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Dalit Literary Meet: 1958
Anna BhauSathe's Inaugural Speech¹

Translated by

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The chairperson, my brothers and sisters I consider myself lucky because a dalit like me is to preside this India's First Dalit Literary Conference. But I am aware that I am here in the place of Acharya Atre.

Some people have been questioning the decision to have a separate Literary Meet for Dalit writers. For some, since there is the law for the eradication of caste, the word 'Dalit' is redundant. This is all right. The people who talk about this issue consider a dalit as a human being. But they are not ready to acknowledge that those dalits have a social group and because of this the issue of separate dalit literary meet comes into existence.

If we have to restrict our discussion to Maharashtra there is fairly large social group of dalits. Dalit people's lives are different and they are cohesive to other social groups. This social group is developing in various ways in this nation and their legitimate struggle for justice affects the entire society. This social group is the socio-cultural base of the country. But it is different from other social groups as it is forlorn, exploited and has to put in a lot of manual labour for living. This social group does not see representation of its life in contemporary literature. Present literature should be clear like a mirror. The only demand dalits have is that the contemporary literature should represent their issues. It is not wrong to expect to be seen as we are.

The representation of dalits in literature is like a shadow seen in a wavy lake: shaky and distorted. This dalit is the heart of the society. This heart beats permeably. It has joyous, sorrowful, tender and hard feelings in it. Nobody takes cognisance of how and where these feelings are materialized. Unless a writer understands why this exploited person has to put in such painful manual labour he will not be able to create literature for and of Dalits. To understand the unfathomable life of a dalit, the writer has to have an ethereal vision. He has to be devoted and impersonal to that social group. And he has to believe in the reasonable struggles for justice and ultimate triumph of the dalits. Thus, this writer has to be an idealist and has to have this kind of imagination. Why does a human being live and struggles to exist? We need to think about this. We think this fallen person who struggles to live is timid. But he has to climb the electricity poles to connect the electricity wires, lit explosives in the mines, move around the furnace to liquefy iron and all these places are possible deaths for him. Sometimes this dalit dies while working. This is a completely different way of life from what other social groups experience and the writer needs to understand this. The difference between the death due to

¹This speech was delivered on 2nd March 1958 as an inaugural speech by Shahir Annabhu Sathe for the first literary meet organized by Maharashtra Dalit SahityaSangh.

bankruptcy as a result of share market crash and an accident while working at furnace, electricity pole or at mines, needs to be taken into account and then the writer needs to decide which death is more virtuous.

Like other human beings dalits too have feelings that are non-inert. But a dalit is slightly different from others. He is not an inanimate clay of soil. He is creative and in the material world works hard to earn and achieve heights in his life. A great human being like this needs an artist who would create great literature for him.

This dalit survives his family by cooking his food, on a stove made out of stones, in an earthen pot under a tree. Even if this dalit appears to be poor his desire to live is pure. His belief in family as an institution is constant. But his family is discarded under a tree by the capitalist world. A writer should first observe this condition, look for the conditions that cause this and then write about this penny less human being. One should write carefully as all the layers of this society have traces of a dalit. To use poetic words, "This world, this earth is balanced not on the head of *SheshNaag*² but on the palm of a dalit." A dalit's life is like pure spring water that trickles down from rocks. Observe it closely and then write about it because what Tukaram says is true, "live life the way the other person lives to understand his suffering."

Thus, the people who write about dalits have to be first committed to their cause. It is important to make dalits realize that they are not slaves and this world needs them. The life of dalits has to be improved with constant efforts and for this the writer has to be always with the people. Because an artist who supports people gets the support of the people in return. Literature would turn away from the one who turns away from the people. All the great artists in the world have considered literature the third eye of the world. And it is important for this third eye to lead the people and be with them.

Recently people participated in an unprecedented struggle for Marathi language. That struggle actually was and is for Marathi literature. In that struggle several girls of tender age of sixteen sacrificed themselves. The artists who were with people in this great battle wrote poems about it. Some artists' poetry gleaned like swords. Some artists' miserly writing turned into an abundant expression of bravery. Other artists expressed the greatness of Marathi language. Maharashtra will never forget those artists. But an artist who is not with the people produces art that is restricted to four walls and dalit people's art is not enclosed in four walls. Our art and literature roams around amongst people. It traces down the sounds of tambourine. It is also a beautiful art work like a mole on Dalit woman's cheek. We know that an artist who does not believe in an ideal and is not with people walks on which path and many examples of this can be cited. We write what we see around. Such an artist claims that art has to belong to a class and has to be propagandist and these kinds of artists dominate the scene today. But an artist who does not take into account and is not aware of the people makes them look ugly and many instances of this are available in Marathi literature.

What would you call a story in which a twelve year old girl falls in love with a tom cat and she takes out her knickers to satisfy his sexual desires! Does not this story transform a human-being into a beast? A clerk undergoes Vasectomy but his wife is pregnant for the third

² The Myth of Sheshnaag suggests that the earth is carried by Sheshnaag with patience and strength on its head as he was asked to do by the Hindu god Brahma.

time and he is grief stricken for this. Does not this mean that the woman is an adulteress? What should we learn from the story?

The president of women's union plays her last trick on a man she met while travelling from Pune to Mumbai. Is not this denigration of men? Kamala Phadke's stories do not have Marathi men and dalits as characters. The literature produced by the Phadkes, both husband and wife, is like this. It means a person who does not have an ideal appears ugly to the people. Artists like Phadke are peeling human beings using Psychoanalysis. That is the only reason for a separate literary meet of dalits. The people who believe in Psychoanalysis while defending their literature state that life has two sides and they try to delve deeper into one. But in Nashik there is a river like Ganga and there also exists drainage. Why do you choose drainage over Ganga?

We want literature to be unclouded like Ganga. We want goodness. We are proud of the great tradition of Marathi literature.

Our struggle for life is the precursor for Marathi literature. When the shadow of dalits was unbearable to people the writers of Mahanubhav sect revolted for access to knowledge to all, believing that knowledge brings salvation. They are our writers. Dnyaneshwar, who demanded that a human being should be able to live like human being and wrote Dnyaneshwari in the language of dalits, is our writer. Eknath, who carried a young Mahar kid that had lost its way, is our writer. History shows that a person who speaks about and shows dalits in ugly manner is made ugly by dalits.

It is easy to give shape to words. But it is more difficult to infuse this shape with soul. Some writers manage to achieve this difficult task as well. But it is very difficult to trace the historical conditions and cause and effect relations for the soul. This clarification by Acharya Atre should be interpreted by us, the dalit writers, and try to trace the historical traditions. We should be faithful to our social group and create literature for it. We should be concerned about how the life of dalits can become happy and prosperous. We will try to uplift the life of dalits through our literature.

Some scholars say, "Untouchability is eradicated by law. So an entity called dalit does not exist", but this is just an illusion. The upper-caste Hindus' hearts beat faster at a common well while fetching water. Till the utensils of Mahars and Mangs are in the water the upper caste Hindus do not put theirs in the well. In many hotels there are separate cups for dalits. The reason for this is the long-standing belief systems. They cannot be destroyed so quickly and easily. Thus, we should create dalit literature. Gorky says in one of his writings, "One can not claim that the art based on words and imagination has its unique feature in making people aware of human errors. The true feature of literature is to uplift human being from his material world, free him from the restraints of the world that brings him lowliness and to make him realise that you are not a slave, you are the master of the world around, you are a free creator of life. In this sense literature is always revolutionary." It is for this reason, in the above sense, we should produce literature and pay our homage to dalits. That is all.

