pioneering theorists of Dalit literature said, “The established literature in India is Hindu literature. The Dalit community is the revolutionary force that could bring about liberation and readily accepts the values of science and socialism. ‘Dalit’ is an adjective for liberation. It’s a revelation of revolution.”

In the caste-society called India, for Dalits, the process of writing was the process of re-inventing their past and consecutively shaping their present in order to bequeath humanness to their generations. They knew well that if they didn't write, their generations would be erased from the pages of history by Brahminical forces. What triggered the beginning of Dalit literature was the community's collective consciousness — shaped by the dire and inhumane circumstances under which they were forced to live — rather an individual vision of pursuing a literary career. Each Dalit writer then, in this sense, became the representative of his/her community and its experiences. He/she became the community and the community spoke through him/her. Tukaram Bhaurao Sathe, known more commonly as Anna Bhau Sathe, was one such Dalit writer.

In 1920, when hunger occupied the lives, dreams and brutal reality of people like him, Anna was born into a family belonging to the Matang caste (also known as 'Mangs') in the village of Vategaon, Sangli. Although he did not study beyond Class Four, he went on to write 32 novels and 24 short story collections which were translated into several languages. For the common folk, he was '*Patticha Shahir*' (a master balladeer).

Looking at his life closely, it appears no less than a metaphor for the world of magical realism which he inhabited with his people (who later became the protagonists of his novels, stories and songs) — those who were not otherwise visible to Brahminical writers. The period in his life that most shaped his perception and his writings was the decade lasting 1931 to 1941. During this period, he witnessed poverty, what it means to be born 'untouchable', what it means to be hungry, and what it means to crush your dreams in order to survive. These were the experiences that formed the writer within him.

When Anna's father took the family to (then) Bombay, from their village, in 1931, this changed Anna's life completely. With no money, very little food, ragged clothes and with no guarantee of shelter or work, the Sathe family's journey from their village to the city was still one of liberation from casteist feudal forces. This migration changed the way Anna would perceive the world around him.

When the Sathe family reached Kalyan, they were persuaded by Christian missionaries into a camp — one that had barbed wire fences — that the British had built for 'Criminal Tribes'. The camp was meant for 'reforming the lives of its inmates through 'social work' and proselytising. Anna Bhau Sathe found it a disgusting place, wanting more than anything to escape its environs. With the help of a guard at the camp, Lala Pathan, the Sathe family managed to do just that, and made their way to the locality of Byculla.

This was a time when (then) Bombay had a robust social, political and cultural life. This was also the time when Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar launched his anti-caste movement and gave voice to the struggles of millions of ‘untouchables’. This was also the time when the Communist movement in Bombay — led by Brahmins — came into prominence. Anna absorbed all these developments. While living in Byculla, he became attracted by the Communist ideology and became a full-time Communist, singing his folk songs for them, spreading their ideology and raising funds for the party. That same Communist party ruthlessly abandoned Anna towards the end of his life, when he developed an anti-caste lens to view oppression through, and became sympathetic towards Ambedkar’s movement.

Though his political ideology was founded in Communism, Anna Bhau Sathe’s protagonists were always Dalits. And why not? For survival, he had worked as a coal carrier, porter, boot polisher, door keeper, daily wage labourer etc. He had been absorbed among these people or maybe it was these people who absorbed him. With *Fakira*, the masterpiece novel Anna dedicated to Babasaheb Ambedkar, he theorised his vision of Dalit struggle. *Fakira*, the protagonist of his novel was a rebel who stood up to the oppression of colonisers as well as the Brahminical structure. *Fakira* gathers almost all the untouchable castes to fight against everyday oppression at the hands of British and Brahmins. Anna, in the form of *Fakira*, created a symbol for the entire Dalit struggle where their fight was twofold. *Fakira*, in many ways, is his seminal work as it sums up the anxiety and rebellion of a Dalit person against oppression. *Fakira* tell us that a Dalit man comes to a realisation and now identifies his enemies and companions in a struggle. It also exposes the oppressors — both locals and outsiders (Brahmins and colonisers), and how their interests consolidate each other’s because their duty is to maintain the hegemony in their respective spaces. Anna knew that to attain liberation, both these structures would have to be demolished. *Fakira* tell us that to attain such liberation, all Dalits should come together. The novel also symbolised the life and times of Shivaji Maharaj who fought against Muslim invaders, Brahmins and upper caste Marathas.

In Maharashtra, the Dalit movement did not often mention Anna as part of it, because of his affiliation with the Communist party. Which makes it all the more interesting that *Fakira* was dedicated to Dr Ambedkar’s anti-caste movement. Critically examining Anna’s stories and novels, we find not much explicit mention of untouchability as he mostly tried to use simple metaphors to convey his experiences. Nevertheless, when it was assumed that only Dalits were the victims of the caste system at the structural level, it was Anna who showed — through his story *Gaja-aadcha Veda* (A madman behind the veil) — how caste also victimised the upper castes at the mental level, portraying their dehumanisation. This story is another gem from Anna Bhau Sathe’s pen as it illustrates the sexual harassment, suppression of sexual

desires, patriarchy, violence and tussle for power in the upper caste household of a village's *sawakar* (feudal lord).

This space is too limited to fully discuss the literature of Anna Bhau Sathe, his political life, and his realisation that Communism at the hands of Brahmins in India had been an utter failure. But his will always be a name that crops up whenever Dalit literature in Maharashtra is discussed. Some of the characters he outlined on paper were part of his life, he shared drinks with them, he shared his sorrows and joys with them. Maybe he didn't write them; perhaps they wrote themselves *through* him. As Eric Fromm says in his *Fear of Freedom* — until some of point of time, it was man who created history but after a point of time, it was history that created man. Anna wasn't only a man created by history, he created the history of people through his stories, and novels. Anna's life and literature supports as well as challenges Fromm's understanding of the creation of man and history. In Anna, we see the metamorphosis of Dalit experience.

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