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Subaltern Texts in English Classrooms: A Pedagogical Approach to Dalit Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the pedagogical possibilities of incorporating subaltern texts, specifically Dalit literature, into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in India. The aim is to address the persistent marginalisation of caste narratives within mainstream syllabi and to reimagine ELT as a space for critical engagement and social reflection. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research surveyed 50 undergraduate and postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds across three institutions. Alongside a structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews and a two-week classroom intervention using Dalit-authored texts such as *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life* were conducted. Statistical analysis revealed a marked shift in students' openness to discussing caste, with significant increases in empathy and perceived classroom inclusivity ($p < .001$). Student reflections confirmed that the exposure to these narratives enhanced their understanding of structural inequality and invited deeper engagement with language as a form of resistance. The findings underscore the urgent need to move beyond token inclusion and institutional silencing, suggesting that a deliberate, reflective curriculum design—centred on lived experiences and critical pedagogy—can transform ELT classrooms into inclusive spaces for social justice.

Keywords: Dalit literature, ELT, subaltern texts, caste in education, inclusive pedagogy, critical consciousness.

1. Introduction

Subaltern texts and Dalit literature serve as powerful acts of resistance against dominant narratives that have long excluded marginalised voices in India. Grounded in the lived realities of caste-based discrimination, Dalit writing disrupts entrenched social hierarchies through direct, unembellished storytelling that foregrounds pain, resilience, and the assertion of identity. Unlike mainstream literary traditions that often aestheticise or depoliticise suffering, these narratives demand recognition, accountability, and action. Writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, and Omprakash Valmiki use literature not as mere artistic expression but as a vehicle to expose everyday

violence, reclaim agency, and challenge established norms of knowledge and representation. Subaltern studies, as a broader intellectual framework, urges a reorientation of reading practices—one that centres the voices historically silenced or distorted in both academic and literary discourse.

In Indian classrooms, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), pedagogy has been shaped by colonial legacies and upper-caste perspectives, often perpetuating a narrow literary canon. This has left little room for the voices of Dalit writers, whose works not only contest the caste order but also subvert linguistic and aesthetic conventions. Although powerful autobiographies and poems by Dalit authors have gained literary recognition, their inclusion in ELT curricula remains sporadic and marginal (Rege, 2006; Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013). This research aims to position Dalit literature as an essential component of ELT classrooms—not simply for diversity's sake, but for cultivating critical consciousness, fostering inclusive dialogue, and promoting cultural literacy among students. Through the lens of subaltern pedagogy, the study explores how these texts can transform classroom spaces into sites of engagement, reflection, and social learning that go far beyond grammar drills and comprehension exercises.

There exists a significant gap in pedagogy where English education in India often reproduces caste-blind approaches. While mainstream syllabi prioritise Euro-American texts or neutralised Indian writing, they largely ignore literature that deals with caste as a living reality (Guru, 2002; Nambissan, 2010). Even in institutions that pride themselves on liberal education, caste is often approached hesitantly, if at all. This avoidance leaves Dalit students intellectually underrepresented and emotionally isolated, while dominant-caste learners remain unaware of the structural inequalities that shape their classrooms and society at large (Kumar, 2016). The research objective here is twofold: first, to assess the educational value of integrating Dalit narratives in English classrooms; and second, to propose a pedagogical framework that acknowledges caste as central to understanding power, identity, and language.

2. Review of Literature

The relevance of subaltern literature in education has been explored through various theoretical lenses—postcolonialism, critical pedagogy, and identity politics among them—but Dalit literature occupies a distinct space due to its rootedness in lived oppression and resistance. Scholars such as Rege (1998, 2006) have underscored the need to read Dalit women's writing not merely for representation but for the epistemic challenges it offers to both Brahmanical patriarchy and elite feminism. In her analysis of Dalit testimonios, Rege argues that these texts articulate a counter-history of the nation, one that is often excluded from mainstream discourse and yet essential to it.

Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* (2000), translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, broke literary and linguistic conventions to give voice to the spiritual, social, and educational alienation experienced by Dalit Christian women. The fragmented narrative structure, interspersed with Tamil phrases, invites readers to engage with the politics of language and identity. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) continues this lineage of subaltern expression by offering intimate glimpses into the intersections of caste, gender, and labour, making it a valuable text for classrooms that aim to foster intersectional understanding. These works are not only autobiographical but also pedagogical, encouraging readers to confront discomfort and rethink dominant narratives.

Freire's (1970) concept of education as the "practice of freedom" provides a useful theoretical base for understanding the role of Dalit literature in the classroom. He emphasises dialogue, reflection, and conscientization—the awakening of critical consciousness—as essential to learning. In the context of caste-based discrimination, these principles become even more urgent. Canagarajah (2013), writing from a linguistic justice perspective, has argued that language classrooms should serve as spaces where diverse identities and speech forms are validated rather than erased. His earlier work (1999) critiques the ideological underpinnings of English teaching, noting how it often privileges Western norms while

ignoring local sociolinguistic realities. The inclusion of Dalit narratives challenges this by foregrounding code-meshing, emotional registers, and regional inflections that are typically considered non-standard in formal ELT settings.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, actual classroom practices remain slow to change. Textbooks in Indian universities frequently exclude caste-specific texts, or when they do include them, present them without sufficient context, rendering them emotionally flat and politically neutral. Gopal (2019) notes that educational institutions often maintain a "progressive" image while avoiding material that may disrupt the comfort of dominant groups. This selective inclusion amounts to a form of symbolic violence, whereby the presence of subaltern voices is permitted only if it does not challenge institutional norms.

Practical efforts to change this landscape have emerged from grassroots educators and alternative institutions. Anbalagan and Sebastian (2023) document an experiment in a private university in Bangalore where Dalit-authored texts were embedded in a compulsory English course. Students were invited to reflect on their own identities, prejudices, and relationships to language. The results were transformative, not just in terms of student learning but in how the classroom functioned as a dialogic space. Similarly, Mohanty (2019) has shown how multilingual pedagogies that validate vernacular speech can counter caste-based alienation in schools and universities.

Still, significant challenges persist. Teachers may feel ill-equipped to facilitate discussions around caste, particularly if they themselves come from dominant backgrounds. Institutional resistance often comes in the form of bureaucratic hurdles—approval processes, textbook committees, or conservative academic boards that shy away from anything perceived as "politically sensitive" (Nambissan, 2010). Moreover, Dalit students may carry emotional trauma into the classroom, making it necessary for pedagogical approaches to be empathetic and trauma-informed.

The scarcity of Dalit educators in ELT further compounds these issues. As Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) argue, representation matters not only for content but for the everyday politics of authority and belonging in classrooms. When students see their histories, languages, and lives reflected in the curriculum and the educator, it can validate their presence in ways that no amount of inclusive rhetoric can achieve.

In summary, the literature indicates a clear need and a growing momentum for integrating Dalit literature into ELT. What is still required is a cohesive pedagogical framework that addresses both structural and emotional aspects of caste in education. This study contributes to that effort by bringing together voices from classrooms, textual analysis, and critical theory to propose a way forward that centres justice, dignity, and dialogue.

3. Methodology

To explore how subaltern texts, particularly Dalit literature, can reshape English pedagogy in Indian higher education, this study adopted a qualitative research design, supported by survey insights from a purposive sample of 50 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in English literature and ELT courses across three urban colleges in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, India during 2024 December to March 2025. These participants were selected for their exposure to standard English syllabi, and the sample aimed to reflect a mix of caste, gender, and linguistic backgrounds. The research focused on understanding their experiences with curricular materials, their familiarity with Dalit-authored texts, and their reflections on classroom inclusivity and representation.

Data collection unfolded in three interconnected phases. First, a structured survey was administered to all 50 participants to gather initial impressions on how caste-based literature was represented in their syllabi, their comfort in discussing caste in class, and whether they had encountered texts by authors such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, or Namdeo Dhasal. Questions included both Likert-scale

responses and open-ended reflections. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 voluntary participants from the same group to allow for deeper narrative insights. These conversations revealed emotional responses to reading Dalit literature, including feelings of discomfort, solidarity, resistance, or intellectual awakening, especially when their classroom spaces had previously remained caste-neutral or silent (Rege, 1998; Gopal, 2019). Third, textual analysis of the core syllabi in these institutions was conducted to evaluate the inclusion or absence of subaltern voices. Most revealed a heavy reliance on either British canonical works or upper-caste Indian English writers, with only occasional gestures toward inclusivity.

The classroom component of the study involved a small pedagogical intervention. In two classes, Dalit texts—Bama's *Karukku* (2000), Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), and selected poems from *Poisoned Bread* (Dangle, 1992)—were introduced over a two-week period. Students were asked to keep reflective journals and participate in structured group discussions. This allowed the researcher to assess not only student engagement but the affective and intellectual shifts brought about by encountering voices they had not previously heard in formal education (Canagarajah, 2013). Classroom observation and student reflections were then thematically coded to trace emerging patterns of empathy, resistance, or recognition.

Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured anonymity and the freedom to withdraw at any stage. The approach was not to extract knowledge from marginalised identities but to centre their voices and create respectful academic spaces where caste could be discussed critically, not avoided (Freire, 1970; Anbalagan & Sebastian, 2023).

This methodology, grounded in dialogue and participatory reflection, offered rich, multi-layered insights into how English classrooms can either reproduce or resist caste hierarchies—depending on what and how they choose to teach. A questionnaire designed for the study "*Subaltern Texts in English Classrooms: A Pedagogical Approach to Dalit Literature*". It includes Likert-scale, yes/no, and open-ended questions to assess students' exposure to, perception of, and engagement with Dalit literature in ELT contexts (Annexure 1)

4. Results

The data collected from the 50 surveyed students revealed both a significant gap in exposure to Dalit literature and a notable shift in awareness and engagement when such texts were introduced. Prior to the intervention, 76% of participants reported never having read a Dalit-authored text in their coursework. However, after exposure to works such as *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life*, students reported increased levels of empathy, critical thinking, and awareness of caste-related issues. The intervention also revealed changes in classroom dynamics: students became more vocal about social issues, and reflective writing indicated deeper engagement with themes of marginalisation, identity, and resistance.

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare students' attitudes towards caste discussion in the classroom before and after the Dalit literature sessions. The analysis revealed a statistically significant increase in openness to discussing caste issues (Mean_Pre = 2.1, Mean_Post = 4.2 on a 5-point scale; $p < .001$). Moreover, the intervention had a positive impact on classroom inclusivity perception scores, with a pre-intervention average of 2.5 rising to 4.0 post-intervention ($p < .01$). Below is a summary of the main statistical observations:

Table 1: Exposure to Dalit Literature Before and After Intervention

Category	Pre-Intervention (%)	Post-Intervention (%)
Never read a Dalit-authored text	76%	0%
Aware of caste issues in literature	38%	92%
Comfortable discussing caste	24%	88%
Reported increased empathy	–	84%
Found the texts emotionally engaging	–	78%

Table 2: Statistical Summary of Paired Sample t-tests

Measure	Mean (Pre)	Mean (Post)	t-value	df	p-value
Openness to discussing caste (5-pt scale)	2.1	4.2	-10.54	49	< .001
Perceived inclusivity in ELT classes	2.5	4.0	-8.76	49	< .01
Emotional resonance with literature	2.0	4.3	-9.81	49	< .001

The results demonstrate that even brief exposure to Dalit-authored narratives can lead to statistically and pedagogically meaningful changes in learners' attitudes, classroom interaction, and critical engagement. Reflective journals supported this data, with recurring themes of "seeing what we were never taught," "understanding English from the margins," and "questioning silence in the syllabus." The findings strongly suggest that including subaltern voices in ELT has not only emotional and ethical importance but clear pedagogical value in fostering socially aware, critically engaged learners.

5. Discussion

The results of this study offer a compelling glimpse into the transformative potential of integrating Dalit-authored texts into English language and literature classrooms. The sharp rise in student engagement, empathy, and willingness to discuss caste after the classroom intervention signals more than a surface-level impact—it points to a deep cognitive and affective shift. Before the exposure, most students had either never heard of Dalit literature or assumed caste was irrelevant in English studies. This reflects long-standing curricular silences shaped by dominant-caste narratives that sanitise the classroom space of caste discomfort (Guru, 2002; Nambissan, 2010). However, once students read *Karukku* (Bama, 2000), *The Weave of My Life* (Pawar, 2008), and select poems from *Poisoned Bread* (Dangle, 1992), their reflections began to display a greater awareness of structural injustice and a personal investment in recognising social inequalities in their own lives and learning environments.

The significant statistical improvement in students' openness to discussing caste, rising from a mean of 2.1 to 4.2, suggests that exposure alone—when coupled with reflective pedagogy—can break entrenched taboos. The emotional responses were just as telling. Students from dominant-caste backgrounds admitted to discomfort and guilt, but instead of retreating, many described the process as awakening. Dalit and Adivasi students, meanwhile, noted feeling seen and represented, some for the first time in their educational experience. These reactions validate Rege's (1998) argument that subaltern texts are not only narrations of pain but assertions of presence and political voice.

However, the responses also underscore the need for sustained curricular reform rather than one-off engagements. Without institutional backing—be it in teacher training, textbook revisions, or supportive classroom environments—the power of these texts may remain fleeting or limited to more "progressive" educators. Gopal (2019) rightly observes that many academic spaces claim inclusivity while avoiding the discomfort of structural critique. The same tension was visible during the intervention, as some students expressed concern about whether caste discussions might "disrupt" classroom harmony. This points to the fragile equilibrium in classrooms where inclusivity is welcomed only if it does not challenge dominant comfort.

The classroom, as Freire (1970) envisioned, should not be a neutral ground but a space of critical dialogue. In this context, Dalit literature does not merely bring diversity—it forces a reckoning with the very foundation of knowledge, authorship, and legitimacy in education. The findings echo Canagarajah's (2013) assertion that language learning should not be separated from the power structures in which it exists. By allowing students to engage with code-meshing, regional linguistic identities, and narratives that resist polished grammar or conventional structures, the intervention expanded the pedagogical boundaries of English itself.

In short, this study shows that when Dalit voices are treated as central rather than marginal, the classroom becomes a site of transformation—not just in literacy, but in ethics, identity, and social consciousness. That transformation, however, depends on educators' courage and institutions' commitment to justice—not only in words, but in practice.

6. Potential Outcomes & Benefits

Integrating Dalit literature into English classrooms offers not just literary enrichment, but a deep pedagogical and ethical shift in how students learn about society, identity, and language. One of the most immediate outcomes is the recognition of caste as a lived reality rather than a historical footnote. When students engage with texts like Bama's *Karukku* (2000) or Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), they are introduced to narratives that articulate exclusion, resistance, and the emotional landscape of marginalisation. These stories prompt reflection not only about others' experiences but about one's own position in structures of privilege or oppression (Rege, 1998). Students reported a sense of cognitive dissonance initially, but this discomfort eventually opened up conversations that traditional syllabi often avoid.

A significant benefit of such integration is the humanisation of English language learning. Dalit narratives tend to blend regional languages, oral traditions, and non-standard Englishes, which allows learners to see that proficiency does not require erasure of one's voice. Canagarajah (2013) suggests that embracing translingualism in classrooms can validate students' linguistic identities and encourage expression without fear of correction or judgement. In this study, students became more expressive, and some even began to mix dialects or regional idioms in their writing tasks—previously seen as errors, now acknowledged as meaningful expression. This shift aligns with the goal of linguistic justice: valuing voices for content and context rather than adherence to dominant norms (Poteau & Winkle, 2022).

The emotional benefits are equally important. Dalit students, who often feel invisible in elite English spaces, expressed a sense of visibility and validation. Seeing one's life experiences mirrored in course content can significantly improve self-esteem, engagement, and academic retention (Nambissan, 2010). For dominant-caste students, the encounter with caste-based narratives created new forms of ethical awareness. Several mentioned that they had never spoken about caste in an academic setting and that reading these texts helped them understand structural inequality in ways lectures alone could not convey. This kind of impact nurtures the formation of critically conscious citizens—learners who do not just consume knowledge but question its source, form, and implications (Freire, 1970).

Another long-term benefit is the development of a classroom culture that supports inclusion beyond tokenism. Discussions around caste become more sustained, reflective, and less burdened by shame or defensiveness. Teachers too begin to view literature not merely as aesthetic material but as social intervention. As observed during this intervention, classroom dynamics shifted from hierarchical teacher-led analysis to collaborative meaning-making. This encourages students to think of the classroom not just as a place of instruction, but as a dialogic space where experiences matter and silences are gently disrupted (Gopal, 2019).

Ultimately, the inclusion of Dalit literature holds the potential to not only reform language pedagogy but to democratise the English classroom itself—opening up a space where the politics of reading and writing can align with the values of equity and justice.

7. Challenges and Limitations of Integrating Dalit Literature in ELT Classrooms in Indian Society

Despite its transformative potential, integrating Dalit literature into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in India faces several entrenched challenges and limitations—both pedagogical and socio-cultural. One of the most pressing obstacles is institutional hesitation and curricular rigidity. Most Indian university syllabi are built around canonical English texts—British, American, or upper-caste Indian writers—leaving little room for subaltern voices that unsettle the comfortable neutrality often expected in English classrooms. Dalit texts, with their blunt portrayal of caste discrimination and social violence, are frequently seen as "too political" or "too regional" to belong in an ELT or English literature syllabus (Nambissan, 2010; Rege, 1998).

Another significant challenge is teacher preparedness. Many educators have not been trained to handle discussions on caste with nuance or sensitivity. Some may avoid including Dalit narratives altogether, fearing they might provoke discomfort or conflict in mixed classrooms (Guru, 2002). Others may approach these texts through a lens of pity or charity rather than empowerment, further marginalising the experiences they are meant to centre. Without critical pedagogical training, there is a risk that teachers may misrepresent the texts or silence student voices—especially those from Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Student resistance is also a concern. Dominant-caste students, often socialised to believe that caste is either irrelevant or obsolete, may react defensively when confronted with texts that implicate caste privilege. In the absence of prior sensitisation, the classroom can become tense, with students expressing discomfort, detachment, or even outright denial. This makes it difficult to create a genuinely dialogic space where all students feel safe to share and learn (Freire, 1970).

Language ideology presents another limitation. Dalit authors often blend Tamil, Marathi, or other regional languages into their English writing, resist polished grammar, and foreground oral storytelling traditions. In ELT contexts—where correctness, fluency, and "standard English" are prized—these linguistic features may be dismissed as poor language rather than expressions of identity and resistance (Canagarajah, 2013). Without rethinking what counts as "good" English, educators may unintentionally undermine the very texts they wish to highlight.

Additionally, tokenism is a real risk. Including one or two Dalit texts without embedding them within a larger framework of caste critique or social justice pedagogy can lead to superficial engagement. This token inclusion, though well-intended, often reinforces the idea that Dalit literature is an outlier rather than an integral part of the literary and pedagogical landscape (Gopal, 2019).

Finally, societal attitudes seep into classrooms. Casteism is far from being a thing of the past in Indian education. Dalit students frequently face subtle and overt discrimination from peers, faculty, and administration. The inclusion of Dalit texts does not automatically ensure that caste-based prejudices within the institution will vanish. On the contrary, it may expose the extent to which silence, denial, and hierarchy continue to define academic culture (Paik, 2009; Anbalagan & Sebastian, 2023).

To truly overcome these limitations, change must occur at multiple levels—curriculum reform, teacher training, institutional commitment, and a cultural shift in how we approach English education in India.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The integration of Dalit literature into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms presents a powerful opportunity to transform both pedagogical practice and social consciousness. This study has shown that exposure to subaltern voices—through texts by writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Namdeo Dhasal—not only enriches literary understanding but also fosters critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper awareness of caste-based inequities. Students, particularly those from dominant-caste backgrounds, demonstrated an increased willingness to engage in discussions on caste and marginalisation, while Dalit learners expressed a sense of representation and validation often missing from mainstream curricula. However, this potential can only be realised through deliberate and sustained efforts at all levels of the education system.

To begin with, ELT curricula should move beyond tokenistic inclusion and treat Dalit texts as central to the learning process, not peripheral additions. Text selection must be sensitive, varied, and rooted in lived experiences rather than exoticising or aestheticising suffering. Pedagogical strategies must include reflective writing, open discussion, and classroom practices that allow students to confront their own social positions. Teacher training programs should incorporate modules on caste sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy, ensuring educators are equipped to handle these texts with nuance and care.

Institutional support is crucial. Departments of English and education must acknowledge the value of subaltern narratives and revise syllabi to reflect a wider spectrum of voices. Policy frameworks should encourage educational spaces that are not just linguistically inclusive but socially responsive. Without such systemic change, the transformative potential of Dalit literature in ELT classrooms may remain unrealised.

Ultimately, centring Dalit voices is not simply a pedagogical choice—it is a moral imperative. In doing so, we not only reshape how English is taught, but also reimagine the classroom as a space of equity, dialogue, and social justice.

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Annexure 1

Student Questionnaire

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: □ Male □ Female □ Non-binary □ Prefer not to say
3. Caste/Social Group (optional): _____
4. Level of Study: □ Undergraduate □ Postgraduate
5. Medium of Schooling: □ English □ Regional language □ Both

Section B: Exposure to alit Literature

6. Have you ever read a Dalit-authored text in your English classes?
□ Yes □ No

7. Are you familiar with any of the following authors? (Tick all that apply)
   □ Bama
   □ Namdeo Dhasal
   □ Urmila Pawar
   □ Omprakash Valmiki
   □ None

8. On a scale of 1 to 5, how often do your English classes include texts that discuss caste or marginalisation?
   □ 1 – Never
   □ 2 – Rarely
   □ 3 – Sometimes
   □ 4 – Often
   □ 5 – Always

Section C: Perceptions of Inclusivity in English Classrooms

9. I feel that the texts included in my English syllabus reflect diverse social realities.
□ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

10. Discussions around caste and inequality are encouraged in our English classes.
    □ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

11. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions about social injustice in class.
□ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

Section D: Impact of Reading Dalit Literature (For participants in the intervention)

12. After reading texts like *Karukku* or *The Weave of My Life*, I understand caste realities more deeply.
□ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

13. Reading Dalit narratives has made me reflect more critically on my own social position.
□ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

14. These texts helped me see English not just as a subject but as a medium of resistance and identity.
□ Strongly Disagree □ Disagree □ Neutral □ Agree □ Strongly Agree

Section E: Open-Ended Questions

15. How did reading Dalit-authored literature affect your understanding of caste and education?

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16 What challenges, if any, did you experience while engaging with these texts in the classroom?

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17. What suggestions would you offer to make English classrooms more inclusive of marginalised voices?
