

## Unheard Voices and Sustainable Development: Understanding the Implications of Socially Excluded Dalit and Unsolicited Development Discourse

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**Abstract.** Social segregation of Dalits needs to be comprehended from the perspectives of the arbitrary practices of exclusion, which is essentially a part of the socially rooted narratives of exclusion, and the unsolicited development discourse, which always compromises with Dalit's contributions and shares in development processes and upshots. The whole idea of development and its purpose remain unsettled unless the marginalised and the Dalit are empowered and brought to the centre, and hence we move toward a sustainably developed nation-state. The contribution of Dalit Writings, over the years, in terms of giving voice to the voiceless is immense. The paper tries to explore the pitiable conditions of Dalits at the hands of the privileged few, and underscores the ways in which the Dalit writings question the flawed social mindsets, which politically exclude the Dalits and make them the other.

**Keywords :** Social segregation; arbitrary practices of exclusion; unsolicited development discourse; empowered; Dalit writings.

Are we really developed? is a question that emerges out of the development discourse, which purposely compromises with the due shares of the oppressed, marginalised, underprivileged and the victimised Dalits. The Dalit writings over the ages have been providing unbiased lenses to unmask the brutal aspects of the lop-sided development and criticises the benefits relished by the privileged few. No development can achieve its goal or said to be a conducive one, unless it is based on the idea of inclusivism, promoting the very psychology of community and shared identity. In his book, *The Myth of Development*, Oswaldo De Revero, the former Peruvian diplomat, contends, "development little more than a myth today, propagated and enmeshed by the West in the name of assisted modernisation-an idea which is promiscuously linked to the Enlightenment ideology of progress and the Darwinian survival of the fittest". (Dutt, 9)

The politics of exclusion, economic deprivation and political exploitation of centuries would have never been defeated, had it not been challenged by the Dalit discourses established by some liberation and protest movements, which came in the form of socio-religious and socio-political stirring and literary and academic arguments. In fact, the age-old hierarchical prejudices and socially crafted stories had been in majestic vogue, and hence the idea of sustainable development, social equality and equal share of resources and equal distribution of knowledge had to suffer very hard. The multi-layered assertion of heterogeneity and fractionalization of Dalits, denying the monolithic social order led to an increasing sense of social dissent, mobilizing leaders, analysts, academicians and litterateurs who advocated for a monolithic social order. As a result, the Dalits gradually became visible to the State, and started to stake a claim for their share in the power structure and resources of the State.

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**Development: An Unamicable Discourse for Dalits**

Development discourse has always been contested despite the promises it situates in the name of social-political and socio-economic transformation, and hence an improved livelihood of people. Artur Escobar, in his book, *Encountering Development: the Making and the Unmaking of the Third Worlds*, looks at development as an 'agency of economic management', which always justifies the capitalist and the bourgeois' interests. And the late 1980s poststructuralists consider development as one of the many discourses of power, which focuses on the way in which discourses of development help shape false truth and dismiss every alternative and non-elite discourse (11). Maia Green argues that post-development scholars position themselves outside the institutional structures of development and sees development as "a bureaucratic force with global reach and an explicitly pro-capitalist agenda, operating as tool of regimes that seek to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependence" (Green, 123-125). The planners of development-models strategically construct realities, making people believe something merely hypothetical and imaginative: everyone for the people and everything for the people. Ironically, a large number of people (mostly, Dalits, Adivasis, marginalised and subalterns) are hurled into an uncertain future. Arundhati Roy finds the post-colonial development models of India quintessentially elitist. In her essays, "The Great Common Good" and "The End of Imagination", Roy discusses the crisis of the disempowered Adivasis, and presents her critique against the tyrannies of the development discourse, which questions the implications of the development discourse. The point that she raises is potentially logical, and therefore it makes a sense: why is it that only the have-nots have to contribute and suffer in the name of national or social progress. The fiction of 'national progress' as Partha Chatterjee would have it, demands that Government must be 'abstracted out of the messy business of politics', thereby releasing it for the utopian task of "receiving inputs from all parts of society, processing them, and finally allocating the optimal values for the common satisfaction and presentation of society as a whole" (Chatterjee, 160). Critiquing the state's propaganda with regard to the Narmada Valley Development Project, Arundhati Roy, in her essay "The Cost of Living", looks at the development project as myth, which holds nothing for the poor or the marginalised, and which affected hundreds and thousands of lives. Roy calls the project 'India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster' (Roy, 30)

Two of the hugely ambitious dams, the giant Sardar Sarovar in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar in Madhya Pradesh, were considered to be a benevolent one and it was anticipated that both of them will hold 'more water than any other reservoir on the Indian subcontinent'. (33) The project aimed to provide electricity and safe drinking water for millions while irrigating millions of hectares of infertile farming land remained a problem. The project has been fraught with problems from the very beginning: hundreds of thousands of local people, mostly Adivasis, have been displaced from their land, with irreparable damage done to their lives, their economic self-sufficiency, and their culture. The evidence suggests that the project may consume more electricity than it produces, and that the flood-warning and irrigation systems have had a damaging and devastating effect on the very dam, the state sought to protect, the very crop-yields they promised to increase. The question is whether the development for the poor or for the large gamut of the non-poor which enjoys the post-development scenario: biased and lopsided. Of course, no development proposal or project can be successful unless there is an essentially improved implementation of development. No alternative model of development is needed; it's only the recognition

of the individual participation and the individually-directed development that can help the state achieve the essence of *subka saath-sabka vikaas*. The State must listen to the Dalit representations, for it is the unheard voices which can help us see the other side of developments. Amartya Sen regards development as freedom, freedom from poverty, illiteracy, disease, shelterlessness etc. Freedom, thus, is premise of development and development, in its turn, should widen the scope and possibility of freedom.

### **Reiterating the Saga of Dalit Victimhood and Iconoclasm**

The story of Dalits' exploitation and victimhood is immensely appalling and horrendous, encompassing the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-religious atrocities and exploitations from centuries. The hegemonic hierarchy of the privileged few determined the lives of Dalits and assigned them duties of serving the so-called elite *Varnas* or the non-Dalit, and deprived of knowledge and were denied social-economic and political status. The division of labour led to the division of the labourers, based on inequality and exploitation. The caste system degenerated Dalits' lives and this politics of degeneration persisted even after India became free from the English. The transfer of power from Western rulers to the Babus failed to introduce the desired and expected development policies which could have resolved the caste conflict. The sense of feudalism pervaded post-colonial political corridor and therefore compromised with the essence of democracy. As a result, the earlier extent of the socio-economic inequalities and imbalances became more visible. Ambedkar's ideas did not influence policy-making in India; instead, they remained confined to the hierarchical ideologies, which promoted the politics of segregation, and shaped a lop-sided development, profiting and catering to the needs of the non-dalits.

Article 46 of the Constitution directs the State to protect the dalits (also the adivasis) from all sorts of discrimination, bondages and oppression. He says that the State should promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Nevertheless, the state has miserably failed: atrocities against dalits continue unabated and the state remains indifferent [10]. It seems that state is an instrument of oppression and the Dalits have become prey to what Foucault would mean by governmentality. In many a case, economic dependence accounts for increasing atrocities against dalits. The economy should be a sphere of autonomous activity, unimpeded by the forces which restrain dalits' progress. The inhuman and barbaric practices committed against the Dalits, led them to protest against the caste-based hierarchical system of India, polarising Indian society on the basis of the elite *Varnas* and the Dalits (including Adivasis and women). The Dalit movement that gained momentum in the post-independence period have its roots in the Vedic period. Started with the Shramanic-Brahmanic confrontation, the movement became more powerful with the introduction of the western language, and with the influence of the Christian missionaries. As a result, some educated Dalit began to mobilize around the ideas of equality and liberty and hence critiqued the politics of segregation; they looked down upon the caste system, promoting the Saussurian theory of binary opposites, which negates meaning in isolation. This became the pivot of the Dalit arguments, which began to voice against the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the elite *Varnas*. For them, the elite and the non-elite *Varnas* are complementary; they form meanings in relation to each other. The

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persistent atrocities against the poor and exploitation and humiliations from the upper castes gave rise to many post-independence Dalit movements. In the 1970s, the Dalit Panther Movement began in Maharashtra. The most fundamental factor responsible for the rise of Dalit Panthers was the repression and terror under which the oppressed Dalits continued to live in the rural area. Inspired by the Black Movement, the Dalit Panthers was formed by a group of educated Mahars in order to lead the movement. The Dalit movements in India gave rise to the birth of many writers and journalists, and therefore the crux of these social movements cannot be understood without the Dalit Literary Movement.

### **Dalit Writings: Attributing Voice to the Stance of the Subdued Voices**

There was nothing specific like Dalit Literature category till the late nineties, however there were a number of non-dalit writers who created space for the unheard and made them heroes of the mainstream and regional literatures. The depiction of the bitter aspects of the hoary conflicts, existing in the cast hierarchy, made those literatures a living documentary on the lives of the Dalits or the Untouchables. The history of such writings dates back to the 11th century. The various Dalit liberation movements and the writings of Premchand, Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Thakazhy Sivasankar Pillai and to name a few studied the pathos and tragedy of social underdogs in India. In one of his short stories, "Sadgati" Premchand portrays the life of a Chamar (a dalit), named Dukhi whose unnoticed demise raises a big question on society that exploits his toil till the very last drop of his sweat. Tagore's *Chandalika* talks about the untouchables and Bakha, the visionary representative from the Dalit Community in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, stands out and questions the socio-economic hierarchy and the theory of segregation. Velutha, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, is another case in point. The novel, *The God of Small Things*, foregrounds the plight of the distressed class, and stands out as a tale of love, betrayal, hatred, vindictiveness, guilt and stigma. Through the lives of the characters of Ammu and Velutha, Roy portrays the plurality of India and the different identities that vary, "depending upon class, caste, region and language" (Tharoor, 6), and allows her invectives to criticize the practice of the caste system, which stops Dalits to stand out and assert their identity.

Roy makes her dalit character so strong that he challenges the caste fabric of India. Velutha, an untouchable works at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Factory owned by Ammu's family. The other workers at the factory resent him and he is paid less money for his work. Velutha's presence is unsettling to many who believe he goes beyond the limits assigned by the socially elite group. His own father notes, "Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (*The God of Small Things*, 73). Velutha's lack of complacency causes him many problems throughout the novel. When Velutha has an affair with Ammu, he breaks an ancient taboo and incurs the wrath of Ammu's family and the Kerala police. He breaks away the rigid social rules of the caste system and therefore, the authorities must punish him.

The contributions made by the authors of the mainstream and regional literatures and the kind of efforts they put in to valorise the unheard are immense. However, some critics and the activist opine that only a person belonging to the community in question can truly depict the lives and shades of its people. As Ramnika Gupta, a popular Indian

writer and activist said, "Only ash knows the experience of burning", so the question that followed was: can literature about the Dalit be counted as Dalit literature if it is penned down by a non- Dalit person? Nonetheless, the Simulation theory of empathy destabilises Ramnika Gupta's claim. The theory holds that humans anticipate and make sense of the behaviour of others by activating mental processes that produces similar behaviour and similar expression of emotions. It is, therefore, of no use to discuss as to who gives voice to the unheard and the Dalits. Instead, we must discuss as to how we could make the dalits' lives easier and bring them to the centre.

Amidst this tussle some famous Dalit writers held the pen and started voicing themselves. The Dalits began their own magazine and began to express their own experiences. Noteworthy names in this regard are of Arun Kambale, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Annabhau Sathe, Lakshman Mane, Narendra Jadhav, Bama and Om Prakash Valmiki. With the formation of the Dalit Panthers, there began to flourish a series of Dalit poetry and stories depicting the miseries of the Dalits. These literatures argued that Dalit Movement fights not only against the Brahmins but all those people whoever practices exploitation, and those can be the Brahmins or even the Dalits themselves; it is not caste literature but is associated with Dalit movement to bring about socio - economic change, through a democratic social movement.

### Conclusion

Development in India is always seen in association with developed people- the postcolonial elites. The upper caste people mostly comprise of these elites and since independence it has been observed that these privileged few grabs more benefits than the exploited, the Dalits, marginalised and the subalterns. There have been many debates and discourses to empower the Dalits and the marginalised, but the centre has always negated their contributions. The sense of discrimination and humiliation still persists in the society, which is successfully portrayed in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, Bama, Baby Kamble, Narendra Jadhav, Arundhati Roy and Om Prakash Valmiki. They show as to how social and political machineries have always exploited dalits and segregated them. In their texts, they find education as the best tool to empower them and help them to get out of their pathetic condition, as seen in Valmiki's *Joothan*, where the protagonist turns out to be a playwright, which, at length, is inspirational. Critiquing the prevalence of inequalities in socio-cultural and socio-economic fabrics, Dalit writings have carved out space for Dalits and raised social sensibility. Arundhati Roy rightly says:

When Dalit literature has blossomed and is in full stride, then contemporary (upper caste?) Indian literature's amazing ability to ignore the true brutality and ugliness of the society in which we live, will be seen for what it is: bad literature. It will become irrelevant. (Anand, *outlook*)

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