Chapter Five
Caste, Language and Dalits: A Critical View

Synopsis

In this chapter I wish to show how exclusion is built into the language employed by casteists. The language becomes a source for us to look at social and political reality. The politics of Dalit exclusion can be observed in how language is used in everyday life. Without an understanding of how exclusion operates in local language it is not possible to understand Dalit exclusion in English language education in India.

5.0. Introduction

According to Chandrabhan Prasad, a well known Dalit philosopher, in an interview with Sheela Bhatt (editor of Rediff. Com), says that “ethnic languages of India are carrying forward -- generation after generation -- the prejudices and biases of casteist Indian minds.”

He also says that no Indian language is free from the caste flavor. Furthermore, in Indian language, the speaker chooses the word according to whom they are speaking to, and the choice of the speaker reflects the social relationship to the listener. For example, in Hindi, when the relationship is intimate or when the speaker does not need to show the respect to the listener, English word, “you” is represented by the pronoun “tum”. But when the relationship is more formal, or when the speaker is supposed to show the respect and courtesy to the listener, “you” is represented by another pronoun “ap” instead. If we rephrase this, when an upper caste person talk to a Dalit, “tum” is used, but when a Dalit speaks to an upper cast person, “ap” is used. Furthermore, the language that is used by the upper caste Hindus for Dalits always tend to be very much derogatory.

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For the sake of a good explanation, I am here taking my mother tongue- Telugu for some of the caste based derogatory phrases or proverbs.

5.1. Phrases / Proverbs

Telugu: Chaakali Mangali Pothu intiki raadu ithu.

English: No grain comes home if a washer man and a barber do agriculture together.

In some places there is a notion that the Chakali (wahserman) and barber communities eat and drink a lot and they do not save the money for future generations. So, whatever they get from their work they simply waste it on eating meat and drinking alcohol. Therefore, it is said that when these two people do agriculture; they do not bring any grain to their homes except selling that for drinking and eating.

This is used to comment on the two persons who usually do the things only for eating and drinking.

Telugu: Golloniki malle puvvu iste gosila pettukunnadata

English: If a Golla person is given a Jasmine, he keeps in Dhoti

The meaning of the above proverb is like...... “If you give a Jasimine to a ‘Golla’ person (Golla refers to Yadava community), he does not know where to keep it; therefore he keeps the Jasmine in his ‘Dhoti’ (left side or right side)

The above proverb broadly explains an offensive meaning that the ‘Golla’ caste people are utterly nothing. They are not educated and socialized. They do not know the external world except rearing sheep and goats.

Telugu: Chaduvukunna vani kante, chaakalodu nayam.

English: The Dhobi (Washer man) is better than an educated person
Generally, this proverb is used when an educated person fails to tackle the things. It has a positive meaning. Dhobi is appreciated because the things that the dhobi tackles are not tackled by an educated man—in a context. For example, a Dhobi as part of his daily work collects the clothes of the villagers and washes them. In the evening, he distributes all the washed clothes in a systematic way where even a single villager misses his clothes. But this proverb has a caste flavor because people mention the caste of Dhobi (washer man) when a person from different caste fails to tackle the things. Moreover, it is used in a negative situation.

Telugu: Mangaloni laaga gundu korugaku.

English: Do not loot me like a Mangali (barber) tonsures the head.

It means when a person is asked by his friends, well-wishers etc, to spend more and more money on various kinds of things. The money donor says “do not tonsure my head like a barber. It means do not loot my money.

Though, it said in a casual way, it explains the nature of the work of the barber derogatively. Not only this, but also it explains the nature of the caste of barber.

Telugu: Panileni mangalodu pilli thala korigaadata.

English: the barber who does not have work engaged in shaving the head of a cat.

According to this proverb, people abuse the Mangali (barber) caste blaming that they are not expert in any work other than cutting hair. They even try to gain the knowledge of other works. When he does not have his work of cutting hair of customers, he simply finds a cat and cuts the hair of that. People with casteist mind use this kind of proverb to refer to a person who does not do any work except useless things.

Telugu: Madigoonni mandalinechi thannaale, maalonni mandaliyyaka thannaale.
English: kick a Madiga by asking and a Mala by not asking.

Madiga and Mala are the two major castes fall under Scheduled castes.

According to this proverb…. Madigas are not obedient and they do not listen to the upper castes people when it comes to the loss of their identity and rights. So they naturally start asserting for their position in the society. But people have a notion that “Madigas loose the patience in a very short time because they are very radical. Moreover, they do not have the political awareness”. If anyone wants to beat a Madig, they should start questioning their caste status so that Madigas will simply get beaten.

Malas have, to some extent, political awareness. Moreover, they are educated if compared to Madigas. They will listen and think of the intrigues of the other people. That’s why there is a notion that if anyone wants to beat a Mala, he should not be asked about his caste status or any other things related to his ways of doing politics.

Telugu: Sannaasi sannaasi raasukunte boodidaraalutadata.

English: If two Sannasis come together ash will come out and fall down.

Sannasi is a sub-caste of Madiga in Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh. In the Hindu ideological structure, the caste Sannasi has a meaning which refers to something that has no value in the society. If a person is said he is a Sannasi, it means he has no value and he does the things in valueless and non profitable way.

So, this proverb explains that when two Sannassis come together to do works, nothing (profit) will come out.

Precisely, the work that is done by the two Sannasis is equal to ash which comes after the fire.

Telugu: Cheppevi Sriranga neetulu dooredi dommari gudiselu
English: Taking/following the morals of Sri Ranga but entering Dommar houses.

In Telugu, the word ‘Dommar’ refers to the caste that does the prostitution for survival.

This proverb explains that the people who always tell and teach the morals will enter the houses of the Dommar. When a person is said that he is a brute and he has no moral values, this proverb is used for him. Precisely, the proverb expresses the derogatory and casteIST notion of the people towards another Hindu caste in which the women offer their body for their survival.

Telugu: Kootiki thakkuva kavachchu, kaani kulaaniki takkuvemi kaadu

English: Food may be less but that does not mean that caste is also less/ inferior/lower.

The above proverb refers to the caste hegemony- lower and upper. A suitable example for this proverb is..... ‘I may not have food as you have today but I am not inferior to your caste’. It means he comes from an upper caste background and the other person is from lower caste. Therefore, the above proverb proves that lower caste should behave in a limited freedom; they should remember their caste and social status before speaking to the upper most caste people.

5.2. Some derogatory words

Along with the above proverbs, I would like to incorporate some words which express the caste in Indian languages.

Telugu: Maadigoda

English: Our wall

The word Maadigoda is something like ‘Maadi’ means ‘ours’ and ‘goda’ means ‘wall’. So when we connect these two words it becomes like Maadigoda (our wall). What
I intend to say here is that it has a derogatory sense because when an upper caste person wants to abuse a lower caste Madiga, he touches a wall and says:

‘Idi maadi gooda’. In English it means ….. ‘This is ‘our wall too’.

Gangeddulonilekka cheeyaku/ aadaku

English: Do not behave like Bullock dancers

Gangireddula (Bullock dancer) is a dancer community which does the dance with their bullocks in front of marriages ceremonies and ritual ceremonies. This community is found in Telangana region in a great extent. They wear colorful clothes and a cap on the head.

This proverb is used for the kids and sometimes even for elders who do the things in a childish way. So, it is said that this proverb expresses the derogatory sense of meaning. Not only this but also it makes the Gangireddula caste as a worthless community.

Not only proverbs, there are some other elements of language also prove that there is caste in Indian languages. For example, In Hindi, to greet somebody we say pranamam. The person bows down and there is a kind of body co-ordination like the folding of hands and bowing down of the head when he or she says pranamam.

According to Indian tradition, Dalits do not have the right to receive pranamam. Because the receiver of the pranamam had the right to bless, so Dalits never received pranamams. In response, the person responds with 'khush raho (be happy).

To say, there are lot like all the above proverbs and words which express the caste in Indian languages in a very derogatory manner.

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The study deals particularly educational exclusionary practices in India with special reference to Andhra Pradesh one of the South Indian states on the ground of Dalit untouchables. Basically, this study is done in the educational status of the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. It particularly attempts to find the reason behind the Dalit low involvement and poor achievement in schools and colleges, and examines how the educational opportunity of the Dalit children being affected by their caste status. The research is shown how social exclusion is determining the educational attainment of the particular caste group of the country. The research has been undertaken to observe the importance of the emerging Dalit literature very applicable to the contemporary studies. And it is focused on the purpose of studying Dalit literature. The research has great expectations on this present project that is being proclaimed. Hoping it will be a very beneficial to the coming generation within the society, mostly to the students coming from different backgrounds.

In this brief chapter we are able to see that the local language exclusion of Dalits is further mirrored in Dalit exclusion that is happening at the level of English language education. This connection is vital for not only understanding caste system in India but also in order to look at the importance of English language education for Dalit liberation in India with special emphasis on Andhra Pradesh.