

Meenakshi Bharat

University of Delhi

Civilized/Barbaric? Changed Connotations in Indian Dalit Poetry

In 1937, almost at the fag-end of his long and creative career, Rabindranath Tagore, India's lone Nobel laureate, composed a poem entitled "Africa."¹ In this, he painted a picture of Africa's ancient "primordial" past, its simplicity and its uniqueness before embarking on the "blood and tears" saga of the continent, the "history of its indignity" under the raids of Slave traders. He also voices, quite clearly and incisively, the latent conundrum behind the "civilized"—barbaric polarity. He says that even as the "barbaric greed of the civilized" lay bare their "shameless inhumanity," back home, church bells were ringing out in their neighbourhoods in the name of God, and children played in their mother's laps, and poets sang paeans to beauty. Thus highlighting the stark contrast of the standards of humanism and value for life the invaders practised back home and the barbarism displayed by them in the colonies, leads him to voice his poetic dilemma: are there any infallible yardsticks by which these two categories can be defined? Tagore's belief in universal Humanism and the intellectual prowess of European thinkers and so their civilization, was undying. Yet in the face of such atrocities on fellow human beings by their own kind, he was left disconsolate. This little example from Indian poetry seems to be an illuminating entry point into one of the most debatable and contentious global issues that has ever assailed the world: the on-going polarity of civilization and

¹ See the appendix.

barbarism. Even if the origins of the tension lay in the comparatively less loaded Greek word *barbaros* simply denoting non-Greek, the constant juxtaposition with the word “civilized” has injected an inescapable and irreversible politics into it—civilized variously meaning having a highly developed society and culture, showing evidence of moral and intellectual advancement; humane, ethical, and reasonable and marked by refinement in taste and manners; cultured; polished and so on. More often than not, this has implied a face-off between two people or peoples, the one accusing the other of barbarism, while self-importantly ascribing a *superior* civilized position to the self.

It is quite evident that the historical project of colonization gave a special piquancy to this binary in the outsider, the usurper, feeling the need to name the indigene as barbarian and the self as civilized, in a bid to legitimate his intrusive action. No wonder that the notions of civilization and barbarism that were imposed on, and later ingrained in the native psyche were received “western” notions which characterized a whole culture with all its markers, one of which is literature—as civilized or not civilized, barbaric or not barbaric. Broadly then, the concepts of civilization and barbarism taught by the colonizers were meant to keep the natives in place. This uncomfortable distillation makes it necessary that this highly wrought and political categorization be addressed in the hope that it will lead to clarification while engendering new modes of knowing, comparing and theorizing, more so, because the ripple effect of this dichotomization inevitably percolates down time to colour and direct perspectives. It emerges that this largely nineteenth century currency has subsequently been reincarnated in thematic strains in both popular discourse and creative writing, the rhetoric continuing to be powerful in fuelling the identity politics amongst various groups. Consequently, even today, this re-inscription of the civilized/barbarian dichotomy in the culture and identity dynamic, demands a critical examination of the civilized/barbarian discourse as “This Land” (2008), a Dalit poem by Anu highlights quite succinctly, giving word to this tension remarkably:

A sure gaze
maze it will tackle
A quiet race
survived shackles

This soil ours
our toil yours
Yet we live
not in anger
Like so many others
You are just visitors
in our home
wrote tomes
To grab, steal, own
what was never yours
It's 3000 years,
you see, vanish we won't
This land is us!²

But it would seem that the ideas inherent in the civilized/barbaric polarity handed down from above do not give the complete picture when seen in the context of the history of India as one of the oldest literate cultures in the world. Moreover, though it is apparent that this binary is as much at home on the Indian subcontinent as it has been in the Western world, the hues of the competing contestations are evidently quite different and the indigenous, inherited ideas much more complex. Here too, one can see the cyclic appearance of the barbaric and the civilized that Joseph Conrad discerned in the West in his 1899 *Heart of Darkness*: he notes that England, the “biggest,” “the greatest” nation of the world, “has [also] been one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad 9). Simply put, civilized England was once regarded as barbaric by its Roman invaders. The acme of civilization can still, as the examples of Tagore and Conrad amply highlight, have the darkness of barbarism gnawing away at its innards. As Walter Benjamin says in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, VII (1940) “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

It would do well to recognize some basic facts about Indian literary history at the outset. The take-off point lies in the recognition, as already posited, that India boasts of one of the oldest known civilizations in the world. These evidences come from the fact that India has one of the oldest traceable histories

² “This Land” posted by Anu on November 12, 2008. <<http://castory.wordpress.com/tag/dalit-poetry/>> Accessed 25 Dec 2012.

on the face of the earth corroborated by the fact that it has some of the oldest extant literature in the world. And with the ultimate origins of the literary in orality, the history becomes even longer and the “texts” even older. This early literary character shows itself in the The Vedas, the Epics and the Puranas, all texts that have subsequently risen in stature to become revered as religious and sacred texts. It is a point worth noting that all these early texts were metrically composed for mnemonic reasons and are therefore, the earliest examples of poetry on the Indian subcontinent. Further, if age, growth, development is a meter for the civilization of a culture, then certainly, this early creativity displayed in the field of poetry becomes its distinctive mark. The fact that the verses from these texts continue to be used and recalled even today at important junctures of Hindu life—birth, marriage, death, festivals—makes this poetry the most persuasive reminder of this civilized identity.

In addition to these early beginnings, Indian civilization particularly stands out for its openness and assimilative tendencies as evidenced by historical events. The successive waves of migrants—invaders or otherwise starting from 1500 BCE—hat came and mingled with the locals gave rise to a great deal of intermingling at the linguistic and cultural levels. Already, the extent of the land had multilinguality written in as an essential feature. The interplay with outsiders gave rise to further languages and variants, both at the spoken and the written levels. This makes India, the land of many languages and as a result, the land of many literatures, and so of poetry in many languages. But it has to be recognized that historically, when two languages and literatures come face to face, some tension would automatically get written into the scene, each purporting to speak for a superior (and therefore more civilized) culture. The multilingual multicultural scenario and the arising tensions could be dealt in several ways:

1. Acceptance, which is a first display of civilization.
2. Acceptance and assimilation, the tolerance marking the next, sophisticated level of civilization.
3. Resistance to another culture: this would bring into play the notion of the binary of civilization and barbarism. In the complex multicultural, multilingual Indian setting, a tremendous degree of play is possible and indeed, is constantly on where these categories are concerned.

It has been found that the poetry, in particular, gives word to this tension. Quite often then, the focus falls not only on this theme, but quite often, the poetry itself sometimes comes to display civilized or barbaric qualities—and this is rather strange—in the kind of language used; the former in the sophistication of language and the latter in abrasive, frontal attacks as in the Marathi Dalit poet, Namdeo Dhasal’s “Hunger”:

Then we will screw
Seventeen generations of you
Hunger, you and your mother.
(qtd. in Meshram 41)

and in Anu’s poem “Cruelty”:

I am a venereal sore in the private part of language...

A rabid fox is tearing off my flesh with its teeth;
And a terrible venom-like cruelty
Spreads out from my monkey-bone.³

Clearly, unequal power structures inevitably factor in additional complications and tension to this binary.

- a. It could prompt the one with the upper hand to press home the advantage and to remind the other that it is the superior one which it would do by emphasizing the latter’s “inferiority.” The first available way of inking this in would be by positing the self as the best example of “civilization” and the other as “barbaric.”
- b. The one occupying the lower position, constantly reminded of its limitations and character as barbaric, would be under pressure to rise from the dumps and achieve “civilization.”

This is what happened when India was colonized.⁴ When, in 1922, British Orientalist, Sir John Woodroffe, published a book pointedly titled, *Is India*

³ Anu, “Cruelty.” <<http://castory.wordpress.com/tag/dalit-poetry/>> Accessed 25 Dec 2012.

⁴ Though Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut in 1498 in the pursuit of trade, colonization by the Europeans in India really began in 1502 with the Portuguese. Thereafter, towards

Civilized? he was enunciating the on-going palpable cultural tension between the “civilized” notions of culture with which the colonizer associated himself, and the facile, dismissive identification of the native with the “barbaric.”

Despite the fact that this resulted in the injection of a sense of inferiority in the local population, there were some like Sri Aurobindo, poet and philosopher, who refused to be beaten down. He fiercely reacted to William Archer’s diatribe that “India achieved nothing of importance, produced no great personalities, was impotent in will and endeavour, her literature and art are a barbaric and monstrous nullity not equal even to the third-rate work of Europe, her life story a long and dismal record of incompetence and failure.” (Sri Aurobindo, *A Defence of Indian Culture*). Turning the tables on the white man, he rises to a defence of Indian culture by summarily dismissing Western rationalism as “the formula of an intelligently mechanized civilization supporting a rational and utilitarian culture” and rooting for a solution in the poetry and the philosophy of the east, applauding it roundly as the more civilized.

The polemics that began in the colonial period can be seen in the continuing rhetoric in contemporary India and is played out at many levels and in many ways: barbarism and savagery comes under attack in literature documenting the atrocities perpetrated during the holocaustic Partition; it also appears in the poetry (and this is ironical) written under the influence of the west in the post ’60s when the angst at the unfulfilled promises of a free nation and the death of ideology appeared in images of barbaric and self-consuming sex, carnality and violence. But in a highly fraught social and economic tense scenario, where two classes are constantly pitted against each other: the higher classes versus the marginalized lower castes, the Dalits, this uneasy conversation is most likely to erupt.

With these preliminary ideas, I take the example of contemporary Dalit poetry from India to explicate this idea, believing that this discourse not only informs it but also becomes an enabling entry point to understanding it. This

the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the British, and to a lesser extent, the French, the Dutch, the Danish and the Spanish set up trading posts in the country. The British East India Company went on to become the de facto ruler of most of the nation which was formally replaced by British government rule in 1858. They ruled India till August 1947.

attempt will naturally lead to some understanding of the evolving connotations of the terms in the context of India through time.

Starting with the general premise that the treatment of this binary in poetry would be highly charged and highly political, the verse most likely to take it up would be written by:

- a. poets from the centre who consider themselves civilized and feel threatened by their horrifying Barbaric Other

or

- b. poets from the margins who, like the Dalits, question their relegation to the barbaric and who throw the civilization motif back at their accusers.

A beginning could be made by first accepting the validity of the innate paradox that any culture that can produce poetry would be patently civilized and that talk of the civilization or barbarism of cultures would be purely at the thematic level and second, by getting to identify the “centre” and the “margin” in the context of India and the caste system. It soon becomes clear that even here, classifications and notions of civilization and barbarism have come to be re-read and re-written.

At this point, it is necessary to define Dalit as a concept for audiences not familiar with the socio-political scene in India. Originally, the term referred to the untouchables of Maharashtra, Dalit being the Marathi word for “the spurned.” First used in this limited sense in 1930, today, it has panned out to comprehensively include the Harijans (such as Mahars), Mangs, Mallas, Chambhars and Pulayas, in fact any community which is regarded as “lowly,” and is therefore marginalized. The literature that gives voice to their struggle and which protests against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation is called “Dalit literature.” Practitioners may be divided about whether only “Dalits” can write this kind of literature or whether the term should include even upper caste and upper class writers who write for and about the Dalits. In its revolutionary avatar, it takes on the garb of the subversive radical “minor” literature in the Deleuze and Guattari mould.

Finding the accusation of being uncivilized, barbaric continually being hurled at them by the higher castes, the poet from the conflicted Dalit community turns against them in his poetry. His *enoncé*, his articulated critique

is unabashedly political as he attempts the Deleuzian by deterritorializing the repressive enunciation of his self-professed “superior” antagonists.⁵ This poet not only aims to insert himself, his marginality and his marginalized experience within the central hegemonic space that the Other has reserved for himself but also enables him to lay claim on a unique “civilized” identity. It goes without saying then that this act of creation becomes one that invests power to his marginalized self and his writing.

So why should these writers not strongly believe that their poetry affords them a platform to engage in socio-political commentary and allows for constructive critical engagement? These writers make a fervent plea for a complete civilizing overhaul of society. As Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer puts it, “even the Sun needs to be changed.” They are out and out activists in the field seeking to bring about an amelioration of the lot of their marginalized subjects as a community. In effect, they are looking for a true civilizing process to take over their society hoping that the collective utterance enshrined in their writings will have a collective value.

Talking about the complications that arise due to the interplay of caste, class and gender in this tussle for supremacy, these poets seek restitution in being raised to a higher social tier. In enunciation lies part solution because through enunciation, they have acquired agency. Hira Bansode, for example, takes a personal experience of being attacked as uncivilized to speak for her whole community. The intimate descriptions become a collective utterance in the Deleuzian mould and also take on the colour of a public critical intervention demanding that she and her kind be viewed with catholicity and understanding; that it is, in fact, her attacker who is the uncivilized one. Her poem, “Bosom Friend” (qtd. in *The Individual & Society* 49) will serve to accentuate all that I have put forward. She begins by welcoming and applauding her civilized, upper caste, upper class friend, “Today you came over to dinner for the first time.” This magnanimous act, something quite unheard of, quite overwhelms the ingenuous Dalit girl

⁵ Paper entitled “Major and Minor Literatures: The Indian Case,” presented at the FILLM Congress on “World Languages and World Literatures” at Halden, Norway, 5-8 October 2011.

You not only came, you forgot your caste⁶ and came
Usually women don't forget that tradition and inequality
But you came with a mind as large as the sky to my pocket size house
I thought you had ripped out all your caste things
You came bridging that chasm that divides us
Truly, friend I was really happy (49)

She idealistically believes that her upper class friend had this civilized outlook on life but she is in for a rude shock. Old habits, it would seem, die hard. When she arranges the food on her plate with "naïve devotion," she notes with horror,

. . . the moment you looked at the plate, your face changed
With a smirk you said Oh My—Do you serve chutney koshambir this way?
You still don't know how to serve food
Truly, you folk will never improve (49)

Hearing this accusation, she reels under the apprehension of her inferiority, of being uncivilized:

I was ashamed, really ashamed
My hand which had just touched the sky was knocked down
I was silent . . .

The last bit of courage fell away like a falling star
I was sad, then numb (49)

But it is not long before she retaliates with new found assurance in herself, firm in the realization that she is neither to be blamed for any apparent backwardness nor should she have any cause to feel humiliated:

But the next moment I came back to life . . .

⁶ Indian society had been divided traditionally into four castes: the *Brahmins* or the priestly class, the *Kshatriyas* or the warrior class, the *Vaishyas* or the trading community and finally, the *Shudras*, the menial workers. Initially meant to be purely a facilitating and organizational arrangement, the caste system became a rigid structure which imprisoned the lower castes in their groups. The untouchables were often entirely beyond the cover of the caste system, outcasts. This group, thus stigmatized and marginalized, has been at the receiving end of discriminating atrocities. The state has now put into place laws to safeguard their rights and though there has been a change, total recuperation is slow in coming.

You know, in my childhood we didn't even have milk for tea much less yoghurt
or buttermilk
My mother cooked on sawdust she brought from the lumberyard wiping away
the smoke from her eyes
Every once in a while we might get garlic chutney on coarse bread
Otherwise we just ate bread crumbled in water
Dear Friend—Shrikhand was not even a word in our vocabulary
My nose had never smelled the fragrance of ghee
My tongue had never tasted halva, basundi (49)

She now recognizes that her friend has

. . . not discarded [her] tradition
Its roots go deep in [her] mind . . . (49)

that it is not she but her friend who is uncivilized; her friend's "tradition" that is limited. Confidently, she turns back to hurl damning accusations at her "superior" guest

Are you going to tell me what mistakes I made?
Are you going to tell me my mistakes? (49)

The poem clearly marks out the vast gulf that divides the upper and the lower castes even today, the chasm created by a notional separation on the basis of civilized and the barbaric. It traces some kind of a history and identifies developments in the relationship as a result of education. But so deep rooted is the difference that both the upper caste and the lower caste girls find it impossible to get out of the caste-induced internalized superiority and inferiority. The upper caste girl "smirks" and the lower caste girl responds by being "ashamed." It is also quite clear that the lower castes have been economically repressed. Being consigned to abject poverty, most of the time they "just ate bread crumbled in water." This has made for such a huge cultural difference that the distance seems insurmountable; the chutney *koshambhir*⁷ served the wrong way, the manner

⁷ Chutney made of fresh coriander leaves, green chilies and lemon, an add-on dish that scales up the class and quality of the meal. As do *halva* (a grain flour or more typically, semolina dessert of a somewhat gelatinous consistency, made with clarified butter and sugar.), *ghee* (clarified butter), and *basundi* (another Indian dessert made of thickened milk garnished with saffron and dry fruits). These are food items for the upper castes and classes.

of service of the food. But, the low caste speaker has discovered a voice and places the onus of the repression squarely on the other by throwing her attacking rhetorical questions at her. By so doing, she has laid claims to a new space for herself, has ventured into “untrodde,” exclusive civilized territory.

The verse written by the Dalit writer in which s/he poetically accosts the supposedly civilized cadres of a society that “barbarically” side-line her/him then, becomes the site for spotlighting this tug of war. Writing against the mainstream, the literary space of the so-called civilized, s/he is attempting the brazen and seemingly unthinkable. The civilized/barbaric polarity becomes the means of an unprecedented opening out of the mind to radical postures in this poet’s writing which opens out new paths, unlocks doors to give birth to a truly revolutionary literature, a literature which has adroitly accessed the ruptures between the “civilized” mainstream and the “barbaric” marginal to enunciate something of far-reaching significance, something that is absolutely novel and striking in its attempts at completely eradicating this chasm.

I spit on this great civilization
Is this land yours, mother,
because you were born here?
Is it mine
because I was born to you?
(L.S. Rokade, “To be or not to be born.” Trans. by Shanta Gokhale,
qtd in Dangle 1)

APPENDIX

Africa

(Samayik Patra)

In a restless ancient age
 When the discontent Creator
Was pondering again and again the new creation
 On one such day punctuated by
 Dissatisfied shakes of His head
 The raging arms of the sea wrested you away
From the earth's eastern bosom, Africa—
Bound you behind guarding walls of opaque jungle
 Embedded in a core of miserly light
 There in dark secluded leisure
 You pieced together remote mysteries
 Unraveled enigmatic signs of the waters and the sky
 Learnt Nature's hidden magic
Devised in your mind spells and chants
 To taunt the monstrous terrors
 You desired to intimidate fear
 Adorning majestic cloaks of horror
Turning yourself fearsome a separate line in a frenzied greatness of terror
 Amid drumbeats of destruction

 O shadowy silhouette
 Under your dark veil
The turbid gaze of neglect
 Kept your human face obscure
 They came with their iron bracelets
They whose nails were sharper than your wolves'
 They came, the trappers of humanity,
They whose pride blinded them into darkness
 Darker than your forest canopies
 Barbaric greed of the civilized
 Stripped naked brazen bestiality
Your wordless wailing condensed on jungle paths
 Your tears and blood mingled to pollute dusty earth
 Forever now the fetid clumps
 Beneath hobnailed boots of assailant's feet
Have left their muddied imprints on your reviled history
That very moment by the shores of the sea
 In every temple of every town
The church bells morning and evening rang

In the name of their most merciful God
While the children played in their mothers' laps
And their Bard devotion to beauty sang

Today, when on the western horizon
The twilight hour is breathless under raging winds
When the beasts from their hidden caves have all come to light—
To sound the ominous toll of their dusk
Come new age poet
Now in the final rays of impending night
Come stand at the doorway of the affronted woman
To say, "Forgive!"
Above the wild delirious rants
Let this be the last benediction of your civilization⁸

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⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, "Africa." Translated by Rumana Siddique. *The Essential Tagore*. Ed. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty. Camb., Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011. 299-300. There have been many translations of this poem. This is a more recent, more contemporary translation. I quote this poem as a convenient entry point to the location of the civilized/barbaric polarity on Indian soil. It is by no means the first, or the last, word on the multilayered, enigmatic play of the binary in Indian society.

Summary

When, in 1922, British Orientalist, Sir John Woodroffe, published a book brazenly entitled, *Is India Civilized?* he enunciated the on-going palpable cultural tension between the “civilized” notions of culture with which the colonizer was associated, and the facile, dismissive identification of the native with the “barbaric.” But these received notions of civilization and barbarism are at odds with the indigenous ideas of the terms. With one of the oldest literate cultures in the world, the location of India in the contemporary world becomes very enigmatic. In this paper, I attempt a contemporary understanding of the terms in the context of poetry from India, both in English and the indigenous languages while trying to see the evolving connotations of the terms through time.

Key words: comparative literature, “civilization” and “barbarism,” Indian Dalit poetry, Rabindranath Tagore, Anu, Namdeo Dhasal, Sri Aurobindo, Hira Bansode, L.S. Rokade

Cywilizowany/barbarzyński? Przemiany znaczeń w poezji Dalitów („niedotykalnych”)

Streszczenie

Kiedy w 1922 roku brytyjski orientalista John Woodroffe opublikował książkę pod wyzywającym tytułem *Czy Indie są cywilizowane?*, ujawnił istniejące wówczas napięcie pomiędzy kulturowymi wyobrażeniami o kolonizatorach jako o ludziach „ucywilizowanych” a powierzchowną i lekceważącą identyfikacją tubylców jako „barbarzyńców”. Stworzone w ten sposób pojęcia cywilizacji i barbaryzmu pozostają w sprzeczności z lokalnymi wyobrażeniami. Biorąc pod uwagę fakt, iż Indie są jedną z najstarszych piśmiennych kultur, jej umiejscowienie we współczesnym świecie staje się bardzo enigmatyczne. W niniejszym artykule ukazuję współczesny sposób pojmowania wspomnianych pojęć w kontekście poezji indyjskiej – pisanej zarówno w języku angielskim, jak i w językach rodzimych – starając się przedstawić, jak na przestrzeni czasu zmieniały się znaczenia pojęć „cywilizowany” i „barbarzyński”.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, „cywilizacja” a „barbarzyństwo”, poezja Indii, Dalitowie („niedotykalni”), Rabindranath Tagore, Anu, Namdeo Dhasal, Sri Aurobindo, Hira Bansode, L.S. Rokade