



# Caste And Myth: Dalit Revisions In Contemporary Theatre.

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## Abstract:

Contemporary Indian mythology reflects upper-caste perspectives, normalising caste hierarchies and overlooking marginalised voices. Myths often dehumanise Dalit characters. Contemporary Dalit theatre counters this by restoring these characters' complexity, suffering, dignity, and resistance, thus offering a powerful counter-narrative. The main argument is that Dalit playwrights actively reclaim and transform mythological characters, directly challenging dominant narratives and decisively asserting Dalit identity. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of texts such as the Ramayana, Manusmriti, and caste myths forms the foundation of Dalit theatre theory. Sharankumar Limbale's work emphasises humiliation, violence, and resistance, critiquing religious myths used to justify caste exploitation. This article examines how Dalit playwrights and performers reinterpret mythic characters to challenge the hierarchical caste system and rewrite inherited stories from the perspective of the oppressed.

**Key Words:** Dalit Revisions, Hierarchical Caste Structure, Oppressed, Perspective.

## Introduction:

India's caste system is rooted in Hindu scriptures such as the Manusmriti, which divide society into four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This hierarchy, justified by religious and social norms, placed Brahmins at the top and condemned Dalits to "polluting" tasks such as manual scavenging. After independence, the Indian Constitution, under Dr B. R. Ambedkar, aimed to dismantle caste through affirmative action policies, including reservations in education, employment, and political representation for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar found that Hinduism was the root cause of Dalit oppression, perpetuated by the Manusmriti. Since its creation, Dalit culture and lifestyle have been unfavourably represented in mainstream socio-historical paradigms. Caste Hindus, as Manusmriti followers, have imposed the identity of 'untouchable' upon Dalits, defining them both in society and upper-caste literature. Ambedkar believed change would come from Dalits' education, movement, and agitation, rather than from external factors. As Paulo Freire advocated, the search for liberation must come from the oppressed, through their own struggle. Ambedkar believed literature must foster values and social progress Dalits must write their own stories as upper-caste literature maintains inequality at its core. He said: 'Manusmriti is not acceptable to us, given its endorsement of inequality. Why should we not burn such a text?' (Limbale). In 1938, years after Manusmriti's burning, he told T.V. Parvate: Not all parts of Manusmriti are condemnable, nor is Manu a fool we burnt it as a symbol of the injustice that has crushed us for centuries and kept us in poverty. (Limbale). For Ambedkar, literature supporting inequality demanded mass opposition.

Dr. Atulkumar M. Parmar (Pg. 11511-11519) 11513, saying that Manusmriti was unacceptable to him, and ultimately publicly burned it. According to him, every text must be accountable to society and to humanity. He took the position that literature must enhance equality and destroy inequality. For Ambedkar, Dalits who wrote Bhakti literature failed this test because it was of no use in the destruction of the Hindu Varna system.

### **Dalit Theatre:**

Dalit Theatre originated in Maharashtra, drawing inspiration from Dr Ambedkar. It has since spread nationwide, echoing Ambedkar's ideals and paralleling experiences like those of African-American theatre. Dalit Theatre challenges dominant narratives, establishing a distinct identity and highlighting common ground with other oppressed groups.

Dalit Theatre has sought to present its thoughts, philosophy, and rebellious character and consciousness with total commitment, carving out a distinct identity for itself. It helped the Dalits discover their identity, their self-esteem, and even their existence. It has also emerged as a means for their struggle. Ambedkarite Dalit Theatre is a powerful means for providing impetus to the socio-cultural reorganization of Dalit society. What began as Ambedkarite get-togethers evolved through several phases, including Ambedkarite folk and street plays, before ultimately metamorphosing into Ambedkarite Theatre. This theatre seeks to establish Ambedkar not as an individual but as a school of thought and philosophy, as an institution.

Ambedkar severely castigated untouchability as well as other forms of discrimination based on caste, race, varna, or clan. He was against the chaturvarna system. He opposed religious, social, cultural, economic, and psychological exploitation. He worked to build an egalitarian society. He also tried to educate and raise awareness among Dalits and equip them with values. He uncovered a new history of the Shudras. He led different campaigns and movements for social equality. He tried to turn the Dalits into rebels against the system. He played a key role in propelling Dalits out of their inertia and into a life of dynamism. He recreated their cultural legacy. All of this revolutionary work done by Ambedkar finds a place in Dalit Theatre. Dalit Theatre has consistently sought to emphasize the relevance and contemporaneity of Ambedkarite thought and philosophy. But it is also adapting to changing times by improvising in subject matter, craft, style, language, and presentation. It has been constantly experimenting. The concept of "Dalitvatva" (Dalit-ness) is also being broadened. The value system of "Dalitvatva" is being evaluated in the context of globalization. Old myths are being revisited to discover new meanings. The import of folk theatre is being expanded and made more comprehensive. Ideals are being re-established.

Datta Bhagat emerged as one of the most influential voices in the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra. Born into a Dalit family, Bhagat's work reflects his lived experience of caste discrimination and his commitment to social justice. Dalit literature, which gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, was driven by the desire to reclaim the dignity and agency of Dalit communities. Influenced by the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar and the larger civil rights and anti-caste movements, Dalit writers sought to challenge the dominant upper caste narratives that marginalised Dalit voices. Bhagat's writing is marked by its stark realism, political urgency, and profound psychological insight. His plays include *Routes* and *Escape*. *Routes* expose the existential dilemmas faced by Dalits, the betrayal of Dalit political leaders, and the complex relationship between caste and the social reality of caste oppression.

In Valmiki's Ramayana, a Brahmin comes to Rama with a complaint that his son died because a Shudra called Shambuka did meditation. The Brahmin argues with Rama and appeals to him to protect dharma by killing Shambuka, who was not supposed to meditate, which is an exclusive privilege of the Brahmins. Rama in Valmiki's Ramayana kills Shambuka. But Kuvempu in HKIS's play *Shudra Tapasvi*

demystifies this popular myth and breaks the metanarrative of Valmiki. In his play Rama does not kill Shambuka at the behest of a Brahmin. Instead, he tells the Brahmin to commit the sin, and he thus saves both Shambuka and the Brahmin. Kuvempu's Rama is aware of the power and status of Shambuka, and therefore, he wonders at the sagacity of the Brahmin who complains against Shambuka.

Girish Karnad was a towering figure in modern Indian literature, widely recognized as one of the country's most prominent playwrights. Alongside contemporaries like Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar, he revolutionized Indian theater by blending historical and mythological narratives with contemporary sociopolitical issues and Western dramatic techniques. As he explained, Nittilai's character in *The Fire and the Rain* brings the voice of humanity, authenticity, and spontaneity. The fire of love between Brahmin Aravasu and low-caste Nittilai is the redeeming fire of humanity that unites the elements and enlightens the heart. Karnad's Aravasu is a symbol of the authentic common man, a lover of life, interested in acting, dancing, and singing, and not in the observance of Brahminical rituals as in the original myth.

The character Nittilai holds deep knowledge and morality she questions the hypocrisies of the upper caste intellectual Brahmins. She highlights the sexual exploitation of lower caste women by upper caste men, boldly quoting her father—"These high caste men are always glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them". Nittilai worked as a bridge between the upper and lower castes. Girish Karnad makes use of the tales from the Mahabharata and develops the story of *The Fire and the Rain*. It is relevant even today because we also see the domination of the superior caste over the lower caste.

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