

## CASTE AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN AKHILA NAIK'S BHEDA

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### Abstract:

*Caste has been a forbidden subject in Odisha despite its all-pervasive presence in the socio-cultural fabric. Dalits in rural Odisha are frequently subjected to discrimination, violence, and ostracism, often left unaddressed by the state, media, and civil society. Akhila Naik's novel Bheda (2008) offers a window into the lived realities of caste oppression in Odisha, particularly through the lens of the marginalized Dom community. It studies Bheda as interrogating Brahminism's cultural hegemony, examining how Brahminism's effect, both on rural Odisha's economy and society, results from historical origins of caste and a specific form of power relation: that of Brahmins and Marwaris to the detriment of the established social order. Naik's work also brings out the complicity of other marginalized groups, such as OBCs and tribals, in maintaining caste hierarchies. Finally, the study positions Bheda as a critical text that challenges dominant cultural narratives and advocates for radical social transformation.*

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### Introduction:

The novel Bheda by Akhila Naik marks a seminal moment in Dalit literature in Odisha, offering a rare, firsthand narrative of caste oppression. The title itself encapsulates the core theme of the novel—Bheda, meaning separation, difference, or conflict, aptly symbolizes the lived experience of Dalits, who are marked by social exclusion and discrimination (Naik, 2017). Until the publication of Bheda, caste in Odisha had largely been an uncharted subject in academic and literary discourse.

In Odisha, Dalits are subjected to systemic violence and exclusion that ranges from burnt homes to false legal accusations. Naik's protagonist, Laltu, is the young Dalit activist symbolizing courage to challenge the structural inequality. Drawing upon his experiences, Naik discloses mechanisms of caste oppression where the state apparatus, media, and cultural institutions support Brahminical dominance. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar declared in his undelivered speech Annihilation of Caste (1936), caste cannot be

destroyed without uprooting its religious base. Naik voices this opinion and attacks the process of Hinduization for creating caste society.

### Cultural Hegemony and the Genesis of Caste in Rural Odisha:

Naik traces the origins of caste in rural Odisha to the influx of Brahmins from the coastal regions. Historical accounts suggest that Brahmins were invited by local rulers and given land and privileges to perform rituals, leading to the consolidation of their power (Panda, 2022; Pati, 2012). Marichipadar and Beheda underwent significant socio-cultural transformations because indigenous traditions were replaced by Brahminical practices. The renaming of villages, such as Firozpur to Srirampur, symbolizes the cultural erasure imposed by Brahminical dominance. Indigenous villagers, once harmonious and egalitarian, were divided along caste lines, with the introduction of untouchability and hierarchical social structures. This systematic stratification ensured the exploitation of Dalits and perpetuated their economic and social marginalization.

**Temple as a Site of Caste Violence:**

Temples in Odisha are contested spaces where caste and cultural politics are enacted. In Bheda, the moment of caste violence comes when the Dom community tries to enter the Mahadev temple. The denial of entry to Dalits, justified through notions of purity and pollution, reflects an entrenched system of exclusion. Naik also describes the terrible results of this endeavor: a mob of OBCs and tribals, provoked by Brahminical elites, attacks Dompada, burns the houses and injures many residents (Naik, 2017).

The complicity of marginalized OBCs and tribals in the violence against Dalits shows the divisive tactics of the upper-caste elites. The violence is not spontaneous but is part of a structural strategy to maintain the caste hierarchies, according to scholars such as Pati (2012). In rural Odisha, Brahmins often manipulate the economic and cultural insecurities of OBCs and tribals against Dalits, as depicted in the novel.

**The Brahminic and Capitalist Forces in the Rural Power Play:**

Naik attacks the two forces of Brahminical and capitalist exploitation in rural Odisha. The Brahmins, such as Baya Banabihari Tripathy, and the Marwaris, like Semi Seth, join hands to dominate all the resources of the villages and suppress dissent. Baya is more than a mere Brahmin; he represents the patriarch of the village and his decisions affect every possible aspect of life. This is a manifestation of the traditional role of Brahmins as cultural and political interlocutors legitimized by virtue of their proximity to religion (Panda, 2022).

In this regard, Semi Seth embodies the capitalist penetration into agrarian economies, utilizing his money to exploit Dalits as well as OBCs. The partnership between Baya and Semi is a reminder of the way caste and class exploitation coalesce. Laltu's activism against this nexus, such as the stoppage of

illegal timber smuggling, is a direct threat to their dominance. Organized caste violence against the Dom community is therefore used to suppress resistance and perpetuate the status quo (Naik, 2017).

**Destruction of Indigenous Social Harmony:**

The rural Odisha before Brahmins and Marwaris was characterized by a social life where relationships were totally beyond the caste line. Naik nostalgically presents this pre-caste society, where people lived like an extended family in villages. But the imposition of Brahminical norms disturbed the social fabric where cooperation turned into conflict. Naik specifically brings forward the complicity of touchable marginalized communities, as exemplified by the Gond and Teli, for maintaining the caste order. The above division within subverts any possibility of solid Dalit-Bahujan unity; this is fundamentally what occupies the political thoughts of an Ambedkar.

In Naik's narrative, cultural and religious usages get weaponized toward the consolidation of caste suppression, instead of erasing those indigenous traditions.

**Conclusion: Toward Social Transformation**

Bheda stands as a sharp critique of caste and cultural politics in rural Odisha, laying bare the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of caste oppression before the reader. It therefore challenges readers to confront these structures of inequality that constitute Indian society. His work, therefore, speaks towards radical social change, such as Ambedkar wished for the annihilation of caste.

The complicity of marginalized groups, the role of religion to perpetuate caste, and finally, the capitalist exploitation of economies in villages have highlighted many aspects of caste politics, as the novel underlined. Bheda not only documents the lived realities of the Dalits but also comes as a call to make a more just and an egalitarian society.

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