

Social Trajectory and Social Change Depicted in My Father Baliah by Y. B. Satyanarana

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In Indian society, caste plays a significant role in social communication. Earlier, education, occupation, and religion were mainly governed by the factor of caste that delimited the progress of the marginalized Dalit community. Caste formed a huge chasm between the two social poles- the upper caste and the lower caste. According to the reformist, G. K. Devadhar caste was a kind of system which is strange and slavish created harmful social norms and situations. Caste features 'degraded' and unfree people and a source of 'irksome and painful customs' (Bayly, 157) which has created a restricted social structure that was previously an egalitarian society, 'trenching on the liberty of anterior times' and 'down trodding the Indians with weapons of superstitions and social oppression. Devdhar believes that for ages caste had destroyed the 'natural vitality of the race...' which resulted in a loss of 'individual liberty and 'individual consciousness' and demolished 'national consciousness' on the whole. He says: "A nation whose individuals are moral weakling, social slaves and intellectual dwarfs [can] never ... make a strong and powerful nation intellectually, morally and spiritually." (157)

The reformers Vaswani and Ranade considered the caste system as a dark patch that 'hindered popular progress and the growth of popular freedom.' This limitation of caste can be removed by bringing about political and social transformations in society. The downtrodden people need to be supplied with protective laws and reservations to compensate for their loss and humiliation. According to these social reformers, caste was regressive and deteriorative social harmony, it has forced the lower caste to become a nemesis to the upper caste and that has led to disharmony. It is considered an obstacle to the morality and political renaissance of the nation. Thus, it is a chain-linked up with 'evil customs' needs a self-inquiry and change in the outlook of all 'forward looking' men of principle. (158)

It was due to this caste system there were inequalities in right to education which the upper caste was privileged. It restricted human development as well as the stagnancy in the social system on the whole. "The Indian system of education in the past was non-universalist, parochial and partisan.... ancient Indian education was, after all, the product of Indian outlook on knowledge and corresponding scheme of life and values... education for more one reason was seen necessary and more or less limited only to the 'dwijas' (twice born) caste... the 'untouchables' were the only section of the society left out with no accessibility to education of any kind". (*Education for Dalits* Reddy, 3-4) Educational rights to the untouchables were regarded as a sin and this system prevailed. Education was exclusive to Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas till the Britishers laid the foundation of new education system which circumscribed the unprivileged caste. Exclusion of educational opportunities to the Dalits caused their subjugation, exploitation, social degradation and marginalization most significantly static social system with its flaws. Education to the untouchable was commenced by the philanthropic activities of the missionaries with "Educational Mission" initiated by Alexander Duff of the Free Church of Scotland as an evangelical vocation. "The missionaries took the initiative for imparting education and to prepare the 'untouchables' for higher walks of life." (7). To bring out socio-economic empowerment and consciousness, the Missionaries initiated charitable schools and colleges and introduced the humane side of the western culture. Moreover, they also provided medical and social services. Thus, the missionaries played a vital role in making the Dalits formidable to resist the discrimination and exploitation by the elite caste. Further, it was through this education there was the scope for social mobility and social change through reformative movements. The Non- Dalits too, felt the

need to reform the rigid caste system and they endeavoured to eradicate the caste system to bring change in the social outlook by catering education to the unprivileged castes. In the Andhra region, two of the pioneer reformers from Caste Hindu namely Kandukuri Vireslingam and Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu raised a protest against caste discrimination and showed empathy for the downtrodden. Later they were joined by Unnava Laxminarayan and Ramaswamy Choudhary to uplift the untouchables with education. More philanthropic caste Hindus came up with the social reforming cause like Maharaja of Pithapuram who established schools and hostels for the Dalits, the socio-religious reforming organization such as Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj which not only condemned the caste system but also raised concern for education for the Dalits. Hence, education is the root cause that lies in social transformation which is perceived in the biography *My Father Baliah*. It depicts how education acts as a pivotal point in the social upliftment and amelioration of the Dalits. The biography is social document to trace the social trajectory of the Dalits through hardships and struggles of Baliah and his family as author expresses in the Preface of the biography "... this is also the story of a community. It has been my lasting desire to show the present Dalit generation – and more so the future generations – how Dalits struggled." (Satyanarayana, 15) Further, it also signifies social change that is instigated through education. "I have myself been witness to the practice of untouchability and hope that future generations of Dalits will be free from this evil custom." (15) The paper explores several incidents and events narrated in the biography which imply social change and significance of education for social change.

The biography focuses on the character of Ramaswamy who is later known as Baliah. According to the social norm, the untouchables are not allowed to educate and in case any attempt is made it would be considered a sin. Narsiah makes his son Ramaswamy aware of this to curb his desire to study "No son, we are not supposed to write and read. We commit a sin when we do that". Ramaswamy satisfies his urge to study through his informal schooling by Mullah. "after many centuries of being denied learning by caste Hindus, a Muslim teacher sowed the seeds of learning in the Yelukati family – something for which the coming generations would be forever indebted to this

first teacher of the family"(37). This was the dawn of the brighter sunshine to come. The change that has taken place in the Narsiah's family was that the British railway system provided opportunities to the Dalits like Narsiah and his son Ramaswamy and opened the scope for new employment opportunities in railways which redeemed the Dalits from exploitation and degrading jobs enforced by the upper caste. Ramaswamy's interest in study grew "he could experience the wonder of learning all by himself. He was discouraged and sometimes even condemned by people of his own community, who told him that it was a sin for untouchables to read and write" (49-50) Rather than succumbing to this criticism, he 'fuelled his determination to have his own children educated.' Thus, the strong intensity in him to evolve and break the social trend was supplied by his interest in studies. The opportunity provided to Narsiah in the railways changed "the course, not only of his own life, but also of the generations to come." (54) It had also emancipated him from all sorts of economic exploitations and dependency on the landlords. The significant change that occurred in the lives of Dalits was that "The untouchables who lived in the railway colony enjoyed the same freedom as the higher castes. There wasn't any social restriction here. In colonial times, cantonment areas and railway colonies were 'free zones' for untouchables, where they could aspire to better social lives, and earn their livelihoods like caste Hindus. The economic opportunities were similar for both the touchables and the untouchables." (77) Not only this, there was a change in their dressing style for both untouchable men and women. "The women began to wear their saris in such a style that their ankles were covered, and they could afford to wear gold jewellery." (78)

Ramaswamy later renamed Baliah who couldn't get proper education, is determined to provide better education so that it will certainly lead to upward social mobility. He foresees a quality prospect in his children's lives and he is committed to do whatever possible. "It was Baliah's deepest wish that his children be educated and become high-ranking and well-respected officers in the railways. For this, he was prepared to work extremely hard." (83)

In order to make his dream come true, he admitted his children Abbasayulu, Narsimlu, Anjiah and Sathiah to railway school. He personally tutored them and advised them to neglect any sort of discrimination

from the upper caste student and focus on their studies. He was very attentive to his children's education. "Every evening he sat with them, and like a tutor, made them repeat what they had learnt in the classroom Bachamma played an important role in monitoring her brothers' education; she would make them sit down to study when her father was on duty in the evenings." All three generations were deeply indulged and engrossed in education which they realized to be the only way out of all the drudgeries of the upper caste. He made provision for everything that they needed "I saw Father arranging all that we required for our studies in the shed. He was trying to provide us an atmosphere in which we would not be disturbed from our studies Father took our studies very seriously. In fact, he kept track of the progress each of us made in school and even met our teachers to enquire about our performance." (115) Baliah considers education as a significant move towards social change. He says "Our job is to give our children a good education, which will take care of the other things in life." (117) Baliah was determined to educate his children for their brighter prospects. His younger son became an officer in railways. "He was also the first person from the Yelukati family to reach this level." (101) There were more matriculated children added in the family through Narsimlu and Anjiah. His son Abbasayulu later joined College in Secundrabad and also did a job in the night shift. Yadagiri was the brightest of children among others who succeeded in matriculation with a great result and secured admission to Engineering College at Warangal without caste reservation. This was a rare moment in this community in which education has brought greater influence to bring change. Baliah had turned things around not only for his family but set an inspiration for the whole community to break the shackles and move forward. Even his wife also toiled hard to provide good education to her children. It was very uncharacteristic for a Dalit family to get higher education which was made possible by Baliah by encouraging his children to attain higher education.

Through education, their social status and lifestyle have improved. "There was a change in the lifestyle of the family now: there was a change in the food, not only did we now eat chapattis made of wheat flour... we had vegetables and rice at every meal. We had more physical comforts too, like writing tables, chairs and ceiling fans." There was economic stability and

empowerment as Baliah's children- Narsing and Sathiya got government jobs in Government colleges. Narsing later became a research scholar at Osmania University and earned pride for his family.

The influence of education is reflected in the social outlook of Baliah and sympathies with the Brahmin girl who is driven out by her family due to her affair with his son. He calmly handles the situation and accepts her as his daughter-in-law. "He did not care which caste the girl belonged to, nor was he apprehensive about what the community would think. He was thinking like a human being. He had not read any of the social reformers, but his compassion led him to appropriate action.... he broke traditions and entrenched customs, and was the first man in our family to open its doors to inter-caste marriages. My father was a visionary and a great man, greater than many intellectuals who claim to be Ambedkarites, and yet remain against inter-caste marriages" (183)

These transformations in education and lifestyle 'had changed' them a great deal. Mr. Narayana, a high cadre official Brahmin community had offered his daughter's proposal for Baliah's son Sathiya and the wedding was fixed. Education among Dalits had also transformed the elite caste's perspective to some extent which is illustrated through this marriage tie. This led to 'the grandest of the marriages by far' not only in the family but also in the whole community.

Baliah's commitment to uplift his family and lead it towards socio-economic mobility is acknowledged by his son "My father had not been rich and never owned a house, but he enabled his sons to reach a position where they could make their fortunes" (195). His determination to earn social dignity and live life with pride is remarkable. Though he is unaware of Ambedkarite philosophy he still has imbibed a formidable character in him- right to live life in dignity. He strongly admits "You must abolish slavery yourselves. It is disgraceful to live at the cost of one's self-respect. Self-respect is a most vital factor in life. Without it, man is a mere cipher. To live worthily with self-respect one has to overcome difficulties. It is out of hard and ceaseless struggle alone that one derives strength, confidence and recognition," (195). He wants his family to be an ideal example in the community by never succumbing to any injustice or exploitation. He remembers his father's piece of advice "do not bend yourself before anyone. No matter whether you are starving, your pride should never be

mortgaged”(195). This hereditary ideology has yielded a tremendous turnaround in the succeeding generations of Baliah’s family.

Thus, the biography projects the Yelukati family and their journey. Baliah’s son Sathiya admits the vital contribution of Baliah to his family and his community. He acknowledges Baliah’s spirit of living “The man who had taught his sons discipline, made them tough and uncompromising, enabled them to reach the highest possible heights in education, and given them a good standing in society breathed his last. He had set an example for many Dalit families and was popular among not only Dalit communities but among all railway employees from Secunderabad to Kazipet. He was no social reformer and had not read Ambedkar, but he fought social evils at his own level and was uncompromising in his fight. He had refused to be subservient to anyone throughout his life, and had therefore commanded respect even from those who belonged to the higher castes” (205). To conclude, social change and upward mobility of the downtrodden community education play a significant role as exemplified through the biography. Education and determination to resist social injustice make their life more fruitful and worth living. It has opened up a new horizon to make a significant impact not only on their personal lives but also on the societal level.

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