

Untouchability and Human Dignity in K.A. Gunasekaran's *Touch (Thodu)*

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Abstract

Touch is a translation of a Dalit Tamil drama *Thodu*, written by Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran and translated into English by Ravi Shankar. It deals with the theme of untouchability and human dignity. It also exposes the cruel nature of caste based discrimination encountered by Dalits for centuries in Indian society. It is published in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*, edited by Ravikumar, Dalit writer, critic and activist, and Dr. R. Alagarasan, Professor of English, University of Madras. The author Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran was the prominent Dalit activist, folklorist, dramatist, theatre personality, the former dean of the School of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University and the director of International Institute of Tamil Studies. He was honoured with Kalaimamani Award by the Government of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, and Dalit Isai Kurisil Award from The Tamil Association of Canada.

Inspired by Left Movements, Progressive Writers' Movement and Marxian ideology, after Mandal Commission's Report, Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran focussed on the dalit point of view, ideology and theatre. He has done extensive research work on folklore, started his own performance troupe 'Thannane', toured across the globe spreading awareness of the problems of untouchability and the plight of Dalits in India. The rebellious song *Manusangada Naanga Manusangada*, (Human Beings, We are Human Beings) written by Tamil poet Inkulab and powerfully sung by Dr. K.A. Gunasekaran which became the anthem of the Tamil Dalit Movement. Dalit Theatre / Theatre of the Oppressed is a non-traditional theatre used to promote community centred problem solving, to create awareness of one's social situation, used worldwide for democratizing their own organizations, analyzing problems and preparing for action. Theatre of the Oppressed was established by Brazilian theatre artist and director Augusto Boal, to learn ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives. Street theatre is a

major tool for propagating the ideology and challenging the dominant discourse. Dalit theatre on the lines of the theatre of the oppressed is revolutionary, experimental, innovative and effective.

Touch deals with the theme of untouchability and its cruel nature. It explains how caste becomes a pollutant, mere touch of a human to another human pollutes, how untouchables / dalits struggle for survival and quest for human dignity, the nature of the caste based discrimination encountered by Dalits, the natives / inhabitants for centuries in Indian society, who live without land and peace of mind. *Touch* creates awareness and inculcates the audience/ readers to understand the problems of untouchability, makes the audience to touch each other and fulfils its purpose as a dalit theatre play. Caste plays a vital role in Indian society. Mere birth, caste determines ones destiny. Dalits are still subjected to extreme forms of socio- economic exclusion and discrimination. They experience humiliation, expose strong resistance of the so called higher castes, resulting in inhuman treatment, torture, rapes, massacres and atrocities. Dalit reality in India is not a mark of national pride but of international humiliation. The insults, indignities, inhuman treatment and atrocities against dalits continue unabated till date. To say that caste and untouchability are not relevant today is to deceive one's own conscience and refuse to see the reality.

Key words: untouchability, discrimination, dalit theatre, ideology, human dignity.

Touch is a translation of a Tamil Dalit drama *Thodu*, (2005) written by K.A.Gunasekaran, translated by Ravi Shankar, deals with untouchability and human dignity, exposes the nature of the caste based discrimination encountered by Dalits for centuries in Indian society. It is published in *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing*, edited by Ravikumar, Dalit writer, critic and activist, and Dr. R. Alagarasan, Professor of English , University of Madras.

K.A.Gunasekaran was the prominent Dalit activist, folklorist , dramatist and theatre personality, the former dean of the School of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University and the director of International Institute of Tamil Studies. He was honoured with Kalaimamani award by the Government of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, and received the Dalit Isai Kurisil Award from The Tamil Association of Canada. Inspired by Left movements his works laced with Marxian ideology. After Mandal Commission's report, he started focusing on the dalit point of

view, ideology and theatre.. He has done extensive research work on urban folklore associated with the Progressive Writers' Movement. He started his own performance troupe 'Thannane' and toured across the globe spreading awareness about the problems of untouchability and the plight of Dalits in India. His play *Bali Adugal (Sacrificial Goats)* was a precursor to the arrival of Dalit theatre in Tamil Nadu. His dramas *Sathya Sothanai, Thodu, Mazhi, Maatram, Varaivu Kadavuthal, Kanthan Valli* and his autobiography, '*Vadu (The Scar)*' are some of the important works. The rebellious song *Manusangada Naanga Manusangada*, (Human Beings, We are Human Beings) written by Tamil poet Inkulab and powerfully sung by K.A. Gunasekaran which became the anthem of the Tamil Dalit Movement. *Cheripuraviyal' (Dalit Lore), Dalit Arangiyal (Dalit Theatre), Sathiya Sothanai (Experiments with truth,* and *Pavalakkodi Alathu Kudumba valakku (Family Dispute)* are the significant works on folk arts, modern theatre history, criticism and music.

The term dalit is traced the root word 'dal' in Sanskrit which means to crack, split, broken, and crushed. Dalits are the group of people earlier known as untouchables subjected to social, political, economic, cultural and religious oppressions. They are maltreated by the so called upper caste people. They are called by different names such as Untouchables, Outcastes, Harijans, Scheduled castes, Chandalas, Depressed People, and Avarnas. According to dalit writers the term dalit is self chosen more political in nature. It is the symbol of change. Dalit Panthers use the term 'dalit' systematically rejecting all caste related positions of the former untouchables of the Indian society.

Dalit literature has achieved clearly recognized status of its own both nationally and internationally. It is undoubtedly global, it shares its thematics, tonetics, and aesthetics with subaltern literatures all over the world. It is glocal because it translates a distinct local dalit culture for global exposure and recognition. Dalit Theatre / Theatre of the Oppressed is a non-traditional theatre style used to prompt dialogue and promote community centred problem solving designed to create awareness of one's social situation, used worldwide for democratizing their own organizations, analyzing problems and preparing for action. Theatre of the Oppressed was established in the early 90s by Brazilian director Augusto Boal. It fosters democratic and cooperative forms of interactions among participants, designed for people who want to learn

ways of fighting back against oppression in their daily lives. He organized performances in the streets, factories, unions, churches, and the slums. He later worked in Argentina and developed 'Invisible Theatre' aimed at getting around the repressive political climate. Invisible theatre transforms public space into a public stage, drawn into a discourse about social oppression, and urged to take immediate action that might affect the scenario being played out, transforms monologue / dialogue between audience and stage. Participants determine their priority issues, problems from everyday life, in short scenes, as a vehicle for analyzing power, stimulating public debate and searching for solutions. Performance can be an activity of cultural enrichment, experimentation, escape, social critique, therapy, education, and self-empowerment. Dalit theatre movement in Tamil Nadu invokes the history of Dalit culture and absorbs the theatrical elements of other cultures. It incorporates the unrecognised folk performance traditions and fused them with aspects of the invisible theatre, theatre of violence, native theatre and feminist and black theatre. It draws upon myriad influences, distinctiveness lies in existing ideas and weaving the angle of human rights with a view of exposing the nature of the caste and its atrocities on dalits. It is classified into two categories, the first is activist playwrights stage their performances in the Dalit Cultural Festivals (Black Cultural Festivals in USA), and the performances in academic forums such as Seminars, or meetings on dalit issues by the students / scholars of the department of theatre arts in colleges and universities.

Dalit cultural festival was conducted first in Pondicherry in 1992. It has created a space for recognising dalit artists / activists and helped the growth of dalit theatre. The act of drumming the parai has incorporated as part of theatrical performances, challenging its perception as a demeaning occupation of a particular caste group. Dalit theatre is radically different from others. The elements of theatre activities make dalit community life, reflecting their protest, resistance and self confidence. Theatre provides a common platform for people to assemble and experience a work of art irrespective of their caste and religious differences. It plays a vital role in secularism and integration. Democratization of art owes in dalit folk tradition than to the theoretical tradition of the hegemonic. Folk performances are staged in available open spaces where no one is denied entry. Dalit theatrical activity is under the patronage of the Left-wing parties and the plays deal with issues related to poor peasants, unemployment feudal

exploitation, and land rights. Social reality plays deal with social issues from the point of view of Marxist theories. Street theatre is a major tool for propagating their ideology and challenging the dominant discourse. Dalit theatre on the lines of the theatre of the oppressed was a revolutionary, experimental and innovative.

Experience of untouchability is the theme of the life of dalits in their creative works. Untouchability is not simply a remnant of the past but a deeply entrenched form of inequality which takes on new avatars in modern institutions. Dalit literature is directly involved with fundamental human issues and human values. It is concerned with basic secular values like liberty, equality and fraternity. Dalit literature aims at restoring lost human values of equality and brotherhood to deny its existence is to deny humanity and equality. The untouchables in India suffered for centuries but during the 20th century they became aware of their ignoble condition education and organised efforts brought slow but steady change. Dr. Ambedkar's role in this regard is unique in the entire history of the world he blew new life into dead souls of the millions of the depressed people. Dalit literature is very important in the context of human rights. It consists of every individual right to live with liberty and dignity, It is a birth right of each and every human being, it also rights as a citizen of a state and economic social and cultural freedom. Dalit literature is connected with social commitment of the writers the values of life as reflected in their works and the awakening sense of equality, liberty, justice and fraternity in the minds of the readers. In dalit literature human being is the centre; it glorifies human dignity and human equality and liberty. Dalit literature protests against the traditional values that have neglected human equality and liberty it is against injustice, it fights for and the victims. According to Dr. Ambedkar mere political freedom should be of meaningless, unless all people become equal and enjoyed human dignity. Social harmony in India remains a dream because of age-old traditional caste system, continues to dominate in one way or the other.

Touch deals with untouchability and human dignity, exposes the nature of the caste based discrimination encountered by dalits for centuries in Indian society. When the drama opens, a woman appears kneeling in the centre of the stage, covering the mud pot with her long hair. She slowly raises her head and looks at the audience with anguish on her face. She expresses her anguish as, "Oh my people! Born to me! My mind is now stricken by agony as ever before"

(168). This is the reason for her mental anguish. So many children have played happily in the lap of this mother and gone their way. She scoops up and scatters the sand from the pot. She says, “My people live with no peace of mind. And what progress can we think of when there is no peace of mind?” (168). She says that people came from Greece, Rome, Dutch, French and Portuguese. The British came and considered this land to be their own land, played around and went. All these people came but the real owners of this land live without any piece of mind. Dalits are the natives of India, by the entry and exist of different people, the natives or the inhabitants of this land became landless people. The woman rises, walks towards the audience with the mud pot, and her hair covers her face and sobs inconsolably.

She repeats and moves towards the actor standing on the opposite side, touches the actor standing in the northern corner, stands in front of him as if pleading for justice. She says, “ criss-crossing these lands...toiling all the time ...these people have become dark skinned, it was their sweat that turned the forests and the hills into farming lands... now they have been swept aside in another direction”(164). Then she returns to the centre of the stage, and resumes her earlier posture. The sad background song picks up again, the four actors in four corners move to the front and stand in a row forming a curtain. Behind the curtain the woman leaves mud pot at the centre of the stage. When the music changes, the actors framed the curtain flap like wings, perform a heroic dance and their steps match the pounding of the big drums. Then the four actors perform cillambattam with elaborate steps and gestures but they are not exhausted. After the dance they form a tower like structure with their staffs and freeze. When the drums fall silent the flute picks up, the four actors starts moving in a circle without breaking the tower structure. The smaller and bigger drums start sounding along with the flute, the actors start earning their staffs around to shoe their courage in battle when it ceases, they resume the tower like structure.

Actor - 1 comes forward, faces the audience and says, “My Thatha was a mighty man ... an expert...he was a matchless dancer” (164). He looks at the other three but they laugh mockingly. Actor - 2, gestures them to stop and says, “You know me? My Appa taught cilambattam to all the people in this area.’(165). Actor - 3, swirl his cilambam forcefully in the air, slaps his thighs and brags. He further says, “If I announce who my father is, everyone here will be awe struck! (165). He strikes a gallant pose twirling his moustache, the other three look at

him laugh and ridicule. Actor - 4, laughs dramatically like a stage-hero and says, “It was my ancestors who invented cilambattam” (165). But the other three laugh at him. Then all the four jingle the anklets and make way to their corner and freeze. Actor1 points to the mud pot at the centre and says, “This pot... this mud pot...does any of you dare to touch it? (165), but the others become angry. Actor - 2 replies that the Actor -1 has mocked his valour. Actor – 3 says, “Who do you think you are speaking to? You have ridiculed my whole ancestry” (165). Actor - 4 bets, “If I touch this pot, will you shave off your moustache? Will you take a vow that you will never touch this cilambam again? You shouldn’t show your face here again. Will you swear? Will you? (165). At this time, the sound of the flute music comes blowing in the wind. Exactly like the darkness setting in at the sundown, when they hear the flute, their body language starts to show their increasing distress. As if stricken by a great mental anguish, energy drains out of them, and facing their directions they slowly collapse on the stage, the flute music ends.

Actor -1 comes upstage, looks at the audience and says that the people cannot even touch this mud pot. This is the important story you know. It is a story repeated in the village day after day. He hurries to the field for work, picks up the mud pot and leave the stage. A song picks up in the background that means, “The pea nut prices have gone up, Karuppayi... I will make a pair of ear studs for you” (166). Listening to the song, someone is tilling the field. Two actors are the bullocks and they are harnessed to the yoke and plough formed by the staffs while the farmer does the tilling. While ploughing, the actor suddenly looks up at the sky as if he finds the sun unbearable. He shows signs of a seizure and limbs failing about, collapses to the ground frothing at the mouth. The bullocks move aside. A passerby sees this and panics. He studies the scene carefully and runs around calling out for help. He says, “Anyone there ... anyone? Ayya is having a fit. Please come and hold him down... save him” (166).

He realises that help is not forth coming but hesitates to touch the quivering body himself. After a moment’s thought, he unties the plough from the yoke and makes the man on the ground grip it. The quivering slowly stops and he watches while the man slides into a faint. He turns away and bows before the ancestral god in his mind. He scoops up some mud and smears it on the man’s forehead like sacred ash. Releasing the plough from the man’s hands he calls him, “Ayya ...Ayya” (166). He looks around for anything that might help. He spies the mud pot on the

stage; he steps forward to pick up, but hesitates to touch it. Then he picks it up and brings it to the man and splashes water from it on his face. The man revives and now asks for water. He raises the man's head to lay it on his lap and offers him the water from the pot. Thirst quenches, the farmer becomes more conscious. The man who saves him asks, Ayya... Ayya..., how are you feeling now, Ayya" (156).

Slowly the farmer understands in whose lap his head has lain. As realisation dawns, he moves away abruptly, agitated that the unthinkable has occurred, he raises his foot and kicks the man who gave him water. The farmer scolds and curses the man who has helped him at the time of danger,

Why did you touch me?

Are you allowed to touch me?

Why did you touch me? (166).

The caste Hindus have psychological problem that a Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Caste is all in all. But the man explains to the farmer, "Ayya, you had a fit and fell unconscious. I thought you might die..." (166). Immediately the farmer replies, "So what if died? Why did you touch me?" (166).

Then the former rises, tries to hit him on the head with the pot. The man realises that this is the pot that has been touched by the other. He drops the pot and picking up the plough tries to hit the other with it because the plough too has been polluted by the man's touch, he throws away. The farmer becomes angry because he is polluted by the touch of the man. He has to face the people of the villager.

He becomes so serious and says, "How can I show my face to the villagers now! They will mock me for being polluted. Why did you touch me? Don't stand here. Go away?" (167). The farmer throws a fistful of mud on the man. When the man goes away, the farmer wails away. He "A low- caste fellow touched me ... a low-caste fellow touched me" (167). Further, the farmer cries, caress his bullocks and calls them endearing them like, "My beloved, my precious one" (167).

The bullocks bellow then all of them bellow in one chorus which becomes a comical orchestra. Laughing together, they place the mud pot in the centre, start moving around the pot, the raised staffs maintaining the appearance of a tower. At the time flute music fills the air:

In the backdrop,
In the fourfold system
We are not humans
Worse than dogs we are
We don't live here
Outcastes we are.
We have no relations here
Outcastes we are
We have no rights here. (167)

These words resound in the background. When the song is over, Actor - 1 comes towards the audience. The other three follow him. The sad song heard at the beginning of the play now picks up again. The four stand facing the audience forming a curtain. The woman is now back in the kneeling position with her long hair hiding the mud pot. When the voice and the notes from the flute mingle to make a sad composition, the four actors walk towards the four corners representing the four directions. The music stops and there is silent everywhere. The woman raises her arms and pleads, "Oh my people! I will rejoice only the day you unite" (167). Actor - 1 says, "Our people turned the forest into settlements... into cities...they harvested gold from the fields. The same people are now roaming around like refugees with no place to live, with no mat to lie on, no means to study."(167-168). Hindus love and touch animals like cow,dogs, cats and even pigs but never touch dalits because they consider mere touch will pollute. Actor -1 expresses that the mentality of caste Hindus as,

Touch a goat
Touch a cow
Touch a dog
Why, touch even a pig.
But can you touch another human? (168).

Even today, there are villages where you cannot use footwear, where you can not touch even a glass tumbler of tea. Finally the woman announces that at least now, here, everyone can touch each other. The actors move forward, mingle with the audience and each starts to touch the other, on their shoulders, arms and hands.

The problem of untouchability is an old question but a new challenge. According to the report of Human Rights Watch-1999, Untouchability forms part of complex of discriminatory practices that impose social disabilities on persons by reasons of their birth in certain castes. Untouchability continues to be a widely prevalent and deeply entrenched part of rural life, important issue for social thought and action, no significant studies of untouchability. It is a burning issue in India which demands focus of all Indians irrespective of religion, caste and other man made laws. It prevents overall development of our nation in the international level. Can the elite and the intelligentsia answer? Do dalits are treated just like everyone else? Aren't the atrocities against dalits that are reported in the news? Isn't the problem of untouchability limited to so called states of India? Do all the policies and programmes help dalits overcome the stigma of caste? All these questions are open for the intellectual intelligentsia of the caste ridden Indian society. Several such questions are to be raised, discussed and its solutions should be searched.

A campaign against untouchability requires to promote legal literacy and mobilise the masses for legal action to undertake strong penal and judicial interventions, guarantee to survivor, and initiate reorientation of the law and order machinery to create strict accountability in public sector and judicial reforms at all levels. Every sixth human being in the world is an Indian and every sixth person in India is a dalit. So, dalits can not be ignored, rejected, excluded, omitted, oppressed, suppressed and subjugated as it was done in the past. Dalits are ready to sacrifice anything for their lives to lead dignified life. But at the same time non-dalits invent and create unique and innovative powerful deadly ideas to dominate dalits. There is always a drift / conflict exists in the lives between two poles and produces unnecessary problems and atrocities affect the normal lives of the people. According to Dr. Ambedkar Caste system divides society into closed hereditary groups ranked by ritual status. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible.

Untouchability is an extreme and particularly vicious aspect of caste system that prescribes stringent social sanction against members of castes located at the bottom of the purity

and pollution scale. Atrocities on dalits are innumerable and untold sufferings are recorded unconsciously by the state and central governments, kept in records which now take new sense of unrest in the society. Caste system remains a challenge for dalit quest for social justice and human dignity. The caste system undergoes transformation and consequently so does the practice of untouchability. Dalits are resisting and struggling against their subjugation, revolt against oppression and injustice. Dr.Ambedkar says,” ... turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You can not have political reform; you can not have economic freeform, unless you kill this monster (177).

To conclude, Caste plays a vital role in Indian society. Mere birth, caste determines ones destiny. Dalits area still subjected to extreme forms of socio- economic exclusion and discrimination. They experience strong resistance from the so called higher castes, resulting in inhuman treatment, torture, rapes, massacres and atrocities. Dalit reality in India is not a mark of national pride but of international humiliation. The insults, indignities, inhuman treatment and atrocities against dalits continue unabated till date. To say that caste and untouchability are not relevant today is to deceive one’s own conscience and refuse to see the reality.

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