

Growing up Untouchables in India

*A Dalit Autobiography by Vasant Moon
Translated from Marathi by Gail Omvedt
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Normally Indian writers, thinkers, political leaders and other public figures feel shy of writing their biographies. They would, however, relate their own experiences and throw up biographical notes at random and endlessly, but to sit back, reflect and write an honest account is hard to come by. Despite some well-known autobiographies, this genre of literature is rare not only in English, but in most Indian languages. When this is true about the writers from the privileged sections or ruling classes who dominate writing for various historical and social reasons, then it is a welcome relief to find a Dalit thinker activist to sit back, reflect and write an honest account of his life, his struggle and make a candid comment on the contemporary social life as well.

We have here a social history of Nagpur region once part of present Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. All those Indian elements—caste hierarchy with Brahmins as the most pure at the top and untouchables as the most polluted at the bottom of the ladder, their exploitation and dehumanization, poverty [born in poverty and die in poverty syndrome], and their heroic struggle—are present in this small book. It is also a story of India's awakened Dalits and the influence of their great leader Babasaheb Ambedkar. It may be lacking in an in depth analysis of the rise of the Dalit movement or a critical assessment of the role the leaders like Ambedkar played, but Moon makes it up by a plain

and a sensitive description of the events. One could even sense the impact of Mahatma Phule. Moon does question Ambedkar on some vital issues during his few meetings, but then these are the encounters with the Hero whom he holds in great reverence throughout. This clearly is a relic of the old Brahmin cultural syndrome of idolatry and the pull of the personality and Moon does not make much effort to come out of that.

Vasant Moon began his life as any other Dalit does in deprivation, poverty, hunger and the struggle was just to survive. Vasti, the focus of his narrative from the beginning is the abode of the pitiable, of discarded sections in any urban settlements anywhere in India. So it is not his Vasti, but a universal Vasti of his fellow beings. There is a graphic account, touched by emotions that tell the heroic saga of struggle, of love and of hate. These Ladvans, Barkes, Zhade Ghanvas, Somvanshis and of course, Maharas are just not sub castes, but are real people. They share the common bonds, build support system in worst of the situations as it happens in case of Moon's mother, Purnabai. She is an untiring woman who is forsaken by her drunken husband and she struggles hard first to bring up her two children and later help Moon in running his house. The high caste people except some rare awakened individuals mostly keep away from the Basti and its people. But then some Mahars, the Dalit caste to which Moon belonged render

yeoman's help. Despite hard struggle for Moon and his friends at school, at play or when leading a drama troupe to stage socially relevant plays, the life is least dull. Emotional bonds and timely help make this Basti, a place of joy. One can find the same spirit pervasive in this Basti and is indeed in some respects as in Dominique Lapperie's *Is it the City of Joy*. Hard life, full of daily struggle—but the unbound fellow feeling helps to swim across the worst tides. Moon's maturing period coincides with the Quit India Movement and he brings out the vital differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. How a Dalit leader saw the freedom movement simply as the upper caste Hindus' desire to gain power, ignoring the needs of the poor scheduled castes that Gandhi fondly called Harijans. Second World War and the pitch of India's struggle against the British and Ambedkar's condemnation of the Pune Pact and his call for a separate struggle—Moon brings all this to a full public gaze in his intimate style.

In fact, reading this autobiography in the context of the continued denials of rights to Dalits and unabated atrocities against them, one could safely assert that we have not progressed much in creating a liberal humane society. In large areas of this Basti, Dalits continue to suffer the 'ignominy of carrying night's soils on their heads despite a legal ban. Their social, economic and political exploitation continues unabated. The intolerant reaction on the part of a section of the

high castes as in 1940s against conversion to Buddhism and other religions continues. As recently as November 2002, when killing of five Dalits in Haryana evoked wide protests and the consequent conversion, some BJP MLAs in Bhopal disrupted the International Buddhist Conference. Moon talks about this when he discusses the clashes between the Mahars, a Dalit community in Nagpur with the RSS. We seem to be reliving the past. And, what kind of leadership has been there from Phule to Ambedkar to Mayawati is another question confronting the Dalit liberation struggle.

This Dalit autobiography is much more than this. It talks about the plays the young boys wrote on the plight of their fellow beings, the rise of Dalit media like Bahashkrit Bharat, Janata, Dalit Bandhu, Dawn and Sidharath and the joys of boyhood. This indeed is the precursor of the later flowering of the rich Dalit literature.

Moon's contribution as part of the social and political movement of the Dalits is well-stated. The powerful memoir of Vasant Moon whose major contribution of editing 17 volumes of Ambedkar's writings is well-recognized, is just not a life story of a poor boy whose mother deserted by a drunken husband, fights a valiant battle, educates her son to make him a sensitive civil servant. But it is also the story of the struggle and triumph of the poor in this country. Christopher Queen of Howard University makes an apt comment, "Moving beneath Moon's sharply-edged tale of material deprivation, caste conflict and neighbourhood politics is the inexorably rise of Dalit militancy and spirituality. This book puts living flesh on the bones of recent Indian social historiography."

There is a compelling description in a simple and powerful language of a community of Mahars, untouchables, at the bottom of India's caste system. When Moon was growing up, the community too was undergoing a change, a sort of metamorphoses. There

is a clear hierarchy of caste among the untouchables. Poverty, prejudices and hunger are all widespread. As you read, you live through it. Vasant Moon has rendered an honest account of the evolving consciousness amongst the untouchables and the role of Ambedkar (1891-1956), a towering leader and a guide of the untouchable movement.

Most remarkable is the description of the meeting, which Moon had with Babasaheb at Nagpur in 1953. He presents his hand-written magazine and an intimate conversation with Ambedkar follows. Babasaheb read the entire issue and asked, "Who wrote this article on the Buddha?"

"My friend Pundalik Sughate has written it. He's in my class," I said.

"What is going on regarding Buddhism?"

"In our community, we have begun a class on the Buddhist religion. Dr. Niyogi comes to explain Buddhism to us", I said.

Babasaheb, giving me a glance, said, "Who? Dr. Niyogi? The one who was a high court judge? Remember, he's also a Brahman." Maisaheb was sitting and listening. Then Babsaheb said, "At first those who accepted Buddhism were Brahmins. Still, later on it was the Brahmins who corrupted the basic principles of Buddhism; this should not be forgotten."

I continued asking Babasaheb questions, and he went on talking to us as one teaches his students. Of these questions, two remain clearly in my mind. I asked, "Babasaheb, Buddhism does not believe in the soul, but if this is how can there be rebirth? Everyone asks us this question, yet I can't understand it."

"Listen, one candle can light another candle, can't it? Doesn't the spark go from one to another? Rebirth is the same way. Without being extinguished, the spark from the candle arises in another place that is what is called rebirth. Look, no one dies, sees heavens, and then gets reborn."

Is Moon satisfied with the answer? Almost. Is there a kind of hero worship

for Ambedkar or he just does not want to debate these fundamentals any further? We do not know that. Perhaps he owes an explanation to the readers of his narrative. This kind of idolatry may be just brahmanical legacy or just our ritualistic past, we don't know. But Moon does offer some assessment of the movement to emancipate the Dalits from the yoke of centuries of criminal and inhuman exploitation.

But in contrast, he offers us a glimpse from his very personal life in the chapter entitled, 'The end of Omar Khayam' where he writes about the death of his father who had been staying with Moon's stepsister in Kolkata. Moon refuses to observe any ritual like tonsuring his head or observing other ceremonies despite protest from his sister. He indeed is a rebel of sorts.

And, what happens to his mother and how she reacts. Here is Moon telling us, "With the death of her husband, the burden of vermilion on her forehead was lifted. The black thread around her neck and the bangles on her hand had ensnared her. Now she had been completely liberated." There was hardly any relationship that existed between the two.

This is Puranbai, a woman of indomitable will and daughter of a man who was an awakened individual and she had the fortune of some basic education but her marriage to a drunkard leaves her struggling all her life. This self-respecting woman is the role model who as per Moon's words gave her children character, self-confidence and integrity.

The position of the Dalits has improved in some ways. But a good majority of them continues to live in sub-human condition. This autobiography besides being a telling comment on the social situation of India, should also be a source of inspiration.

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