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Mark Tully's upcountry tales: A journey into the lives of Dalits in India

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the book "Upcountry Tales" written by Mark Tully, specifically focusing on its portrayal of the lives of Dalits in India. The paper analyzes Tully's work as a reflection of the social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Dalit communities and the impact of caste-based discrimination on their lives. By examining Tully's narratives, this research delves into the themes of marginalization, resilience, and social justice, shedding light on the experiences of Dalits and their struggles for dignity and equality. The paper also critically evaluates the book's contribution to the broader discourse on caste in India and its implications for social change.

Keywords: Upcountry tales, mark tully, Dalits, cultural challenges, discrimination, marginalization, struggles

Introduction

India, with its rich tapestry of cultures and traditions, has long been plagued by the pervasive system of caste-based discrimination. The Dalits, historically known as "untouchables," occupy the lowest rung in this deeply entrenched social hierarchy. Their lives are marked by marginalization, exclusion, and systemic oppression. Mark Tully's book, "Upcountry Tales," offers a compelling exploration of the lives of Dalits in India, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and resilience in the face of adversity. This research paper aims to delve into the intricate narratives presented by Tully and critically analyze his portrayal of Dalit communities, ultimately assessing the book's contribution to the broader discourse on caste in India and its implications for social change.

The Dalits, comprising a significant percentage of India's population, have long endured discrimination and social exclusion due to their caste status. Rooted in ancient Hindu scriptures, the caste system has divided Indian society into rigid hierarchical layers, with the Dalits positioned at the bottom. Denied access to basic human rights, education, and opportunities, Dalits are trapped in a cycle of poverty and social invisibility. The caste-based discrimination they face permeates every aspect of their lives, affecting their economic prospects, social interactions, and overall well-being.

Against this backdrop, Mark Tully, a renowned journalist and writer, ventures into the lives of Dalits in "Upcountry Tales." Through his book, Tully unveils a world that often remains hidden or conveniently overlooked by mainstream narratives. He brings to the forefront the stories of individuals and communities whose voices are stifled, giving them agency and visibility. Tully's exploration of Dalit lives in "Upcountry Tales" serves as a powerful testimony to the resilience, dignity, and humanity of a community long oppressed by the chains of caste-based discrimination.

By examining Tully's narratives, this research paper seeks to analyze the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by Dalit communities as portrayed in "Upcountry Tales." It aims to unravel the complex dynamics of marginalization and resilience that shape the lives of Dalits and understand the nuances of caste-based discrimination they confront. Furthermore, the paper will critically evaluate Tully's contribution to the broader discourse on caste in India, exploring the potential of literature in challenging social hierarchies, fostering inclusivity, and advocating for social justice.

Through Tully's narratives, we can gain insights into the multi-dimensional challenges faced by Dalits and the mechanisms of resilience they employ.

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Moreover, this research endeavors to examine the book's impact on raising awareness about Dalit issues, challenging stereotypes, and stimulating conversations on social change. By shedding light on the lives of Dalits in India, "Upcountry Tales" provides a platform to reevaluate our societal structures and work towards a more inclusive and equitable future.

Literature Review

Literature, including fiction, memoirs, and ethnographic accounts, has played a vital role in representing the Dalit experience and challenging dominant narratives. The writings of authors such as Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Daya Pawar provide rich insights into the lived experiences of Dalits, often drawing from their personal encounters with caste-based discrimination. These literary works explore themes of identity, resistance, and social transformation, offering alternative perspectives on Dalit lives.

Caste-based discrimination and the plight of Dalits in India have been extensively studied and discussed in academic literature and social sciences. Scholars and activists have documented the historical context, socio-economic realities, and cultural dimensions of the Dalit experience, providing a foundation for understanding the complexities surrounding this issue. To comprehend the contemporary struggles faced by Dalits, it is essential to explore the historical origins and evolution of the caste system. Scholars such as M. N. Srinivas, B. R. Ambedkar, and Gail Omvedt have extensively researched the caste system's historical, sociological, and political aspects. Their works shed light on how the caste system has been institutionalized and perpetuated over centuries, contributing to the social exclusion and marginalization of Dalits.

The construction of Dalit identity and the emergence of a collective consciousness among Dalits have been significant areas of study. Scholars like Eleanor Zelliot, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, and Ghanshyam Shah have explored the socio-political movements led by Dalit leaders and activists, emphasizing the assertion of Dalit agency and resistance against caste-based discrimination. These works highlight the importance of Dalit identity and its impact on individual and collective mobilization for social change.

Numerous studies have focused on caste-based discrimination and its implications for the socio-economic conditions of Dalits. The works of Sukhdeo Thorat, Chandra Bhan Prasad, and Surinder S. Jodhka have examined various aspects of discrimination faced by Dalits, including access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare. These studies illuminate the structural barriers and systemic biases that perpetuate social exclusion and hinder Dalits' upward mobility.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this research paper involves a multi-method approach. It includes textual analysis of Mark Tully's "Upcountry Tales," conducting content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns, comparative analysis with other literature and sociological studies, interviews with Dalit individuals and scholars, and potential fieldwork in Dalit communities. Ethical considerations will be prioritized throughout the research process. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the portrayal of Dalits in the book and

contribute to the discourse on caste-based discrimination in India.

Objective

The objective of this research paper is to critically analyze Mark Tully's "Upcountry Tales" with a focus on exploring and understanding the lives of Dalits in India. The paper aims to examine the portrayal of Dalits in the book, uncover the social, economic, and cultural challenges they face, shed light on the intersectionality of caste and identity, and contribute to broader discussions on caste-based discrimination, social justice, and empowerment of marginalized communities in India.

Sir William Mark Tully and his stories

In his journey as a journalist, Mark Tully observed the harsh realities faced by Dalits throughout India. Motivated to bring attention to their struggles, he initially addressed the issues in his non-fiction works, such as "Non Stop India," "India in Slow Motion," and "No Full Stops in India." However, Tully recognized the power of fiction in reaching a broader audience and captivating readers. He made a conscious decision to write about Dalits in the form of short stories, aiming to convey his observations and suggestions in a more appealing manner.

Before delving into his fictional portrayal of Dalits, Tully meticulously researched their living conditions by immersing himself in their communities. He embraced their unhygienic surroundings, attended their family functions, and even befriended individuals like Ramchandra, his long-serving servant. To gain a deeper understanding, Tully visited Ramchandra's village, exploring the places and experiences Ramchandra had shared.

To protect the identities of the people who confided in him, Tully altered the names of the characters in his stories. However, he soon realized that mere name changes were insufficient, and the stories required further disguise. He decided to blend his imagination with a realistic flavor, ensuring that the essence of each tale was rooted in his experiences. Tully's stories underwent scrutiny by a friend familiar with the depicted places, people, and traditions, assuring accuracy.

The stories served as an extension of Tully's reporting for the BBC, reflecting the realities of Indian villages and the marginalized communities he encountered. Through his fiction, Tully aimed to shed light on the plight of Dalits, hoping to raise awareness and provoke meaningful discussions about social justice and equality.

In Mark Tully's "Upcountry Tales," the first chapter portrays the struggles faced by a Dalit named Budh Ram, highlighting the common issues experienced by Dalits. Tully aims to expose the unjust treatment of Dalits in a society that denies them space and oppresses them. Budh Ram seeks to honor their saint, Ravi Das, by building a temple for Dalits on common village land. However, the community warns him that the Brahmins, known as "Gosain Bramins," will never allow it. Dalits fear violence and exclusion if they assert their rights. When Budh Ram approaches the village Pradhan, he encounters another Dalit, Kamal, who disagrees with his plan, viewing it as a potential source of trouble and oppression by the upper castes. Kamal questions the need for temples and rituals, seeing them as tools of Brahmin oppression.

The character Kamal represents the perspective of a Dalit who believes that the country is controlled by the upper castes, who exploit religion to oppress Dalits. Kamal opposes the idea of building a temple, fearing it will attract the attention of the powerful upper castes and the police, whom he sees as working for their interests. His skepticism towards the law and authorities is justified when the police, led by the SHO, deceive and mistreat the Dalit community during a raid. The SHO mocks their complaints, demonstrates casteist behavior, and even physically assaults Budh Ram. This incident exposes the reality of the system's discrimination against Dalits, where even the police exploit and abuse them. The confrontations highlight the power dynamics and the struggles faced by Dalits within the system.

In Mark Tully's "Upcountry Tales," the economic and social disparities between Dalits and upper castes are highlighted. Dalit homes are depicted as small, made of mud, and situated near open drains, while the houses of upper castes, like the Gosains, are portrayed as concrete structures in well-maintained quarters. This reflects the stark economic gap between the two groups. Additionally, Dalits face obstacles in accessing education, as upper castes, such as the Brahmins, hinder their attempts to build a school by preventing its completion. Upper caste individuals also subject Dalits to caste-based discrimination and derogatory remarks. The chapter concludes with a discussion between the village Pradhan and the Brahmin priest, where the priest expresses concern about the size of the proposed Dalit temple, fearing it may diminish the status of the Gosains. This reflects the narrow-mindedness and preservation of social hierarchy among the upper castes.

In the chapter "The Reluctant Lover" and "The Making of Monk" from the book "Upcountry Tales," Mark Tully emphasizes the importance of education in the lives of Dalits. Through the characters of Ajit Singh and Balwant Singh, Tully highlights how education can bring respect, influence, and the ability to challenge corruption and discrimination. Ajit Singh believes that education can unite villagers and empower them to demand their rights. Similarly, Balwant Singh, who himself faced discrimination as a Mazhabi Sikh, encourages a Dalit to educate his son, emphasizing that education is the key to fighting the caste-based discrimination that persists in society. Tully portrays education as a vital tool for Dalits to rise above the limitations imposed by caste and to challenge societal divisions.

Mark Tully, through the characters of Ajit Singh and Balwant Singh, emphasizes the transformative power of education in the lives of Dalits. Tully highlights that education can bring respect, influence, and the ability to challenge social and political injustices. By showcasing the experiences of these characters, Tully suggests that education can empower Dalits to unite, raise their voices against corruption, and demand their rights. The characters' personal stories, particularly Balwant Singh's own journey from a marginalized background, demonstrate that education is a means to overcome caste-based discrimination and challenge societal divisions. Tully's message is that education is essential for Dalits to break free from the cycle of oppression and discrimination and strive for social equality and justice.

In this chapter, titled "The Reluctant Lover," Mark Tully highlights the pervasive issue of untouchability and the

significance of education in the lives of Dalits. The story portrays the discrimination faced by Dalits and their struggle for equal treatment and respect in society.

Ram Bharose, a Dalit boy, is initially saved from a beating by upper-caste boys by Rajput Thakurs. However, when they visit his Dalit home, they are not offered water or a place to sit, illustrating the practice of untouchability and the narrow-mindedness of upper-caste individuals. Ram Bharose's father, Ram Chander, becomes furious upon hearing about the incident and decides to go to the police to file an FIR against the higher-caste boys. However, his wife, Bina Devi, is afraid of the consequences and urges him to avoid trouble.

Ram Chander meets Balwant Singh, the SHO (Station House Officer), to seek assistance in filing the FIR. Balwant Singh, who himself comes from a marginalized background, advises Ram Chander against escalating the situation and instead emphasizes the importance of education. Balwant Singh shares his own experiences and highlights the role of education in empowering individuals to challenge caste discrimination and assert their rights.

The SHO references Babasaheb Ambedkar, a prominent Dalit leader, and encourages Ram Chander to prioritize his son's education as a means to overcome the challenges posed by caste discrimination. Despite his wife's concerns, Ram Chander decides to send Ram Bharose to school. However, Ram Bharose faces obstacles at school, including punishment for refusing to touch his teachers' feet and targeted mistreatment by a particular teacher.

Ultimately, Ram Bharose's education is cut short when the principal seeks revenge for Ram Chander's refusal to undergo a sterilization operation. The principal falsely accuses Ram Bharose of defying government rules and assaulting a government official, leading to his expulsion from school.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the pervasive issue of untouchability faced by Dalits and to emphasize the importance of education as a means of empowerment and social upliftment. Tully seeks to highlight the challenges faced by Dalits, their aspirations for equality, and the systemic obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of education and social progress.

In the chapter "Village Strike," Mark Tully reflects on the importance of all communities in society and their roles. The chapter highlights the conflict between the upper caste Bhumihars and lower caste communities, particularly the barbers and sweepers, regarding their payment for services. The barbers and other lower caste individuals demand cash payment instead of the traditional grain payment. The refusal to pay in cash leads to a village-wide strike, with the upper caste members attempting to enforce their dominance and authority over the lower castes. However, a Brahmin intervenes and advises the Bhumihars against using violence, emphasizing the need to pay the barbers in cash. Despite this, the Bhumihars plan to go to a nearby town for haircuts instead of resolving the issue with the barbers. Ultimately, the upper castes are compelled to accept the demands of the lower castes, including the payment in cash.

The purpose of this chapter, as reflected by Mark Tully, is to shed light on the social dynamics, power struggles, and caste-based discrimination present in Indian villages. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the rights and contributions of all communities within society and the need for equitable treatment and payment for their services.

Tully's purpose is to highlight the challenges faced by marginalized communities and promote dialogue and understanding between different caste groups

Analysis and Conclusion

In the book "Upcountry Tales," Mark Tully presents a nuanced portrayal of Dalits in India, delving into their lives and the challenges they face due to caste-based discrimination. Through his narratives, Tully brings to light the socio-economic and cultural realities of Dalit communities, shedding light on their marginalization, resilience, and quest for social justice.

Tully's exploration of Dalit lives in "Upcountry Tales" exposes the deep-rooted nature of caste-based discrimination and its impact on every aspect of Dalits' lives. He vividly describes the living conditions of Dalits, emphasizing the stark economic disparities between them and the upper castes. Tully portrays Dalit homes as small and made of mud, situated near open drains, in contrast to the concrete structures and well-maintained quarters of the upper castes. This depiction highlights the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, perpetuating social exclusion and poverty among Dalits.

Moreover, Tully explores the challenges Dalits face in accessing education. He emphasizes the transformative power of education in empowering Dalits to challenge discrimination and assert their rights. Through characters like Ajit Singh and Balwant Singh, Tully portrays education as a means to overcome the limitations imposed by caste and promote social mobility. These characters serve as examples of Dalits who believe in the power of education to unite communities and fight against corruption and discrimination.

Tully also addresses the issue of untouchability, a deeply entrenched practice that continues to affect Dalits in various social contexts. He exposes the discrimination faced by Dalits in their daily lives, such as being denied water or a place to sit by upper-caste individuals. Tully's narratives highlight the resilience of Dalits in the face of such discrimination, as they strive for equal treatment and respect in society.

Furthermore, Tully critiques the power dynamics and preservation of social hierarchy among the upper castes. He portrays the resistance faced by Dalits when they assert their rights and challenge the status quo. The confrontations between Dalits and the police, as depicted in the book, reveal the systemic discrimination and abuse faced by Dalits within the law enforcement system itself. Tully exposes the exploitation and mistreatment of Dalits by those in positions of authority, shedding light on the power imbalances that perpetuate caste-based discrimination.

The book also examines the role of religion in perpetuating caste-based discrimination. Tully highlights the complexities surrounding the construction of a Dalit temple, as the upper castes express concerns about their own status and resist any potential changes that may challenge their dominance. This exploration raises questions about the intersections of religion, caste, and power in Indian society, prompting readers to critically reflect on the ways in which religious practices can be used to maintain social hierarchies and perpetuate discrimination.

Evaluation of the Book's Contribution

Mark Tully's "Upcountry Tales" makes a significant contribution to the broader discourse on caste in India. By bringing the lives of Dalits to the forefront and presenting their experiences in a compelling and empathetic manner, Tully challenges stereotypes and raises awareness about the realities of caste-based discrimination. His narratives provide a platform for dialogue and reflection, stimulating conversations on social change, inclusivity, and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

The book's exploration of the social, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Dalits contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding caste-based discrimination. Tully's nuanced portrayal humanizes Dalit communities, allowing readers to connect with their struggles and aspirations. Through his storytelling, Tully encourages readers to question existing power structures, confront their own biases, and engage in efforts to promote social justice and equality.

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