

*Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*

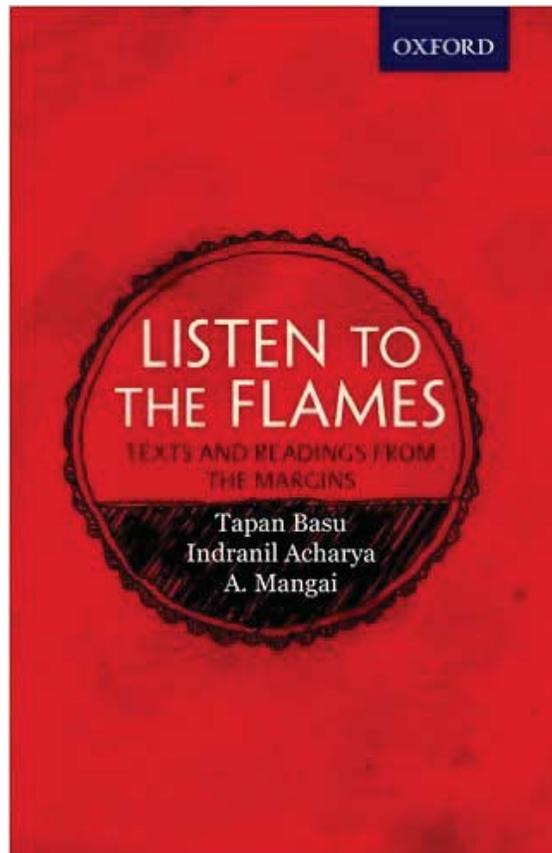
Eds. Tapan Basu, Indranil Acharya and A Mangai

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### **Reading the Margins, Systematically and Empathetically**

Gone are the days when the tales of the Dalits had to be told by upper caste writers. In the recent decades the trend has taken a different course and the stories of Dukhi, Bakha, Velutha and Doulati are told not just by established upper caste authors like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi. Dalit people themselves have responded positively and passionately to the onus of providing the readers with firsthand account of the lives of their communities. In doing so, these writers have re-scripted the discourse on Indian society and history and have also questioned established literary conventions. Such is the influence of these works that they have donned, and quite successfully so, the epithet of a literary movement. Though it has often been argued that social sciences in India have been practiced in 'casteist', exclusionary ways that effected epistemological as well as material violence to 'lower caste' communities, it can still be assuredly asserted that caste is, at least, being seriously *discussed* (even though not necessarily from a conscious, anti-caste standpoint) with the emergence of Dalit literature as a major literary movement. Translation, of course, plays a crucial role in ascribing Dalit literature the feature and importance of a literary movement as the more important of Dalit literary works are in vernacular. Only a proper translation of these works might entail a 'dialogue' with other language readers. However, capturing of the Dalit or marginalised experiences in translation involves an intense and often painstaking search for appropriate idiom. Not surprisingly, Indian universities as well as those situated in the West are including Dalit literary texts in English translation in their syllabi. Britain's Nottingham Trent University and Universite Paul-Valery Montpellier, France in June 2014 together started a study that aims to bring Dalit literature to new readers. Acclaimed historian and founding member of the Subaltern Studies Project, Gyanendra Pandey recently started a course at Emory University, US, which aims to read Dalit history in conjunction with that of African Americans. Several other American universities including University of Washington, University of Texas and University of Oregon, offer courses which include Dalit autobiographies. This development simultaneously results into a realignment of the politics of canon formation and is a result of that very realignment.

In such a backdrop the editors of the book under review, *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*, had a threefold job in hand. Firstly, the anthology needs to be proper representation of voices that are marginalised for centuries by the machination of caste-hierarchy in India. It must also pay attention to the fact that the

many layered pathos, anger, protest and memories of injustice in Dalit life may be lost in the process of translation. Thirdly, the book seeks to cater to the needs of undergraduate students which implies formulating a strategy to guide the newly initiated through the complex socio-historical web entangled intrinsically with Dalit reality. One must admit that the editors are more than successful in addressing all these concerns. The anthology brings to the foreground the work of twenty one important Dalit writers. Though, some literary genres like autobiography and life-writings are privileged over others in Dalit study, the editors of this volume have attempted to include as many genres as possible. Therefore the reader gets a chance to read poems, excerpts from stories, autobiographies, memoirs, plays and prose writings by Dalit writers. The anthology includes representative voices from twelve Indian languages; the only inclusion from English is an excerpt from B R Ambedkar's writing. The care for inclusiveness is evident also from the list of authors. While there are entries from established writers like Sharankumar Limbale (*Akarmashi*) and Bama ("Just One Word"), one can also hear relatively lesser-heard voices of Susil Mandal ("The Sunderbans") and Mahesh Deka ("The Sweeper"). On the one hand, among the authors, Sadalakshmi ("The Last Place for a Dalit Woman") has been a minister of Endowments of the state of Andhra Pradesh, Achintya Biswas ("Portrait of Ambedkar") is a former Vice-chancellor of a state university in West Bengal and C Ayyappan ("Madness") was a professor of Malayalam. On the other hand, Sri Lakshman ("Undying Love"), born in a tanner family is a fulltime social activist who has barely completed his High School and Jayant Parmar ("The Last Will of a Dalit Poet") sold painted miniature paintings for livelihood before being a full-time poet. Dalit women, often considered "victim par excellence" - the casualty of both patriarchy and caste hierarchy, are represented well in this anthology. Bama, the first Dalit woman who published an autobiographical narrative, attempts to capture the internalized caste sentiments in Indian society in her story "Just One Word". S. Suirtharani in "A Faint Smell of Meat" shows positive and assertive strength in saying that "the faint smell of meat" on her own self is an indelible part of her, just as the houses and loud chatter are. Excerpt from Sadalakshmi's autobiographical writing, "The Last Place for a Dalit Woman" reveals the signs of the sheer determination and intellect that enabled a woman from the *bhangi* (manual scavenging) caste to rise to the stature of a minister of state. There are other very interesting inclusions in this text that gestures towards the heterogeneity of Dalit experience in India. Jayant Parmar's "The Last Will of a Dalit Poet" is written in Urdu

which is generally believed to be the language of the Muslims. On the other hand, Paul Chirakkarode's "Nostalgia", a short story in Malayalam, explores the very complex equation of marginality of a Dalit Christian vis-à-vis the discrimination from the Hindus and as well as from the Christians. AchintyaBiswas's "Portrait of Ambedkar" is another significant contribution as drama is a rare presence in Dalit literature.

The anthology strives to be a textbook of Dalit literature for undergraduate students. The classification and arrangement of the entries is done according to the genres and each of the entries contain biographical note, comments from the author and brief words of introduction. Each text is followed by a series of questions given in the form of exercises and activities to be done by the students. The general introduction lucidly presents an overview of the Dalit scenario in India. The translators have done a commendable job as the readers find no jarring note while they move smoothly from one article to another.

Still one last question lingers and that perhaps relates less to this particular anthology and more to the academic exercises involving Dalit literature in general. In the poem "Agony" which is the English translation of Anil Gharai's Bengali poem "Agunburi", the translator has used the following expression: "Between the dream and the reality/ Falls the shadow of the pestilence". It is difficult to miss the Eliotesque echo from *The Hollow Men*: "Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow". The fact that the translator belongs to the department of English in a West Bengal university once more brings back the question of the subjective self of the mediator casting its shadow into a text that is supposed to be the voice of a subaltern, a Dalit. It would invariably lead to the debate inspired by GayatriChakravortySpivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" However, such debates are only welcome as it would enrich the students' experience of Dalit reality which is certainly the aim of the editors of *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*.