



## CAGES OF THEIR OWN: INTERROGATING CIVILITY, IDENTITY AND MARGINALITY IN MOHANDAS NEMISHARAY'S *APNE APNE PINJARE* (1995)

Hari Prasad

Department of English, Zakir Husain Delhi College Evening, University of Delhi, India

✉ [hariprasaddu@gmail.com](mailto:hariprasaddu@gmail.com)

Hari Prasad: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6060-0030>

### ABSTRACT

*Widening the circumference of hatred, societal constraints and limitations, multiple atrocities in the name of stereotypically established social norms have created a space of resistance and a possibility to hold legitimate discourse upon the fate and destiny of marginalised communities in India. Authors from Dalit communities have expressed their compressed freedom through their autobiographies in different Indian languages. Out of many such expressions, Apne Apne Pinjare by Mohan Das Nemisaray looks into the predicament of a community segregated and excluded from social and economic opportunities due to their lower-caste status. A powerful portrayal of the lives of Dalits and other marginalised communities in India, Apne Apne Pinjare (1995) highlights the brutal realities of caste-based discrimination and oppression. The author has used a metaphor for the social and economic structures that keep marginalised communities trapped in poverty and discrimination. Nemisaray's autobiographical account challenges the normative social and economic provisions and their implementations in the democratic culture of Indian civil society.*

**Keywords:** *Marginal, Dalit, Subjugation, Autobiography, Oppression, Injustice, Perspectives, Caste, Assertion.*

*Apne Apne Pinjare* has been used as a metaphor for the experience of being trapped in a social and economic system stacked against Dalits. The politics of expression in Dalit literature revolves around breaking free from these cages and finding a voice to express the experiences of Dalits. Dalit literature is a form of literature

that Dalits write, often focusing on the experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, and oppression they face in Indian society. Dalit literature is a form of resistance against the dominant caste hierarchy and seeks to challenge and subvert it.

The politics of expression in Dalit literature is grounded in using literature as a tool for social change. Dalit writers use their literary works to bring attention to Dalits' issues and challenges and expose the injustices they endure. Through their writing, Dalit writers seek to challenge the dominant narrative of Indian society, which often ignores or marginalises the experiences of Dalits. Furthermore, the politics of expression in Dalit literature is about reclaiming agency and power. Through their writing, Dalit writers seek to reclaim their identity, dignity, and humanity that has been denied to them by the dominant caste society. Dalit literature is not only a form of expression but also a form of resistance and empowerment.

Namisharay spent his childhood in a cluster known as *Chamarwada* (the section of a village with Dalit occupancy exclusively) in the Meerut district and was located at the periphery. The distinction of their dwellings could be observed; they were identified differently due to their dwelling habits and mainly due to odours emanating from other abodes and the stench from their own. The stench of their basti has extended the presence of filth and, consequently, of them. Thus, they were labelled as the inhabitants of filth.

[O]ur locality marked by a strange stench of leather. Houses were filled with leather, wet pieces of leather were splattered in the open for drying, and the stench of leather filled the air, which further

signified the existence of *chamarwada*

(*Apne Apne Pinjare* 1995, p.12).

The politics of expression in Dalit literature is about breaking free from these cages and finding a voice to express the experiences of Dalits. Dalit writers seek to challenge the dominant caste hierarchy, expose injustices, and reclaim agency and power through their writing. His writing also explores the broader societal and political issues affecting Dalits in India, including caste-based discrimination, poverty, and social injustice. Nemisaray was also a prominent activist and worked tirelessly to promote the rights and dignity of Dalits in India. He was involved in several social and political movements and was a vocal critic of the caste system and the injustices it perpetuates.

Through his autobiography, Mohan Das Nemisaray highlights the various forms of discrimination and violence Dalits face in Indian society, including caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation, and physical violence. She describes her family and community's social and economic conditions and how they were forced to live in poverty and squalor due to their caste identity. This autobiographical account discusses Dalit oppression, particularly the experiences of the Dalit community who face double discrimination due to their caste and gender identities. He talks about the various forms of violence, including sexual violence, that Dalit women experience and how these experiences are often silenced and ignored by the larger society. Namishray also held her foster mother responsible for

his journey of life. He speaks about various women, from his well-wishers to the painted women (prostitutes) and women between these two categories.

He has sensibly observed the need for women's education as his sisters have been unable to attend school. Similarly, the death of his mother and his affection for his foster mother, Tai, is very well narrated. To an extent, the 'lack' of a mother has been filled with the love of his foster mother. But how far that 'lack' of the mother has influenced his sensibility and sexuality? Namishray further elaborates on women's courage and observes their affinity in despair. He also elaborates on the women workforce, who have been employed in menial tasks and exploited financially and physically. In a way, the author explores the woman's life beyond the household's regular everyday responsibilities and concerns.

*Apne Apne Pinjare* serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of the Dalit community in the face of systemic discrimination and violence. This novel has been widely regarded as a powerful commentary on the societal pressures individuals face in India and a call for greater personal freedom and empowerment. However, for Dalits, emancipation means much more than achieving individual freedom or upward mobility in the social hierarchy. It means the complete elimination of the caste system and the creation of a genuinely egalitarian society.

In the context of Dalit literature, the concept of subjugation also needs to be redefined. While the dominant narrative

portrays Dalits as passive victims of oppression, Dalit literature challenges this portrayal by emphasising the agency of Dalits and their resistance against the dominant caste system. For Dalit writers, subjugation is not just a physical or social constraint but also a psychological and emotional trauma that results from the internalisation of caste-based discrimination and violence.

Several theoretical perspectives are relevant to the literature on marginality, including Postcolonial theory, which examines the social, cultural, and political effects of colonialism and imperialism. In the context of marginality literature, postcolonial theory can be used to analyse how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the experiences of marginalised individuals and groups. It can also help to identify how colonialism has impacted the production and reception of literature.

Feminist Theory examines how gender shapes social hierarchies and power dynamics. In the context of marginality literature, feminist theory can be used to explore the experiences of women and non-binary individuals who face discrimination and exclusion. It can also help to highlight how gender intersects with other forms of marginalisation, such as race, class, and caste. Critical race theory interrogates how race shapes social hierarchies and power dynamics. In the context of marginality literature, critical race theory can be used to analyse how race impacts the experiences of marginalised individuals and groups. It can also help to highlight how racism intersects with other forms of marginalisation, such as

gender, class, and sexuality. Marxist theory examines how economic structures and class relations shape social hierarchies and power dynamics in the context of marginality literature.

Dalit literature redefines the relationship between emancipation and subjugation. For Dalits, emancipation is not just the absence of subjugation but also the creation of a new social order that recognises the dignity and humanity of all individuals, regardless of their caste or social status. Therefore, Dalit literature emphasises the need for collective action and social transformation rather than individual success or achievement. The concepts of emancipation and subjugation need to be redefined in the context of Dalit literature. Dalit literature provides a platform to challenge the dominant narratives of oppression and redefine these concepts in a way that reflects the experiences and aspirations of Dalit communities.

A critical inquiry into Dalit atrocities in Indian narratives is a necessary step towards understanding and addressing the experiences of Dalits in India. It involves questioning the dominant narratives, challenging stereotypes, and exposing the underlying power structures that sustain the caste system. This requires an intersectional approach considering the complexities of caste-based discrimination and violence and the need for social transformation to eliminate caste-based oppression. The assertion of Dalit communities' cultural and political identity in India and the highlighting of the discrimination,

marginalisation, and oppression they have faced historically and continue to face today. Dalit literature is born out of the struggle for social justice and equality, and it seeks to challenge the dominant narratives and representations of caste, class, and power in Indian society.

There have been various anecdotes where the author has encountered an inhuman display of social behaviour and has been compelled to bear the atrocities in the name of untouchable and marginal social structures. He recalls an incident of Ganga Mela on the occasion of Kartik Purnima, a holy day for bathing in the Ganga River. Upon arrival at the Ghats of Ganga, he felt that different tents were installed and labelled with their caste identity.

Namisaray says:

‘गंगा के घाट पर हमारी जात के तंबु डेरे  
अलग लगे । एक चमारवाडा भी ऊभर आया था  
।’

*(A separate caste labelled tents were set on the Ghats of Ganga as if a tiny cluster of Dalit community stood out)*

Atrocities in the name of untouchable caste, our community carried a burden of pain, hatred, indignity, and helplessness. This sort of behaviour meted out to our community was more significant than the atrocities committed against animals. Our social identities were destined to carry this burden and follow the torturous commandments of dominant caste communities. Observing these patterns of behaviour churned the anger and compelled

the author to pour the feeling of resistance in the work of art titled *Apne Apne Pinjare*.

The specimen of inhuman behaviour appeared when the author, along with his elder brother, was going to his newly married sister's house; on the way to her sister's house through the village of dominant communities, they felt the urge to thirst and ask for water to a person who categorically denied to offer the water on account of our caste. We were directed to quench our thirst from the water stored in a pond made for animals.

Bearing the quantum of hatred and the author came up with the following:

“जोहड के पानी में गर्मी से बचने के लिए अपनी टांगे सिकोड़े दो-तीन भैस बैठी थी । पानी में हर जगह कालापन था । एक जगह से चुल्लूभर पानी देकर मुँह में डाला । सवर्ण जाति के लोगों ने तो हमें आदमी ही मानने से इंकार कर दिया था । तभी तो मुझे जानवरों के साथ पानी पीना पड़ा था ।”

Even Dalits have the liberty to live their life with self-respect and dignity under the constitutional provisions. My sister's father-in-law in a gross amount of disrespect evidently projected his anger as follows:

“स्साले बामन, म्हारे मेहमान को पानी देने से मना कर दिया । तम इत्ते उच्चे हो गए । ठहर जाओ, म्मै तमारे पानी में पिसाब कर दूंगा । थूक्कूंगा, फेर पीना उस्से । म्हारे मेहमान ढोर-डांगरों के साथ पानी पियै ...।”

This anger churns within and comes out with resistance to liberty and the rights of human beings constitutionally provided to everyone in this country. This consciousness

paves the path of liberty and emancipation. The second part of the autobiography is also full of discrimination and atrocities. After returning home from Mumbai, the author feels that the smell of homeland has been recalling him and holding him from leaving for urban places. He starts his higher education. He takes admission with Hindi, English, Political Science and History subjects. He observed that the teacher of History, Mr Harbansh Singh, patronised his studies and offered valuable instructions and suggestions for his further studies.

The impression of the Zamindari system and the atrocities of Zamindars were visible in our societies. A jamadar was passing through our cluster and suddenly stopped his carriage and shouted:

“झुनिया के घर के सामने इक्का-ताँगा रोककर वहीं से गरजा । अरी ओ झुनिया, झुनिया का बेटा बुखार से तप रहा था । वह उसके पास बैठी थी । उसने फिर पुकारा – सुनती नई, तेरी खाल मसाला माँग रही है क्या? अब तक चार छः मर्द-औरत वहाँ जमा हो गए थे । वहीं काशतकार इक्के-ताँगा पर बैठा-बैठा आल-बवाल बोल रहा था । बाहर हल्ला सुनकर अब तक झुनिया भी आ गई थी । उसे देख वह बोला – “चल री चल म्हारे खेते में भौत काम पड़ा है ।

A Dalit consciousness and brotherhood were reflected, and a struggle to emancipate caged identity was strengthened. *Apne Apne Pinjare* beautifully depicted these predicaments and spread awareness that education and self-dignity to be restored democratically are the only tools through which this atrocity may be lessened. Nemisaray says that at the beginning of his



stay in Meerut city and his appointment with Home guards, he experienced a bitter reality of discrimination in the urban place, which happened as follows:

– “हम दो तीन साथी रसोई में चले गए और वहाँ क्या बना था, इसकी जाँच-पड़ताल करने लगे, मैंने एक टब को उघाड़ कर जैसे ही भीतर रखी सब्जी देखनी चाही रसोईए ने इसका एतराज़ उठाते हुए गुस्से में कह दिया “न जाने तुम लोग कहाँ से आए हो, कौन हो । सब्जी का बर्तन ही छू दिया ।” हमें भी गुस्सा आ गया, हमने चिल्लाते हुए कहा “हम चमार हैं और इसी शहर से ही आए हैं ।” “तब और भी गड़बड़ हो गया ।” रसोईया उफनते हुए बोला । “क्या गड़बड़ हो गया ?” हमने भी उफनते हुए पूछा । “यही कि सब्जी खराब हो गयी ?” हमारे स्वर गर्म थे । राम, राम, राम ,,,, सब कुछ भरस्त हो गया । हमें क्या मालूम था कि .... ।”

A collective voice of resistance changed the camp's management dedicated to preparing the recruits for Home guards in Meerut City. Nemisaray thought of writing a write-up for daily news from this incident, and it inspired him to become a writer. He edited and published a weekly Newspaper named *Samata Shakti* later on. We may conclude that *Apne Apne Pinjare* is not only an autobiographical account of Nemkisaray's life but also captures the narrative of Dalit predicaments, namely the pathetic condition of our society, pity, hatred, atrocity, compressed liberty, and struggle to gain emancipation. This narrative has been based on social realism with a unique narrative perspective. This document provides a sense of strength to protect and respect human liberty and dignity for

making a notable change in the lives of the downtrodden and deprived sections of Indian civil societies under the constitutional provisions. With various content and discontents, agreements and disagreements, *Apne Apne Pinjare* received an overwhelming appreciation since its composition.

## References

- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. New York: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- Beth, Sarah. “Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi: Transformation of Pain into Resistance.” *Swedish South Asian Studies Network*; Lund U., 19 Jan. 2011.
- Brueck, Laura. “Rewriting the Rape-Script in Dalit Women's Literature.” *University of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA. 28 Mar. 2008.
- Chatterjee, Partha. “Caste and Subaltern Consciousness.” *Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Guha, Ranajit. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989. 169–209. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. *Futures* 36 (2004): 757–63.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. New York: Random, 2002.
- Gopal, Priyamvada. *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation, and the Transition to Independence*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Guha, Ranajit. Foreword. Selected Subaltern Studies. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Gupta, Ramanika. Introduction. *Dusarī duniyā kā yathārth*. Ed. Gupta, Hazaribag: Navalekhana, 1997.

Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Vision of India: From *Bahishkrut* to Inclusive *Bharat*”

Hazari, Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste. New York: Praeger, 1969.

Ilaiah, Kancha. Buffalo Nationalism. Delhi: Samya, 2006.

Kothari, Rita. “The Short Story in Gujarati Dalit Literature”. *Economic and Political Weekly* 10 Nov. 2001:4308–10. Print

Limbale, Sharankumar. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations. Trans. Mukherjee, Alok. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004.

Naimisharay, Mohandas. *Apne Apne Pinjare*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan (Hindi) 2018.