

Book Review:

Title	:	<i>Sanatan : Truth Untold</i>
Author	:	Sharankumar Limbale
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In the vast landscape of Indian literature, few works have attempted to reconstruct history from the perspectives of those systematically erased from its pages. Sharankumar Limbale's *Sanatan* emerges as a groundbreaking narrative that not only repositions Dalits as active agents in Indian history but also exposes the complex web of religious, social, and political forces that have perpetuated their marginalization. Through a masterful blend of personal narratives and historical events spanning three generations of a Mahar family, Limbale creates "a new and progressive social order" - one where the voices of the marginalized take centre stage.

Set in Sonai village under the Jhol princely state, the novel presents a microcosm of India's complex power structures where Hindu rulers, Muslim authority, and British colonial influence intersect. This layered political landscape provides the backdrop for a story that weaves together three generations: Bhimnak Mahar and Sidnak Mahar, two friends who join the Company army seeking liberation from caste oppression. While Sidnak takes the additional step of converting to Christianity, becoming Philip Bush, Bhimnak ends up in London, where he marries a Caribbean woman. Their divergent paths - one leading to religious conversion and its complexities, the other to geographical displacement - culminate in the story of Carter, Bhimnak's grandson, who returns to Sonai seeking his roots. Their personal trajectories intersect with major historical events, from the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 to the emergence of Dalit consciousness through figures like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar.

Limbale captures the complex socio-political landscape of colonial India with remarkable precision. His narrative unfolds with unflinching rawness in colonial India, where three power structures intersect: British colonial authority, Hindu rulers, and Muslim governance. The village becomes a microcosm of these power relations, "clearly divided between Hindus, Muslims and untouchables" (p.8). Within this layered hierarchy, Mahars occupy the lowest rung, their oppression marked through strategic devices: "stick and a bell to inform their arrival... animal bones on the roofs to spot their houses... black thread around necks and waists." These are not mere customs but carefully constructed tools ensuring Dalit visibility while maintaining their exclusion.

The arrival of colonial power introduces new dynamics that challenge and reinforce existing structures. When George Thomas, the British tehsildar, arrives, his authority terrifies both Mahipatrao Deshmukh, the local king and the Brahmins, disrupting traditional hierarchies. Meanwhile for Mahars, colonialism presents potential liberation - Bhimnak and Sidnak join the Company army, gaining access to horses and guns. Simultaneously, Father Francis's church offers an alternative path through religious conversion, creating anxiety among upper castes about their eroding authority. This complex engagement with colonial modernity reveals how different groups navigate change: upper-caste Hindus struggle to maintain traditional societal structure, while Mahars seek liberation through new institutions, though these paths prove more complicated than initially hoped.

What sets *Sanatan* apart is its robust repositioning of Dalits as active agents in Indian history. Limbale's retelling of the Sepoy Mutiny (1857) exemplifies this approach - a Mahar soldier reveals the cartridge controversy to Mangal Pandey during a confrontation where Pandey refuses to drink water from him. This rewriting serves dual purposes: establishing Dalit presence in crucial historical moments while exposing how caste prejudices persisted even in moments of national crisis. The novel documents multiple forms of Dalit participation in history, from military service, though aimed to "devastate the Sanatani tradition of dominance", to involvement in organized movements like the Anarya Rectification Association (1903) and Maharshi Vitthal Ramji's Depressed Class Mission (1906). Through these accounts, Limbale challenges the notion of Dalits as passive victims, showing their continuous resistance and contribution to India's history instead.

The novel's genius lies in weaving personal narratives into this histori-

cal tapestry, creating a kaleidoscopic view of modern India. The power of narrative tradition itself becomes a battleground - Mahars' self-narratives emphasize valour and undying loyalty, while stories from the upper castes paint them as discriminatory and demonic. Religious texts extend this duality, where Puranas create hierarchies, making even "the gods and goddesses of the untouchables faceless and meat-eaters" (p.29). Individual stories powerfully illuminate these larger conflicts. Sidnak's conversion to Christianity, becoming Philip, reveals the complexities of seeking liberation through religious transformation. His internal struggle, captured in dreams where the Bible transforms into Ramayana, shows how "changing religion just complicated their problem" (p.102). The observation that "although his body was Christian, his mind was still that of a Mahar, of a hindu" (p.114) reveals the persistence of caste identity despite external changes.

The tragic story of Manik, Balbhim's son, further demonstrates how personal narratives intersect with larger social forces. His role as a guide helping travellers navigate challenging landscapes metaphorically represents Dalits' position in Indian society. His death following an accidental touch of Lalita during a storm reveals how caste violence persists despite changing social conditions. Similar patterns emerge in Philip's ostracism and Carter's eventual fate. Carter's story brings the narrative full circle - born to plantation workers and educated in British ways, his return to Sonai seeking to reclaim his Mahar identity ends in tragedy. His death at the hands of villagers who misunderstand his intentions mirrors his great-grandmother's fate, completing the novel's circular structure and suggesting the persistence of caste violence across generations.

While Sanatan masterfully weaves these multiple narratives, it has its limitations. Characters sometimes disappear before their conflicts resolve, as with Philip's death. The treatment of progressive voices, particularly through the Hindu widow Saraswati's statements about Mahars writing their history, occasionally feels forced. Some characters, especially in discussions about religion, appear too neatly divided between progressive and conservative viewpoints, lacking nuanced development.

Nevertheless, Limbale's achievement remains remarkable. Through its unique blend of historical documentation and personal narrative, *Sanatan* demonstrates how different groups experienced the intervention of colonial modernity. The novel moves seamlessly between historical objectivity and personal subjectivity - as it grounds itself in historical facts, it delves deeper into the emotional and psychological experiences of its

characters. This technique reveals how national history comprises multiple, often contradictory narratives: colonial powers exploiting social divisions while inadvertently providing tools for resistance; upper-caste Hindus struggling with modernity while clinging to tradition; Dalits finding both liberation and new challenges through education and religious conversion.

By recovering lost histories and centring Dalit agency in significant historical moments, *Sanatan* offers more than a counter-narrative to mainstream history. It provides a template for how marginalized communities might reclaim their past while imagining new futures. The novel stands as both a historical recovery and a literary achievement, reminding us that understanding India's past requires acknowledging multiple voices, experiences, and struggles. In doing so, it enriches our understanding of history and challenges us to confront the persistent structures of caste power that continue to shape contemporary Indian society.

Kathiravan Annamalai