

Dalit Aesthetics and Consciousness in Sharad Poudel's *Likhe*

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Abstract

Dalit art and literature has been an inseparable part of Dalit movements in Nepal. It has its own aesthetic characteristics, literary features, paradigms and missions for Dalits' rights, equality, dignity, and social transformation. However, there is no remarkable qualitative research focusing on Dalit aesthetic perspectives. This research article aims to explore the caste system, social context and consciousness in Dalit literature. It examines the literary paradigms and Dalit aesthetics characteristics and values in literature. For this purpose, the study has employed the emerging concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness as a theoretical lens developed by Sharankumar Limbale, C. B. Bharti, Arjun Dangle, Rajarao Dunna and Anju Bala to the novel "Likhe". The study has adopted the exploratory method with a qualitative approach. Findings of the study illustrate that Dalit literature has its own aesthetics features and values and literary paradigms. As a protest literature by its nature, Dalit literature awakens Dalits and backward communities to move against all types of atrocities, caste discrimination, oppression, exploitation. The study further elucidates that the novel "Likhe" portrays the Nepali society and the misery of Dalits. It delivers socio-political messages to establish an equity-based prosperous society through its context, content, plots and characters.

Key Words: Dalit literature, Aesthetics, Consciousness, Dignity and Social Transformation

Introduction and Rationale

Nepal is a country with multi-ethnic heterogeneous societies. There are hundreds of castes and ethnic communities inhabited in Nepal. Among them, Dalit is a community who has been searching for dignified life and social respect as humans in the society. The word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal', which means to shatter, to break into pieces and to step on" (*Nepali Comprehensive Glossary* 602). In a similar line, Yam Bahadur Kisan describes 'Dalits' as "[...] shattered, overburdened, suppressed, oppressed, squeezed, step-upon, kneaded, ground down, shamed by being required to bow to someone else's feet, or silenced through suppression" (6). Dalit word in the contemporary context denotes to officially categorized groups. At one point, Bidhyanath Koirala unfolds the etymology of the term that "'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit nomenclature and is used by the politicians and social scientists of Nepal to identify or categorize a group of people who are religiously, culturally, socially and economically oppressed" (19). The term is

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developed by the nineteenth century Indian reformation movement. Simon Commission, 1927 in India and the British Government used the term "scheduled castes" for the first time in 1935. Koirala further defines that "'Dalits'...who are socially and culturally depressed and deprived of different development opportunities including education" (20). Dalits are mainly depressed in the socio-cultural spheres in Nepal. Hence, Koirala's definition clearly sketches the reality of contemporary status of Dalits.

Dalits have been suppressed, oppressed and discriminated against for centuries. They could not raise their voices for centuries. In the late twentieth century, the voices for their rights, equality and social dignity began to rise from different corners of society; and, one of them was the literary movement through writings. Writing about Dalit issues and subject began in 1940s; however, those literary voices were severely suppressed by the state and society in the beginning days but later the writings by many Dalit and non-Dalit writers emerged and flourished as Dalit literature in Nepal.

Among the various genres, fiction writing on Dalit subjects and issues was developed rapidly in the literary writings. The early Dalit writings and literature were banned by the state; and boycotted to the writers in their social lives as well. In this connection, Ninu Chapagain states "Muktinath Timilsina's novel *Ko Achhut* (2011 BS)...the banning of the novel shows how important the book was at that time" (69). After 1990 AD, Dalit literature prospered in a good range which is considered as an outcome of the entire Dalit social movements. The literature has been written with a mission for the rights, equality and dignity of Dalit community of the society. However, the then leaders and social activists of Dalit movements expressed their dissatisfaction that most of the literatures written on Dalit issues, contexts and subjects were not truly representing or reflecting Dalits. Specially, it was believed that the literature written by non-Dalit writers hardly reflected the Dalits' issues; rather, they fabricated and propagandized Dalits' context and issues.

Though, Nepali Dalit writings and literature flourished in Nepali literature; there is no remarkable research conducted on Dalit literature, aesthetics, literary paradigm and its impacts to Dalits and Dalit movements in Nepal. For that, I have selected Sharad Poudel's *Likhe* as primary text for the research. The novel is written on the context and scenario of Dalits, social consciousness and rights-movement. Hence, the article explores some pertinent issues on Dalits; how does the novel *Likhe* represent the social issue, context and movement of Dalits? What are the aesthetic characteristics and values embedded in it? What is the contributing factor for Dalit consciousness in the society? The study mainly examines the caste problems, socio-political context and consciousness of community; and, seeks aesthetic characteristics and values of Dalit literature. It is expected to fulfill the gap of qualitative research done in Dalit literature.

Methodology and Methods

Dalit literary history shows that there was no specific measuring parameter of impacts, themes and messages and features of Dalit literature. The present research aims to

examine the caste problems, social context and consciousness, aesthetic characteristics and literary paradigms of Dalit literature. For this purpose, I have selected the novel *Likhe* as primary text and employed the concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness as theoretical tool borrowing concepts from Sharankumar Limbale, C. B. Bharti, Arjun Dangle, Rajarao Dunna and Anju Bala to critically analyze the Dalit literature.

Aesthetic value of Dalit literature is associated to consciousness of Dalits. It expresses the pain and problems, sufferings, experiences, context, evolution, marginality, protests, socio-political and economic status, and daily life-style and livelihood of Dalits. The Dalit literature is the outcome of the inherent of Dalit consciousness. Indian writer, Sharankumar Limbale argues:

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a brief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus... Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature. It is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. (32)

Dalit aesthetics portrays realistic situation of Dalits through literary writings. It is believed that Dalit criticism generally does not bring the real experimental quality of Dalit literature.

The classical theoretical perspectives hardly study and analyze the Dalit literature; rather, it is studied from its own perspective and framework because it has distinct qualities and characteristics from mainstream literature. It is a protest literature reflecting the social reality aims to have a particular mission of its own. In this regard, Indian writer and scholar C. B. Bharti states in his book *The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*:

The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for *Dalit* literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of live. (56)

Bharti shows the urgent need to developing own separate aesthetics theory to study Dalit Literature many years back. The literature cannot give the proper meanings; or readers and audiences cannot reach to the crux or themes if they read it traditionally because it is a product of hearts and experiences but not minds. Since Dalit literature is produced; there is a real experience of authors or characters.

The aesthetics of Dalit literature has its own purpose, commitment and values of fundamental aims. These are the unique features embedded in the literature. Limbale states that "The aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on three things: *first*, the artist's social commitment; *second*, the affirmative values present in the artistic creation; and *third*, the ability to raise the readers' consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity" (120). Dalit literature is mission literature that it captures the issues and reflects the movement and struggle for rights, equality, dignity and social transformation. Hence, based on the above mentioned conceptual and theoretical understanding, I have used the concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness as theoretical lens to the novel

Likhe because as Rajarao Dunna argues that "Dalit aesthetics theory can accommodate better understanding of Dalit literature" (24). The novel is the primary text for textual analysis and interpretation. Undoubtedly, the research adopts exploratory methods with a qualitative approach. It is library-based research.

Dalit Aesthetics and Consciousness in *Likhe*

The research paper explores that Dalit literature has been developed as an inseparable part of Dalit movements where the audiences and readers find the characteristics of protest and resistance against all forms of discrimination, oppression, suppression and social injustice. It is the voice from margin to seek the space and new identity in the mainstream of social life. Sharad Poudel's *Likhe* appears as a masterpiece of socio-political story of Dalits. It portrays the poverty, problems and the life status of Dalits of western Nepal. The novel reveals that how a nine-year-old Dalit boy (later youth), Likhe encounters with hundreds of incidents of caste-based discrimination and exploitation due to his caste and economic status. His parents cannot afford for his education; rather, they send him to the local landlord's house as domestic child labor.

Dalit literature develops as a protest literature by its nature and target. The protest is also one of the aesthetic characteristics of Dalit literature. In this context, Tejbilash Adhikari and Purushottam Rijal argue that "Dalit aesthetics in true sense is concerned to Dalit liberation. The Dalit liberation and Dalit aesthetics are looked and understood from these two angles- aesthetics of class struggle and aesthetics of Hindu caste system" (24). In the novel *Likhe*, the protagonist Likhe fights against socio-economic and political problems of Nepali society. The narrative reveals "An upper caste woman of the village asked 'which caste do you belong to, boy?' Likhe replied that he was Damai (so-called lower caste). And, the woman ordered 'you cannot touch the tap, but next well is built underneath the tap for Dalits'; you can fetch the water from there'" (trans. Poudel 11). The social position of people is determined by class and caste in the Nepali society. Likhe has to bear the problems of caste and class together from his early days. His childhood mind cannot understand it properly.

Dalit literature embeds its own aesthetic features and values. It, basically, talks about the pains, sufferings and bitter experiences of the community. In Dalit literature, the readers find the realistic stories of every individual of Dalit community and what they encounter with everyday life. In the novel, the narrator reveals about the well, a water source for Dalits:

There was animal stool, mud and garbage everywhere nearby the well. What Likhe could do there! He washed his hands with the dirty water. He fetched the water and splashed on his face. He spat on the ground. It smelt with washing soap; and, he looked at the source of water. The water came from the upper tap where upper caste's women were washing their clothes- *saree*. Likhe spat on again. He was confused whether to fetch the water or not. (trans. Poudel 11)

This is a bitter reality of Dalits who are not allowed to use the hygienic water of well or taps. The so-called upper castes' people use the hygienic water but they ban Dalits using it. It is a misery of Dalits in most of the remote areas of Nepal.

Dalit literature speaks the voice of Dalits. It has its own literary features and characteristics. Regarding it, Raja Rao Dunna argues "Dalit aesthetics is not traditional aesthetics in general. It has a different purpose in the literary world..." (411). It has different features, quality and mission. Moreover, the purposes and features of Dalit aesthetics as R. G. Jadhav states "...the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness" (304). The main purpose of the Dalit literature is to liberate the people from all kinds of discrimination and oppression. The protagonist of the novel, Likhe faces severe discrimination and torture due to his caste. He is beaten brutally by the landlord with an accusation of stealing the jewelry that causes him to be sick for weeks. His father Chaure rescues and takes him back to his home. When Likhe meets his father; he cannot control himself and weeps a lot. The narrator of the novel reveals:

Chaure instantly melted with the tears and wept for his son who was sitting on his lap. His eyes were filled with tears. Chaure felt trembling due to extreme pain. Chaure felt that something was burning inside his heart. But, he could not speak even single word. He wanted to put his son a bit away from him and see his face but he could not. Chaure could not detach his son. (trans. Poudel 79)

The tears of Likhe and Chaure are symbolic expressions of pain, suffering and agony due to his bitter experiences that they survived through. The trauma is released with tears in the presence of each other. Likhe's father, Chaure can easily assume the reality of brutal torture and weeps but he cannot show it to his son.

Dalit literature works as a medium to express the pain and sufferings of Dalits. It presents many more about their pains and sufferings through writings. In the novel, Chaure is worried about his son's health because Likhe's health becomes worse day by day. He does not have money to take his son to hospital; rather, he takes him to Shaman (witch doctor) for treatment. Dalits' socio-political problem is interlinked to economic status. It creates the own aesthetics values of Dalit literature. Dunna further argues "Dalit aesthetics has been essentially informed by socio-political existence" (411). Generally, Dalits combat the socio-economic problems in their daily lives. They rarely belong to a better economic status. The novel reveals that they cannot celebrate even the great festivals due to lack of money. Likhe's parents are very much worried about poverty. His father goes to the local city to earn money by carrying the luggage of shopkeepers and home returnee soldiers. The lines indicate that "Stay well, I will be back until *fulpati* (seventh day of Dashain). Chaure became ready early morning to move to the local bazār with a rope..." (trans. Poudel 99). It is the fate of Dalit family who cannot afford the good food even in Dashain festival due to their extreme poverty.

Dalit literature reflects the ground reality of socio-cultural, political, and economic status of Dalits. The school-going-age-children of Dalits cannot go to school; rather, they are compelled to work as domestic child laborers in local landlords' houses. They are suppressed, exploited and discriminated on the basis of their caste, class and culture. As, Anju Bala states "...denounced identity of these so called untouchables to a self-chosen identity as Dalit is a story of composite struggle waged over centuries" (039). Dalits are treated as untouchable and given the identity as untouchable community. They are compelled to clean the glasses and dishes in the hotels after having food. In the story, Likhe is on the way to Delhi with his neighboring brother Laure. He faces discrimination even in the local urban hotel. The plot of the novel reveals:

Hotel owner woman prepared the tea. She came near to Likhe and handed the tea over to Likhe and spoke, "Are you a Dalit?" Likhe did not speak. Hotel owner woman put the tea cup on floor from the hand and spoke to Laure, "You are calling a Dalit inside hotel, what a man you are? Laure was a well experienced boy and became confused with the situation and immediately spoke "what an issue of Dalit in the bazār area? Paying equally does not matter entering inside a hotel or staying outside". (trans. Poudel 127)

The caste-based discrimination and untouchability seems rampant in food habits even in urban areas. Dalits do not feel as humans when they reach near to so-called upper castes' people. This is a misery of Dalits what the literary text reflects in.

In Dalit literature, fictitious characters also represent the true and realistic stories of Dalits. Regarding it, Sharankumar Limbale states, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (30). Human beings always dream for humanity and liberty; so as, Dalits do. They have to tangle with various obstacles. In the novel, Likhe is going to foreign land in his early age. He has a dream to earn money and give happiness and peace to his parents.

Dalits believe that the foreign employment is one and only solution to reduce the poverty of Dalits. Neither, they do have any opportunities of employment nor income sources in the homeland. They think to go to Indian job market for their income. In the novel, Likhe reaches to Delhi and joins a job as domestic child labor. There, he faces more torture and exploitation from the landlord and his family. He cannot even get medical treatment in his illness. He does not get the salary as well. The landlord and the landlady both are so cruel; they ignore even Likhe's illness. Within one and half month, Likhe becomes sick for three times. He cannot eat, walk and work. At this very critical situation, he laments to his parents and weeps time and again. As, the narrator discloses:

[...] he was murmuring to himself. He suddenly missed his mother that she had given him some cetamol tablets but that was also stolen in a rail stop. He wished to have those medicines. Suddenly, his eyes were filled with tears when he remembered his mother...oh God! How can I get rid from this prison? I may meet my mother or not, he spoke himself. (trans. Poudel 183)

Likhe laments by missing his parents when he encounters many obstacles there in foreign land but his neighboring brother, Laure does not meet him for long. He misses more to his family when he is sick. He misses Laure as well. Likhe murmurs "the brother did not come for a long time! Where did he go?]" (trans. Poudel 183) but he does not have answers to his own questions. He is there in foreign land to earn money but his economic condition becomes more vulnerable than in his birthplace. He lives there being more deprived of everything. As, Limbale remarks, "Dalit have been kept deprived of power, property and position" (30); the society did not allow the Dalits to earn money or deprived from property. Hence, Likhe is an example of deprivation and extreme poor boy.

Dalits' lives seem full of despair and melancholies. They think these are their destiny. Likhe, in the novel, encounters with the diverse socio-economic and political problems from his early age. He is supposed to be on his deathbed in a landlord's house in Delhi; lastly, Laure rescues him from the cruel Indian landlord and keeps him with his roommate, Parashuram. After recovery, Likhe joins a job in a poultry-farm in support of Parashuram. Then, he writes a letter to his parents revealing his present status in Delhi. Likhe's letter exposes: "I am with Parashuram Dai now. Dilli Dai (Laure) was also with us earlier days but he is not with us now. I am fine now...Parashuram Dai is a very supportive and good person. He has taught me to read and write. I think I will write a letter with my own handwriting after sometime" (trans. Poudel 207). The letter makes his parents happy because he is literate now. Dalit literature is about day-to-day struggles and experiences of particular community and person. It is the experiences of hundreds of individuals expressed in written words. In this connection, Limbale argues "experiences conveyed in Dalit literature have several characteristics. They constitute an engagement in self-search..." (31-32) that it shows the true positions and fortune of every individual of Dalits. The caste and poverty are the root causes of Dalits' problems.

Basically, Dalit literature narrates the life-stories of Dalits and their struggles. The struggles are for survival, justice and social dignity. The novel *Likhe* also depicts the struggles and problems of the protagonist. Lastly, Likhe gets proper guidance and political orientation from Parashuram and Sunam. Sunam appears as a political cadre who orients the characters ideologically and politically in the novel. He educates to Likhe and Parashuram with various useful tips for life. It explores that the education opens the door of wisdom in Likhe's mind. He is conscious about the rights, equality and dignity of his community. He wants to have social equality in society. He feels; he has a hunger of utilizing the social dignity and freedom which is possible through social revolution. In this connection, Bharti claims that "Dalit literature is not simply a literature but it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and a new people" (34). The literature advocates for discrimination-free, equality-based and dignified society for all people. It creates hope and ambitions to Dalits. In a group discussion among the characters of *Likhe*; Likhe curiously asks Sunam that "Is it possible in a society where poor and backward people get respect and dignified lives, brother?" (trans. Poudel 235). The protagonist of the novel dreams to have a respectful and dignified life in the society.

The rights, equality and dignity fundamentally give human status to every individual of the society. Dalit movements and protest also aim for the same goal. The text like *Likhe* also aims to liberate the people from all types of barriers, atrocities and social malpractices based on caste and ethnicity. It also encourages the society to move toward the right direction. Hence, Limbale argues "...Dalit literature is mired in the issue of taste. It comprises flattery, advice, direction and sympathetic encouragement..." (121). The main aim of Dalit literature is to raise the fundamental consciousness through youth education and empowerment because education, empowerment and consciousness have power to motivate the people; and move for their rights and dignity. Education is the most important weapon for social transformation. Limbale further claims "spread of education, pressure of the Dalit movement, and struggle against conditions of existence caused Dalit youth to express their aversion for and anger against the established unequal social system in their writing" (25). The youth like Likhe is conscious about the importance of education, movement and social transformation in the novel *Likhe*.

Educating the people shows a process of movements. It is prerequisite as well. Education makes the people and society conscious about their both rights and duties. In the novel, Likhe learns to read and write from Parashuram and Sunam. He can write letters; speaks for Dalit and marginalized issues and social context. Sunam, who represents a political cadre of communist party, works in labor issues in foreign bureau of his party. He orients the youth laborers and makes them conscious in various cities of India. He orients politically and ideologically to Likhe and Parashuram through various discussions, debates and mutual talks. In the novel, Sunam speaks:

[...]I am speaking about our society today. Look at, some people are touchable. Others are untouchable. If you touch, one should sprinkle the water. It is also believed that there is sacredness in touchability and wickedness in untouchability. Otherwise, one may go to hell. Not only that but also inequality is in existence in the temples...If we talk about it, tell me friends, who makes the temples and statues and the peak of temples? Definitely, he is an ironsmith. Who constructs the wall? He is a poor mason. But who owns the temple after completion? They are the feudal of the society. (trans. Poudel 254)

The above mentioned assertion shows the inherent practice of casteism and untouchability in the society. Here, the literature also talks about the contribution of Dalits in the national building process and social transformation. It also examines that Dalits and marginal people have given tremendous sacrifices and contributions; however, their efforts and contributions are not truly reflected and documented in the mainstream history and literature. Unlike it, Dalit literature is a platform to provide a space for Dalits. In the novel, the political cadre, Sunam is rigorously working day and night to fill the hopes, enthusiasm, and consciousness in youths.

The social and cultural practices reject the presence of Dalits in everyday lives. They are boycotted, excluded and sidelined from social spheres. They do not feel as humane in this very situation; and, expose their revolutionary activities with dissatisfaction as protest, revolution and movement. Regarding the context, Limbale argues "Dalits have voiced their dissatisfaction against the unequal Hindu caste system" (29). In the novel, Sunam tries to convince Likhe by presenting the contemporary context. But, Likhe is not convinced at all. Likhe speaks "when I listen to the talks of Sunam Dai, everything is fine but there is an issue of caste embedded inside Likhe brother (me) ...]" (trans. Poudel 267), Likhe cannot liberate the pain of his inner feeling. He cannot abandon his all bitter experiences aside. Sunam speaks to convince him: "It is easy to speak, my friend! But why does it happen? Why does the outdated mindset stay embedding in? Let's talk more, why does Likhe brother think that this is Brahmin and that is Damai? When did it start from? If we cannot understand we cannot change it, can we?...." (trans. Poudel 267). Dalits feel humiliation due to their caste when they are with so-called upper caste people. It is clear that Dalit literature reveals the inner feelings, experiences and pains of Dalits, in fact. These show that Dalits are true victims of Nepali society.

The revolution and movements seem the immediate outcome and impact of socio-political consciousness in the society. Consciousness is the immediate impact of education, awareness and empowerment. When Dalits are conscious about their rights, equality and social dignity; they are ready to fight against the system. Dalit literature is a tool to energize them with rights and equality of the community. It also awakens the people and promotes to break the traditional concept and practices of society. The result of consciousness is revolt, protest and movement. In a program of "Workers' Union", Likhe addresses the mass: "There were many movements fought against the system but those movements were for feudal and their people rather than backward communities, poor and victims. The movements could not be fruitful for Dalits and poor. Hence, we should support to the poor and backward people for their consciousness" (trans. Poudel 275). Likhe is completely conscious about the Dalit rights and equality. He wants to work for social transformation and dignity. He wants to liberate the people from casteism and all types of discrimination. The novel ends with Likhe's return to Nepal with a hope and plan for social transformation.

Conclusion

Dalit literature is considered as protest literature by its nature and goals- rights, equality, justice and social dignity of Dalits. It has its own aesthetic characteristics and values, literary features, themes and social messages it delivers to the wider readers and audiences. It is also a mission literature for Dalit cause. As a Dalit literary text, *Likhe* appears as masterpiece of socio-political and economic story of large population of Dalits of Nepal. It portrays the Nepali social problems and poverty of Dalits; and at the same time it aroused the issues of socio-political consciousness for social transformation. The characters representing ideologically oriented youths seem radical for socio-political transformation and movements. They uphold the rights, equality, justice and social dignity. They also promote and encourage Dalits.

The novel *Likhe* is written on Dalit issue, subject and context to promote the Dalit community with socio-economic empowerment and political consciousness. The writer Sharad Poudel who had closely observed the society of remote areas of Nepal; perceived the misery of Dalits; and wrote the novel upholding the rights and equality of Dalits. The text is a protest literature because of its content, context, structure and themes. The protagonist, Likhe, represents a Dalit boy encounters with many social atrocities, discrimination and exploitation in his life- from village to Delhi, India. Wherever he goes; he faces a lot of discrimination and exploitation due to his caste and poverty. The novel reflects Dalits' bitter experiences, sufferings, pains and changing status of conscience as well.

The concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness, a theoretical lens critically analyses and explores the novel as a complete package of caste system, class exploitation and social problems existed in Nepali society. It also comprises the importance of education, organizations, consciousness, rights and dignity of human beings in society; and, shows the need and importance of socio-political struggle for Dalit liberation. These are the fundamental elements of aesthetic characteristics, literary features and values of Dalit literature that the novel *Likhe* contains in it. Dalit literature has its own aesthetic characteristics and values which are distinct from mainstream literature because the literature promotes, encourages, motivates, empowers and awakens Dalits of the society. It makes the people socio-politically conscious about their rights and dignity. In this sense, the novel is able to sketch the clear picture of Nepali society and miseries of Dalits; and, it also delivers the messages for establishing a casteless and classless prosperous society in Nepal. The researcher believes that the article will be a good source to the academicians, scholars, target audiences and larger stakeholders to understand Dalit literature, its aesthetic values and thematic paradigms; and it will significantly contribute to germinate to the further researches in various paradigms of Dalits.

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