EDITED BY
Rajeev Bhargava
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Helmut Reifeld

JUSTICE

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Poetic and Social Justice: Some Reflections on the Premchand–Dalit Controversy

Alok Rai

The concept of 'poetic justice' is believed to have been invented by Thomas Rymer in 1678, in *Tragedies of the Last Age Considered.* This is the idea, broadly speaking, that the poet or artist has not only the freedom but even a duty to invent his imaginary worlds in such a fashion that, in it, the wrongs of the everyday world are redressed. There, the guilty do not go unpunished and villains do not prosper. Legitimate lovers are united, and illegitimate ones meet their just deserts. The underlying assumption, of course, is that an unjust world is also unaesthetic. Consequently, in the domain of aesthetic representation, the injustices of mere life *can* and *should* be corrected.

Not surprisingly, the concept soon became a subject of mockery and disdain. Thus, in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, 'Poetic Justice' is one of the 'four guardian Virtues' of the Majesty of Dullness:

> Poetic Justice, with her lifted scale,
> Where, in nice balance, truth with gold she weighs,
> And solid pudding against empty praise.
>
> —(*Dunciad*, Book 1, ll. 52–54)

But while the concept might well have fallen into disrepute, the underlying idea—of imagined, aesthetic worlds being, somehow, compensatory and corrective—is to be found in other traditions also. And it has indeed continued to exert an influence on artistic practice in times and places far removed. Thus, even overtly realistic fiction—such as in the English 19th century—was under pressure, often from its readers, even to temper its representation of the actual with some idealist, some sentimental amelioration, some massaging of the cold facts. (The altered ending of Dickens's *Great Expectations* is a famous example.) It is this that lies at the root of the sudden transformations that one finds in so much of such fiction. The main narration is under obligation to be faithful to the known world of injustice and so on. Because, after all, a *wholly* imaginary universe would have no relevance to the real world of experience, and consequently have no consolatory power. The compensatory and 'just' transformations can only be tacked on.

Similarly, under the dispensation of socialist realism, the writer was under obligation not only to show what was actually there in the lived historical world but was also required to divine, further, the shapes of the still-forming future, and indeed, to assist in the shaping of that future by showing what might be, and could be, and ought to be true. Here, far away from Rymer's 17th century world, we can still see the idea of poetic justice exercising its influence.

The concept of 'social justice' has a very specific Indian inflection. The Preamble to the Constitution mentions three kinds of justice: political, economic and social. The first refers to political freedom and so on; the second pertains to poverty and the inequities of class. The last 'social justice' refers and is understood to refer specifically to caste injustice, and addresses issues of reparation and recognition for the victims of savarna Hindu society. A kind of urgency, an

uncompromising insistence on priority, is built into the very origins of the Indian concept. Thus, Ambedkar who is its proximate progenitor, differed crucially with Gandhi over the question of timing. I am sure that there are many ways of reading the Gandhi–Ambedkar controversy that was ultimately resolved, after a fashion, through the Poona Pact. But the part that is relevant for my argument here, in counterposing social justice and poetic justice, is simply the implication that the needs of social justice, which can hardly wait even for the attainment of independence from colonial rule, cannot be met by the fantasy resolutions of imagined worlds.

In this sense, poetic justice and social justice are polar opposites. While the former provides consolation and courage in an imaginary realm, the latter seeks tangible gains in the immediate political and historical context. Normally, one would expect these to be non-intersecting discourses, operating as they do on entirely different planes. However, as the Dalit cultural upsurge of the last few decades shows, there is an aesthetic corollary of the claim of social justice. And it is at that level that one may see some infection by the notion of poetic justice, that is, in the demand for representations in which that which is yet to become actual in the material–historical world, is represented as already-achieved. This is the familiar 'is–ought' slippage that signals the long reach of the notion of poetic justice. Thus, Kanwal Bharati (2000) writes,

> गंगी का विद्रोह क़ाबिले तारीफ़ है, पर प्रेमचन्द वर्ण और जाति पर उससे कोई चोट नहीं करते [कराते?] हैं। कोई मुक्ति-संग्राम लड़ा होता गंगी ने, तो हो सकता था, गंगी की जान चली जाती, पर वह दलितों की अस्मिता की कहानी बन जाती और जोखू वही मैला-गन्दा पानी नहीं पीता। डॉ. अम्बेडकर ने भी कहानियाँ रची थीं। पर वे कहानियाँ उन्होंने क़लम से नहीं, कर्म से रची थीं। (Gangi's revolt is praiseworthy, but Premchand does not make any attack on caste and community through her. If only Gangi had fought some battle of liberation, though she may well have lost her life,

> but it would have become a story of the Dalit fight for recognition, and Jokhu would not have had to drink that dirty polluted water. Dr Ambedkar also created stories. But he did not create these by his pen, he created them by his actions.)

This prescriptive militancy is to be distinguished from that coldly matter-of-fact writing in which the quiet representation of actuality is itself subversive. The aesthetic that demands more, that demands sentimental excess and imaginary amelioration—whether in the form of improbable goodness or improbable militancy—is what I have classed under the rubric of 'poetic justice'. Here, one demands of art that it compensates for the sluggishness and defect of reality.

There is one further distinction that one needs to make with respect to the concept of social justice. Basically, it seems to me that the notion needs to be disaggregated. There is an important part of it that pertains to the world of rules and laws. There is another not less important part that pertains to attitudes and feelings, to the persistence of the past in ways that, while they may be insubstantial, are far from being inconsequential. I speak of prejudice and predisposition; and this is the part that is identified by keywords such as dignity and self-respect, but also—and there is an important difference here—with the need for recognition. And, whereas the former component of the notion of social justice can and should be legislated into unambiguous reality, there is no immediate way in which the latter—dignity and recognition—can be brought into existence by fiat. Obviously, there are ways in which action on the first level has consequences, over time, at the second level of attitudes and feelings also. But the latter is, willy-nilly, a slow and *necessarily consensual* process—and that is why the cultural-aesthetic question becomes one of paramount importance. It takes two to play the game of recognition.

There is an inherently conservative, trans-historical pretence that is part and parcel of traditional aesthetics. This is the idealist claim that the aesthetic domain is autonomous of the claims of history and other contingencies. It is, on this account, a kind of utopian space in which the hierarchies of the real historical world are held in abeyance, because the aesthetic realm is subject to its own, mysterious rules. This is an untenable claim—but I hope to argue later that the notion of aesthetic autonomy fulfils an important function, and therefore still needs to be defended, albeit in a modified form. Still, the fact of the matter is that notions of the aesthetic—notions of what is or is not acceptable, 'artistic', 'beautiful' and the like—*do* change over time. In the historical snapshots that we can get of this process, there often appears to be a mysterious consonance between the interests and predispositions of socially dominant groups and the ruling aesthetic ideas of a particular time. By the same token, any new 'content'—the experiences and perceptions of hitherto excluded groups—is resisted by retreating behind the notion of aesthetic autonomy.

The social and historical contingency of the idea of the 'aesthetic' hardly needs strenuous demonstration. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the workings of the notion of 'taste'—and of the ways in which cultural capital is unevenly distributed, rather like the other kind, except that the two distributions do not overlap exactly—has complicated the idealist–aesthetic defence significantly. However, apart from the gross 'power' considerations—like who gets to man the institutions and establish the pecking order—there is a subtler level at which inertial resistance might account more for the glacial pace at which aesthetic ideas change. This is the operation of those often unarticulated views and beliefs regarding plausibility, viability, likelihood and so on, on which judgements of aesthetic quality rest. These views

and beliefs are not in themselves aesthetic, but they have profound aesthetic consequences.

I referred earlier to those historical snapshots that reveal the mysterious consonance between notions of the 'aesthetic' and the social configuration in a particular time. And if we look at such 'snapshots' over a period of time, we notice that what appears in each snapshot as frozen, eternal and beyond the reach of mere time, in fact changes over time. *But the point or process of change never becomes visible—there are no snapshots of 'process'*, and even a movie is only a fast succession of snapshots.

We know something about the diachronic movement of the real, historical world, and we have accounts of the vertical synchrony between particular moments of this real historical world and the corresponding aesthetic formations—to put it crudely, we know something about the emergence and consolidation of the urban middle class in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe; and we know something about the ways in which their tastes and their worldviews got translated into the forms of art. But we know very little about the necessary diachronic movement at the aesthetic level, without which, all we are left with are jerky snapshots, spurts and ruptures. And yet, if we wish to understand the process by which new 'content' is first resisted, then accommodated and assimilated in a new aesthetic configuration, it is precisely this elusive 'change' that we need to understand.

I referred to views and beliefs that are not in themselves aesthetic, though they underline our aesthetic judgements. These views and beliefs are produced in a wide variety of ways and locations—in families, in classrooms, on playgrounds and so on. But they are also generated in that twilight zone between life and art that is not life, but is sufficiently informed by it to reflect a transformed and transforming light upon it. Anyone who has experienced the power of literature—its ability to take us out of ourselves

and into other unlikely selves and experiences, only to bring us back enriched and transformed—will understand readily the commonplace everyday experience that I am trying to describe here. It is this power that all those who endeavour to use literature in the service of social transformation and attitudinal change must seek to understand and to yoke.

When one looks at the Hindi literature that emerged in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the early 20th century, the silence with regard to the life-experience of the so-called Hindu lower castes is nearly total. It should perhaps be said that this silence is pretty much there in the Urdu literature of the time as well. Indeed, the pressure of the elite, urban literary culture sits rather more heavily on the Urdu writer, and is indeed part of the reason why Premchand, looking around at the unregarded life of his time, 'switched' from Urdu to Hindi. The literary culture of the latter was still forming, and Premchand had an important formative influence upon it.

But the strongest influence by far was that of the Hindu savarna classes that were, indeed, inventing themselves as a class-for-itself through the process of inventing the language that Hindi was soon to become. What is more, these classes (or groups, or castes) saw themselves as excluded—with some justification. As such—and for all the traditional reasons of caste prejudice and the like—they could hardly be expected to pay much attention to groups (or castes) that were even more completely excluded than they were—excluded, crucially, by the Hindu savarna themselves. *The emergent Brahmin of the post-1857 Hindi heartland was particularly ill-positioned to be sympathetic to the anti-Brahmanical critique that was gathering strength elsewhere*.

For complex historical reasons, these early-Hindi ideologues were not even particularly sympathetic to the anti-Brahmanical voices of past centuries. Thus, even a figure

like Kabir, and a tradition like Bhakti, had to wait for recognition by a later generation of 'progressives' before it could be assimilated into—and then *become*—the glorious past of modern Hindi. Thus, Ramchandra Shukla's dismissal of Kabir as mere *sadhukkari* is well-known. However, the near-total silence with regard to what, in a later idiom, we call the Dalit experience, is an essential background for understanding the Premchand–Dalit controversy. The rage of the Dalit ideologue is instantly understandable—the choice of the target, Premchand, will take somewhat longer.

In many respects, Munshi Premchand has become a hoary icon, a sometime sentimentalist from a bygone age, firmly established in the dubious immortality of a curricular classic. He has become part of our cultural shorthand, the familiar and rubbed-down currency of our social imagination. It requires something of an effort to focus on his apparent 'organicity', the manner in which 'Munshi Premchand' came, through what was a remarkable personal story of self-invention, to crystallise and symbolise also a zone of social consciousness. Premchand was both, a creator and a symptom of that great movement of consciousness whose accents can be heard throughout India in the decades around 1900.

When Stephen Dedalus sallies forth into the future in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he intends, famously, 'to forge, in the smithy of my soul, the uncreated conscience of my race'. Similar young men dominate the modern traditions of many of India's languages—encyclopaedic Renaissance men (not many women, alas, for all the well-known reasons), towering and formative individuals whose cultural influence goes far beyond their considerable achievements and competencies. The manner in which these great originary figures work is by picking up disparate aspects of the life of their times, and endowing

those with an unprecedented coherence. In that precise moment, a new cultural subject is born. New continents of experience open up suddenly and become available both for social action and cultural appropriation. What unites these past masters of conscience—Tagore, Karanth, Senapati, Bharati—is the fact that they significantly enlarged the range and reach of the social imagination by making a greater proportion of the marginalised life of their times available to the imagination for being given narrative shape, and so form the basis for a moral order. There is a very real sense in which, even without our consent or knowledge, we *inhabit* the narratives that were invented by these master fabulists, these masters of 'conscience': we live in the worlds that these writers have imagined for us—imagined, and so rendered thinkable, capable of being experienced and acted upon.

It follows from this that Premchand—unlike any other writer of his time, across a wide swathe of north India—was deeply concerned with the inhumanities of the caste system, with the kinds of social experience that the conception of social justice seeks to address. As a journalist, he wrote fearlessly and trenchantly about the injustice that was, for him, a constitutive feature of the Brahmanical order. The accents are sharp—sharp enough, I would have thought, to satisfy even the Dalit ideologues of today who have attacked him. Kanti Mohan (2003: 85) cites Premchand.

> प्रेमचन्द, 'महान तप': क्या अब भी हम अपने बड़प्पन का, अपनी कुलीनता का ढिंढोरा पीटते फिरेंगे? यह ऊँच-नीच, छोटे-बड़े का भेद हिन्दू जीवन के रोम-रोम में व्याप्त हो गया है।...हम आदमी पीछे हैं, चौबे या तिवारी पहले।...इसकी गहरी जड़ों को खोद कर समाज से निकालना होगा। (Will we continue to boast loudly about our greatness, about on our being high-born. All this business of high and low of big and small, this has penetrated every fibre of Hindu life. … Our humanity means little, what matters is that we

are Chaubays or Tiwari. … The deep roots of such attitudes will have to be dug up and removed from society.)

They were certainly sharp enough to have invited the wrath of the Brahmins, who accused him of having used his writing in order to generate 'loathing' for Brahmins. Thus, one Jyoti Prasad Nirmal called him, with some justification, *ghrina ke prachaarak*, that is, preacher of disgust. Premchand's only regret, expressed as such, was that he was unable to do more along those lines, unable to do more to bring down the Brahmanical social order, the *varna-vyavastha*.

Kanti Mohan again citing Premchand in *Udhbhavna* (p. 86) from Jan. 1934 'क्या हम वास्तव में राष्ट्रवादी हैं?' (Are we Nationalists?)

...शिकायत है कि हमने अपनी तीन-चौथाई कहानियों में ब्राह्मणों को काले रंगों में चित्रित करके अपनी संकीर्णता का परिचय दिया है...हम कहते हैं कि अगर हममें इतनी शक्ति होती, तो हम अपना सारा जीवन हिन्दू जाति को पुरोहितों, पुजारियों, पण्डों और धर्मोपजीवी कीटाणुओं से मुक्त कराने में अर्पित कर देते। हिन्दू जाति का सबसे घृणित कोढ़, सबसे लज्जाजनक कलंक यही टके पंथी दल हैं, जो एक विशाल जोंक की भाँति उसका ख़ून चूस रहा है... (…the complaint is that in three-fourths of my stories, I have shown my prejudice by painting Brahmins in dark colours… . What I say is that if I had enough strength, I would devote my whole life to freeing the Hindu community from the priests, the parasites who feed off religion. The greatest disgrace, the leprous scab of the Hindu community is precisely such petty groups, who are like a gigantic leech, sucking away the life-blood of the community.)

That is why it is particularly intriguing to find a Dalit ideologue accusing him of betraying, finally, a lingering affection for that same *varna-vyavastha.*

Kanwal Bharati, (2000: 87–88) cites Om Prakash Balmiki-

'प्रेमचन्द ने दलित चेतना की कई महत्वपूर्ण कहानियाँ लिखी हैं...लेकिन अंतिम दौर की कहानी कफ़न तक आते-आते वह गाँधीवादी आदर्शों,

सामन्ती मूल्यों, वर्णव्यवस्था के पक्षधर दिखायी पड़ते हैं। एक अंतर्द्वन्द्व है उनकी रचनाओं में–एक ओर दलितों से सहानुभूति, दूसरी और वर्णव्यवस्था में विश्वास।' (Premchand has written several important stories that show Dalit consciousness… but by the time he gets to the last story 'Kafan', he appears to be in favour of Gandhian ideals, feudal values and the caste system. There is a deep struggle in his writings—on the one side, there is sympathy for Dalits, on the other, faith in the caste system.)

These journalist writings, however, for all their trenchant vivacity, their forthright condemnation of *savarna* Hindu society—leeches and parasites, he called them—are still a restatement of opinions that were available in the political discourse of the time, albeit not very current in Brahmanical Uttar Pradesh. What is really remarkable in his achievement is the extension of *imaginative citizenship* to the hitherto outcaste and the downtrodden. In insinuating *these* figures into the cultural discourse of the literate and overwhelmingly *savarna* Hindu society of his time—particularly in the Hindi register—Premchand was bringing about a fundamental and far-reaching change in the moral economy of his society. He was altering the established moral equilibrium, in which there was a rough coincidence between desert and destiny, between what is and what ought to be.

This destabilizing manoeuvre is at the heart of what might be called the literature of conscience. This is essentially a 19th century mode in which the writer endeavours to widen the circle of sympathy by including hitherto excluded categories of persons within it. Key to the phenomenon of this literature of conscience is the guilty reader, except of course, that the challenge for a pioneer of this kind of literature—such as Premchand unarguably was in the Hindi heartland—is actually to *invent* the guilty reader, to extend the stigma of 'wrong' to yet more categories of hitherto acceptable or at least tolerated behaviour. This is recognised by some dalit critics. Thus, Sheoraj Bechain (2000) refers to

the 'Dalit' literature produced by the liberal/progressive *savarna* writers as 'स्वजाति संकुचन का साहित्य' which may be translated roughly as the literature of embarrassment of one's own caste.

However, such an invention requires not only an advanced awareness of social injustice but also, crucially, a sensitivity to the tides and limits of contemporary social consciousness. The reader can be pushed—and if this is done with sensitivity and creative vivacity, might after a time even desire to *be* pushed—but if he is pushed too far or too fast, as Dalit ideologues may well discover, he soon ceases to be a reader at all. It is not a question of aesthetic autonomy, as conservatives might suggest, but rather a question of aesthetic *tact*.

The altered moral economy that results—not only but also because of the operations of this kind of literature—is characterised by a generalised sense of *moral debt* that is owed to those whom caste society has brutalised. It is difficult to quantify this debt—it does not show up in the account books of the hopelessly practical world; but this debt is nevertheless available, as a form of *moral capital*, even to those who are, or can plausibly represent the victims of that injustice. In my understanding, it is something similar to this that gets transformed into the socially corrective, affirmative action programmes that get instituted after 1947. Numbers are an important part of this story—but it is still incomplete without calling to mind also the necessary and entirely deserved guilt of the *savarna*.

The real rage of the Dalit ideologue, however, is directed not so much against either the journalism or most of the stories—it is directed against the last, great story, 'Kafan'. Kafan is, in many respects, a breakthrough, which only sharpens the regret at Premchand's premature and abrupt demise at the age of 56, for, Kafan is the last story he wrote.

Hitherto, Premchand's Dalit stories, so to speak, had remained within the familiar forms of the literature of conscience: the victims are shown as suffering inhumane and cruel treatment, but they are themselves sufficiently human to permit that necessary identification whereby this literature works. Creeping timidly with Gangi towards the forbidden well of the Thakurs (in *Thakur ka Kuan*); dying with Dukhi outside the heartless Pandit's house in Sadgati (in *Sadgati*)—we extend to those excluded others and to others like them, first in literature and then, more reluctantly, in life also, the generosity of our *temporarily liberal* humanity. But it is crucial to this psychological transaction that the victims must be simultaneously damaged and undamaged, wronged but essentially unharmed, *needing but also deserving* salvation. If, on the other hand, the victims are shown as truly damaged—as they *must* be, at some level—then we, the would-liberal but essentially privileged readers of this literature, stand doubly accused. Because of course, *we* are responsible for that damage: the accusing trace of the practice of cruelty. By the same token we are, gratefully and surreptitiously, exonerated by that miraculously undamaged condition.

Kafan violates this taboo, crosses this threshold. The protagonists of Kafan, Ghisu and Madhav, are entirely human in their inhumanity: the violence that the unjust social order has inflicted on them is registered in their damaged natures, their existential necessity to seize an all-too-rare moment of happiness from the unlikely bounty that the death of the son's wife has provided them. There is a bitter condemnation of the social order that has produced these brutalised individuals, just as there is a mockery of the legitimating ideology of that social order in the bits and pieces of standard-issue Brahminism—karma, maya, and so on—that the two dredge up drunkenly from time to time to assuage their residual guilt at partying, while the young woman dies. It is an unforgettable story—a clear advance over the basically sentimental

stories that preceded it. Because of course, that sentiment is the staple of the literature of conscience. Kafan on the other hand is radical and uncompromising. It offers no toehold for optimism—not in the miraculously undamaged humanity of the victims, and therefore, by implication, not in the improbable eruption of humanity in the victimisers. Kafan subverts that ultimately liberal game. There are some truths after which no reconciliation may be possible.

Though the rage of the Dalit critic is directed against Kafan in particular, there is a generalised complaint also. Premchand did not write as today's Dalit writers aspire to write, bristling with Ambedkar-inspired aggression. Sheoraj Bechain (2000: 11) analyses the alleged moral transaction explicitly in terms of the ideological division between Gandhi and Ambedkar:

> इस कहानी [सद्गति] में प्रेमचन्द का लेखक पीछे छूट गया और चमार विरोधी गाँधीवादी कायस्थ आगे आ गया है। ...यही कारण है कि सद्गति के दुखी चमार के चरित्र पर गाँधीवादी कायरता की प्रतिछाया स्पष्ट दिखायी पड़ती है। दलित चेतना के पात्र के व्यक्तित्व में वर्ण-व्यवस्था के प्रति आक्रोश, असमानता, के प्रति विद्रोह अपेक्षित है, जो प्रेमचन्द के पात्रों में नहीं है। दया, सहानुभूति, करुणा और कृपा का मोहताज दलित नहीं हो सकता। उसमें अधिकार चेतना भी होनी चाहिए। (In this story (Sadgati), the author Premchand has been left behind, and the Chamar-hating Kayastha has come to the fore. … That is the reason why there is a clear shadow of Gandhian cowardice in the characterisation of Dukhi Chamar in Sadgati. What one expects to find in the consciousness of a Dalit character with respect to the caste system is rage, anger with respect to inequality—but these are missing in Premchand's characters. Any character who lives in anticipation of kindness, sympathy, generosity and pity, can not be a Dalit. He must also have a consciousness of his rights.)

Further, Premchand's characters, the poor, ground-down folk of rural Avadh in the early 20th century are, broadly, passive, timid, trapped in the hegemonic ideology of the dominant savarna. Surely, a Dalit critic advises, Premchand could have, at least in his imagined universe, improved a little on this all-too-familiar, melancholy reality—a touch of poetic justice, a spark of rebellion, perhaps?

And even when he does get around to depicting awkward, unaccommodating and unaccommodated characters like Ghisu and Madhav, they take the form not of angry idealists burning with a passion for social justice, but rather two derelicts, down and out, snatching desperate solace from a life and a social order that gives them nothing. They understand something of the wrongness of a social order that gives charity for a shroud for the dead woman, but not help for medicine while she is still alive. But this ironic perception does not take them in the direction of a social and political critique. Within the terms of the story, the final reaction on their part might well be of gratitude—the charity that comes too late might as well be used for the purposes of the living duo rather than the dead woman.

It is entirely appropriate that Kafan should be the immediate cause of an aesthetic crisis. And the point of talking about this crisis is certainly not a defence of Premchand, who scarcely needs such defence. Only the generalised form of the aesthetic crisis need concern us here. It boils down to a problem that is, I suggest, perhaps already too much with us: this is the 'problem' of representation, the question of who has a right to speak *for* whom. It is, I believe, entirely comprehensible that when historically submerged groups seek to emerge from the shadows, they find themselves imprisoned not only in physical ways but also, and this might well be the most difficult imprisonment, in hegemonic systems of representation, in the narratives of other people.

A possible 'solution' to this—although one that I believe is deeply problematic as it is understandable—is the assertion that only those who are born Dalits can write Dalit literature—which is an ironic reprise of the traditional logic of oppression, that caste is destiny: the accident of birth is both enablement and disability.

Bharati said (2000: 91):

> 'दलित साहित्य दलितों द्वारा लिखा गया साहित्य है।' (Dalit literature is literature that has been written by Dalits.)

Bechain (2000) goes even further on p. 106:

> 'आवश्यकता इस बात की है कि समूचे साहित्य में दलितों द्वारा लिखा गया साहित्य भी शामिल हो और उसकी व्याख्या के लिए दलित साहित्य के दलित विशेषज्ञ नियुक्त होने चाहिए। (What is required is that literature written by Dalits should be included in the whole literary corpus, and that for commenting on it and explaining it, Dalit specialists on Dalit literature should be appointed.)

There is a further suggestion that, while being born in particular castes is a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient one. Thus, there is a distinction sought to be made between 'Harijan' writing—borrowing Gandhi's well-intentioned but now patronising term—and proper Dalit writing: In a sense that I understand and even sympathise with, this gesture of 'secession', the hard assertion of 'difference', is an essential moment in the cultural politics of identity. But the field of literature, at any rate, offers an illustration of something that I believe to be true, namely, that it is possible to suffer from 'too much difference' just as it is possible to suffer from 'too little difference'.

I would not dare to offer a general theory of the way in which this politics of difference works: different situations, different strategies. But culture offers an extremely valuable

interface of the aesthetic and the moral: the relative autonomy of the aesthetic domain offers a liberated, utopian space within which unfamiliar experiences and perceptions may be encountered. On the other hand, as I have argued earlier, there is a constant and necessary osmosis and seepage between the aesthetic and moral realms—effective precisely because it is unacknowledged, and often, even unconscious. Notions of what is aesthetically acceptable and narratively plausible are of course, both, historically contingent and parasitic upon underlying moral conceptions—but these in turn seep from the aesthetic realm in order to influence behaviours and expectations—that is become morally consequential.

It seems important to me, however, *not* to abandon the notion of 'universality'. It is entirely understandable that the complacent 'universalist' assumption of dominant groups gets challenged by emergent ones. But this bland and even arrogant universalism needs to be replaced by something that I can think of as a *negotiated universal*—a horizon of universality, towards which all utterance presses, unless it is content to become and to remain the dialect of a ghetto, incomprehensible to outsiders. The impatience with sentimental 'poetic justice' inspired writing is entirely comprehensible and even traditional. But it is important also to acknowledge the origins in something like 'poetic justice' of the remorselessly militant Dalit who is never tired and never wrong, and certainly never like Ghisu and Madhav. Further, and this is crucial, it is important to keep open those channels of communication that 'poetic justice' sought to set up—between groups, between domains—albeit in its own fashion. Because if 'recognition' is a key desideratum of the struggle for *social* justice—particularly in its cultural forms—then that struggle must involve, and not merely implicate and castigate, the other. Without that necessary

involvement and possible transformation, there are already other, traditional identities waiting to be resumed, available for ascription even as they are sought to be rejected: the mutual name-calling that passes for social discourse in a deeply divided society.

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