



SPEECHES AS LITERATURE: A CONSIDERATION OF THE SPEECHES OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR AND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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ABSTRACT

The term Literature has been defined variously by scholars and academicians. Some definitions restrict the scope of literature to only classic texts belonging to a “canon”, a word which itself is a vaguely defined term. Some limit literature to only written texts and hardly take oral texts into consideration. Some consider oral and written both as literature and uphold the legacy of orature, or oral literature found in the folk forms. In the modern times literature is assumed to include a vast body of formal writings like newspaper articles, newsletters, written material produced in various disciplines such as Law, Politics, Sciences, other subjects in Humanities etc. There has been a controversy as to the exact definition of Literature. The boundary line between what is and what is not literature is difficult to be drawn. But basically there is a consensus that literature is a verbal expression of human thoughts and emotions aimed at entertaining, educating, and informing the reader or audience.

INTRODUCTION :

The observation about Literature by John Morley (qtd.in Murphy) is more comprehensive.

“Literature consists of all the books... where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, sanity and attraction of form....poets, dramatists, humorists, satirists, masters of fiction, the great preachers, character writers, maxim writers, great political orators, they are all

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*Literature in so far as they teach us how to know man and know human nature
.This is what makes literature rightly sifted, and selected and rightly studied.”
(Murphy)*

In the words of Hudson,

*“Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have
experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it
which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus an
expression of life through the medium of Language.” (Hudson)*

Fiction and Non Fiction are two categories of Literature. While Fiction includes Short Story, Novel, Drama and Poetry, Non Fiction includes Essay, Biography, Autobiography, Letters, diaries and Speeches. A speech is a non - fictional prose, a formal address delivered to an audience in order to persuade, inform, enlighten, inspire, or entertain. Speeches are delivered by eminent persons like people in higher positions, academicians, social activists, political leaders, reformists, legislators, philosophers, artists, literary figures. Speeches are a part of most of the school and college curriculum the world over. Speeches are found in written form as a script of oral delivery to an audience. Since ancient times speeches have been the soul of oratory. Rhetoric too was an important aspect of speeches since time immemorial. Speeches of great orators and speakers are studied as valuable pieces of literature. Demosthenes of Athens, Greece and Socrates are perhaps the oldest speakers known for their speeches. In the modern times, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, John F Kennedy, President Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B R Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Barack Obama have be famous for their content as well as style.

The 20th century witnessed the rise of two great icons on the socio political scene of the world. They revolutionized the world with their activism, writing and speeches. Dr. B R Ambedkar and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged the extremely strong foundations of the socio- political systems based on discrimination and hegemony and succeeded to a great extent in winning equal rights and justice to the downtrodden masses in America and India. The most important achievement of these great men was to put life into the souls of their brethren who had become as cold and lifeless as corps under the extremely formidable and degrading conditions imposed for generations upon them by the evil and inhuman forces of racial and caste discrimination. Both of them were scholars par excellence. Both struggled throughout their lives for the three values-Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Both were fearless advocates of non- violence and peace. Both brought change into the lives of Millions of people in bondage. They conveyed their ideology to their brethren and the world through



their activism as much as their writings and speeches which were extremely powerful in their content and style.

The great social reformist, politician, economist and jurist Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born on 14th April 1891 in an Untouchable Mahar caste in Maharashtra, India. Right from his childhood he experienced the sting of caste discrimination practised by the upper caste Hindus. He was greatly disturbed to see the inhuman treatment given to the untouchables. The untouchables were at the lowest rung of the caste system where -by they were denied right to education and economic progress. Their shadow not just the touch, too was polluting. They were doomed to live in worst conditions outside the village and do all sorts of menial jobs and serve the upper castes. As ordained by the religious Law book *Manusmriti* they could not improve or change their status and climb to upper rung. All doors of their progress were permanently shut. Defying *Manusmriti* invited severe punishment to them. Thus crushed for generations, subjugation and servility had killed their spirit of manhood.

Born in such a caste, Dr. Ambedkar nevertheless completed his education being the first untouchable to be decorated with degrees like M.A, Ph.D (Columbia University), D.Sc (London School Of Economics) Bar at law (London) and D. litt. He became Labor, Irrigation and Power minister in viceroy's executive council, first law minister of Independent India and the architect of the Indian constitution. Throughout his life, he championed the cause of the untouchables and raised a struggle for their emancipation. To give voice to the untouchables' problems and to sensitize the upper castes he started newspapers and magazines like *Mooknayak*, *Janata*, *Samata*, *Prabuddha Bharat* organisations like *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha*, Scheduled Caste Federation and *Samata Sainik Dal*. He undertook Kalaram Temple entry *satyagraha*, *Parvati Satyagraha*, and *Mahad Satyagraha* to fight for equal rights of the untouchables. Dr Ambedkar wrote prolifically. '*Buddha and His Dhamma*', '*Thoughts on Pakistan*', '*Annihilation of Caste*', '*Who were the Shudras*', are some of his important books. The vast body of writing and speeches, books, letters, debates, is the literary out- put of Dr. Ambedkar. It is a storehouse of the ideology called 'Ambedkarism'. This literature has inspired others to produce Novels, Poetry, Drama, Films, Documentaries, Autobiographies, research articles and Ph.D. Theses. His writings and speeches are studied as Non- Fictional Prose or discursive writing under Indian Writing in English.

Dr. Ambedkar was a prolific orator. He travelled the length and breadth of the country delivering hundreds of speeches in Marathi and English to awaken his masses. His parliamentary debates are a testimony of his scholarship and erudition. He has a voluminous work to his credit. His speeches had the most important role to play in his movement. The speeches played an important role in awakening the illiterate, extremely poor, ignorant and



helpless untouchables who had lost the hope and strength to challenge the discrimination and change their wretched state. Through his speeches Dr. Ambedkar gave them confidence, sense of pride and self-esteem and a strength to rise and fight against centuries old façade of Hindu *chaturvarnya* that had kept them in utter bondage. The power of the speeches was so strong in appeal that the illiterate and ignorant masses completely change their way of life, thinking and old habits. The most remarkable change that the speeches achieved was the conversion. Millions of untouchables broke the shackles of Hindu religion based on inequality to embrace Buddhism. This was perhaps the greatest conversion in the history of the world which happened without shedding even a drop of Blood. The Powerful words Like educate, Agitate, organize changed the lives of millions.

The scope of Dr. Ambedkar's speeches was vast. His speeches can be categorised as Social speeches, Political Speeches, religious speeches, Economic speeches and debates. The social speeches deal with caste system, inequality, discrimination, women's upliftment, Poverty, education and social justice. The political speeches are on importance of Unity, solidarity, Democracy, Elections, importance of political power, importance of Ballot and votes etc. The economic speeches are about poverty, problems of Peasants, workers and trade unions, Religious speeches are on conversion, Buddhism as the only way to world's problems, Hinduism and *Cahturvarnya*(*Mnausmriti*,) . These are broad and general categories or areas. There are hundreds of sub areas which cannot be discussed considering the paucity of space and the scope of the topic. Dr. Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches are published in 22 volumes by Government of Maharashtra. Scholars like Bhagwan Das and Narendra Jadhav also have tried to compile the speeches in their own way.

The speeches of Dr Ambedkar are not just a social document but also excellent pieces of Literature. They are examples of excellent prose in English as are the debates, books and letters written by him. Dr Ambedkar's Literary output can be termed as "Literature of Thought." Like the writings and speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, G K Gokhale and Ranade Dr. Ambedkar's work doesn't find much space in Indian Writing in English. The spiritual and moral appeal of his works as well as the vastness of the intellectual scape is unparalleled.

Speaking about his speeches Vijay Kelkar, Chairman Indian development Foundation, Delhi states,

"These three volumes of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's speeches show his dazzling brilliance. Dr Ambedkar was a polymath and intellectual colossus who effortlessly moved from philosophy to praxis. These speeches cover wide ranging areas such as political economy, sociology, history and real politique.

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These volumes tell us why we all should be grateful to the providence for having Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar when free India needed a new dawn of enlightenment.”

“The Speeches indicate how great the quality of public discourse was those days when a new India was being shaped” comments H K Dua , Senior Journalist and member of Parliament

In America Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights movement for the Blacks and fought for their freedom and equality using non- violent methods. He was awarded Noble Prize for peace for his peaceful ways of agitation. King was born on 15 January 1929 in a family which was extremely religious and peace loving. His Grandfather, father and uncle were all preachers. The legacy of the church came to him from them. Very early in life King experienced discrimination. He was deeply troubled to see the unequal and inhuman treatment given to the Negroes. The Jim Crow Laws were the instrument that the white racialists used against the blacks to exploit them in all possible ways. The Negroes faced segregation and humiliation on day to day basis. Law and Judiciary also favoured the interests of the whites and suppress the Blacks. Lynching and killing were very common. Access to public places like parks, public transport system, theatres, schools hotels shops lunch counters etc. was denied. Because of Racial discrimination the Negroes were relegated to a state of extreme poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. Spiritually they had lost the strength to fight injustice.

King Jr. mobilized the Black population and organized several sit- ins, long Marches, protests and agitations in America against discrimination. The black protestors had to face the brutalities of the Police. The police used fire hoses, ferocious dogs and even guns. Beatings, torture and imprisonment were very commonly used to punish the protesters. The Negro endured all this patiently without retaliating with violence. This strength came from the extremely dynamic leader Dr. king whose extraordinary speeches instilled in the minds of the Negroes the sense of pride and self- esteem. The powerful appeal of the speeches gave tremendous confidence and unparalleled optimism to the Negroes who had given up all the hopes of a better life.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the age of 38. But in such a short life he produced a vast body of literature. Some of the books he wrote are- *“Stride Toward Freedom”*, *“The Strength to Love”*, *“ Why We Can’t Wait”*, *“Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?”* and *“The Trumpet of Conscience”*. He wrote several essays on religion and non –violence, love and peace, war, Integration, race relations, democracy and nationalism. He also produced historic essays like *“Letter from Birmingham”*, *“Black Power*



Defined”, “A Testament of Hope”. The speeches of Dr. King’ are considered most remarkable. Some of the famous speeches are:

“I have a Dream”, “Give us the Ballot”, “Noble prize acceptance Speech”, “Where do We Go From Here: chaos or Community?” and “I see The Promised Land”.

King’s speeches are excellent pieces of prose. They appeal to the intellect as well as to the heart. They have a unique literary quality. King uses rhetorical devices and figurative language. There is also a lyrical quality in his speeches. King’s extraordinary faith in God is reflected in almost all the speeches throughout. He alludes to philosophers, poets, and eminent thinkers. Being a Minister and a devout Christian, Biblical allusions too are in plenty in his speeches. Following is one excerpt from the historic speech “*I Have a Dream*” speech delivered on August 1963 on the steps of Lincoln Memorial in Washington to two hundred thousand people.

“This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

Dr. King’s speeches are studied as prose and discursive writing in schools and colleges. His speeches are not only ‘Literature of Thought’ but also ‘literature of emotions’. They are studied as literary texts. They are analysed as discourse.

Non-fiction prose like essays, autobiographies and biographies find ample space in English Literary Studies as part of the syllabi across the world, as in India. The writings and speeches of great political leaders, nationalists and social reformers of the world find little space even today in English Studies and research. As far as the great body of speeches available to us is concerned, these great personalities hardly got the due they deserved in being included in English studies. And if the speeches are there, they are studied only for their rhetorical,



linguistic and discourse oriented nature. The speeches are mostly in English of higher standard as the speakers themselves were highly learned men with the highest degrees in their name. Their speeches, like other forms of fiction and non-fiction have touched almost all the aspects of human life, individual and social, spiritual and material. They have made people cry and laugh. They have taught to dream and translate the dream into reality. They have changed the timid into courageous, degraded into noble, revengeful into forgiving, hateful into loving and ignorant into enlightened. The speeches have given voice to dumb. The speeches have proved to dispel the darkness to be substituted by the light of bliss.

Speeches are our legacy. They are a treasure trove of the best that man can think for himself as a society and as an individual. Speeches should be included as texts at all levels of instruction in English studies. University departments of English can have a separate paper or option related to speeches. There is also immense scope for research on speeches. The research could be of comparative nature. It could also be interdisciplinary. Autobiographies in that matter, have been ahead of speeches.

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