



Baluta: A graphic portrayal of dalit exploitation and humiliation

Hitesh Goyal

Associate Professor Department of English, Govt. Ripudaman College, Nabha, Punjab, India

Abstract

Daya Pawar's autobiography stands witness to this exploitation and humiliation faced by dalits at every step of their lives. Throughout the work, the author narrates many humiliating episodes from his life in order to give voice to the common experiences of dalits. As a matter of fact, poverty, misery and suffering form an integral part of this dalit autobiography. Remembering everything clearly, Pawar gives a firsthand experience of the unimaginable suffering, humiliation and disgrace faced by himself and his family members at the hands of the upper caste Hindus.

Keywords: Exploitation, humiliation, subjugation, suffering, deprivation

Introduction

Baluta, an autobiographical work, when first appeared in Marathi in 1978, caused a sensation in the literary world and won the author Daya Pawar the award from the state government in the year 1979 and an award from the Ford Foundation in the year 1982. Janhavi Acharekar in "The Lives of Others" rightly opines, "When Baluta was published in 1978, it shocked its upper caste readers!"

The very beginning of the narrative makes explicit the fact that Daya Pawar did not like his name 'Dagdu' because it suggested his low caste status and for this reason, when he starts going to school he asks his classmates to call him DM in an attempt to hide his real name. In the prologue to Baluta, he expresses his extreme sense of anger over the way their names marked their low caste status as dalits and reflected the society's contempt for them:

My real name is Dagdu . . . But that's the name you'll see in the school register. No one in the city knows me as Dagdu. Who knows whether my wife and children know?

the name. Since my childhood I've hated this name. Shakespeare may have said, 'What is in a name?' but tell me, why should this name fall to my lot? It smacks of a clod on which a clod was born. Look at our nicknames – Kachrya, which conjures up dirt; Dhondya, which suggests stones. If by some chance someone were to name his child Gautam, it would be shortened to Gavtya . . . Brahmins' names signify learnedness –Vidyadhar, for instance. Kshatriyas' names suggest valour - like Balaram. Vaishyas can be named after the goddess of wealth, say Laxmikant. And Shudras? For us, names like Shudrak or Maatang, names that declare our low caste status. That was the order of things for centuries. (4-5).

The very location of the place where Pawar was born reveals that they have been secluded from the upper caste society and forced to live in filthy and degrading conditions right from their birth just because they are dalits. Commenting upon such an evil impact of caste system on the lives of dalits in the society, Smruti Suman observes, "the impact of caste system has been horribly demeaning the idea of a graceful and dignified life for Dalits in Indian society. Just by being born in a particular caste, the Dalits are placed in a far inferior and degrading position" (193). They are excluded from the rest of the society and disallowed any sort of social upward mobility Daya Pawar's

autobiography stands witness to this exploitation and humiliation faced by dalits at every step of their lives. The occupational identity of the Mahars as shown in the narrative is a significant trait of the caste system whereby only certain menial and distasteful occupations are served for them. Pawar writes that most of the Mahar men "worked as hamaals or labourers. Some worked in the mills and factories" (7). While the Mahar men work as labourers, the Mahar women have to work even harder than them. They scavenge pieces of broken glass and iron and scraps of paper and rags etc. and sell them in the market. Due to the nature of their work, they can not even observe 'purdah.' They never stop serving their drunkard husbands however hard they beat them. In short, the condition of Mahar women is even worse than that of Mahar men.

Throughout the work, the author narrates many humiliating episodes from his life in order to give voice to the common experiences of dalits. As a matter of fact, poverty, misery and suffering form an integral part of this dalit autobiography. The work depicts both physical and psychological hunger in the life of Mahars. There are a lot many references to the stunted lives of Mahars who have to live in extremely miserable conditions. The pitiable conditions of Mahar houses in Kawakhana speaks volumes of their plight as dalits. In the rainy season, "every house leaked. All night we would place vessels and cans under the leaks. And when sleep came unbidden, it was to the music of this jaltarang" (11). The duties that the Mahars have to perform also serve as an evidence of their exploitation and subjugation. They have to work day and night to fulfill their needs. There is no timetable for their work. They live their lives in slavery and are bound to do any kind of work that has to be done. Most of their jobs need neither study nor skill. They are forced to work for all the twenty-four hours of the day and do 'bigar' labour. For all this, they only get 'baluta' - their share in the village harvest. As a child, Pawar always goes with his mother to claim their 'baluta' in return for their hard work. He regrets that even this 'baluta' is not given to them as their right for their job and the farmers often grumble and rebuke them while handing over the grains.

The autobiography clearly demonstrates the fact that the working conditions of Mahars in the caste ridden Indian society are extremely uncondusive. There is no denying the

fact that the “difficult working conditions that these Mahars are exposed to are evident of their subordinate status . . . Mahar’s inferior social position is inescapable . . .” (Murage 74). The lives of the characters in the autobiography are dictated upon by their caste identity and they are forced to adapt to their traditional subordinate status at their work place.

Pawar confesses that he is still unable to forget the pitiable condition of his family members that he has witnessed from his very childhood. He calls his autobiography ‘a scavenger’s account of his life’ and says that his life as a child has left its scars on him forever. He narrates, “What I saw of this Maharki as a child has left its scars. This history will not be erased. Perhaps it will only go when I die. This stain of helplessness on my face? It dates back to that time. However much I scour my face, even to the point of bleeding, it will not be wiped away” (65). Remembering everything clearly, Pawar goes on to give a firsthand experience of the unimaginable suffering, humiliation and disgrace faced by himself and his family members at the hands of the upper caste Hindus.

The author narrates an incident when he is asked a very insulting question by an intellectual at Sahitya Sahvas, a writer’s colony in Mumbai, “So have you eaten the meat of dead cattle? Tell me honestly, how does it taste?” (73). This question, says Pawar, makes him feel as if his breath has been taken away and with some confusion he answers, “When I ate it, I was not at the age at which one remembers tastes. I only knew how to assuage my hunger, by filling the hole in my belly. During a famine, Vishwamitra ate the leg of a dog. During the great war, the Maratha platoons ate the meat of horses. So, I won’t talk about the dead cattle that I may have eaten” (73). It shows how starvation and poverty form an inseparable part of their lives in their caste-based socio-cultural set up. They are forced to eat the meat of dead animals because that is the only way out they have to live. The upper caste elite society reduces the life of the lower caste Mahars to such a shameful state that “the death of cattle brought great excitement to the Maharwada” (73). In very touching words, Pawar narrates how their excitement is almost doubled if the death of the animal is caused by it falling off a cliff because then the flesh is fresh and all the Mahars descend on the carcass before the vultures can get it: . . . if the animal had died falling off a cliff, the excitement was even more acute. Such an animal’s flesh would be fresh. News that an animal had died in the wilds did not take long to get to the Maharwada. It would pass along faster than the telexes of today. When the vultures and kites began to circle, like aeroplanes, the Mahars would locate the fallen animal. They would rush to get there before the birds picked the carcass clean. (73).

The meat of the carcass they get is often scanty. Therefore, they preserve it for rainy days whenever they can. As they don’t have refrigerators, they cut it into small thin strips which they call ‘chaanya’ and dry these strips by the fireplace:

When the chaanya were dry, they would be cut into pieces which were called todkya.

These were held in reserve for the bad months of Shravan and Ashadh. Sometimes, a beautiful white fungus would grow over the todkya, or maggots would sprout on them. The young ones were given the job of drying them again in the courtyard, guarding them with sticks. (77) Their poverty and low caste status make this helpless subaltern class a

victim to exploitation at the hands of the elite upper castes. They are not allowed to enter the Maruti temple even though the land on which the Maruti temple stands belongs to the Maharwada. The Mahars have incessantly laboured to build this temple but as soon as “Maruti was ensconced and the temple consecrated, the Mahars had to be kept away” (133). Once when the narrator tries to visit this temple thinking how his entering the temple will jeopardize its sanctity, he is accused of having polluted God and is beaten up badly. It is only when his grandmother begs and pleads that he is allowed to go.

Pawar laments that a large portion of his life has been full of deprivations, sufferings and humiliations imposed upon him due to his low caste by the privileged high caste people and he feels broken under the weight of the torturing memories of his past. He blames his caste based hegemonic socio-cultural set up for destroying the dreams and hopes of all the Mahars like him by keeping them marginalized and by labeling them as untouchables. As injustice has been heaped upon them in every way possible, he holds the dominant caste system responsible for this miserable condition of his own and of his people as subalterns.

In spite of the society and circumstances being so hostile and oppressive, Pawar is proud that he got enrolled in Nagpada Municipal School where he studies until the second standard. It is here that for the first time in life he starts feeling how different their world actually is from the world he learns about at school. He seems to be impelled to a “life of long battle between construct of reading and construct of existence. They collide with each other . . .” (Barua 173). His dalit self is forced to undergo an irreconcilable tussle and his education about truth vanishes with the reality that his father has to steal in order to survive:

Even if all of this seemed to be distasteful, I could not express my opinion. It was unlikely that I would have had the courage of my convictions at that age. But were they my convictions? Here, in school, I was being taught Always speak the truth and there, I was taking Dada’s loot to sell at Chor Bazaar. The world I learned about at school seemed fraudulent compared to the world I lived in. (27-28)

His meager existence as a dalit stands opposed to the ideal world he is taught about at school and he can see the differences clearly. In the third standard, he joins the village school. Pawar’s depiction of how even in the school he is made a victim to caste-based marginalization is really heartening:

The school had classes up to the fourth standard but from first to fourth, we all sat in one large hall. We would take a piece of sacking to sit on, along with our slates and school bags. I remember the early times well. We were not allowed to sit with the Maratha children from the village. They faced the teacher and we sat at right angles to them, facing in a different direction. If we were thirsty, there was no water for us at school; we had to go back to the Maharwada to drink. (44-45).

His teacher belongs to the ‘Brahmin’ caste and promotes untouchability and casteism among the innocent students. The concept of equality advocated by the Constitution holds no value for these Mahar children. For them, even playing with the village children means their contempt. Fed up with such a life of deprivation, exploitation and discrimination, Pawar finds himself growing increasingly isolated. His degraded status as a Mahar becomes palpable to him and

makes him want to flee from the oppressive norms of the society. He reminisces that the country had got independence when he was in his fourth standard and laments that even after independence no significant change is visible in the lives of dalits:

I can't say which year these things happened. But I do remember that I was in the fourth standard when we ate the jilebis of Independence. We also got shiny new badges with Bharat Mata on them. We wore these on our chests proudly. But what did it really mean? I don't remember my life changing in any significant way. Village leaders made speeches in our school; they made no sense to me. (60).

After passing the fifth standard with good marks, Pawar gets admission in taluka hostel. He is happy with the prospect that his Aai's burden will be lessened now to some extent. He feels as if someone has unclogged his stream of difficulties. The food in the hostel is free; but the environment is again not free from the shackles of untouchability and casteism. One day, as he is on his way to the mess, the Superintendent of the hostel, who belongs to an upper caste, stops him and warns him against entering the hall because he belongs to a low caste:

The Superintendent was of the same caste as they. He stopped me as I made my way to the mess, my copper plate gleaming with the scrubbing I had given it. Look, you are a Mahar. If you go into the hall, you will be beaten black and blue. Quietly, I took a place close to the door, not neglecting to leave some space between me and everyone else. I looked at the students. They looked at me with the threatening eyes of bulls about to charge. (118).

After getting rebuked by the Superintendent, he leaves the hall. Pawar laments that it is still a matter of regret for him that he lived there like a coward, without any self respect. The mal treatment that he receives everywhere simply because of his low caste is experienced by him here also, amongst the educated class. Even education doesn't seem to make much difference. Enraged with the status quo that the dalits are forced to maintain throughout their lives, he expresses his feelings at such times in the following words:

I was an insect being teased by wanton boys for their sport, unable to respond, unable to retaliate. I chose not to strike back but to push on. Sometimes I would wonder how a mouthful of food could drain us of self respect. Why could I not have the courage to oppose them . . . I left the hall with my plate and glass, feeling like a convict sentenced to a lifetime of servitude. I could hear the fetters clanking hollowly: khoodam, khoodam . . . I would look into the lofty blue arch of the sky and wonder: Would there ever be room in it for free flight? (119).

The impermeable wall of caste separates him from the rest wherever he goes and he longs for a life of freedom and equality. The hardships undergone by his mother to educate him torture him all the time. He remembers how when she came to the hostel to sell whatever she could, he would intentionally avoid speaking to her in front of other students, running after her when she had left. He confesses, "I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord" (122). He is ashamed of living in such a caste-based society which compels the lower castes to maintain even the sacred relationship of a mother and a son in a secretive way.

He begins to wonder if he is destined to live such a filthy life forever. At one point in the narrative he recites a poem "Tree" from Kondvada to define his sorrows:

Somewhere I see a tree, shivering in pain.
Like the banyan, its roots go deep.
Unlike the banyan, it never flowers.
This tree is bare whatever the season
In each vein, pain seeks release.
Its leaves slough, a leper's fingers.
Each branch bears strange fruit:
Corpses that dangle.
But the end will not come
And the tree must bear death pangs
In each living moment.
Somewhere I see a tree, moaning its pain. (105)

In this poem, he uses the metaphor of a tree to define his sorrow as a dalit. He compares himself to a tree laden with sorrow and in a very sentimental way shares how he himself, his ancestors and in fact his entire community have always suffered untold miseries due to their low caste. The traditional caste ridden society neither tries to mitigate their sufferings, nor does it offer them any kind of consolation. Like the roots of the banyan tree that spread deeper and deeper in the ground, the sorrows of his community are also deeply rooted in the social structure of Indian society; but unlike the same tree which flourishes and blooms in the spring season, they never get a chance to flourish in their lives. Their sorrowful life as members of a downtrodden class makes the author feel that their perennial pain while living in their neglected world of poverty, ignorance and sufferings is going to last forever and an end to their miseries will never come.

Baluta is undoubtedly a standing witness to all these sufferings faced not only by Pawar as a member of dalit community, but also by the entire dalit community as a whole. Even after seven decades of independence, the golden dream of liberty, equality and fraternity is still to be realized. Baluta aspires to "blow away unabated the fig leaf of grandeur and valour of the great Indian nation, and reveal the hollowness that exists underneath vis-à-vis Dalits and other marginalized communities" (P. Naik 21). It underlines that being a dalit means a life of hardships, replete with subjugation and humiliation.

References

1. Acharekar J. The Lives of Others. The Hindu [Internet], 2015. [cited 2025 Jun 12]; Available from: www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/janhavi-acharekar-reviews-jerry-pintos-translation-of-baluta/article7796376.ece
2. Barua S. Dare to Read: A Dalit Reads in Daya Pawar's Baluta. J Dept Engl [Internet],2020;13(1):172–9. Available from: inet.vidyasagar.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/5417/1/18_Subhashis%20Barua.pdf
3. Murage PN, Makokha KS. Aesthetics of Globalization in Daya Pawar's Baluta: Reflexivity and Social Change in Critical Perspective. Contemp Voice Dalit,2020;12(1):71–81.
4. Naik PC. Baluta and Joothan amid Humiliation. Econ Polit Wkly,2016;11(27):19–21.
5. Pawar D. Baluta. Pinto J, translator. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015.
6. Suman S. Caste, Gender, Ethnicity and Class as Distinct Categories and their Interconnections. In: Human Rights, Gender & Environment. New Delhi: Omega Publications, 2017, 188–210.