

Holding up a mirror

In his latest book of short fiction, Sharankumar Limbale, a formidable voice of Dalit literature, mirrors the reality that Dalits live with even today.

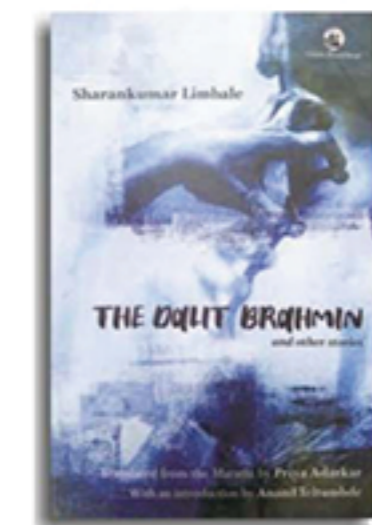
BY LYLA BAYADAM

SHARANKUMAR Limbale is among the most acclaimed writers of contemporary Dalit literature in India. His latest book, a collection of 28 short stories titled *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*, further cements his reputation as the voice of Dalit literature.

The son of a Patil father and a Mahar mother, Limbale realised that he was considered *akkarmashi*, or one of impure blood. His grandmother had a live-in relationship with a Muslim. Limbale embraced this as his social, genetic and emotional heritage. He named his autobiography *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)*, and when it was published in 1982, it was hailed as a landmark in Marathi literature.

EXPERIENTIAL WRITING

Dalit writing is largely experiential. There is not much fiction. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that until recently Dalits did not write or, more accurately, were not allowed to write. Until 50 years ago,



The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories

By Sharankumar Limbale
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literature in India was the stronghold of the upper castes.

The stories and traditions of Dalits were oral until B.R. Ambedkar emphasised the need for Dalits to declare themselves through literature and disprove the accepted wisdom that writing and literature were meant only for the upper castes. Hence the experiential writing that now largely characterises Dalit literature.

The writer Anand Teltumbde writes in his introduction to the book that it is this intensive recounting of their lives and all that

has been forcefully ingrained in Dalits that has made Dalit writing "occupy a central place in literary discourse today". Teltumbde places Dalit writing in context, saying: "The history of Dalit writings, as the experiential narrative of Dalit lives by Dalits themselves in writing, goes back to the Tamil Siddhas (6th to 13th centuries C.E.) and Bhakti saints; since many of them were Dalits, it is probable that their oral verses were committed to writing for their aesthetic and spiritual value by others.... Modern Dalit writing, a

product of the consciousness created by the Ambedkarite Dalit movement and the spread of education among Dalits, adopted the natural genre of short story."

Teltumbde goes on to trace the rise of this literature through the growth of certain publications that "brought forth a new generation of writers who were dissatisfied with the established Marathi literature, which they saw as bourgeois, Brahminic, moribund and orthodox. It [the Ambedkarite Dalit movement] ushered in modernism in Marathi literature and significantly became one of the catalysts of the Dalit literature movement."

The short stories in the collection are a glimpse into the lives of Dalits. The framework is the Ambedkarite movement. The characters are Mahars who have converted to Buddhism. They include the young and the old, men, women, children and young adults with raging hormones. They either bow to cruel tradition or challenge institutionalised oppression. The settings are both urban and rural. Feudalism, modernity, class barriers, illiteracy, superstition, love, treachery, blind devotion and oppression rage through the stories. They are not pot-boilers; they mirror the reality that Dalits live with even today.

There is the generation that accepted the injustices. There is the generation that questions these injustices, followed by the generation that is

caught in a limbo of acceptance and rejection of what their ancestors tolerated.

Then there is the generation which roars and seizes its rights by the throat. But turmoil still rules. The generation that takes its rights for granted is yet to be born—social conditions have not allowed for that generation to be born. Limbale captures all these aspects in his evocative, raw, painful and lyrical stories.

The intriguing title of *Dalit Brahmin* is a reference to the urban, educated middle-class Dalit who is suspected by other Dalits of looking down upon them.

Teltumbde explains how "the term was first coined by [the Dalit writer] Baburao Baghul, but made famous by [the Dalit litterateur] Arjun Dangle through his anthology *Poisoned Bread*.... Dangle's description of the Dalit Brahmin as one who seeks to distance himself from the political progress and cultural expression of his caste community drips with disdain. Dangle's Dalit Brahmin is educated, yet beset by an inferiority complex. He is opportunistic, and unmoved by the communal spirit of freedom and struggle of the Dalit movement..."

In the story with that title, the protagonist likes his Brahmin friends visiting his home because it increases his prestige; his wife attends non-Dalit ceremonies such as the *haldi-kunku* (social gathering in which married women present each other turmeric and vermillion) and the Satyanarayana

puja; he himself likes to attend functions of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). He talks of revolution but shies away from attending a Dalit protest march. Finally, after a meeting at a Brahmin household, his friend baldly tells him: "Do you know—all the utensils that you used were kept separate. All the cloths you used have been taken and given to the laundry.... You as a Dalit writer stay at his house, and his progressiveness and generosity shine forth for the world to see. Do you understand? He would not serve even a charity meal to a Dalit from this town."

Listening to his friend proves to be a reality check for the Dalit Brahmin who reflects, "Dinesh's [the friend] words pierced me like arrows. I had become numb like a lump of clay. I had understood the limits of that house. The limits of humanity, and my own." Although Limbale is clearly contemptuous of the "wannabe" Dalit Brahmins, he captures the fragility of their expectations and aspirations sensitively.

A thread of Brahminical hegemony runs through the stories, whether it is the beautiful Brahmin women who reject the advances of Dalit men because of their caste or the school principals and government servants who conspire against their Dalit colleagues. Brahminical power is expressed succinctly in the story titled "Son-in-law of the Government" where Brahmins assert themselves and perform pujas in offices despite it being unconstitutional, but object

when Dalits ask to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti.

Limbale highlights the infighting among Dalits when he talks of the leaders of the community being interested only in collecting contributions. He also exposes the almost internalised need of some Dalits to carry forward the slavery of their ancestors.

This is brought out with anger and pathos in "The Yeskar's Bhakri", the story of a Dalit village watchman. A robbery occurs on his watch and he is accused of involvement. He tries to find the thieves but is unable to. His punishment is a thrashing given to him by fellow Dalits on the orders of the village patil (chieftain). To clear his name he hangs himself, leaving his family destitute. His post is a much-coveted one among his community, and when another Dalit is appointed watchman, life moves on as if nothing had happened.

Limbale also exposes the grip that customs have on his community. In "Vows", a Dalit fulfils a vow to the village goddess by making his teenage son participate in a *dhadka*, a ritual in which the devotee rushes headlong into a temple wall. His son dies while doing this and the distraught mother hits her own head against the wall and dies as well. Instead of expressing horror at the deaths and the manner in which they occurred, the other devotees worry about whether the goddess will curse them because a woman had performed *dhadka*.

While this reviewer has not read the Marathi original, there is some-

thing about the translation that, at times, feels stilted. The translator, Priya Adarkar, has addressed this problem in her introductory note where she says: "The levels of Marathi used vary with the character who speaks or narrates. It is, of course, not always possible to convey the effects of dialect in the original, when it moves to a different language. One just has to approximate it with simple, less sophisticated words."

NARRATIVES OF UPLIFT

Although the stories express well-worn and well-known themes of exploitation, suppression and oppression, there is a vigour in Limbale's writing that raises them from tales of woe and self-pity to narratives of struggle, uplift and courage.

If there is criticism, it is that the narrative seems to have been handled simplistically at times. Teltumbde expresses this when he says: "Limbale's engagement with the Dalit universe appears tunnelled insofar as he either does not confront the complexity induced by capitalist development that has been taking place since the last century, or notes it but prefers to drive past it on the preconceived caste road."

Limbale is a representative of the community, and his narratives uphold this, but he needs to go the extra mile. Teltumbde sums it up when he says: "Perceptive writers like Limbale have a definite role to play. They are not expected to provide answers; their role is to hold a mirror to society." □