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From Autobiography to Fiction: On Contemporary Hindi Dalit Literature[1]

Kālidāsa and the Pariah

Even a common taxi driver in some of India's fast growing metropolitan cities knows something about the strange German occupation with indology and often interprets it in terms of a somehow natural affinity between India and Germany. Max Mueller's contributions to his field of research, particularly to vedic studies, may actually be studied only exceptionally, but Mueller's national identity and his background in German Indology – even though he was employed in England most of his academic live – are widely perceived as such and sponsor the extraordinary reputation of German indological studies in India.

The sacrilegious and sinful act of publishing the mantras of the *Rigveda*, kept secret for thousands of years from anyone considered not twice born, is long forgiven by the great majority of the keepers of this tradition, the Brahman orthodoxy. Remains Max Mueller's undisturbed fame – a philologist, born outside of the holy continent of *bhāratavarṣa* (i.e. the Indian subcontinent), therefore by definition a barbar (*mleccha*) according to classical religious law (*dharmaśāstra*), whatever good he may have done. Max Mueller – who never touched Indian soil – is a non-Hindu highly respected in Hindu society, who has made public the most auspicious piece of sacred literature for any Hindu, whatever creed he may follow and whatever ritual tradition may be his own within the multitude of creeds and religious practices within what is widely perceived as a single religion, called Hinduism.

The tremendous impact of translations of classical Sanskrit fine literature on the German intelligentsia before and after the year 1800 is well known – starting with Kalidasa's

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[1] A slightly revised version of a lecture read at the Oriental Institute, University of Warsaw, December 17, 2003. Thanks to the Oriental Institute for inviting me to Warsaw to present and discuss a preliminary version of the paper with students and staff members of the institute, particularly to Dr. Danuta Stasik.

Shakuntala into English (by William Jones) and then into German (by Georg Forster) in the 1780s, continuing to Arthur Schopenhauer's reception of the *Oupekhnat* – the Latin translation of a selection of Upanishads first translated into Persian on Dara Shuko's incentive, elder brother of the famous Moghul Aurangzeb. German romanticism with its India-oriented undercurrent was particularly deeply influenced by Friedrich von Schlegel's book *On the Language and the Wisdom of the Indians* published in its original German version in 1808.

Academic scholars started to perceive the riches of classical Sanskrit and its literature and the relation between India and Europe through this language and the culture it once incorporated. The study of old Indian languages – including Pali and Prakrit – soon became institutionalized on the academic level in the reactionary epoch following the final defeat of Napoleon during the battle of Waterloo and the following conference of Vienna, which paved the way to a restoration of the multitude of kingdoms and fiefdoms in Germany. Even though politically reactionary, it was an epoch open to the discovery of new fields of knowledge and research, of the founding of universities and chairs, particularly in the state of Prussia.

Even though institutionally unrelated to colonial ambitions, as in the case of the then East India Company Raj, it can hardly by successfully argued that 19th century German indology was not part of an imperialist approach to the East aiming at mapping the Orient, defining and owning of its cultural heritage. The growing awareness of the conditioned nature of oriental research has to be kept in mind, and explains the strong Brahmanical influence in German Indology.

Friedrich von Schlegel's brother August Wilhelm became the first ever Professor for Oriental Languages with special regard to Sanskrit in Europe in 1818, when the university of Bonn – the small town going back to a Roman military camp at the shores of the Rhine river, which had become part of the Prussian state in 1815 – was founded in 1818. Berlin and other universities followed soon after. The year 1818 therefore marks the beginning of the tradition of German Indology. Most of the about 15 small departments and institutes of indological learning existing today in Germany go back to the 19th century with their still strong focus on Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit literature. In the meantime, modern Indian languages and their rich literature have also been introduced and studied at almost all these places, but usually Sanskrit comes first – with few exceptions to this rule.

The enthusiasm of one of the most well known German men of letters, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, after reading the translation of *Abhijñānaśakuntalaṃ nāṭakam*, is well known. It is also known, how the Indian conception of drama and particularly the role of the *sūtradhāra* stimulated his addition of the first scene in his most famous drama *Faust*.

It is however less well known that the same Goethe has also worked on an issue that was hardly less well known even then, at least not in the 1820s, i.e. the outcast issue. The result of his recognition of untouchability as a feature of Indian society led him to the creation of his ballad *The Prayer of the Pariah* (*Weimarer Ausgabe* I,3;9).

Quote:

"Edel sind wir nicht zu nennen.
Denn das Schlechte, das gehoert uns,
Und was andre toedlich kennen,
Das alleine, das vermehrt uns."

Translation into English:

"We are not to be called noble.
'Cause the evil, this is ours,
And what others know as deadly,
This alone, this continues us."

The fascination for the untouchable is so strong because untouchability is somehow unparalleled in the European tradition and therefore alien to occidental consciousness. What is alien is attractive, particularly when it relates to the Orient, which since antiquity was perceived as a perfect space for projection of all sorts, including the projection of an Aryan civilization representing an original and somehow ideal state of mankind and society. Untouchability is, as Goethe's poem may demonstrate, a kind of anti-projection to the Brahman focus on purity.

Nevertheless, it was not at all Goethe's bad will, but an honest effort to internalize an imagined Paria's identity in his ballad, probably inspired by Michael Beer's (1800–1833) tragedy *The Paria*, which was performed in the Prussian King's Theater in Berlin in 1823.

Anyway: In the 1820s, even though not in detail, the peculiar hierarchical character of Hindu society with its ritual and sacral dimensions was already known and perceived. And, together with this, the state of the outcast as an untouchable together with the term *Paria*, which was already well established and used as metaphor in early 19th century German. By the way, *Paria* is one of the few loanwords going back to Dravidian origin – through Portuguese mediation – in European languages.

A new paradigm

The following remarks on the genre of Dalit literature in Hindi may be understood as a kind of workshop report. My personal interest in Hindi Dalit literature started off from my occasional reading of Dalit short stories, particularly in the famous Hindi literary monthly *Haṃs* under its senior editor Rājendra Yādav. I soon started to appreciate some of these stories and to realize the authenticity and the literary potential of this literary genre, which was not as well developed as in Marathi until some years ago.

Beyond that, I became aware of the hidden link between Dalit issues and an Indologist from Bonn University. Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar (1891–1956), the undisputed Dalit leader during the fight for independence and after independence the father of the Indian constitution, had enrolled himself at Bonn University in 1921 and 1922, and his application letter in fluent German and some other documents have survived in our archives until now. Besides economics, the subject he was enrolled in, Ambedkar appears to have intended to learn Sanskrit under Hermann Jacobi, the then holder of the indological chair in Bonn.[2]

Representation

For Goethe and his middle-European contemporaries, the question of the Paria's literary self-representation was something like a non-question, as it might still be a non-question for many in India and Germany even today. This perception was already true for the then contemporary Hinduism. Contemporary religion and society in India was widely perceived as irrelevant for the understanding of the Sanskritic tradition, whose academic study followed the guide lines of the study of Roman and Greek antiquity. Sanskritic tradition was a matter of antiquity, surviving only in letters. If perceived, the presence was usually interpreted as a form of decadency of a glorious but bygone past. And the knowledge of the social reality of the untouchable contributed to this European understanding of the Indian presence as a decline from a great past.

The image of the untouchable as a backward, and at the same time an illiterate or at least less educated person, as somebody ascribed to and stubbornly absorbed by a subaltern manual occupation, perceived as his traditional and original profession according to some kind of dharma, is still dominating. A survey in some western countries would beyond doubt uncover that the image is somehow similar to the image transported by the Indian middle class, which ascribes *jhāṛū lagānā* (sweeping) without further comment to castes like *bhaṅgīs* and *camārs*, and somehow at least implicitly support the brahmanic definition of identity as caste-bound and denying social and cultural identity beyond this occupation.

Anything beyond the conventional identity of the sweeper defined by his profession would accordingly be interpreted as exceptional, if not abnormal. One has however to keep in mind, that most Dalits – contrary to their public image – aren't sweepers. A majority used to be (and still are) the landless field workers in the villages. Vijay Prashad's excellent case study of the social history of the Mehtar and Chuhra community (*Untouchable Freedom*, New Delhi 2000), whose members were drawn into the hired sweeper occupation by the municipalities of colonial India, demonstrates these social and economical changes. As hired laborers of lowest social rank they developed into what is known as the Valmiki community today only as late as the 1930s. Sweeping (*jhāṛū lagānā*) is a historically

[2] Cf. Bellwinkel-Schempp, Maren, *Ambedkar studies at Heidelberg*. "SAI Report 4/2003", pp. 3–4 (http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/saireport/2003/ambedkar.pdf).

conditioned occupation of this community, conditioned particularly by the colonial ambition to create effective modern municipalities on the background of the colonial understanding of caste – it is not the inherited historical profession cum caste most people believe it to be.

Dalit autobiography as well as fiction, is full of stories of discontent. Autobiography and fiction are close to each other, sometimes the gap is hardly felt. The focus is naturally on the dark side of Hindu society, where human beings are in more or less crude forms rejected according to their imagined impurity. Naturally, the immediate focus of Dalit authors is on literary self representation (*pratinidhitva*), starting off from autobiographical story telling. The therapeutic function of this writing and reading as well is beyond question. I have heard from many Dalit intellectuals, how important the reading about the experiences of rejection made by others was in the development of their consciousness, how this sharing of experiences turned into an incentive for their own writing or political activity or both, for their conscious identification with being Dalit.

Many Dalits prefer names which are not supposed to indicate their caste identity directly. Others, like Sūrajpāl Cauhān for example, take the name of their clan name (*gotra*) as personal name – Cauhān is an untouchable *bhaṅgī* and not a *ṭhākur* (warrior), as his surname Cauhān may indicate. There is a wonderful story in his collection *Harī kab – aegā* on the intricacies of his pretention of being a Cauhān by caste, i.e. a *kṣatriya*, when he follows the proposition of a riksha-driver in Rishikesh to turn to a temple for an overnight stay with his family, when he finds that all the hotels are already occupied because of the religious festival of *ardh kumbhmelā* the family had not been aware of. Since the temple priest understands, they are *ṭhākur*, he offers them shelter for the night. One of the two professors of Hindi at Mumbai University is Prof. Mādhav Paṇḍit – not a Brāhmaṇ (as the name may indicate), but a Dalit. He has simply decided to take up the name Paṇḍit to confuse those, who always look for the caste identity. Omprakāś Vālmīki however, one of the most prolific Hindi Dalit authors and intellectuals, has consciously decided to stick to Vālmīki as a family name, which directly indicate his Cūhrā identity, much to the trouble of his wife, as mentioned in his autobiography *Jūṭhan* (Naī Dillī 1997: *Mere nikammepan kī gintiyoṃ meṃ ātā hai*).

The experience that rejection is not an individual, but a collective experience, was crucial for many authors – an experience very similar to the incentive of feminist authors. I am however not sure about the readership of Dalit literature. Printing is cheap in India, there is a lot of publishing houses, and at the same time it is prestigious to publish one's works. The tradition of proper lecturing and proofreading is unfortunately not very strong. At the same time, reading contemporary literature is confined to a rather limited number of people. Any indologist, who starts working on modern Hindi literature, very soon has to observe that contemporary Hindi literature is somehow esoteric, since its readership is confined to small circles. There is no proof that the developing genre of modern Dalit literature is much read in Dalit middle class households.

Aesthetics

It takes time and continuing and sometimes therapeutic effort, until self representation is realized. In the literature of discriminated minorities, autobiography often is a necessary prerequisite to fiction. The direct link between autobiography and fictional writing also directly concerns the aesthetics of Dalit literature. It has sometimes been argued that Dalit literature is rough and less artificially refined, in other words, it is not a "good literature".

In this context, I would like to point to a story called *Ahalyā*, written by Sūrajpāl Cauhān and published in *Haṃs* 4/2003. The title refers back to the well known story of the wife of the sage Gautam, who is cursed by her husband to become a stone because of alleged adultery with Indra and later returned to life by being touched by the lotus foot of Ram.[3] The story is about a young village *bhaṅgī* girl, whose wish to continue her studies after achieving good marks at her secondary school final exam ("matric") is refused by her family. Instead of this, she is married off to a city *bhaṅgī* family following the classical occupation of town *bhaṅgīs*. The story recounts the details of what *muhallā kamānā*, cleaning bathrooms – is about and how the initial resistance of the girl breaks down – together with her whole personality. Towards the end, she is made to fit into her role, turning her emotionally and as a sexual being into an Ahalyā without any prospect of relief by some divine incarnation (*avatār*) to restore her personality and turn her into a human being once again.

The description of the ugly details of latrines, dirt and smell, of blubbering baskets full of human stool, of *jhāṛū pañjā* and other utensils used during the cleaning of latrines, is essential for the impact of this story. Cauhān follows the aesthetics of provocating ugliness (*aślīṣṭatā*) consciously.

It is a story of self-representation and compassion at the same time, a story drawn on Dalit experience and of a male author imagining the painful life of a female, following the old tradition of male writing on female issues in Hindi. There is no doubt about the genuine Dalit experience as the literary (and emotional) source of the story. Nevertheless, this experience is not personal in the strict sense of the word. If the gender perspective is to be taken seriously, it is not a direct experience, since it is based on the male author's empathy for women's issues.

Sympathetic male writing on female issues has an old tradition in Hindi literature, starting in a time when female writing used to be only but marginal. Let me just mention here Premcand's *Nirmalā*, the *Madame Bovary* (by Gustav Flaubert) of Hindi literature, and the poor Lakṣmī in Phaṇīśvarnāth Reṇu's famous novel *Mailā āñcal*. But like Dalit literature, feminist literature has developed its own stand in Hindi, as a medium of female self representation, and is developing quickly. The present female writing in Hindi leaves

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[3] Cf. particularly popular version of this story in Tulsīdās' (1532–1623) *Rāmcaritmānas* I.6.210–4.211 according to the Gitapress-edition.

behind the middle class "female romanticism" as displayed in the novels of the 1970s and 1980s, as these were characterized in Indu Prakash Pandey's book on this genre literature.

The question of aesthetics (*saundarya*) in relation to Dalit literature was raised by a large number of articles in Hindi literary magazines. I would particularly like to mention the collection of essays by Omprakāś Vālmīki in his book under the ambitious title of *Dalit sāhitya kā saundaryaśāstra* – "The aesthetics of Dalit literature" (Vālmīki 2001) – in this context, even though this collection of essays may not yet be conclusive on the subject.

Another interesting context is brought forward by Surendra 'Agyāt' in his article in *Haṃs* 3/2003 (p. 36–39). His argument refers back to classical Aesthetics: "From old ages onwards, Indian philosophy and its critical thinking have analyzed suffering. And this thought is mirrored in old Indian literary theory." 'Agyāt' draws a direct line between *duḥkha* (suffering) and *śoṣaṇ* (exploitation), while criticizing the restricted Marxist interpretation of class exploitation as *śoṣaṇ*. With Dr. Ambedkar, he argues to interpret exploitation in a much wider context, and he particularly relates to Ambedkar's inspiration for the first conference of Dalit authors in 1958.

The discourse level on the discussion of Dalit Aesthetics in Hindi follows the standards set by the Marathi authors before, as Omprakāś Vālmīki explains (Vālmīki 2001). The *Aesthetics of the ugly* plays a crucial role not only in Dalit literature itself, but also in the earlier literature on Dalit issues written by non-Dalits. Mulk Raj Anands *The Untouchable*, an early masterpiece of Indian literature written in English (published 1935), is the key for this genre. Towards the end of the novel, which also appeared twice in German translation, the initial aspiration of the main character Bakha to live a respectable life is reduced to a rather vague hope for the introduction of a technical innovation: The introduction of water closets, which would make the manual latrine cleaning irrelevant. Neither will the society change nor Bakha's will power appears strong enough to overcome his pitiable status on his own without any support from anyone, and not even from his own community. Compassion based literature appears not less pessimistic as literature based on experience.

Jay Prakāś Kardam's novel *Chappar*, published in 1994, delivers a completely different and optimistic message. The novel is on a certain *Candan*, the first son of village Māyāpur, who moves it to the town to go for a college education. *Candan* is a Dalit, and becomes a Dalit activist while being in the town. Not only in the town, where he opens a day school, but also in his village the situation changes for the better, particularly through education. The local feudal lord changes over sides, and, inspired by his daughter, gives the land away to its tillers, while the local Hindu priest leaves the place. Towards the end, Candan becomes ready to marry a young woman, daughter of his landlord, who had been group raped in her youth and delivered a son because of this raping. She, however, renounces to marry, and she is killed shortly afterwards. In the last scene of the story it becomes clear that Candan will marry Rajnī, the daughter of Māyāpur's former feudal landlord, and at the same time they agree that they will adopt the child, son of the martyred daughter of Candan's landlord in the town. The two know each other particularly through the letters between Candan and his parents, which because of his parents being not able to read and write, were communicated by her over the years.

Is this utopia of a just enclave – the village Māyāpur – in an unjust society a reflection of an original Dalit experience? Most pieces of literature written by Dalits are rather pessimistic. Hindu and Indian society are widely perceived as unchangeable, and even if the more drastic forms of discrimination may disappear in the towns, the subtle forms of discrimination continue to prevail – the subject of much of the Dalit literature written on the live in the growing municipalities in India. In Kardam's novel however, it is the village that changes, and not the town. The experience of Dalit solidarity in the town is only one of the facets of the perception of town live in the novel. The most striking experience in the town life is the killing of Kamlā, while the village goes through a highly fictional process of change, an imagination beyond reality and in opposition to reality.

My personal impression is that this highly imaginary development has to be read on the folio of Premcand's famous novel *Godān* and its inherent pessimism of the Premcand of the 1930th on development in Indian society. The author positively means it as an example of the highly idealistic Dalit humanism (*mānavtā*), an egalitarian and explicitly anti-Hindu ideal of a secularized society. As the *ṭhākur* himself comments, when he demands not to be called by his caste identity, but by his surname in future: "*Keval manuṣyatā kā riśtā ho hamāre bīc. Manuṣyatā hī hamārā gotr ho, hamārī jāti aur manuṣyatā hī hamārā dharm ho*" (Kardam 2003: 112). "There should be nothing but our relationship through humankind between us. Humankind only should be our kinship, humankind only should be our caste and humankind only should be our religion." This is a play with words and their meanings, since *manuṣyatā* means humankind as well as humanism, and *jāti* means caste as well as people in the ethnic sense.

An emergence

While Marathi Dalit literature goes back to at least thirty years of a powerful tradition, with the backbone of the strong, and largely Buddhist Dalit movement and its immediate Ambedkarite inspiration through the Marathi language, the political, religious and literary unity of the Dalits in the Hindi speaking area faced more difficulties and more diversity than in the comparatively more homogenous climate of Maharashtra.

Even if delayed, there are now convincing indications of an evolving and vibrant Dalit literature in Hindi with its centre in the Delhi region. Indications for this development, which is the focus of my research, are:

- the publication of Hindi-Dalit literature and literary analysis relating to Dalit-issues in the most important literary magazine "Haṃs" (published by Rājendr Yādav) since about 1995 and other magazines (like "Kathā Deś"), the growing popularity of *Dalit sāhitya viśeṣāṅks*, reflecting the growing size and the creativity of the corpus of prose literature of this genre, particularly in the field of *kahānī*;
- the publication of at least four literary autobiographies, starting with Mohandās Naimiśrāy's *Apne—apne piñjre* 1995 (part 1);

- the publication of a *Dalit sāhitya* annual bulletin by Jayprakāś Kardam since 1999;
- the publication of several volumes of poetry collections by diverse authors (for example from prominent authors like Śyaurāj Siṃh 'Becain', Rajat Rānī 'Mīnū' and Sudeś Tanvīr);
- the publication of the literary magazine "Apekṣā" under the editorship of Tejsiṃh since October 2002;
- the publication of at least one important novel *Chappar* by Jay Prakāś Kardam in 1994 (*saṃśodhit saṃskaraṇ* 2003);
- the lively discussion about the Dalit identity of the *nirguṇ bhakti* tradition in Hindi literature, particularly relating to the *sant* poetry of Kabīr and Raidās and the search for a forgotten thread of the history of religions in India going back as far as pre-vedic religion by Rājdev Siṃh and the Ājīvika religion of Makkhali Gosāla by Dharmvīr.

Taking all these factors together it should have become clear that the Hindi Dalit literature has recently, which means since about 1994/1995, made gigantic steps forward, corresponding to the emergence of a quickly growing Hindi-educated Dalit middle class and lower middle class community. Hindi speaking Dalit intellectuals are gaining ground, obstacles notwithstanding. This development also corresponds to a growing Dalit presence in journalism, not only in the government run media, but also in the blossoming market of private media, including radio and television. Arvind Mohan, senior editor of the Hindi-daily *Hindustan*, explained to me recently that 15 years ago there were hardly any Dalit journalists with the *Hindustan Times*, either as editors or free lancing. Today, there is a large number of Dalit authors, some of them regularly contributing to his paper with good stories.

Hindi Dalit authors agree with this statement. They believe that the emergence of a Dalit intelligentsia and beyond that the entry of Dalits into the lower middle class (*nimna madhya varg*) is a clear indication of the success of the job reservation system, which pushes Dalits into government posts up to a quota of 22 percent and OBCs ("Other Backward Castes") according to the suggestions of the Mandal commission implemented under the V.P. Singh union government in 1990 to another 27 percent. It is, however, often complained that many of these reserved government positions are not filled, people are deprived of their rights and suffer from more or less subtle forms of discrimination, like the continued refusal of promotion.

In Mohandas Naimiśrāy's short story *Dard* in Dalit Sāhitya yearbook 2003, pp. 113–117, to give an example, this leads to the death of an office employee, who cannot succumb the continuing refusal of promotion accompanied with the unofficial statement that he should not endeavour to become more than his father. His father had been a *caparāsī* (peon), the only position in office understood to be fit for a Dalit.

I do not have any information of a conclusive study of the caste background of Hindi media users, but it is generally understood that Dalit readers form a fast growing component for example in Hindi newspaper readership. Non-Dalit editors vaguely guess the percentage of Dalit readers should be around 10 percent. It is generally understood that Dalit readers want Dalit issues to figure prominently in newspaper reports, but also in cultural and literary magazines. There is, however, no proof of these assessments.

Some clarifications

Before going into further details, I would like to state that I will not go into an argument over some of the allegations brought forward as rather general arguments against Dalit Hindi literature. It is sometimes suspected that Dalit Hindi literature is nothing but a repercussion of the Marathi Dalit literature of the 1970s and 1980s. It is also sometimes argued that Hindi Dalit literature is a political machination and the self-styled *Dalit āndolan* with its literature wing nothing but an offspring of Mayavati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. Both these suspicions appear to me as exaggerations.

Modern Dalit literature, either in Hindi or any other language, cannot be but influenced by the earlier Marathi Dalit literature – the question is only, how far this relationship to the earlier literature is a creative relation or imitative. Since I don't read Marathi myself – not yet – I cannot argue on this point. I may only underscore that Hindi authors are well aware of the Marathi literature written earlier as well as of contemporary Marathi literature. Efforts like Ramaṇikā Guptā's *Dalit kahānī sañcayan*, published recently by the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi (Guptā 2003), including short stories in Hindi (20), Marathi (9), Telugu (5), Gujarati (8), Panjabi (5), Malayalam (1) may indicate a kind of organic relationship between the creative writing in the genre within the literatures of different Indian languages, even though the always harmonistic publication policy of the Sahitya Akademi has its own agenda with its focus on the national unity and its rejection of contradictions. Other publications, like the yearly bulletin published by Jay Prakāś Kardam, follow similar lines by translating from other languages, and particularly Marathi, into Hindi.

Concerning the question of politics, it seems that indeed a majority of Dalit authors are indeed in favor of the BSP holistic approach of a fundamental change in Indian society as a kind of a cultural revolution, some of them – like Sudeś Tanvīr – being party activists and men of letters at the same time. I will go a little bit in detail on this point, since it allows me to explain some of the intricacies of the usage of "Dalit" and its political intricacies.

My personal impression during my many informal talks with Hindi Dalit authors is that the BSP is not so much perceived in terms of a Dalit vote bank, but as a party with a clear position against, what is usually understood as, *Brahmavād* in the Ambedkarian sense and in the sense Kancha Ilaiyah's anti-Hindu confession (Ilaiyah 1996). The Dalit Sāhitya yearbooks 2002 and 2003 contain chapters of the Hindi translation of this much disputed book.

As it is well known, from 1984 onwards, under the national presidency and the leadership of Kanshi Ram, the term 'Bahujan' became popular, referring to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes as well as to "Other Backward Castes (OBCs)", while the use of the term 'Dalit' is often used in the strict sense relating to the scheduled castes only, even though many people use it synonymously with Bahujan (meaning "majority"), following the widest possible definition of the term 'Dalit' like the editors of the Dalit Sāhitya yearbook (introducing Kancha Ilaiyah as a "prominent Dalit thinker" (*jāne—māne dalit cintak*), 2003, p. 203). When the term Bahujan is used, it often indicates a relationship to party, which uses the term and spreads it out, even though it hardly reaches out to the vote bank of the OBCs in Uttar Pradesh, whose majority is more closely related to one of their own, to Mulayam Singh Yadav and his Samajvadi Party. To avoid misunderstandings, Kancha Ilaiyah uses his own terminology, the compound term "*Dalitbahujan*", including all the three groups.

Dalit authors often use the wide concept of the definition of the term Dalit including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Castes (OBC). The narrow "SC only" definition is felt as somehow inadequate.

Another perspective on the issue can be found for example in the chapter on "the definition of Dalit literature" (*dalit sāhitya kī paribhāṣā*) in Dineś Rām's book on *Dalit mukti kā praśn aur dalit sāhitya* "The quest of Dalit emancipation and Dalit literature" (Rām 2002), pp. 35–40. Dineś Rām uses a content based criterion, when he argues that it is "a part of the Dalit movement, which has the opposition to the values and the philosophy of the caste society as its purpose and as its blessings the construction of an alternative to it"[4]. This is clearly a political statement excluding Dalit "renegades" joining the ranks for example of the BJP.

Even though this wide concept is used, it appears that the majority of contemporary Dalit authors in Hindi have either a Camār or a Bhaṅgī background.

Rājendr Yādav, the highly respected editor of the most important Hindi literary monthly "Haṃs", declares in an interview published (Becain/Minu 2001: 40–43) that "Haṃs" is not a Dalit magazine, even if it prints Dalit literature and inspires it. The meaning of this statement is to be understood in the context of the above given Definition of Dalit literature. The *Yādav* community belongs formally to the OBC category.

Surendra 'Agyāt' refuses the term "Dalit literature" altogether ("Haṃs" 3/2003). He argues that literature is "neither Dalit nor non-Dalit, like philosophy is philosophy, it is neither 'Indian' nor 'Western'" (p. 36). For him, who appears to be a Dalit author himself, the crucial point is that literature concerning the Dalits should give "voice to the social reality" (p. 38).

The Gair-dalit issue

Compassion with Dalits and the support of the social reform agenda is an old issue in Hindi literature, starting with Bhāratendu Hariścandra of Benares (1850–1885). Let us have a brief glance at his famous drama *Bhārat Durdaśā*: Among the evils, general

[4] *Dalit sāhitya dalit āndolan kā hissā hai jiskā uddeśya hai varṇāśram samāj vyavasthā ke mūlyoṃ evaṃ darśan kā virodh tathā iske barakat ek nae vikalp kā nirmāṇ*, Rām 2002: 40.

"Death of the truth" (*satyanāś*) reveals in the third act during an outbreak of demoniac dance, his fame to have encouraged untouchability is enumerated.[5] The hierarchical splitting of the Indian society among caste lines is already in Bhāratendu's age understood as an obstruction to modernization and the nationalistic agenda of the Indian elites. The religious reformers too, particularly from Vivekananda onwards, propagated national unity and Hindu-egalitarianism, first in correspondence with the British, and then, after World War I in a growing opposition to the colonial rulers.

The value of literature of non-Dalits on Dalit issues is a hot and often discussed subject. It is, however, never understood as Dalit-literature simply because it is concerned with Dalit life. I have however not heard or read a complete refusal of the value of this *gair--dalit* literature (unlike the refusal of "whitey literature" by some Afro-American authors). During my interviews with authors during this September 2003, *sahānubhūti* based literature of non-Dalits and *pratinidhitva* – compassion versus self-representation – was on several occasions understood as a difference of *jāti* (class), even though the two may sometimes come close to each other.

Vaṃśīdhar Tripāṭhī, BHU professor of Sociology, argues in "Haṃs" 4/2001 that the writing class can very well understand and express the perspective of certain groups in society it does not belong to. This is a crucial question for Dalit authors. At the same time he accuses the Dalits to be not engaged enough to change their situation by their own effort – an allegation that is at least as old as Mahatma Gandhi's encounters with the Harijan Basti in Delhi. "A main problem of Dalit consciousness is that non-Dalits claim to represent this consciousness. There is no bigger obstruction to achieve Dalit consciousness than this," writes Dr. Dharmvīr in an article in "Haṃs" 3/1998 (p. 52). As Sūrajpāl Cauhān explained to me in a private conversation recently: "Compassion [*sahānubhūti*] is fine, as long as it is honest [*īmāndār*]. But even then, it is often momentous [*kṣaṇik*]. The basis of Dalit consciousness is, however, experience [*anubhav*] and therefore never momentous."

Premcand's writing is accepted among Dalit authors as the most important milestone of modern Hindi literature and some of his most famous stories like *Sadgati*, *Ṭhākur kā kuāṃ*, *Mandir* etc. are taken as lasting examples of good *gair—dalit* literature on Dalit issues. Some authors criticize Premcand's famous short story *Kafan*, because the moral deficiency of Ghīsū and Mādhav might support the preoccupied *savarṇa* Hindu conception concerning the inborn lack of moral capacity of the Dalit population.

The Dalit Sāhitya yearbook contains regularly profound articles about recent non-Dalit creative writing on Dalit issues. To give an example of a novel that is refused univocally by Dalit authors: *Nācyau bahut Gopāl* by Amṛtlāl Nāgar, a novel based on a plot of a Brahman-Dalit mixed marriage, is severely criticized because of the stereotype image of the Dalit deficiencies that are contained. Even though the novel is meant to support a reformist agenda, it implicitly transports the 'Brahmavādī' view of the Dalit deficiencies

[5] Bhāratendu Granthāvalī I, p. 138.

that is so much abhorred by the intellectual Dalits: Women as proxi-prostitutes, men addicted to drinking and hardly inclined to work severely. The novel is taken as an example of the widespread ignorance of *savarṇ* Hindus and inborn arrogance, as it is felt by the Dalits. I will not go into details here. A conclusive literary analysis of this novel from a Dalit perspective, submitted by Ajay Nāvariyā as a JNU M.Phil.-thesis, will be published soon.

In search of the history of the Dalit movement

While Surendra 'Agyāt' ("Haṃs" 3/2003) is skeptical about the project of a history of the Dalit movement before Dr. Ambedkar – or some would argue before Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) – the question of the historical identity of Dalit thinking and Dalit religion has gained a prominent place in the discussions of the intellectuals.

The starting point of this discussion is the question of Buddhism. The basis of the Buddhist creed is much weaker among Dalits in the Hindi speaking area than in Maharashtra. Many argue that a Dalit can be Ambedkarite without converting to Buddhism. Neo-Buddhists are a minority in the Dalit Samaj of the North. Some perform for example the marriage according to a neo-buddhist rite (following the pattern of marriage customs of other religions in India), but their "normal" religious practices at home may be different. In a *camār* quarter of a village on Delhi territory, which I visited recently, the *camār* community is deeply divided because some activists have recently stopped to participate in Hindu festivals like Divali and Holi and are going for Buddha Jayantī instead. It appears that this is perceived as a provocative behavior. Among Dalit intellectuals, the focus of the question of Buddhism is, whether Siddharth Gautam is a representative of the *kṣatriya varṇa* and whether he is in support of the theory of reincarnation or not. Rebirth is interpreted as an instrument of Brahmavād to subdue the suppressed, even though it could be argued that because of the *anātmavād* in Buddhism, the punitive justice of the rebirth-theory in Buddhism is not necessarily to be understood in terms of a support of the *jāti*—based society.

Perhaps the most outstanding intellectual in this field of research and prolific writer is Dr. Dharmvīr. He openly criticizes the conversion of Dr. Ambedkar to Buddhism and his public appeal to the Dalits for conversion in 1956. Darmvīr started off with a conclusive interpretation of *nirguṇ bhakti* poetry, particularly of Kabīr and Raidās. His writing is to explain his basic assumption that the *nirguṇ* tradition as such is a genuine Dalit tradition, swallowed up by Brahmanism, especially through the efforts of Hazārīprasād Dvivedī, who had uncovered Kabīr from the dust of history at the beginning of the 20th century (particularly in Dharmvīr 1998).

Dharmvīr's research is paralleled by another study on the "*Nirguṇ* devotion to Ram and the Dalit castes" (*Nirguṇ rāmbhakti aur dalit jātiyāṃ*) written by Rājdev Siṃh and published in the same year as *Kabīr ke ālocak*. Siṃh argues that the declaration of the higher value of the *saguṇ* ("endowed positively with qualities", i.e. the Lord is present in his incarnations and in his temple idols) over the *nirguṇ* ("not endowed with qualities", i.e. the Lord is fully transcendent, and present in each and every soul) devotion to Ram, particularly in Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas* was connected with the successful effort to recover control over the *bhakti* movement in religion and society, which was otherwise dominated by low caste and Dalit authors and their world views. Beyond that, Siṃh strongly refuses the inclusive character of the brahmanic tradition and stresses that Jainism, Buddhism, Vaiṣṇavism as well as Śaivism are non-vedic (Siṃh 1998: 47), and particularly identifies Śaivism as going back to pre-vedic religion of the inhabitants of South Asia before the coming of the Aryans.

While Siṃh goes back to pre-vedic traditions as a source of Dalit religious identity, Dharmvīr traces the origins of Dalit religion back to the Ājīvika tradition, the "vanished Indian religion"[6] founded in the 6th century B.C. by Makkhali Gosāla. Without going into details of this somehow astonishing result of his search of a Dalit tradition in the history of Indian religions, the following statement may explain his basic, and somehow functional approach: "The Gaṅgā doesn't belong to the Brāhmaṇs, the Yamnā is not bought by Kṛṣṇa exclusively, the Himālay belongs to everyone, who lives in India and the see washes everyone's feet clean" ("Haṃs" 1998: 53).

Dharmvīr's extraordinary creativity found a mixed response among the Dalits intellectuals of Delhi. Some openly support Dharmvīr who "freed Kabir from the fetters of brahmanical canons" (Pachauri 2001). Some Buddhist intellectuals argue that Dharmvīr is exaggerating the issue and argue – in defense of the historical Buddha – that he was a functional *kṣatriya*, and not a *kṣatriya* in the Hindu ritual sense. Others, like Surendra 'Agyāt', overtly refuse the research of a mystical tradition of the Dalits since this allegedly leads away from the need to change the present social conditions of Dalit life. Another Dalit intellectual told me once: "Dr. Dharmvīr is fine. Let him write on religion, what he wants. I keep my mouth shut, but as soon as he starts to establish his own religion, I will open my mouth. And he is not far away from it."

Dalit literature as Indian literature

One of the most impressive pieces of Dalit Hindi literature is for me a short story written by Sūrajpāl Cauhān published in "Haṃs" 10/1999 (p. 67–70). It is, of course, one of the many stories based on personal witness and later formed part of his autobiography published as *Tiraskṛt* (Cauhān 2002). A group of officers posted in Gāndhīdhām in Gujarat are keeping a Sindhi Brahmani servant called Puṣpā. When the officers find out that another servant of another group of posted officers charges less, they start to argue with her about the wages. Her final argument is that she deserves more, since even though poor, she is a Sindhi Brahman, and the other servant simply a Cūhrā. Later on, she

[6] A.L., Basham, *History and doctrines of the Ājīvikas: a vanished Indian religion*, London 1951.

starts coming late in the morning. It comes out that her husband has fallen ill and has to be moved to hospital. Soon she has to ask for some money to pay the treatment. Everyone finds an excuse not to give her the desired 500 Rupees, even though she promises to repay the sum. Finally the *bhaṅgī* officer gives her the money with the remark that even though she was *paṇḍitāin* (i.e. Brahman by caste), it had to be a *bhaṅgī* officer, who turned out to be useful for her. "But you are an officer!" says she. Later, when the said officer and the narrative ego of the story is shifted back to Delhi, she turns up at the station for a farwell, in tears, thanking him once again for the money, saying she could not believe he was really a *bhaṅgī*, but in the meantime another officer had told her, it was right.

This is not a story of hate, it is a wonderful, and very sensitive story about the intricacies of castism and its deep psychological impact on everyone, who is related to the caste society, a beautiful example of what is understood as *mānavvād* ("humanism") by Dalit authors. And – notwithstanding the critical Dalit discourse on Mahatma Gandhi – somehow Gandhian in spirit, aspiring to achieve the *hṛday parivartan* ("change of heart") of the unjust other, making him understand and improve his deficiency himself. A similar change of heart takes place in Jayprakāś Kardam's novel *Chappar* with the feudal lord of the village, Harnām Siṃh. After he gives away his land to its tillers, having lost his old feudal identity, he does not find a new place and is spared from a suicidal jump into a well only by the intervention of the Dalit Sukkhā. After this, he asks the Dalits to be called Harnām only, leaving behind his caste identity, and starts a living as a tiller himself.

The strength of Hindi Dalit literature stems from the personal and existential experience of its authors. Dalit literature is underway from autobiography to fiction, and, since some works already form part of the curricula of Hindi studies at colleges and universities, I am convinced that the mainstreaming of Hindi Dalit literature is under way.

However, it appears to me that the next generation of the present lower middle class Dalit intellectuals might not consume Hindi literature any longer. In a recent article in *Rāṣṭrīy Sahārā*, Candrabhān argues that Dalit authors should shift over to English to create a more powerful national Dalit literature. This is a typical attitude for the second and third generation of educated Dalits, and it reflects the mainstream position in Indian society, completely unaware of the estrangement and the social shift inevitably related to the change from Hindi to English. Ramaṇikā Guptā argues against it in a recent "Haṃs" article (Guptā 2003b).

All of the authors I have asked belong either to the first or the second generation of family members, who have been educated at least on a higher school level. Most of them were born either in the village or in remote places and have moved to the towns. And their own children belong to the first generation of Dalits enrolled in English medium public schools. The present Hindi educated generations appear to be intermediaries, the next generations will be drawn into the middle class linguistic mainstream, whose linguistic status symbol and medium of higher communication is English.

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