

Penetrating Caste

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I have been trailing through various places in Europe, North America, South America, India, and Nepal. Reading is not a dedicated affair; books invite pauses, reflection, and theory. Still, yet, I carried a couple of books with me. Among the selected ones, Yogesh Maitreya's *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* was one of them. It is one of the rarest statements of a Dalit youth's journey, written with passion and candour. The present book under review both educates and places a certain responsibility upon its readers.

The Dalit in the world of letters is pre-defined. It is within the structure of steel hierarchies that the Dalit needs to adjust. There are set paths that they need to walk on, and the directions are specifically mentioned. The signposts are not written for everyone walking on the path, but they are customised, especially for the specific Dalit person who is advised to follow and assimilate or face boycott and elimination.

The science of the memoir is written in a form that delegates the responsibility of memory and the interpretation of dreams. Memoirist writing has invited the attention of the world to a great degree. The personalised stories of those whose community is experiencing an unnatural reaction to the world is evoked to make a dent in the set narratives. When would a Dalit mind be thought of as a creator instead of being undermined through a predefined assessment of the intensity of pangs and expression of emotions? It has been a practice of publishers to seek out stories of Dalits, for their value is embodied in the buoyancy of their subordinated existence. There is always a search for a story of triumph, an exit, a climax to end the debris of abuses. But Maitreya is not going to dance to the tune of the set rules of the industry.

Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir by Yogesh Maitreya, *New Delhi: Penguin; 2023; pp 320, ₹499.*

He will not give you what you incessantly desire; his narrative is pouring from Dalit brilliance, courtesy of his bombastic mind. Maitreya is writing because he has found his calling. He is purposed for it.

The Substance of Caste

Maitreya does not tell a tale of arrival; he presents the path of his work. It is not celebrating the tales of miseries. Rather, he constantly reminds the reader with every alternate page about the sustenance of anxiety, pain, hurt, self-doubt, violence, and rage. He is not toying with the line of the industry that is always salivating over Dalit personal space that they anyway never bothered to socialise with or invest in. Through the writing of personal narratives, the publishing industry satisfies its craving to experience a Dalit through distance. It is a win-win situation. Untouchability is also practised, and Dalit life is also enjoyed at the same time by its rules of hegemony and standards. There is something dirty about it. It is a nauseating and ugly voyeurism. This constant gaze of widened *kaali* eyes judges and needles through the scars of a familiar historic weapon called caste.

Maitreya is aware of the doctrinal stand that he has to avow and the ethical fight that he has to wage through the many stories he shares. Be it his troubled father's story—a Bollywood-loving Dalit working-class man whose only refuge is the screen that fictionalises his life like a religion offering hope without actual recourse.

Caste is like a substance. Those who consume it find a purpose in life. They hold on to it for the rest of their lives and endow it to the next generation. The ones suffering

at the receiving end want to get rid of it completely, and that means the creation of a new society too.

As he looks inside his own spiritual experiences, Maitreya is unforgiving of the new Buddhist cult established by the Western Buddhist order under the leadership of Ven Sangharakshita who started the Triratna Bauddha Maha Sangha (TBMS), a practice for laypeople to live a life as monks and devote time to the learning of Dhamma. The new cult, comprising mostly of the Dalit professional class, is keen to shed their lower-caste identity for a newer Buddhist one, and has followed whatever Buddhist values they get from the available shops. The work of TBMS is well-known in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, especially the western part of the region, and it is here where British Buddhists as well as philanthropists visit to build *viharas* and institutions. Their work has been remarkably impressive in creating centres of spiritual practice, lodging, and recreation. Maitreya, which is an adopted name after the next Buddha, explains the hypocrisies he had observed at the TBMS. He finds many interventions into the Buddhist way of life for Dalits as unbecoming of a strong moral force in the Dhamma.

Maitreya comes from Nagpur, the second capital of Maharashtra and the third largest city in the state. Nagpur's social history has seen the rise of the British confederacy alongside the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh that is headquartered there. Nagpur is also the site of the epochal work of B R Ambedkar's mass conversion to Buddhism. The Dalits in the Vidarbha region, particularly near Nagpur, were already landowning Mahars who could raise their status and contribute to the movement. Some of the pre-Ambedkar-era Dalit leaders hailed from the Nagpur region. Many of these well-to-do Mahars even unsuccessfully fielded Ambedkar in the 1954 by-election in Bhandara to ensure that he got into Parliament.

Nagpur, in that sense, is advantaged with history, culture, political movement,

and counter-social organisations that have bolstered the people living in these areas with the required confidence and shown a path. It has become a cradle of a new Dalit kind. Many top positions in any field, from politics and bureaucracy to the private sector, have people from this region. The air of Nagpur breathes confidence for those living in these areas. It is natural for a child who is growing up in this environment to be assertive, bold, and aware of their history. Thus, like Mumbai, Nagpur is also a city where Dalits got the required assertiveness through access to modernity, trade, and the Naga Ambedkarite culture. A slum dweller in a first-tier city is many times ahead of the ones coming from semi-urban and rural areas.

This worked in favour of Maitreya, even though he was living a life of poverty. His brush with Buddhism and the access to Western people and, therein, the world of literature is emblematic of his spatial advantages. However, not all become Yogesh Maitreya. There are ample people like him who are still trying to overcome the difficulties of life, but many have given up. In the graph of Dalit success stories, however, Nagpur has an honourable mention. Many more have turned to Ambedkarite literature and found their echoes resonating in literary circles.

The prominent people whose memoirs have been translated or originally written in English are a handful. Vasant Moon's autobiography was translated by Gail Omvedt and introduced by Eleanor Zelliot. It was one of the landmark works of literature coming out of Nagpur.

One Story, Many Relations

Maitreya's life resonated with me on many accounts. There are so many aspects to describe that were underlined in the book, but a few can be mentioned. Living in the fringes of urban centres, his family tried its best to make it through. His mother, who was an atheist, found a path out of any difficult situation, which is characteristic of one similarity. His mother, similar to my mother, never wore a golden *mangalsutra*. The only priced metal that was given to her during her marriage was left with the moneylender at a 10% interest rate. Months after months, even after repaying the loan, there was something else that

demanding money, and she frequented the neighbouring moneylender. To compromise the absence of gold, like many poor women of India, she opted for the gold-alike "bentex" jewellery. She wears that even today. Coincidentally, just today, as I type this copy, she is wearing a gold triangle in her mangalsutra. The gold was gifted to her by her children's significant other.

In his journey, Maitreya is searching for meanings. There are many regretful tones, and often, it comes with a hidden victimisation that masks the protagonist's next adventure. He is a victim; he is aware of it, but also, he is conscious and lettered, so Maitreya keeps moving in many directions. He has written an explanatory note to all those who did not understand him. It was his caste, clubbed with the fringes of class that he was born into that made him the way he is now. He reacted in a certain way against the old-age scars created in his mind. Thus, he is merely out there without any warning, protection, or support. He is hitting the wall and picking himself up with the help of substances that he finds.

When he is confronted with emotions, he keeps the mask of a strong face. "I was taught by cowards that Men don't cry." This condition gives rise to "suppressed emotion" which "transmutes into violent energy in men" (pp 61–62). Many a time, this does not remain with the emotions of individuals but makes them victims of atrocities. People eject violence instead of satisfaction which is a cause of national tragedy. They have not discovered that themselves. They want to become a shadow of someone, or something.

This *sankhara* (mental disposition) becomes its own territory, for he meets people smoking marijuana, high liquor, or cheap beer. He finds himself escaping the tensions that he does not want to face. He does not want to be responsible for things. He is merely a young adult who has to carry the burden of the *sansara* (cycle of life), and he is looked up to with hope. Whereas Maitreya is simply interested in the world of escapade offered through literary texts because, as he writes, "[B]ooks or literature were not part of these formative years of my life" (p 44).

Like many of us, Maitreya did not start off with a grand story. He started off as a factory worker devoid of any significant

goals. Enrolled at an industrial training institute, he learned to operate a lathe machine and started drinking at the early age of 17. Having a role model like his father, he wanted to experience "what it was about alcohol that made him weird and talkative" (p 47). He is gripped in a world of miseries that offers temporary solace. Thus, a new artist was being smelted in the scorching heat of Nagpur in the three factories where he toiled.

Maitreya is an advocate of poetry who has experienced the desires of people around him. The desperateness to own and be owned makes us equal, he argues (p 153). After all, powerlessness is felt when we gain power in someone else through the libidinal malevolence of cravings and restlessness. Who would, then, ask for caste in the scorching yells of orgasmic height?

Throughout his life, Maitreya is haunted by the slap of loneliness. As he writes, "I was defined by loneliness" (p 43). This spectral fear has animated much of his life because of his innate nature as an introvert. Thus, he visits many people, mostly women, to feel truly calm in their embrace. He longs for that hug, kiss, and ejaculation validated through an embrace. But when you "journey into the territory of conscience," you mature fast as you no longer see your pain in isolation (pp 136, 112). Life takes people in directions they did not sign up for.

Juices and Flows

With the many encounters with his partners and the great difficulties they have had in relationships, one wonders if Maitreya was brave enough to undergo the furnace of potential accusations. Many prominent writers from marginalised communities the world over have had crude attention from the opposite sexes. They have come back with their narratives to destroy or manipulate the story of the ex-lover. Perhaps, Maitreya is cautious and is confessing to his deeds already before someone comes with a dagger.

We get juicy ethnographic insights as we travel with Maitreya. His pictorial representation of the brothel had pictures of both hung on the wall—Bollywood stars as well as Hindu gods and goddesses. Maitreya has the ability to reflect on memory and make it into a fieldwork of imagination to do something bigger.

Many would think Maitreya hurried to put together his story. It is the age that comes with unmeasured rage. Many in the publishing industry are looking for an upcoming profitable Dalit story. It is what the market has turned into now. When it is Dalit craft, it has to be conditioned with the industry's rules where publishers and galleries give only 10% of the royalty while the cream of the rest of the profits fall to them in perpetuity. I see my yearly statements and only crush myself looking at the profits I contribute to the publishing houses.¹ It should not be normal to undergo this experience. Besides, they do not treat you as an author with dignity and honour. A Dalit's story is just one among the many products that the editors put out, ticking off one more responsibility or task. You have to fight to attract their attention and, more so, to seek an audience with the staffers at the massive publishing houses.

With only a handful of Dalit autobiographies written or translated into English, Maitreya has added his name alongside the luminaries of the Dalit literary field. Though he has developed his literary profile like many of his iconic predecessors, he has executed the task of writing his life for the world to now take notice. The genre of Dalit autobiographies has been dense in the Marathi language. Sizeable dissertations have been written on them, and many more research books have come analysing the Dalit person's story that gives clues to the social history of the community and the country. It is in the buried life of the Dalit person that the lost nation tries to find its way out of its calamity. Atrocities against us Dalits, Maitreya says, is a position of "Dalits against entire India" (p 67).

Ambedkar and Dalit literature gave meaning to his life and practice. Suddenly,

he started to notice those beautiful experiences hidden beneath the aggression of caste violence. Maitreya started to read the "vocabulary" of his pain. A rebel was in the making. He saw the immensity of love in Ambedkar, wherein he could transform hate into love and also transform himself into love (p 184). This love language is a pre-amble of an Ambedkarite Dalit existence.

Dalit life is not one of hate but of two loves: workable love and hopeful love. The earlier is a pragmatic jovial love while the latter is an imagination that runs wild to keep the pace of one's feet grounded and mind floating into many spheres. Often, Dalit rage—the beauty of anti-caste violence—is misinterpreted as hate. Hate, as Maitreya captures evocatively, is "too expensive a burden to carry in our heart" when ours is full of compassion and discipline (p 163). Maitreya discounts this with a rather generous medication by alluding to the hallmark of loneliness. He makes caste definitions into a sharpened arsenal of the victim which is arrested by the fake victors assuming the role of the oppressor. After all, they are lonely too and lack a society to grow as humans.

Loneliness is escaped through company; if the company is of a person, even better. If not, company can be someone or something that can be made one's own, premised on one's fragility. Loneliness is seeking a world beyond companionship. It is the drawing force of compassion. The lament of being and belonging to feeling worthy to live a few more years.

The Burden of Permanence

The one thing that keeps reappearing in the testimony of Maitreya's life is the coded seeding of a forced and involuntary exile. It is the diagonal of innocence from where the

powerful is stripped into a bare body that is sensitive to the bloodbath and mockery around oneself. The clothing as apparel is suggestive of the attempts made to cover it with more fuel so the fire can consume everyone near and far into its flames and burn the country—its psyche and body.

The troubled archives of experiences are registered on the bodies, and the mind is holding those mountainous memories in its depth. A slight trigger to the warehouse of burdened shame makes outwardly reaction as being shy or in self-doubt. Such a condition brings in the fortitude of rejection. No one can be made to feel otherwise. A Dalit life for others is that of rejection. You cannot convince us by occasional offerings of worldly comfort. Respect is deposited in the deepest trenches of Dalit anatomy. This forces the cause of freedom into a longing wherein the living trauma invites a mistaken belief of self-harm. Giving up on society is the failure of the country that did not love its own precious children. The dispensary of faith and dogma resides in the chamber of relief of those pushed into a permanent residence of alienation. Dalits have created their own worlds in the confines of segregation. It is these worlds that have developed new words and new life for all to benefit. The Dalit world is privately open for all. Dalit writings are a window into that world.

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NOTE

¹ The market for books on Dalit misery is large and lucrative, with editors from dominant castes seeking to maximise profits. *Caste Matters* sold around 15,000 copies and counting, but I received only a small fraction of its profits. The contract regime is pernicious, and with debutants, they milk it to the last straw. The last laugh belongs to the publishers.