

**POLITICS OF EMANCIPATION: DALIT
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENT**

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by

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To
My Loving Father

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This is to certify that I, M. Murali Krishna, have carried out the research embodied in the present dissertation for the full period under Ph. D. ordinances of the University.

I declare to the best of my knowledge that no part of this dissertation was earlier submitted for the award of research degree of any University.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Autobiography as a distinct genre has emerged in the early 19th century, in the West, at a particular historical juncture when the western society was undergoing rampant political and cultural transformation. During this period, the civil society was also moving towards new forms of literary appreciation. As a result of “[t]he relative insignificance of tragedy in a thoroughly Christianized world view, the disappearance of epic from a non-aristocratic world, or the powerful assertion of novel in an age of burghers”¹ the genre of *Autobiography* has come to emerge in the West.

Commenting on the origins of the genre of Autobiography in the West, Roy Pascal, a scholar on autobiography, says: “An investigation into the historical and psychological origins of this genre must lead one deep into the cultural history of the

¹ Karl J. Weintraub, “Autobiography and the Historical Consciousness”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1.4, 1975, 821.

West.”² Similarly, George Misch, a prominent theorist of autobiography, says:
“Autobiography is one of the innovations brought by cultural advance, and yet it springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understanding of others; or the need for self-assertion. In itself, it is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form.”³

While Georg Misch talks about the source of motivation for writing an autobiography, Weintraub and Pascal specifically refer to the historical and cultural factors that led to the emergence of autobiography as a distinct genre in the West. It appears that the emergence of new ideas such as individualism and nationalism shaped the genre of autobiography in the West. In an essay titled, “Autobiography and the Historical Consciousness”, Weintraub says that

autobiographic genre took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence. Autobiography assumes a significant cultural function around A.D. 1800. The growing significance of autobiography is thus a part of

² Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1960, 2.

³ See Trev Lynn Broughton, ed. *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 1. New York: Routledge, 2007, 663-64.

that great intellectual revolution marked by the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historism or historicism.⁴

As Ross Poole, a social scientist, mentions the nineteenth century was the period when the modern nation theory was emerging. The nationalist movements were in full swing in most of the European countries. The nationalist movements, claiming the right of self-determination, emerged in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Italy and Spain, as well as in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. “Philosophers were forced to consider the constituents of a liberal and democratic order” when national identity and nationalism was at the peak.⁵

This brings us to the question of nationalism. In his book, titled, *Nation and Identity*, Ross Poole says: “Nationalism is the principle that the nation is the ground of political sovereignty and that political sovereignty is the right and destiny of the nation. This principle is satisfied when and only when nation and State come together as the nation-state.”⁶ However, there is a huge body of literature contesting the theory of the nation and its limitations.⁷ What, after all, is a nation? Who constitute the nation? Among many, Anderson’s definition of a nation helps us understand better what a nation is and

⁴ Karl J. Weintraub, “Autobiography and the Historical Consciousness.” *Critical Inquiry*, 1.4, June 1975, 821.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the idea of nation and identity, see Ross Poole’s *Nation and Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1999.

⁶ See Ross Poole’s *Nation and Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1999, 9.

⁷ For a detailed discussion on the idea of nation and its limitations, see G. Aloysius’s *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1997.

what it constitutes: “In an anthropological spirit...I propose the following definition of the nation: it is imagined political community—and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.”⁸ Poole says that nation exists as a mode of “individual self- and other-awareness” (10) According to Poole, the Self and the Other awareness is crucial for an imagination of a community or a nation.

Given the specific cultural and political history of the West that has played a significant role in the emergence of the autobiography as a distinct genre in the West, I feel that an entirely different and disparate set of historical, social, and cultural factors have led to the emergence of dalit autobiography in India.

Ambedkar’s anti-caste movement and dalit cultural and political mobilization for equality mark the genre of dalit autobiography. It is in this context that the genre of dalit autobiography emerges and poses problems to the idea of the individual, modernity, citizenship and democracy in India. Dalit autobiography points out the limitations of modernity and democracy in India. Dalits are still stigmatised, discriminated against and despised in the social, cultural and political domains. Civil society does not, to this day, recognize dalits as humans worthy of respect, despite the Indian Constitutional oath that all its citizens be considered equal.

The social and cultural conditions of dalits in India are such that they are neither treated as individuals nor have they ever been granted equality and self-respect in India.

⁸ See Ross Poole’s *Nation and Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1999, 10.

On the contrary, they have been exploited and oppressed by the dominant caste Hindus in numerous ways and that phenomenon continues to exist in the modern democratic Indian “nation”. Despite the persistent cultural and political resistance against Brahmanism and the graded caste inequalities that are responsible for the degradation of dalits, they have not achieved their goal of emancipation from Hinduism.

Ambedkar’s struggles that resulted in securing constitutional safeguards for dalits lag behind in their implementation due to the overwhelming caste Hindu antipathy towards their implementation. Besides, the fanatically Brahminical public realm operates with an overwhelming caste consciousness, through which it restrains or controls dalits’ social mobility and keeps a firm surveillance over them.

Although the Indian Constitution grants citizenship and civil rights to all its citizens, dalits are yet to receive equal social treatment. On the contrary, they are relegated to the “reserved” positions in the public realm and treated with contempt in the modern civil society. Dalit autobiographies demonstrate how the stigma of caste haunts dalits even after acquiring education and other “desirable” national cultural traits. It is also interesting that even after acquiring a middle class status as a result of modern education and employment, dalits are not accepted as equal human beings in society. When they began to imitate the Brahminical culture for social acceptance, they are derogatorily called sanskritised dalits or “harijans”. In villages, atrocities on dalits have increased because of their self-assertion and resistance towards Brahminical domination.

Apart from the newly-acquired cultural mobility resulting from the conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, the dalit struggles against caste inequalities, assertion of dalit identity and self-respect, infuse confidence in dalits. But such an assertion and confidence of dalits is deeply reviled by the caste Hindus. Not only do caste Hindus detest dalit assertion, they also blame dalits as “casteist” for invoking caste in the public realm. As M. S. S. Pandian, a social scientist, rightly argues “Caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower castes.”⁹

Why is the public realm in India anti-dalit and anti-equality or anti-social democracy? Why does it regard caste a pre-modern phenomenon or a relic of the past, when the socialization is still based on the caste of a person? Why is it that until the emergence of dalit literature caste was hardly a subject of Indian literature? What is the basis on which the Indian “nation” was built? Benedict Anderson says that the nation as community itself is a constructed phenomenon.

Then who constitutes the “imagined community,” in India? Commenting on the construction of the nation in India, Gail Omvedt says:

[T]hroughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the high-caste elites of India had been constructing or ‘imagining’ it as a Hindu community, incorporating some of the language of democracy but most often using a Romantic imagery stressing a community of blood and race, ‘Hindus’ as a

⁹ M.S.S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” in *EPW*, May 4, 2002, 1738.

‘people’ inhabiting the subcontinent, assaulted by outside forces defined as ‘Muslim’, British or whatever, dominated their discourse. While the Congress and left secularists wanted to assert another ‘unity of India’ inclusive of Muslim and other religious traditions, and Gandhian wanted to reinterpret ‘Hinduism’ to allow for a significant reformism, both accepted the elements of the framework. In particular they took for granted the identification of the majority of people as ‘Hindus’ and the identification of the ancient Indian tradition as basically a Hindu one.¹⁰

This conception, she says, was expressed in the common framework of both British and nationalist historical writing. However, as Gail Omvedt reminds us, Phule/Ambedkar/Periyar tradition represents the effort to construct an alternative identity of the people, based on non-north Indian and low-caste perspectives, critical not only of the oppressiveness of the dominant caste Hindu society but also of its claims to antiquity and to bring the major Indian tradition.¹¹ Thus, the dominant caste elite conception of the nation¹² and national identity in India has been rendered not only problematic but it is seen as fundamentally oppressive towards lower castes, more so towards dalits.

¹⁰ Gail Omvedt. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage, 1994, 244.

¹¹ Gail Omvedt. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage, 1994, 244.

¹² For a critique of the idea of nation in India, see G. Aloysius’s *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1997.

The elite conception of national identity proposes an unmarked citizen without any reference to caste, class, religion, gender, region so on and so forth, while what happens in reality is exactly the opposite of it. In other words, this unmarked citizen subject, by all its probability, is a dominant caste Hindu, who is an epitome of oppression and an advocate of the purity-pollution ideology.

This normative citizen subject differentiates people by their marked social identities, and oppresses dalits by imposing excessive markers of defilement. Thus the notion of the unmarked citizen entails an inherent contradiction in India where, as I mentioned earlier, the social, cultural and political identities are excessively marked by caste. As M.S.S. Pandian says, “[i]t is evident that Indian modern, despite its claim to be universal – and of course, because of it – not only constitutes lower caste as its ‘other’, but also inscribes itself silently as upper caste.”¹³

Similarly, the conception of a nation and its distinct culture involves, as Poole says, “a process of *self* formation, not merely formation of the self; it is the process by which human individuals acquire various social identities.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the universal “self” which is supposedly the subject of autobiography, is always already demarcated by certain “local specificities” such as caste, religion, race, class, gender, region etc. Thus, before the critical interventions of the recent feminist, African American and poststructuralist approaches to the understanding and analyzing of the genre of

¹³ M.S.S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” in *EPW*, May 4, 2002, 1738.

¹⁴ Ross Poole’s *Nation and Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1999, 12.

autobiography, the “universal notion of self” remained uncontested and viewed as if it is natural and given. Let me elucidate the terms of contestation for the “universal notion of self”.

Western feminist scholarship on autobiography, like in other fields, demonstrates that the projection of a *Universal Self* in earlier autobiographies has been predominantly the middle class male self. Feminists have questioned, in many different contexts, the cultural domination and “ideological underpinnings of particular version of ‘selfhood’” being promoted as the *authentic* universal self.¹⁵ Commenting on the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender, Nancy Miller, a feminist theorist, argues that, “[i]nsofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and, we may add, Western and middle-class modes of subjectivity.”¹⁶

Adding to Nancy Miller’s argument, Linda Anderson, another feminist scholar, in her book titled, *Autobiography*, remarks that, “by focusing on a particular historical canon of texts which celebrated the extraordinary lives of ‘great men’, an important group of modern critics writing in the 1960s and 1970s deduced abstract critical

¹⁵ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, London: Routledge, 2001.

¹⁶ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, London: Routledge, 2001, 3.

principles for autobiography based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence which reflected their own cultural values.”¹⁷

Susan Friedman, a feminist scholar, even more powerfully remarks in the following manner: “The emphasis on the individualism as the necessary pre-condition for autobiography is thus a reflection of the privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers that have been denied by history the illusion of ‘individualism’.”¹⁸ By calling “individualism”, an illusion created by white men, Friedman redefines the notion of self and autobiography by which she makes it possible for middle-class white women, who are confined to domestic sphere, to give expression to their feelings, experiences and thoughts and, by such an action, to transform and elevate themselves from *being* to *becoming*—a process through which women stake claims over the public realm, job market and politics.

By questioning the normative notions of self and autobiography, the western feminists have highlighted the explicit male-centeredness in autobiographical discourse. As such, the feminist criticism on autobiography highlights the formation of the self as a product of discourse. However, Asma Rasheed, a feminist scholar working on Indian Muslim women’s autobiographies, points out the limitations or pitfalls with such a conception of self for the identity politics.

¹⁷ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, London: Routledge, 2001, 4.

¹⁸ Quoted by Sara Ahmed in Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 153.

Furthering the Asian feminist scholars' contention with the western feminist conception of self as a product of discourse, Asma Rasheed points out its implications to the identity politics. To quote Asma Rasheed, "The dangers of identity politics, then, could be that, it casts as authentic to the self or group an identity that is in fact defined by its opposition to an Other."¹⁹ As Asma Rasheed rightly cautions: "Reclaiming such an identity, as one's own would then merely reinforce its dependence on this dominant Other, and further internalize and reinforce an oppressive discourse" (5). A more productive effort then, in such a context, as Asma Rasheed suggests, would be to understand the discursive formations of a self, with a sharper focus on the local (5).

What this means is that an understanding of the context, history and political aspirations of each community or a group is inevitable to grasp the significance of the narrative self. Consequently, the notion of autobiography too gets redefined and expands its scope in the process of its encounter with different identities. Identity formations and contestations of certain dominant values take shape as a mode of political articulation in autobiographical writings. The genre of dalit autobiography is one such which challenges the notion of universality and the dominant conceptions of identity and the self.

¹⁹ Asma Rasheed. "Imposing identities: Interface of Self and Nation in Auto/Biographical Narratives," Diss. Vadodara: Maharaja SayajiRao University of Baroda, 2006, 5.

Purpose and Politics of Literature

Thus, literatures produced in any society will have their own context and socio-political relevance. Many a time, the literatures of the land reflect the social configuration of their times. The plurality of literatures throws light on diverse aspects of society, like people's beliefs, values, and ideologies. Above all, they point to the emerging social, political and cultural concerns of diverse groups of people. Therefore, I would say, there are many dimensions to the evaluation of any literature. It may not be surprising to learn that literatures of various kinds produced by distinct social groups exist in conflict with one another and many times contradict one another. They contradict one another because the motives or objectives and interests are different and because these literatures contribute to the construction of different kinds of social orders within society.

There seems to be something very revealing about the very conception and the genre of literature and the nature of literary practice in India. Literature is traditionally called "Brahmanas".²⁰ The title is self-evident as to what it would project and valorise as literature. It is not a difficult cognitive task to speculate who would have been the masters of knowledge production in the earlier times and what kind of knowledge about the society and culture they had (re)produced. Studying Phule's struggles against setting the knowledge domain free from the monopoly of Brahmanical forces would bring a lot more clarity on this subject.

²⁰ See C. D. Naik's *Thoughts and Philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*, New Delhi: Sarup, 2003, 353-354.

As mentioned earlier, literatures are context and culture specific; they carry a whole lot of cultural history, ideology and are charged with certain pre-determined objectives—political as well as social. In such conditions, whose literatures have been considered to derive historical information? What kind of history had been constructed? To whose benefit and whose detriment has this history been contributing? Who have been the writers? Sisir Kumar Das, a prominent literary critic, also points out the social composition of the Indian writers till the early twentieth century. He mentions that only Brahmin and Kshatriya men happened to write the most. Except in the Tamil context where non-Brahmin men dominated the literary field, it is mainly Brahmin, Kshatriya, and middle class shudra men who have been writing both in English and regional languages. It seems that there have been no lowered caste writers till the twentieth century.²¹

Sisir Kumar Das identifies D. Javalkar's *Desaca Dusman* (1926), an essay attacking Chipulankar and Tilak, for which the author was prosecuted by the Brahmins, as the beginning of dalit writing in India.²² But even before 1920, dalit writing has existed. It has existed in the form of petitions or *vinatipatras* to the British officials on the

²¹ Sisir Kumar Das. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom, Triumph and Tragedy*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995, 13.

²² See Sisir Kumar Das. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995, 22.

material and social conditions of dalits and in the form of newspaper articles and magazines addressing the problems of untouchables.²³

Therefore, I argue that the radical anti-caste fervour of dalit writing lies in its aims to record dalit history and to eradicate caste inequalities but not in the nationalist movement as Sisir Kumar Das's remarks seem to imply. Dalit writing thus emerges from the anti-caste traditions and expands its cultural and political horizon with Ambedkar's movement. For instance, as Lakshmi Holmstrom, in the introduction to Bama's *Sangati*, mentions, Tamil dalit ideologues such as Gauthaman and Unjairajan argue that "the Dalit uprising is not confined only to the expression of Dalit literature. On the contrary, Dalit

²³ As a reply to a Brahmin British collector, Iyothee Thassar writes a petition criticising his remarks suggesting that Parayas convert to Christianity. In this petition, he makes an extensive critique of the Brahmin-British collusive imperialism and the Hindu society's violence against Parayas. For more details, see Iyothee Thassar's "Open Letter" written in 1893 to a Brahmin official serving as an Inspector General, in the British government, published in G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: Buddhist Movement among Tamils under Colonialism*, New Delhi: New Age International, 1998, 197-204. In an essay titled, "Unwritten Writing" in *Venomous Touch*, Ravikumar gives a list of magazines run by dalit intellectuals for the cause of untouchables. Rettamalai Srinivasan, for instance, has started a magazine called, *Parayan* in 1893 and he has run it successfully until 1900 when he went to London. Iyothee Thassar has later started a literary and political magazine called, *Oru Paisa Tamilan* in 1907 and ran it until his death in 1914. On the other hand, Gopal Baba Valangkar, a member of Phule's "Satya Shodak Samaj," has written a *Vinatipatra* in, as early as, 1888 to the British government, which was an extensive critique of caste exclusion and untouchability. Valangkar has also written several articles on the subject of caste inequalities and untouchability in the newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to newspapers such as *Sudharak* and *Deena Bandu*. For more details, see Anupama Rao's essay, "Who is the Dalit? Emergence of a New Political Subject" in *Claiming Power from Below*, ed. Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus, Delhi: OUP, 2008.

literature came about as part and parcel of anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice, and political protests for economic equality.”²⁴

However, until the emergence of dalit literature as a distinct genre in 1960s and 70s, it has been the non-dalit social reformers, dominant caste Marxists and the liberals who have written *about* the lives of untouchables in prose, out of sympathy and pity.²⁵ Similarly, in vernacular literatures too, it has been the non-dalit writers who have written sporadically on the issues of untouchables.²⁶ It is only after the emergence of dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh in the late 1980s that dalit writers came into the literary domain on a larger scale, and only since then they have begun to produce literature with an anti-caste fervour and dalit consciousness. Not only in Andhra Pradesh but in India at large, dalit literature assumed the proportion of a movement only after the 1970s when the first generation of literates from dalit communities plunged into the literary field.

Let us also take the case of Marathi dalit literature, the forerunner of dalit literature in India. Arjun Dangle, a dalit writer and a leader of Dalit Panther movement, says that before Ambedkar’s movement dalit literature was being written in a very small way. It was “[a]round 1950, when the first batch of dalit youths graduated from college,

²⁴ Lakshmi Holmstrom’s Introduction to Bama’s *Sangati: Events*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005, xii.

²⁵ Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and Sivasankara Pillai’s *Scavenger’s Son* are classic examples in this regard.

²⁶ In Telugu literature, except Kolakaluri Inaak’s short story, *Oorabavi*” (1969), much of the prose on untouchables has been written by non-dalits. See Nikhileshwar’s “Telugu Katha: Dalita Vadam” in *Samantara*, April 2010, 73-75.

Ghanashyam Talwatkar and others set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh. The Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was later formed from this body.”²⁷

If this is the case with dalit literature and dalit writers, what kind of literature have the dominant caste elite writers produced in the wake of anti-colonial period? For instance, when we closely observe the postcolonial Indian writing in English, we can notice certain important notions that have guided the fabric of Indian writing. G.N. Saibaba, a literary critic, argues that Indian writing in English has emerged as a sub-discipline of English literature categorised under the rubric of “third world literature in English” in the western universities:

A section of the Indian diaspora who studied and settled in the Anglo-American universities contributed largely to the process of constructing this discipline. Similarly, the emergence of nationalist and pan-Indian ideologies in colonial and “post-colonial” India has played a crucial role in shaping the discipline. But it is still a marginal discipline in western universities as well as in Indian universities. In the recent times it has

²⁷ Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992, 239.

gained importance in the Anglo-American academy, albeit in its status of being part of English literature.²⁸

One would have to understand what these nationalist and pan-Indian ideologies stand for and more importantly what exactly they represent. As Saibaba observes, this new discipline of Indian English literature is structured around certain notions such as India, “Indian”, “Indianness”, “Indian nation”, “Indian sensibility”, “Indian national experience” and so on, by examining the works of literary critics of Indian writing in English like K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah, M. K. Naik, V. K. Gokak and others. Saibaba’s argument is that a large section of critical writing on Indian English literature has been a powerful enterprise towards constructing a kind of elite “Indian nationalism” mediated through the interpretation of the literary works in particular ways.

Besides, this considerable bulk of writing has paved the way for more doubts as to what aspects of Indian culture and history they have represented. What kind of information has been drawn from the literatures that represented the Indian pre-colonial and colonial past is another question which needs further elaboration.

Romila Thapar, in her book, *Narratives and the Making of History*, offers a clue to finding answers to this question. Romila Thapar argues that “the items selected from

²⁸ G. N. Saibaba, “Colonialist Nationalism in the Critical Practice of Indian Writing in English: A Critique” *EPW* 43.23, June 7 - 13, 2008, 61.

the past are often so chosen as to legitimize the values and codes of the present. In selecting and recasting cultural items we highlight some and marginalize others.”²⁹ As a result, the conflictual aspects of Indian culture and history are undoubtedly left out in the literatures structured around notions of *nation* and *nationalism*.

More importantly, the anti-caste genealogies find very little space or no space at all in the canonical literature and history. This kind of evacuation of dalits from literature and history is paralleled with the active sidelining of their citizenship claims in the political realm. As Gopal Guru, a dalit theorist, observes, “The citizenship claims made by dalits were being threatened by Gandhi and other Congress leaders, particularly those with a Hindu bent of mind.”³⁰

Literatures of resistance or anti-caste literatures that aspired for an egalitarian social system have disappeared without being preserved and some have been deliberately set ablaze.³¹ Ravikumar, a Tamil dalit intellectual, notes that historically dalits did not

²⁹ Romila Thapar. *Narratives and the Making of History: Two Lectures*. New Delhi: OUP, 2000, 4.

³⁰ See Gopal Guru’s essay, “Citizenship in Exile: A Dalit Case,” in Rajeiv Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld, ed. *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship*. New Delhi: Sage, 2005, 261.

³¹ While talking about Kusuma Dharmanna’s writings, in the introduction to *Nallapoddu*, Gogu Shyamala, a dalit woman writer and intellectual, says that Dharmanna published many of his writings from his own press. His writings were a major contribution to the literature of that period. He ran a press by himself, published many books and magazines about dalits. But none of those historical materials are available as all that got burnt along with his press. Shyamala says, “It is not accidental that all the photos, literature and history of dalits have been washed away in the floods of caste and burnt in the caste fire” (15). Approximately, twelve literary volumes were written and published by Rangaswamy from his own press “Adi Jana Prachuranalu”. But the availability of those

have any patronage or support to publish books and contribute to the knowledge domain. He remarks thus, “Apart from the damage done by the lack of support, the ‘wealth’ of knowledge belonging to the untouchables was being actively destroyed by the caste Hindus who envied and hated them.”³²

The strategic and organized destruction of the historical evidence which documented defiance against caste-supremacy culminated in de-historicizing and de-legitimizing dalit existence. Moreover, the erasure of dalit history has not been a spontaneous action but it has been done in a systematic manner.³³ This process of eliminating evidence on caste atrocities and imposition of caste slavery on untouchables seems to have been paralleled to a great extent.

books is difficult today. Literature pertaining to Harijanodyamam and Hindu literature written by dalits are unavailable. From those times onwards, (their) literature has become untouchable for the libraries. While the coastal region stands as a place of abode for *Bharatham*, *Ramayanam*, Puranas, Reformist literature and Modern literature, books such as Dharmanna’s *Harijana Sathakam* and Rangaswamy’s *Raitu Pilla* did not see a reprint. “Ancient” libraries across the state are completely filled with Hindu puranas and shatakas. Even after carrying out a thorough search in those libraries, we cannot find the literary shatakas written by dalits. (Translation mine) See Gogu Shyamala, ed. *Nallapoddu: Dalitha Streela Sahityam 1921-2002*. Hyderabad: Hyderabad Books Trust, 2003, 15-16.

³² Ravikumar’s essay, “Unwritten Writing: Dalits and Media, in *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*. Kolkata: Samya, 2009, 23.

³³ “From about the sixth century onwards, the historical evidence of untouchable saints rejecting the Vedas and other Brahminical scriptures and practices is available...From the twelfth century onwards, one finds a number of movements in different parts of the country led by untouchable saints along with others who taught about the essential unity of mankind and oneness of God. They condemned caste, rejected the authority of the Vedas and other religious texts of Hinduism, ridiculed the Brahmin priests, their rituals and practices.” Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jaideva, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India: Emancipation and Empowerment*, Delhi: Kalpaz, 2002, 61.

Language of Caste in Public Realm

Not only the elite Hindu ideologues but also the Indian writers imagine India as a Hindu “nation” and Hindus as the majoritarian community. Until the arrival of dalit literature they have not treated caste as an important component of literary work. Silence over caste in public realm is part of defending Hinduism. Hinduism without the caste system, however, is difficult to imagine. While dalit writing criticizes Hinduism for the hierarchical social order and caste inequalities, caste Hindu reformers and writers endorse Hinduism for their own self-interest; defending Hinduism means defending caste inequalities. M. K. Gandhi, who condemned the practice of “untouchability” as a “sin” applauded the principles of Hinduism and the four-fold varna system. Caste system, moreover, as Ambedkar argued, is not only a division of labour but a division of labourers. Caste system nurtures prejudices of every caste against the other castes. How would any true nationalist or patriot then endorse such prejudices against his/her own country folks? How have the elite Hindu social reformers perceived caste inequalities in Hinduism? It appears that not only did the elite Hindu reformers abstain from interrogating Hindu religion they have not even entertained any criticism against it. We shall see later how the Phule-Ambedkar tradition has been confronted by the elite Hindus on many aspects of their struggles against the caste oppression. To begin with how have Indian mainstream writers shown their complicity in endorsing the caste prejudices and inequalities in the public realm?

In his essay, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere”, M. S. S. Pandian elaborately discusses the popular Indian writer, R. K. Narayan’s autobiography to show how in modern times caste Hindus have developed a certain kind of language that couches references to caste. Thus the act of transcoding, Pandian argues, is an act of acknowledging and disavowing caste at once. He, however, remarks:

It does not need much of an effort to understand what “strictly vegetarian atmosphere” or meat, which is specified as mutton (that is, *it is not beef*) encodes. In other words, the servant that they have at their home is a shudra and that he/she is not an “untouchable”. To talk about all this is to talk about “caste by other means”. The subtle act of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else – as though to talk about caste as caste would incarcerate one into a pre-modern realm – is a regular feature one finds in most upper caste autobiographies.³⁴

Why do Brahmins talk about caste by other means? Why do they restrain from talking about caste openly in the public realm?

One possible reading of this brahmanical tendency of quickly disavowing caste can find resonances in the elite Hindu nationalism, i.e., Hindus as an (imagined) “community” and India as a secular country. Colonial India has witnessed two parallel

³⁴ M.S.S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” in *EPW*, 37.18, May 4, 2002, 1735.

streams of liberation struggles; one stream, primarily, focused on freedom from the colonial rule and the transfer of power from the British to the Indian elite, whereas the other stream of liberation struggles led by Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar and others concerned greatly about the freedom from indigenous elite, the annihilation of caste system and reconstruction of Indian society on the principles of equality, liberty and justice. In sum, the dominant elites represent a political goal of achieving power whereas the subordinated social groups have represented an aspiration for the abolition of the structural inequalities and reconstruction of society on the principles of egalitarianism. Thus both these movements have fought for the “independence” of two different kinds. The former achieved its goal in 1947 and the latter is still struggling for its freedom.

Dalit movement and dalit writing belong to the latter, i.e., the anti-caste egalitarian movements, which have been fighting for the freedom from the upper caste domination and caste hierarchy. The democratic thrust of the anti-caste movements appears to have influenced the goals and modes of articulation of the subsequent dalit movements in India. Social movements led by Ambedkar and the Post-Ambedkarite dalit movements of the 1970s and 1980s reflect the influence of anti-caste movements.

Another reading of the Brahminical silence over caste in the public realm is to preserve the “ethnic plurality” of India by reading caste inequalities as “social diversity”. From the dominant caste point of view, these explanations might serve to defend their silence over caste, but from the dalit point of view, avoiding discussions on matters related to caste is to avoid the moral responsibility of annihilating social inequalities in

India. Bringing discussions on annihilation of caste into the public realm would mean mobilizing peoples' opinions against caste inequalities and Brahminical oppression.

Caste and Social Reform

The Brahmins and other dominant caste reformers mobilized people's consent against *sati* and child marriage. This is why the silence of the caste Hindu reformers over caste related issues becomes conspicuously appalling. Both the elite caste Hindu reformers and the elite caste Hindu writers seemed to have shared this tendency on a larger scale. Whenever there have been attempts from others to demolish the caste system, the caste Hindus have gone to the extreme extent to snub their voice and attempts. Then, we could see the true Hindu self of the elite Indian writers coming to the fore.³⁵

³⁵ For example, in his book, titled, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, Pandian discusses how caste Hindu writers couch their caste prejudices in an apparently liberal language in his reading of the autobiography of R. K. Narayan, a well-known Indian writer in English. R. K. Narayan narrates a confrontation between a European missionary and bystanders in a Madras street in the early twentieth century. The ambience of the confrontation was marked by its everyday ordinariness: "A few onlookers stopped by, the priest nodded to everyone in a friendly manner, casting a genial look around, while the musicians rendered a full-throated Biblical hymn over the babble of the street, with its *hawkers'* cries and the *jutka-drivers'* urging of their lean horses. *Urchins* sat down in the front row on the ground, and *all sorts of men and women* assembled" (19) (emphasis added). As the missionary went on preaching, a scuffle broke out: Suddenly the audience woke up to the fact that the preacher was addressing them as 'sinners'...and that he was calling *our* gods names. He was suggesting that they fling all the stone gods into the moss-covered green tanks in our temples, repent their sins, and seek baptism...When the public realized what he was saying, pandemonium broke out. People shouted, commanded him to shut up, moved in on his followers—who fled to save their limbs and instruments. The audience now rained mud and stone on the preacher and smothered him under bundles of wet

The Brahmin social reformers, like the caste Hindu writers, have been against the abolition of caste. In their attempts to defend the caste system and the Hindu religion, they have openly upheld the principles of Hinduism. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), one of India's earliest feminists, was an outstanding scholar of Sanskrit. As Braj Ranjan Mani, in his book, *DeBrahminising History*, says, Pandita Ramabai was the first Indian woman to declare, on the basis of her study of the shastras, that "the Sanskrit core of Hinduism was irrevocably and essentially anti-women."³⁶ Later she embraced Christianity, denouncing the Hindu shastras, epics and contemporary preachers for portraying women as worse than demons.

Such a radical action of Pandita Ramabai was surely a major jolt for Hinduism and therefore its proponents "accused her of committing an unpardonable sin against Hindu society, she was damned – and deserted – not only by her conservative friends and relatives but also by the reformers and nationalists of many hues. Among Ramabai's detractors were Ramakrishna and Vivekananda" (279) says Braj Ranjan Mani. This incident, however, was not an isolated instance where the Hindu social reformers exhibit such double standards and Brahminical male hypocrisy. In fact, they have displayed such attitudes on many occasions.

green grass" (19-20) (emphasis added). As Pandian notes, referring to this incident, R. K. Narayan ironically put it, "If Christian salvation came out of suffering, here was one who must have attained it" (19-20). If the caste Hindu bystanders defend the Hindu religion by beating up the missionary, R. K. Narayan asserts his Hindu (more importantly, the Brahmin) self by admonishing the act of the missionary.

³⁶ Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, 279.

For example, a well-known Brahmin reformer, M. G. Ranade has been criticized by Phule, a social revolutionary, for his double standards and the patriarchal hypocrisy.

Braj Ranjan Mani writes:

In 1873, M. G. Ranade, then aged thirty-two, a scholar and champion reformer, the toast of elitist reformers, lost his wife and immediately married a girl of eleven. This appalled Phule. He wrote a scathing article in *Vividhanyan Vistar* in which he asked Ranade not to preach what he himself could not practice. Earlier in 1871, when Ranade's young sister was widowed, he said that if she remarried, his father would be devastated and the Pune Brahmans would ostracize him. To this Phule said, "then, don't parade yourself as a reformer and a champion of widow-remarriage."³⁷

Phule had faced opposition from Ranade in another instance. Phule's organization, Satyashodak Samaj, used to conduct rationalist marriages without the usual extravagant Hindu rituals and recitation of Sanskrit slokas/mantras by Brahmin priests, thus doing away with Brahmin tradition. The orthodox Brahmans opposed such an initiative and challenged it in the court of law. As Braj Ranjan Mani remarks:

Ranade in his capacity as a judge earned the distinction of passing a verdict against the Satyashodak marriage ceremonies without Brahmin

³⁷ Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, 266.

priests. In his “enlightened” opinion, it was wrong to perform a marriage ceremony without a Brahman priest, and even if the priest had not been invited to the wedding, he should still be given *dakshina*, the traditional gifts.³⁸

Ranade’s judgment was thus complicit with the orthodox Brahmins’s opinion against Phule’s initiatives that were directed against social inequalities.

Phule’s idea behind conducting such rationalist low-cost marriages is to do away with unnecessary splurging of people’s money in the name of marriage and was also to challenge the authority of Brahmins over non-Brahmins in society. Phule argued in many of his writings that Brahmins have devised certain cunning and irrational methods for the economic exploitation of non-Brahmin majority and have further subjected them to Brahminical socio-cultural domination. They have done so by enforcing and legitimizing the Brahminical rituals, and customs as *norms* in society.

For Phule, liberating non-Brahmins from the stranglehold of Brahminical cultural domination meant making the non-Brahmins independent of Brahmin’s involvement in marriages and other routine ceremonies in non-Brahmin households. Phule felt the need for such “independence” as it would rescue the non-Brahmins from Brahminical

³⁸ Phule had to challenge the verdict – the lower court rejected his case but the higher court ruled in his favour. For another such story of double standards which made Phule aghast at the betrayal of a great reformer, Lokahitavadi, see Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, 267.

exploitation, help people's savings (wealth). Moreover, Phule desired to unite and reorganize the non-Brahmin society on the rational and egalitarian basis which required abolition of the caste system. Delegitimizing Brahminical hegemony and exposing the oppressive character of Brahminical ideology are intrinsically connected to abolition of the caste system. Unlike the Brahmin social reformers, Phule has seen women's oppression as linked to the caste system.

In such a context, where both the Brahmin social reformers and the Brahmin writers defended the caste system in whatever capacity or style they could, anti-caste intellectuals and dalit writers interrogated caste system from many sides.

Knowledge Production: Critique of Brahminical Culture and Power

In the cultural realm, both Ambedkar and Phule have vehemently criticised the Brahminical knowledge system, for its anti-democratic intent, and tried to build an egalitarian social order, ethos and philosophy.³⁹ The crucial distinction between the Brahminical knowledge production and the anti-caste egalitarian knowledge production is that the former aims at the imposition of Brahminical hierarchy and the latter aims at the emancipation of the subjugated masses.

³⁹ Phule's *Gulamgiri (Slavery)*, and Ambedkar's *Riddles in Hinduism* are two important texts that expound the political and religious basis for the domination of Aryan-Brahminism and the establishment of Hindu hierarchical social order.

Since the history of the subjugated people has been obliterated by the Brahminical forces, as I have shown in this chapter, the crucial task of the anti-caste egalitarian intellectuals has been to reinterpret or to reconstruct the knowledge of the past that takes into consideration the history of the oppressed classes such as dalits. This phenomenon has given rise to a new literary and political culture as part of which alternative knowledge systems such as Buddhist knowledge system, Dravidian knowledge system, Bhakti tradition have emerged. Some of these aspects are dealt with in the chapter titled, “Autobiography and Dalit Identity”.

As a result of the hegemonic Brahminical knowledge system, Brahmins and other dominant castes have occupied the highest social and cultural status and the dalits have been relegated to the lowest status which deprives them of basic human rights apart from the national wealth such as land, water and other community assets. Caste slavery and untouchability have been imposed upon dalits as a result of which dalits have been deprived of self-respect. This is discussed at great length in the chapter titled, “From Untouchable Culture to Dalit Culture”.

Dalit writers have been dwelling significantly on the spectrum of anti-caste traditions that envisioned India as an egalitarian nation. Ambedkar being a part and parcel of the anti-caste tradition was concerned, all through his life, with the liberation of the oppressed communities in this country. Though he was one of the modern Indian thinkers who believed in democracy and modernity, he did not think that political democracy

alone would liberate the marginalized people of India. He believed that social democracy is a must for the liberation of a large portion of the oppressed communities in India.

Ambedkar believes that without dismantling the bedrock of the caste system (a source of caste, class and gender inequality), India cannot achieve true “freedom” in the real sense of the term. Ambedkar’s statement in the Constituent Assembly in 1949 points this out very clearly. Ambedkar has said:

On 26 January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality... We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which we have so laboriously built up.⁴⁰

Thus Ambedkar states clearly that India needs social democracy for it to realize the meaning of political democracy. How does India achieve social democracy? In order to accomplish social democracy, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of the

⁴⁰ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage, 1994, 324.

caste structure and Brahminical ideology. According to Ambedkar, any attempt at silencing the debate on caste is anti-social in spirit.⁴¹

After more than two and half decades of Indian Independence and the failure of the Indian Constitution to annihilate caste and social inequalities, the followers of Ambedkar have repeated Ambedkar's threats of burning the Indian Constitution as well along with the *Manusmriti*.⁴²

Having realised the limits of the Constitution, dalits have begun to form their own social and political organisations in order to fight for social equality and political power. In this process, Dalit Panthers have brought out a "Manifesto" in which they have included members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion, in their definition and the category of "Dalit". This definition shows a glaring lack of understanding about the complexity of Indian social structure. Ambedkar, for example, says, "Caste system is not merely a division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers.*"⁴³ Dalit Panthers definition of "Dalit" thus overlooks Ambedkar's theorization of the caste system and undermines the fact that caste is a collective consciousness that all caste Hindus live with irrespective of

⁴¹ Read Ambedkar's essay, "Annihilation of Caste" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, Vasant Moon, ed. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 1979.

⁴² Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi: Sage, 1994, 325.

⁴³ See Ambedkar's essay "Annihilation of Caste" in Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, sixth edition, New Delhi: OUP, 2009, 263.

gender, class and region. I have discussed the problems with this definition in the final chapter, dealing with dalit identity.

Dalit cultural representation and the aesthetics of dalits literature—their resistance to subjugation of dalits in the public realm—opens up a new epoch in Indian literary history. Dalit literature plays a crucial role in the process of recovering the cultural memory of dalit past and in uncovering the socio-cultural subjugation of dalits. It is during this transformative period of dalit social, cultural and political upsurge for social equality and political rights that dalit autobiography has emerged in India. The role of dalit autobiography in this process is more crucial than other literary genres because of its anti-caste non-fictional intent.

Most of the current dalit autobiographies belong to the literary and political culture emanated from this context.⁴⁴ Dalit autobiographies translated so far into English and other languages have been written with the objective of achieving equality and freedom from the caste system. In the following chapters, I have discussed the areas of dalits' socio-cultural transformation and major challenges to dalit emancipation through an analysis of dalit autobiographies by Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar,

⁴⁴ My exclusion of Hazari's autobiography from the present study is mainly due to this reason.

Siddalingaiah, Aravind Malagatti, Sharankumar Limbale, Vasant Moon and G. Kalyana Rao.⁴⁵

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In this chapter, I have discussed the already existing discourses and counter-discourses on the genre of autobiography, the context of the emergence of dalit autobiography and its distinctness from Western autobiography. I have critically looked at how the dalit presence in the Brahminical public sphere, both physical and symbolic, as in literary fields, is understood and controlled by the dominant caste Hindu elite and others. I have discussed at length the purpose and politics of literature, the emergence of a new language of talking about caste as developed by the Brahminical elite and recorded the critique of anti-caste philosophers on Brahminical knowledge and power.

I place dalit autobiography within the dalit writing that is embedded in the Ambedkarite anti-caste tradition and I have explained how dalit autobiographies exposed the elite Brahminical nature of the nation as imagined by the caste Hindus and I have analysed the reasons why I look at dalit autobiography as a historical document that marks the transformation of dalits from being oppressed untouchables to self-asserting dalits.

⁴⁵ Literary critics, scholars and translators who have analyzed and translated G. Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantham* into English recognize it only as a novel. But I argue that it is an autobiography embodying the inter-generational history of dalits in Andhra Pradesh.

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CHAPTER 2

Readings of Dalit Autobiography: A Critique from Dalit Perspective

In this chapter, I will engage with diverse readings of dalit autobiographies and I will present my own critique of those readings for the purpose of which I will discuss both dalit and non-dalit readings of dalit autobiography. I give a political and philosophical trajectory of dalit autobiography which shapes dalit epistemology. This historical reading informs how I decipher the evolutionary process of the dalit autobiography.

Dalit autobiographies not only play a key role in fighting for freedom and equality, but they also emphasise the political aspects of dalit culture and foreground Ambedkarite ideology. Dalit autobiographies have, especially, begun to document the persistent oppressive social and material conditions of dalits in the aggressively caste Hindu society. They produce critical accounts of untouchable culture and mark the areas of transformation in dalit selfhood, culture and identity.

Moreover, as Eleanor Zelliot says, “There seems to be no imitation of Black literature and its two strongest fields, autobiography and drama...in Dalit literature.”¹ Dalits writers and thinkers working with the anti-caste paradigm of Ambedkar have thus begun to develop distinct literary and analytical methods to produce literature without compromising with mainstream tastes and literary standards. Foregrounding Ambedkarite philosophy of equality, liberty and fraternity, Dalit writing produces an incisive critique of Brahmanical Hindu social and cultural practices in India.

It is precisely because of this anti-caste paradigm and the modern dalit literary and political objectives² that dalit autobiography creates its own benchmarks of literary evaluation. Reading dalit autobiographies from the mainstream literary parameters, therefore, gives rise to a lot of confusion. Some scholars, for instance, have found it difficult to define dalit autobiography. Mark. S. J. defines *Karukku* as the following: “At the first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle it reads like an autobiography. From yet another angle, it reads like a brilliant novel.”³ Pandian agrees with Mark’s definition of *Karukku* and goes a step further to say that

¹ Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, Delhi: Manohar, 2005 (1992), 281.

² Laxman Mane, a dalit activist, in the preface to his autobiography, *Upara (An Outsider)* writes that he will feel satisfied if this book “proves useful in initiating a social debate on the problems of the nomadic tribes, giving a fillip to the efforts of those who have been working in that direction” (6). He even appeals to the readers thus: “While we understand the sufferings of these nomads, let us actively cooperate with each other, in lessening their sufferings. For this is a struggle of human liberation.” See Laxman Mane, *Upara: An Outsider*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997, 15. Similarly, both Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar also specify their objectives behind writing their autobiographies.

³ See Pandian’s “On a dalit Woman’s Testimonio” in Anupama Rao, ed. *Gender and Caste*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003, 130.

Bama's is a case of wilfully violating genre boundaries.⁴ Similarly, commenting on Baby Kamble's autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit, a translator and a literary critic, defines it as "a socio-biography rather than an autobiography."⁵

First of all, why do they encounter this confusion defining dalit autobiography? Aren't there differences between mainstream literature and marginalized literatures? When the defining qualities of both kinds of literature are oppositional why do we still apply the standard parameters to define the literary genres of the oppressed groups? Why can't we define and understand dalit autobiography based on its own self-definition? When we understand "dalit" as synonymous with anti-caste or anti-oppression, we need to understand dalit autobiography as a genre that delineates how dalits are subjected to oppression in caste system and how recent dalit movements and Ambedkarite ideology enables dalits to fight against dalit oppression. Thus dalit autobiography, I argue, is one form of self-writing of the oppressed.⁶ The crucial methodological question then is how can the self-writings of the oppressed be judged with the parameters of the literature of the oppressors?

⁴ See Pandian's "On a dalit Woman's Testimonio" in Anupama Rao, ed. *Gender and Caste*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003, 130.

⁵ See Maya Pandit's Introduction in *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, ix.

⁶ In her book titled, *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson remarks, "The idea that autobiography can become the text of the oppressed, articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one. Autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscriptions and recognition." See Anderson, Linda, *Autobiography*, London: Routledge, 2001, 104. This is also true of dalit autobiographies. There are certain aspects in dalit autobiographies that represent both dalit oppression and dalit assertion in society.

I argue that we need to understand dalit autobiographies in their own political and the changing socio-cultural context.⁷ Considering the objectives behind writing dalit self-narratives, it appears to me that dalits use the autobiographical genre as a “weapon of the weak”. In this regard, I think, it is apt to cite Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a postcolonial scholar, who argues that

dalit writers have used the autobiographical mode as a multivalent signifier. Their triumph is to transform personal pain into an indictment of an entire social order. The autobiography in Dalit writers’ hands has become testimony, documenting the crimes and injustices against them and their communities and pronouncing a verdict. Thus, Dalit autobiographies are portraits that are a social commentary.”⁸

In this sense, the self-writing or the life-narratives of dalits have a larger political agenda of “documenting the crimes and injustices against them and their communities” and fighting for the emancipation of dalits than to merely recording an individual’s struggle for progress or success in his or her life.

⁷ Dalits have begun writing their autobiographies after acquiring necessary educational skills. Most of the writers of the current dalit autobiographies are either first generation or second generation literates who wrote their autobiographies after their migration to cities in pursuit of modern education, employment and freedom from caste slavery. These writers might hold different views regarding dalit emancipation and believe in different ideologies, such as Marxism, Ambedkarism, liberalism and so on but most of them struggle and aspire for freedom, economic independence and equality for the dalits. Thus, all of them are united in their anti-caste spirit, their political and cultural objectives of dalit emancipation and autonomy.

⁸ Arun Prabha Mukherjee, *Postcolonialism: My Living*, Toronto: TSAR, 1998, 53.

This, I argue, is the fundamental aspect of dalit autobiography. It is for this reason that dalit autobiographies cannot be read in the conventional manner which might lead readers to an inappropriate understanding or conclusions.⁹ Rather they demand a new kind of reading and understanding. Anupama Rao's observations on dalit autobiography, for instance, point out exactly where dalit autobiography or representation of dalit self differs from, and how it challenges, the generic notions of autobiography. She says: "The possibility of representing the Dalit self also requires challenging ideas of autobiographical interiority, individualism, and, most importantly, authenticity."¹⁰ This is another reason why dalit autobiographies are not written in a linear or chronological order and do not foreground the individual self.

In order to strengthen my argument further and to understand the confusion related to the perception of dalit autobiography, let us consider the observations of Robert B. Stepto, an African-American theorist, on "Slave Narratives". Robert Stepto challenges the traditional notions of autobiography as well as marks a crucial shift in the reconceptualization of the autobiographical studies. He argues:

When a historian or literary critic calls a slave narrative an autobiography, for example, what he or she sees most likely is a first-person narrative that possesses literary features to distinguish it from

⁹ G. N. Devy, Sisir Kumar Das, Tapan Basu many other dominant caste theorists and critics read dalit autobiographies as "Narratives of Suffering" and as "Narratives of Pathos". To know more about them, see Tapan Basu, ed. *Translating Caste*, New Delhi: Katha, 2002. See G. N. Devy's Introduction in Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography, *Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar, New Delhi: OUP, 2003.

¹⁰ Anupama Rao, "Who is the Dalit? Emergence of a New Political Subject" Bhagavan, Manu and Anne Feldhaus, eds. *Claiming Power from Below: Dalits and the Subaltern Question in India*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008, 24.

ordinary documents providing historical and sociological data. But a slave narrative is *not* necessarily an autobiography. We need to observe the finer shades between the more easily discernible categories of narration and we must discover whether these steps arrange themselves in progressive, contrapuntal, or dialectic fashion—or if they possess any arrangement at all.¹¹

In the light of this I shall now argue that Dalit autobiography is far from the conventional generic notions of autobiography in terms of its narrative structure, themes, ontology and the permeable nature of self¹² and politics of representation. Like Robert Stepto points out in case of “slave narratives”, we need to observe the “finer shades” in dalit autobiography in order to understand what exactly this genre entails and for what purpose it has been employed by dalits. This requires us to examine how dalit autobiography’s non-linear, non-teleological nature and their intersection of multiple subject positionalities disrupt or reconstruct the definitions and understanding of the generic notions of autobiography. This in itself can be a separate project and it is beyond the scope of present study of dalit autobiographies.

To reiterate what I have said earlier, Dalit autobiography is not just a story of an individual. It is much more than an individual story, as it has been employed by

¹¹ Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A study of Afro-American Narratives*, Chicago: U. of Illinois P, 1991, 6.

¹² Permeable nature of Dalit self recounted in dalit autobiographies gives scope for various kinds of readings. Maxine Berntsen, a sociologist, for example, finds a huge wealth of sociological information in Baby Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*. Jean-Luc Racine and Josiane Racine, on the other hand, have read a Tamil dalit woman, Viramma’s life story as an anthropological rendition making her an anthropological object with certain discernible qualities.

dalits to reconstruct dalit history and mark the transformation and shift in dalit culture and politics after the phenomenon called Ambedkar. Moreover, dalits use this genre to show their struggles for equality and freedom in a positive light as opposed to the dominant narratives which see such struggles as divisive and anti-national.¹³

Commenting on dalit autobiographies, in his book titled, *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*, Chinna Rao argues that “[t]hey had to a great extent explored the unnoticed aspects of the ‘untouchable’ lives and problems ranging from individual to communitarian aspects” (122). According to Chinna Rao “[t]hese [dalit autobiographies] are of a crucial significance, as the dalits of today, who are conscious of themselves and their plight strive to reconstruct their unrecorded past and identity in terms of their own experiences” (122). It is also true that the exploration of these unnoticed aspects of untouchable lives and the reconstruction of their past and identity would have been difficult outside the context of dalit movement.

This communitarian quality of dalit autobiographies seems inevitable because of the collective servitude of dalits in the traditional Hindu society. Therefore, I read dalit autobiographies as historical documents than merely as accounts of individual progress and failures. Dalits being at the lower stratum of the society in the four-fold

¹³ Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar have been regarded anti-national by the caste Hindu nationalists. Until the Dalit movements in India have resurrected their most valuable contributions for the emancipation of marginalized people of India in general and dalit emancipation in particular, their writings and philosophies have not been granted adequate political and academic attention. For more elaborate discussion on this subject, see Braj Ranjan Mani’s book titled, *Debrahmanisisng History*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005. P. G. Jogdand’s essay, “Caste System in India: Dr. Ambedkar’s Perspective” in Aijaz Ahmed and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, *Dalit Assertion in Literature, Society, History*, New Delhi: Deshkal, 2007.

Hindu caste system, their observations and interpretations on the Indian social configuration present a new and horrid side of the Indian society and history.

Having delineated the importance of dalit autobiography for the anti-caste philosophical tradition, I will now give a critique on M. S. S. Pandian's, D. R. Nagraj's, Anand Teltumbde's readings of dalit autobiography. From its inception, the genre of Dalit autobiography has provoked literary critics and theorists in India. The kind of responses it receives not only suggests the way literary critics and social scientists understand the genre, but also gives us a sense of their ideological inclinations and the nature of their engagement with the changes in the domains of politics and culture in India. These readings indicate the possibility of multiple interpretations depending on theoretical orientations and perspectives of the critics.

M.S.S. Pandian, a social scientist, analyses Bama's autobiography, *Karukku*, and classifies it as a testimonio, for he thinks that it lacks certain characteristic elements that an autobiography encompasses.¹⁴ First and foremost, Pandian argues, in

¹⁴ Defining autobiography has always been a difficult task. Georg Misch, one of the prominent theorists of autobiography, says, "The body of autobiographical writings, when viewed as a whole, reveals at first a Protean character. This genre of literature defies classification even more stubbornly than do the ordinary forms of creative writing. It can be defined only by summarizing what the term 'autobiography' implies—the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto*-)." (64-65) Given the richness of events, both from the personal and social life of each individual that an autobiography encompasses, Georg Misch calls it a chameleon-like genre, for, he thinks it "secures a unity that it does not possess in literary form." For an explication of this argument, see Trev Lynn Broughton, ed. *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1. New York: Routledge, 2007, 66. From this standpoint, M. S. S. Pandian's classification of Bama's *Karukku* as a "testimonio" is rather simplistic. Sharmila Rege also classifies the body of Marathi dalit women's autobiographies as "testimony," calling the genre of autobiography, a bourgeois genre. Gopal Guru, however, makes a critical analysis of such a reading of Rege in his "Afterword" to Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008.

his essay titled, “Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” that the absence of Bama’s individual “self” and the depletion of the autobiographical “I” are major lacunae in *Karukku* for it to be distinguished as an autobiography. Pandian says that, Bama’s story refuses to be her own but that of others too.¹⁵ He argues, “First of all, Bama’s narrative, to a great degree, does not deal with herself, but the context of dalit life in which she grew up and acquired certain self-awareness. Her descriptions of her childhood and the world of dalit labour, which constitute a substantial part of her narrative, are marked for the most part by a compelling absence of herself” (130). Therefore, Pandian feels that “Bama’s is a case of willfully violating genre boundaries” (130).

It appears to me that Pandian imposes his own disciplinary frameworks on Bama’s autobiographical account and expects it to meet with his perception of an autobiography. Why does Pandian expect Dalit texts to address the already existing theoretical frameworks? I feel that Pandian makes a far-fetched analysis of *Karukku*, without paying enough attention to the specific cultural and historical context from which it emerges. Bama makes it amply clear that she has written those events that have had repulsive impact on her life. She says in the author’s preface to *Karukku*, that the driving forces which shape this book are many:

Events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku*¹⁶ and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own

¹⁵ M. S. S. Pandian. “On Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” in *Gender and Caste*, ed. Anupama Rao, New Delhi: Kali for women, 2003, 130.

¹⁶ *Karukku* means palmyra leaves, which, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords.

desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these, taken together. (xiii)

By any means, Bama's aspiration to write about these events, that have (adversely) impacted her personal life, can be seen as autobiographical. It is a different matter if other dalits too have similar experiences in life, given the overarching caste structure in India. But those need not be shown to fictionalize Bama's experiences and pre-empt the scope of "individuality" and subjectivity for Bama.

Evidently, she writes about those events that cause her immense suffering and provoke her amply to revolt against the compounding structures that have a binding on those events. And there is a clearly acknowledged purpose as to why she writes about those events and what she wants to achieve by unravelling those aspects that have perceptibly destroyed her faith and hopes in her life.

However, as Bama herself is aware she is not alone in fighting against oppression. She is aware that many others like her, disheartened with the society, are waging similar battles against oppression. She writes thus in *Karukku*: "There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku, challenging their oppressors" (xiii). It is this challenge of an oppressed dalit that emerges from the desire to create a new egalitarian society that Bama tries to portray in her autobiography.

As Lakshmi Holmstrom, rightly observes, in her introduction to *Karukku*: “It is in many ways an unusual autobiography. It grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as woman, Christian, Dalit” (vii). Bama’s exploration of her “self” in *Karukku* is not confined to the singularity of identity but it unfolds Bama’s subjectivity as a dalit-Christian-woman. Each of these are not only intersecting identities but they are fundamentally inter-conflictual. I argue that *Karukku* presents this inter-conflictual side of a dalit woman’s life, which Pandian seems to miss in his reading of *Karukku*.

Anand Teltumbde, a Marxist-dalit intellectual, gives a contrary reading of the genre of dalit autobiography. Unlike Pandian, who emphasises the compelling absence of Bama in her own autobiography and goes on to say that “Bama’s story refuses to be her own but that of others too,” Anand Teltumbde thinks that dalit autobiographies are “too individualistic to represent collective pain.”¹⁷ He claims that dalit autobiography “certainly does not inspire [its readers] to engage with casteism for the simple reason that the autobiographer himself (or herself) does not make that demand” (42-43). I think that Anand Teltumbde’s sweeping generalizations are bound to fail before Bama’s *Karukku* and other dalit autobiographies that are under study in this dissertation. Contrary to Teltumbde’s remarks, portrayal of casteism in society is the most reverberating subject of dalit autobiographies, and no reader will be able to miss the autobiographers’ critique of caste and casteism in everyday *sociality*.

¹⁷ S. Anand, ed. *touchable tales: publishing and reading dalit literature*. Chennai: Navayana, 2003, 43.

Another remark that Teltumbde makes is equally baffling. He says, “autobiographies fail even to sensitize its readers to the suffering of dalits” (43). According to Teltumbde, what constitutes the suffering of dalits? While dominant caste critics read dalit autobiographies predominantly as “narratives of pain and suffering,” Teltumbde claims that they do not deal with suffering of dalits. In fact, both these readings are problematic as they seem to merit or demerit dalit autobiographies for their depiction of dalit suffering. The objective of dalit autobiography, I feel, is far wider than mere depiction of dalit suffering or sensitization of non-dalit readers to the suffering of dalits. I argue that dalit autobiography is multivalent in its scope and it makes an incisive critique of caste system and Brahminical ideology that subject dalits to immense suffering and exploitation. D.R. Nagaraj, a scholar and a historian of dalit movement, affirms such a quality in dalit autobiography through his reading of Kannada dalit autobiographies.

In his afterword to Siddalingaiah’s autobiography, *Ooru Keri*, D. R. Nagaraj comments:

The relationship between poverty and imagination is a major theme in this book. Reading a dalit writer’s autobiography is at once a matter of interest and anxiety. Interest because the exploration of a new world of experience. Anxiety because the violence of caste society is intrinsic to the genre. When we read dalit autobiographies in Kannada and Marathi, we get the feeling that we are looking at a bonsai tree. They compress several novels into a small autobiography. (110)

A significant difference between short story, poetry, novel and autobiography is that in the former three genres, anybody irrespective of his or her social status and political commitments can write about or dwell upon non-subjective experiences and socio-political concerns which in many cases, like for instance in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, where the portrayal proves to be overtly patronizing and counter-productive to the dalit politics in the country. On the other hand, in dalit autobiography, it is the person who experiences that writes about them.

Moreover, only the genre of dalit autobiography has the potential to prevent the oppressors from writing about the authentic experiences of dalits. Contrary to Teltumbde's claims, dalit autobiographies are not "simple tales of the private lives" which can provide "voyeuristic pleasure" to the readers but they are historical documents that record the struggles of dalits for emancipation from the caste oppression. Dalit autobiographies expose various facets of caste oppression and Brahminical ideology that impose caste-slavery upon dalits and depict persuasive accounts of dalit resistance or defiance.

In his essay "Sociology of Dalit Autobiography", S.P. Punalekar, a mainstream social science scholar, writes:

Dalit autobiography must be credited with the distinction of introducing us to a hitherto invisible and unknown social and cultural landscape, with their use of indigenous symbols and indigenous idioms. They have also attempted to modulate a literary medium to serve the ends of social questioning and, sometimes, offering a moral

critique of the past and present social order, to which they, their families and community were subject (371-72).¹⁸

From a dominant caste point of view, Punalekar wishes to view dalit autobiographies as adding or introducing the hitherto invisible social and cultural landscape to the existing body of Indian literature. Punalekar sees dalit autobiography as literature containing both descriptions of the social situations encountered by the writers and also their reflections on it. Are they all about descriptions of social situations that dalits encounter in Hindu society? What are the political implications of the dalit writers' reflections on social descriptions? Punalekar seem to see no connection between Phule-Ambedkar critique of the Indian social structure and the Brahminical constructions of knowledge and dalit writers' critique of the varied institutions of caste system through dalit autobiographies. Notwithstanding this, Punalekar proceeds rather hastily to dismiss Ambedkar's classification of the hierarchical caste structure in his path-breaking book, *Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto*.

Comparing untouchables living in the village outskirts with the "nomads", Punalekar comments:

The untouchables have at least their houses, huts in the village outskirts. Some of them have agricultural land to cultivate. They have a place in the ritual hierarchy of the village; they have small privileges

¹⁸ Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Social Transformation on India: Essays in Honour of Prof. I. P. Desai*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Rawat, 1997, 371-96.

and pleasures which are hardly disputed by the *Savarnas*. Nomadic tribals, such as the Kaikadis, lack these privileges; they have neither a settled place to live in nor an acknowledged status in the region. They live by the roadside, in the open fields, and always at the mercy of the village lords or the landowners (375).

He does not question the logic of graded caste inequalities and the Brahminical philosophy behind the caste system that deprives both dalits and nomads of proper shelter but he goes on to pitch the abject conditions of nomads against dalits. Moreover, he pitches different *jatis* within the untouchable class against each other and comments over the relative deprivation that they suffer, as if the untouchables are responsible for their own peoples' suffering and lowly social status.

Punalekar's approach resembles an imperialist approach. His paradigm of *settled communities* and *unsettled communities* aims at creating intra-community conflicts among dalits. It shows dalits as the victims of their own social prejudices. Punalekar's analysis of dalit autobiography, thus, fails to bring into focus the roots of caste inequalities and the complicity of the caste Hindus that dalit autobiographies foreground.

Punalekar's failure to see the *ideology of untouchability* as the governing force that generates consent among all social classes, including untouchables, to sustain the caste hierarchy and social inequalities is another factor that has led him to come to such preconceived and hasty conclusions. Indeed, dalit autobiographies rip apart the ritual hierarchy in the village and the dalits' negative social privileges, unlike

Punalekar who sees positive value in those negative privileges. Such a sociological analysis of dalit autobiography impoverishes the genre of its historical and cultural context and the larger social and political ferment that it encompasses.

Dalit autobiographies point out the unsettled contradictions in modern Indian democracy and throw light on the persistent structures, institutions and ideologies that perpetuate inequalities. Moreover, dalit autobiographies point out the convergence of caste Hindu social domination with the modern political power enabling the traditional caste elite to control even the modern state and power. Having been subordinated and marginalized in the social sphere as well as the political structure, dalits project a critical view of both the traditional and the modern structures of power.

Not only does the lived experience of dalits point out the limitations of democracy in India, but the dalit critique of the unequal caste system and modern political democracy also raises doubts over the supposed emancipatory potential of Indian democracy. However, the existing readings of dalit autobiographies do not seem to capture and highlight this strength of the dalit critique. We need to examine the reasons as to why the existing body of research on dalit autobiography fails to focus on the questions that dalit autobiographies alone have raised so far.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta* are two immediate examples that come to mind. To a certain extent, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* also critically evaluates both the Hindu cultural practices as well as

the dalit cultural ethos. Not only these but other dalit autobiographies too criticize various Hindu cultural practices that rivet dalits to the stigmatized social status.

However, the unique quality and therefore the strength of dalit autobiographies is that they not only offer a critical self-evaluation of dalit communities themselves just as they do so with regard to the social inequalities and injustice, but they even point out why and how democracy is rendered ineffective in India. Now, this aspect of the dalit autobiography needs to be analyzed and understood in a comprehensible manner in order to grasp the underlying current of dalit politics in India.

Whatever may be the reasons dalit autobiographies have not been read in the manner that a counter-hegemonic literature needs to be read. Most importantly, dalit autobiographies inherit the lineage of anti-caste ideology expounded by Phule and Ambedkar. It would be highly misleading to read dalit autobiographies as narratives of individual or community progress or as “narratives of pathos”¹⁹. While some scholars have read them as “narratives of suffering,”²⁰ some others have read them as “testimonies”. To read dalit autobiographies as “testimonies,” as Sharmila Rege²¹ and Pandian²² do, would be ineffectual as such a reading loses sight of the context. Also it

¹⁹ See G. N. Devy’s “Introduction” in Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* trans. Santhosh Bhoomkar, New Delhi: OUP, 2003.

²⁰ See Tapan Basu’s and Sisir Kumar Das’s essays in the book, *Translating Caste*, New Delhi: Katha, 2002.

²¹ See Sharmila Rege’s introduction in *writing caste/writing gender*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.

²² See Pandian’s essay, “Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” in Anupama Rao, ed. *Gender and Caste*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003.

sanitizes the radical edge of the dalit autobiographies by calling them “the narratives of suffering” or “narratives of pathos”.

Readings such as these show dalits as objects of pity denying them the initiative and agency to interrogate the unequal social structure and caste Hindu exploitation. Gopal Guru, a political theorist and a dalit intellectual, rightly points out in his “Afterword” to Baby Kamble’s autobiography, that “In the legal discourse, testimonies are provided in the court by the victim, with the intention to provide supporting evidence to enable the judge to deliver judgment impartially, perhaps in favour of the victim.”²³ Sharmila Rege’s reading of dalit autobiographies as “testimonies” in this sense could be objectionable for the following two reasons.

As Gopal Guru maintains, “first, it puts onus on the victim [dalit] to provide evidence for innocence; second, it puts the [non-dalit] judge in the privileged position” (159). Here victim is obviously a dalit, and a non-dalit reader is the judge. Hence reading dalit autobiography as a “testimony” will inevitably place a non-dalit reader in a privileged position and the dalit in a victim’s position. On the contrary, the idea behind dalits’ adopting the genre of autobiography as their preferred mode of expression is to defy the victim status and to show dalits as the agents of desired transformation.

²³ See Gopal Guru’s “Afterword” in Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 159.

Ravikumar too raises objections to the use of the term, “testimony”.²⁴

Ravikumar criticises the complicity of the non-dalit reader or researcher who assumes the role of a judge in exploiting dalits. Commenting on the role of the co-authors of *Viramma*, a Tamil dalit woman’s life story, Ravikumar points out: “When a listener does not identify herself with the narrator the space between them puts the listener in the position of an observer. The narrator becomes the victim under surveillance of the observer.”²⁵ In such a situation, as Ravikumar rightly observes, “The autobiography [of a dalit] becomes a spectacle to be enjoyed and consumed by the nondalit reader.”²⁶ There are many dangers if a non-dalit assumes the role of an observer-cum- judge.

For example, commenting on the life story of an illiterate Paraya woman, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, co-authors of the text, write in their Afterword to *Viramma* that strictly speaking it is not a dalit text which shows “a deep sense of anger and revolt against the prevailing customs of untouchability, the social order, and the established ideology which backs them [dalits]... It is not, in the primary sense, a text attacking oppression, but it is a text which tells *how an oppressed woman lives and thinks*” (emphasis added).²⁷ Thus the non-dalit authors not only make a

²⁴ See Ravi Kumar’s essay titled, “On the Borderlines: Dalit Rights vs Human Rights” in his book *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*, Kolkata: Samya, 2009, 150. Ravi Kumar critically looks at the genre of testimony. He compares distinct forms of producing testimonies either by the State machinery or by the academic elite and critically comments over the inherent violence that particular genre entails for the dalits.

²⁵ See Ravi Kumar’s essay titled, “On the Borderlines: Dalit Rights vs Human Rights” in his book *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*, Kolkata: Samya, 2009, 150.

²⁶ See *Touchable Tales: Publishing and reading Dalit literature*, Chennai: Navayana, 2003, 7.

²⁷ See the Afterword titled, “Under the Banyan Tree: Speaking from the Ground” to the book, *Viramma: Life of a dalit*. Trans. Will Hobson. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005, 313.

microscopic investigation of how an illiterate dalit woman thinks, feels and lives but they also show Viramma's life as not any lesser than a spectacle.

As part of their overtly imperialist gaze, they have manipulated Viramma to talk about her sexual life without letting her know about the prospective of publication.²⁸ Ravikumar, therefore, rightly argues: "When a non-dalit reader approaches a dalit text, he/she can either become a witness or consider it an object of research."²⁹ He also points out thus: "The dalit victim narrating his or her story can never deliver the judgement. He or she is only being judged (by the reader)."³⁰

The framework of "testimony," therefore, prevents the power to the dalit to deliver judgement. On the contrary, it can only make the dalit complain endlessly. Non-dalit readings or analysis of dalit autobiographies have all the above mentioned pitfalls.

Unlike the non-dalit readings of dalit autobiographies, Gopal Guru observes,

dalit women's personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation by the state on the one hand and market on the other hand.

²⁸ When Ravikumar has asked Viramma about her book, she seems to have said that she has no clue about the publication of her story. Later, it seems, Viramma has been given a copy of the French version of the book with the picture of Viramma printed on the cover page.

²⁹ Ravi Kumar's essay titled, "On the Borderlines: Dalit Rights vs Human Rights" in his book *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*, Kolkata: Samya, 2009, 151.

³⁰ See *Touchable Tales: Publishing and reading Dalit literature*, Chennai: Navayana, 2003, 7.

Dalit women's autobiographies are also statements of protest against their exclusion from the dalit public sphere—literary gatherings, academic gatherings, publishing sphere and other spheres of recognition, like political parties.³¹

I concur with Guru's observation regarding the exclusion of dalit women from dalit public sphere. However, one cannot fail to notice the dalit women's political assertion and agency in claiming their own space and share in dalit politics and culture. It is true that dalit women have to struggle, from within and outside, more than dalit men to succeed in their respective fields. Dalit women's struggles are not merely about their "inclusion" in the public sphere. Even when they are included, it will not be without limitations. I feel that dalit women's questions to the dalit men and the public sphere are hinged on democratizing the dalit public sphere as well as the national resources.

However, it is imperative to ask whether dalit women's autobiographies are all about the "exclusion" of dalit women from the dalit public sphere and the mainstream public sphere? Or do they have anything more to offer beyond the rhetoric of "exclusion" and "inclusion"? Do they want mere inclusion, or can they exercise their agency and radically transform the nature of public sphere itself?

Asking these questions is not only inevitable but it is important because these questions will also lead us to the next level: who excludes dalit women and why? Are

³¹ Gopal Guru's "Afterword" in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008,160.

dalit men spared from exclusion from the mainstream public sphere? Should the dalit men and dalit women compete for the tiny number of “reserved positions”? Or should it be appropriate for the dalit communities to fight amongst themselves for the reserved political and cultural space like the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh? We need to ask these questions to be wary of, and to avert the danger of falling into the Brahminical trap of the politics of inclusion and exclusion.³²

Gopal Guru views dalit women’s autobiographies as a political initiative to engage with dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. He reads the conception of the narrative self in dalit women’s autobiographies as historically located and sociologically constituted. However, neither Gopal Guru nor Ravikumar trace the philosophical trajectory and the foundation upon which dalit autobiographies stand. I argue that the dalit autobiographies must be read in the light of the anti-caste struggles and in the light of egalitarian social and political philosophy of Ambedkar.

As my critique of Pandian, Punalekar, Anand Teltumbde and Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine shows, ever since the emergence of dalit autobiography, theorists and critics have proposed various frameworks to understand and analyse dalit autobiographies. Among the existing readings, the most persistent strands of critical analysis seem to have come from scholars working with mainstream feminist framework, postcolonial orientation, liberal, subaltern and marxist frameworks. Among all these frameworks, non-dalit scholars outnumber the dalit theorists and

³² Dalits should not only avoid the modern materialist temptations, but they should relentlessly direct their struggles against the structural inequalities and pull off their share in the national resources.

critics of dalit autobiography. Very few dalit critics and theorists have commented on this genre so far.

The existing readings of this genre, however, vary significantly from my reading of dalit autobiography. Firstly, I argue that dalit autobiography is a distinctly new genre which stems from a counter-hegemonic cultural and political milieu. Secondly, it presents a critical analysis of caste system and the ideology of untouchability through a critical assessment of everyday dalit experiences. Thirdly, I argue that dalit autobiography shows the paradigmatic changes in dalit life before and after Ambedkar's struggles for dalit emancipation. Fourthly, I argue, therefore, that dalit autobiography is a historical document which records the process of transformation and analyses the cultural and political tools that enable dalit emancipation.

My dissertation, therefore, is an attempt to read dalit autobiographies in the anti-caste revolutionary philosophical traditions. Reading dalit autobiographies in the light of Phule-Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophical and political backdrop, I argue, will help us see the *continuities* and *discontinuities* in social, economic, cultural and political domains. My reading of the dalit autobiographies against this philosophical and political milieu marks the difference between the existing studies on dalit autobiography and my study of this genre.

Political Trajectory of Dalit Autobiography

Ambedkar and Rettamalai Srinivasan, a Tamil dalit leader and Ambedkar's contemporary, have made a pioneering effort in the genre of dalit autobiography. However, both of them have only written their autobiographies as precise notes. They have not attempted full-fledged autobiographies. Ambedkar has written a few autobiographical illustrations with a marked focus on untouchability, caste consciousness in India. Ambedkar has analytically described only six incidents, comprising not more than thirty pages.³³ All of his writings and speeches, and biographies tell much about his public life and they only give a glimpse of his private life.³⁴ Why does Ambedkar jot down even those six incidents from his life?

In those six illustrations, Ambedkar delineates the actual social conditions of the untouchable people in villages, small towns and cities in colonial India. He describes the caste Hindu violence and the social constraints under which the untouchables have lived in colonial India. We must also keep in mind the time period of these autobiographical illustrations. In all probability, Ambedkar must have written them after 1938, because the last incident that, he records, has taken place in March 1938. This happens to be the period when Gandhi has taken his "Harijan" politics and social amelioration programmes into the masses. The most important historic event in dalit history, i.e., Poona Pact by then was already over. The three famous Round

³³ I am purposefully deferring my reading of Ambedkar's autobiography in this dissertation, since it demands a very different kind of approach and attention than those given to the autobiographies discussed in this thesis. Ambedkar is a stalwart and a tall national figure unlike other dalit authors studied in this thesis.

³⁴ To have a glimpse of Ambedkar's private life, see Ramabai Ambedkar's life story. *Ramabai Ambedkar: Jeevitha Charitra*. Trans. G. V. Ratnakar, Hyderabad: Bethala, 2008.

Table Conferences have also been organised during which the question of the “depressed classes” has been brought up for discussion for finding a political solution. It is in the Round Table Conferences that Ambedkar presents the case of the depressed classes and demands a separate electorate arguing that the depressed classes or untouchables constitute a separate non-Hindu social class and hence they must be considered as a political minority. Gandhi, on the contrary, argues that the “harijans” are part of the Hindu society and hence they cannot be separated from the Hindu religion.

In an attempt to show how the untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus and also with the intention to explain to the foreigners the caste Hindu animosity against the untouchables Ambedkar begins these autobiographical illustrations. In other words, Ambedkar wants to disprove the claims of Gandhi and the Congress that the untouchables are Hindus.

The problem for Ambedkar has been how best to give an idea of the way the untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus. He thinks of two methods by which this purpose could be achieved: a general description; or, a record of cases of the treatment accorded to them. He feels that the latter would be more effective than the former. Ambedkar, thus, writes his own experiences and the experiences of the fellow untouchables to show how the caste Hindus harass and discriminate against them.

On the other hand, as Ravikumar mentions, Rettamalai Srinivasan aims to, “write about the little improvement that the community at present called the Adi Dravida has achieved in the past fifty years in all the so many thousands of years gone

by; to draw attention to the fact that the little help that has been rendered by the rest of the society for the welfare of these people is not without self interest; and also to make clear the fact that this community of people have achieved whatever they have by their own struggle.”³⁵

It is quite evident that the existing set of dalit autobiographies reflects the method and the concerns shared by both Ambedkar and Rettamalai Srinivasan. Both these autobiographies characterize or exemplify the dalit autobiographies of today.³⁶ The aims of both Ambedkar and Srinivasan are widely shared among dalit writers and it is a fact that the present dalit autobiographies echo these and other concerns as well. Hence, as I have said earlier, dalit autobiography is a distinct genre and, hence, it must be understood and analysed in the light of anti-caste struggles.

On the one hand, anti-caste philosophical traditions or dalit epistemology produces a critique of Indian social structure—the caste system, its social and cultural practices. On the other hand, it attempts to transform and reconstruct social space, politics and culture on the basis of principles of the egalitarian philosophy of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. Dalit writing draws its conceptual tools from the anti-caste or dalit epistemology electrified by Ambedkar. Dalit writers reject the normative cultural tradition of Hinduism. Ambedkarism directs dalits towards attaining social mobility,

³⁵ Quoted by Ravikumar in his introduction to K. A. Gunasekaran’s autobiography *The Scar*, trans. V. Kadambari, Chennai: Orient Blackswan, 2009, xi-xii.

³⁶ Writing about *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee says, “On one level, this is an autobiographical account of Valmiki’s journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the fifties to his present as a Dalit. On another level, *Joothan* is also a report card on the condition of people who are now routinely called ‘erstwhile untouchables’ or ‘ex-untouchables.’” See Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit Life Story*. Kolkata: Samya, 2003, xi.

education, freedom and cultural autonomy, the four important factors that make emancipation possible for dalits.

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In this chapter, I have dealt with diverse readings of dalit autobiographies and I have presented my own critique of both dalit and non-dalit readings of dalit autobiography. As opposed to the Brahmin-non-brahmin framework (M. S. S. Pandian), Marxist dalit reading (Anand Teltumbde) of dalit autobiographies, dominant caste reading (S. P. Punalekar), orientalist and dominant caste anthropologist reading (Jean-Luc-Racine and Josiane Racine) of dalit autobiography, I have given my reading of dalit autobiographies placing them in the political and cultural milieu of anti-caste Ambedkarite egalitarian struggles.

I have also presented a political and philosophical trajectory of dalit autobiography which shapes dalit epistemology. This historical reading informs how I decipher the evolutionary process of the dalit autobiography. I argue that dalit autobiography is much more than an individual story, as it has been employed by dalits to reconstruct dalit history and mark the changes in dalit culture and politics. Moreover, dalits use this genre to show their struggles for equality and freedom in a positive light as opposed to the dominant narratives which see such struggles as divisive and anti-national.

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CHAPTER 3

Dalit Subjectivity: History, Context and Contradictions

Dalit autobiography is a domain in dalit politics that foregrounds subjectivity as a field of political articulation. The genre of Dalit autobiography unravels the difficulties involved in dalits claiming or exercising their human rights and civil rights in India. Hence, through a reading of select dalit autobiographies, I will try and discuss in this chapter, both possibilities and constraints associated with the social, economic and cultural manoeuvring of dalits in India.

According to recent statistical data, a vast majority of dalits—84 per cent—live in rural areas.¹ Dalits living in villages are deprived of their right to natural resources like water and land in India. Most of them work as seasonal agricultural labourers, and very few of them can afford to be sharecroppers or self-cultivators. Hence, a vast majority are landless. And among those who own land, a vast

¹ The statistical data presented here is taken from Ghan Shyam Shah's introduction to *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Hence, all the references to Ghan Shyam Shah are from this book. For a detailed survey of dalit political, cultural and economic transformation, see his introduction in Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007, 17-43.

majority—nearly 86 per cent—comprise small and marginal farmers whose cultivation or irrigation depends mostly on rains as they cannot afford to dig wells or bore-wells.

Among rural dalits, bonded labourers constitute a sizeable number; Ghan Shyam Shah notes that this estimate is more than 20 lakhs. They are bonded against debts that they incurred either for marriage and/or day-to-day expenses. Some of these bonded labourers work for the same master for several years or, in a few cases, even for life. “While bonded labour has been theoretically abolished under the Bonded Labour System Act, 1976, and every labourer ‘shall stand freed and discharged from the obligation to render labour in lieu of loans’, in practice the system still prevails,” Ghan Shyam Shah says (19). Some social science scholars have reason to believe that there is systematic segmentation of dalit workers into certain categories of low-paid economic activities, and this is possibly the result of the discrimination in terms of access to market, land, employment and capital formation.²

Segmentation and discrimination of dalits in public sphere still continues despite the prevalence of the modern democratic system in India. Practice of untouchability in public sphere continues unabated in post-independence India. Many of the dalit communities still pursue their traditional caste occupations such as leather work, weaving, scavenging, basket making, etc:

² See S.K. Thorat and R.S. Deshpande’s essay, “Caste System and Economic Inequality: Economic Theory and Evidence” in Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007.

Limited occupational mobility meant that, in almost all parts of rural India, Dalits continue to dispose animal carcasses, collect human filth and clean toilets and streets... Untouchability is practised in one form or the other in almost eighty percent of the villages. It is most extensive in the private and religious spheres.³

Thus dalits continue to experience humiliation, discrimination and material deprivation in India.

Dalit autobiographies testify to all these and other aspects of dalit deprivation. They pose serious questions to the modern political discourse on equality, freedom and justice. Through these sketches of self critical accounts, dalits attempt to make a sociological analysis rather than emphasizing individual progress. Nevertheless, it does get reflected at some level in the thick texture of dalit oppression and dalit critique of the caste system and the modern state. It does not mean that democracy did not help dalits, at least partially, to achieve freedom and modern employment. In fact, whatever sizeable progress that dalits have achieved after Independence has been unprecedented and it became possible because of the effects or outcome of democracy and modernity.

Nonetheless, dalit experience tells us that the benefits of modernity and democracy too are circumscribed and prove rather ineffective with regard to dalits. It is here that dalit autobiography plays an important role and leads us to examine dalit

³ Quoted in Thomas Pantham's essay, "Against Untouchability: The Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar" in Gopal Guru, ed. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Delhi: OUP, 2009, 180.

political subjectivity. I think it is also due to this distinct quality of dalit autobiographies that we find this genre fascinating and instrumental in aiding us to understand certain fundamental social and political issues that have a bearing on the emancipation of the oppressed in India. Before making a demonstration of these issues in dalit autobiography, let me ask certain basic questions with regard to normative subjectivity.

First of all, what is subjectivity? According to Nick Mansfield, a cultural theorist, Subjectivity refers to

“an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience.”⁴

In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. It is this linkage that the word “subject” insists upon. Mansfield says that, “[o]ne is always subject *to* or [subject] *of* something” (6). Mansfield further says, “Subjectivity is primarily an experience, and remains open to inconsistencies, contradictions and unself-consciousness” (6).

⁴ Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway*, New York: New York UP, 2000, 3. All references to Nick Mansfield in this chapter are from this book.

In the Indian context, a critical appraisal of dalits' socio-economic conditions and their varied efforts for attaining freedom from caste Hindu domination shapes dalit subjectivity. A critical analysis of social and cultural life of a dalit individual can explicitly describe the stakes embedded in leading a life of freedom, dignity and free will for dalits.

While education and modern employment boost up confidence in dalits, traditional occupations and village life dissipate their energies and hopes. If we can observe the way dalits conduct themselves in villages, we can understand some crucial aspects that go into the making of the dalit self. Usually dalits bend their bodies in the presence of caste Hindu landlords, and never raise their heads to see eye to eye while listening to the landlord.

While walking on the road they walk carefully making sure they do not *defile* the caste Hindus passing by. However, in the absence of the landlords, and in the dalit streets, they could resort to abusing the caste Hindus for treating dalits in a dehumanizing manner. If servility and powerlessness make dalits obey the Hindu social codes in the dominant caste public realm, collective suffering and shared concerns of dalits make them retaliate, at least in the absence of the oppressor, that too when dalits are in their own locality. This “doubleness” in dalits’ attitude towards the dominant caste signifies both defiance and obedience towards the dominant caste supremacy. This “doubleness” entails the question of dalits’ powerlessness and self-respect. In order to survive in the village and be part of the agrarian society, dalits have to tolerate the structural humiliation that they are subjected to; but, at the same

time, dalits do not divest themselves from fighting for equality, freedom and human dignity.

On the other hand, we can see the unwillingness or antipathy of caste Hindus towards dalits in granting them the desired freedom and equality. Social conditions in villages are such that only if dalits surrender themselves to caste hegemony, they can survive in the village. On the contrary, if they revolt against caste hegemony, dalits will lose their existence in the village. Therefore, dalits will have to control or balance their emotions in order to ensure their subsistence in the village. This anomalous self-conditioning of dalits complicates dalit subjectivity even more. Dalit subjectivity, in a sense, compounds both revolt and submission at the same time.

In India, a dominant caste Hindu male is the normative subject. Knowledge, space, public domain, Law and power are therefore Hindu male centred in India. Anything that has got to do with dalits, a counter-Hindu or counter-hegemonic subject, is seen and shown as deviance by the Hindu society or Hindu civilization. African American subjectivity might perhaps resemble the condition of dalits. Let me try and explain how a dalit might feel in the “untouchable body” through an explication of African American subjectivity.

Western civilization is predominantly white and male centred. In other words, the normative subject around whom western knowledge has been constructed is none other than the white colonizer. In such a context, where does an African American, the colonized and oppressed, figure in the scheme of western knowledge? How does his/her encounter with the predominantly white world transform the normative

conception of subjectivity? This is a crucial question in the context of this dissertation because of the similarity in the subject position of African American in American racist society and dalits in Indian caste Hindu society.

Donald Eugene Hall, a cultural theorist, in his discussion of subjectivity and identity refers to W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" thus quotes Du Bois:

... born in a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul with tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,-- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge this double self into a better and truer self.⁵

Similarly, untouchable subjectivity constitutes a "double consciousness" of submission to and revolt against caste oppression, both at the same time. Gandhi has

⁵See Donald Eugene Hall, *Subjectivity: The New Critical Idiom*, New York, Routledge, 2004, 38.

imposed a harijan consciousness on dalits which is designed to make dalits automated machines for furthering political interests of the Hindus. Gandhi has tried to make dalits social subjects through his harijan politics. As opposed to Gandhi, Ambedkar has laid a firm foundation for inaugurating dalit identity and constructing dalits as political subjects to pursue dalit political interests. Dalit subjectivity thus is shaped by a shared dalit consciousness which comes from Phule-Ambedkarite political tradition. Dalit consciousness is anti-caste and egalitarian in intent. It addresses two important larger political concerns: a) annihilation of caste and b) merging of all castes into one caste which transforms itself into a nation.⁶

It is in this historical trajectory that one will find two contradicting epistemologies—Dalit epistemology and the Brahminical caste Hindu epistemology— and two opposing “ethical communities”⁷. While dalit epistemology aspires to reconstruct Indian social order on the egalitarian principles of equality, fraternity and liberty, the Brahminical caste Hindu epistemology fosters caste/class/gender inequalities and Brahminical hegemony. Thus dalits and caste Hindus inhabit two distinct knowledge domains: one is hegemonic Brahminical epistemology and the other is counter-hegemonic anti-caste epistemology. In other

⁶ For a detailed discussion on why Ambedkar proposes a merging of all castes into one nation, see Ambedkar’s speech in Mahad satyagraha on 25 December 1927.

⁷ In his work, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar says that “the effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become, caste-bound.” See Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, New Delhi: OUP, 2006, 275. Thus Ambedkar criticises the Hindus for lacking a sense of fraternity among various groups within the touchables of Hindu society. This is also the point where Ambedkar sees “untouchables” as separate from Hindus. Not only does Ambedkar see “untouchables” as distinctly separate from Hindus, but he also recognises them as people operating with distinct moral and ethical principles.

words, it is this epistemological and historical tension that sustains caste hierarchy and dehumanization of dalits. Both modernity and democracy in India have not succeeded fully in eradicating social inequalities based on caste, let alone merging of all the distinct communities into a single national community as Brahminism does not allow this to happen for its own sustenance. Hence it becomes inevitable for us to ask the following questions:

Has the modern education and language of subjective rights eroded the hierarchy in India? How far has the Indian constitution succeeded in promoting equality? What are the several different ways that it has adopted for doing this? Who is considered worthy to be a human being in full possession of self-awareness, rights and responsibilities?

Brahminical ideology does not allow one who operates within its fold to find problems with the caste system and purity-pollution ideology. Brahminical ideology shows untouchables as “lacking” in something, for them to be considered on par with the touchable Hindus. It never allows itself for self-scrutiny, nor does it encourage others to point out problems within its ideology and the social structure based on that ideology.

For instance, Gandhi and several others had shown beef-eating as one of the main reasons why “untouchables” are treated with contempt. However, beef-eating is not the actual reason behind treating dalits as “untouchables”. Even though dalits imitate the caste Hindus in toto, they are not considered equal human beings. Democratic measures to bring equality among all Indian citizens has proved to be

futile and inconclusive yet. If that is so, how is a dalit conditioned by the society he/she inhabits, the politics he/she suffers, the media he/she consumes and the desires that inspire him/her?

How do dalits present themselves before their family members, dalit community, and before the caste Hindu civil society or public realm and the State? What is the place of a dalit in society and in the modern nation-state? Where does a dalit live in actual social space? How do the modern institutions such as educational institutions, offices, market, and civil society organizations, both private and public, recognize and treat dalits? What sort of housing facilities are accessible or available for dalits when they migrate, in search of livelihood or education and modern employment to urban and semi-urban spaces? How does the modern state recognize a dalit, as a right bearing citizen or a member of a “target group” and vote bank? All these questions are important given the kind of stigma attached to dalits in India. Modern state announced itself as harbinger of equality, fraternity and liberty, but in reality, has it been successful in sustaining its objectives? If it did, to what extent did it succeed?

We not only find analytical reflections of dalits on the above questions but we even find the self-scrutiny of dalit individuals and the community in dalit autobiographies. Through an examination of dalit autobiographies, I will try and elucidate the material conditions and the social status of dalits in Indian villages and cities. I will also mark the progress and social mobility that dalits have achieved in the modern democratic state.

Ooru and Cheri

Now let us first see how villages in India mark a structural division between caste Hindus and dalits and also see how a social division of people based on caste affects the lives of dalits, who are at the bottom of such a social order.

“Ooru” in both Tamil and Telugu means village. “Keri” or “Cheri” in Tamil means dalit settlement. In Telugu dalit settlements are known as “palle” (Malapalle or Madigapalle). They are also called “gheri” or “wada” in other regions like Telangana and also in some districts of Andhra region as well. Madduri Nagesh Babu’s poetry collection is titled, “Velivada”⁸, meaning a habitation of ostracized communities or an excommunicated colony. Siddalingaiah titles his autobiography *Ooru Keri* symbolizing the spatial and socio-economic and cultural division between the village and the dalit settlement. The social composition of the village is clearly demarcated with the settlements of the caste Hindus or “touchables”, whereas the Cheri or Keri consists of the segregated “untouchables”. Almost every dalit autobiography under study makes a clear mention of the separation between the caste Hindu village and the segregated dalit settlement or “Cheri” or “Mala-Madiga Palle”.

The beginning paragraph of Siddalingaiah’s autobiography, *Ooru Keri*, refers to the fringes of the village where Dalits have to inhabit. The text begins with the following lines: “Ours was the last house in the colony. There had probably been a

⁸ C.P. Brown’s dictionary defines Velivada as the outer “street” or suburb of a town in which the paraiahs live. See Charles Philip Brown’s, *Brown’s Dictionary: Telugu to English: A dictionary of the mixed dialects and foreign words used in Telugu*, reprint of revised edition of 1903, third edition, ed. A. Satyanarayana, Vijayawada: Victory Publishers, 2005, 731.

house beyond ours, but its roof had collapsed and its mud walls, three or four feet high, were all that remained of it...the Land owned by Ainoru stretched out 500 or 600 feet beyond these walls” (1).⁹ The title of the text, *Ooru Keri*, itself clearly indicates the division between *Ooru*, a village inhabited by caste Hindus, and *Keri*, a ward inhabited by dalits on the fringes of the village.

Social stratification on the basis of caste is strictly followed in Indian villages, where practice of untouchability and caste hierarchy are kept intact. One of the ways in which caste divisions and hierarchy based on purity and pollution has been kept inviolable in Indian villages is through spatially segregating the people in villages with separate settlements for each caste.

Bama shows the spatial division of her village as a symbol of graded caste inequality based on traditional caste occupations. The village division also signifies unequal distribution of resources (both traditional and modern) and the monopolization of power by the most dominant communities in her village. In her autobiography, *Karukku*, Bama writes:

Just at the entrance to the village there is a small bus-stand. This is the terminus. The bus will take you no further. It is as if our entire world ended there. Beyond that, there is a stream. If it rains, it runs full of water. If not, it is nothing but a stinking shit-field. To the left there is a small settlement of ten to twenty houses, known as

⁹ All the references to Siddalingaiah in this chapter are from his autobiography, *Ooru Keri: An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2003.

Odapatti. It is full of Nadars who climb palmyra palms for a living. To the right there are the Koravar who sweep streets, and then the leather-working Chakkiliyar. Some distance away there are the Kusavar who make earthenware pots. Next to that comes the Palla settlement. Then, immediately adjacent to that is where we live, the Paraya settlement. To the east of the village lies the cemetery. We live next to that.

Apart from us, one after the other, there were the houses of the Thevar, Chettiyar, Aasaari and Nadar. Beyond that were the Naicker streets. The Udaiyaar, too, had a small settlement there for themselves.
(6)¹⁰

Commenting on the village structure in Andhra Pradesh, G. Kalyana Rao points out that when we think deeply we can figure out a horizontal dividing line in the Indian society. To support his claim, in his autobiographical narrative, *Antarani Vasantham*, Kalyana Rao gives the following description of the horizontal division of the village, Ennela Dinne:

On this side of that horizontal line live touchables and on the other side of it live untouchables. Touchables are placed definitely on the elevated landscape in the village and the untouchables are surely placed in the downside or on the slope. Ennela Dinne is not an

¹⁰ All references to Bama in this chapter are from her autobiography, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan, 2000.

exception or away from this dividing line. Without this line we cannot draw its picture or map. (13)¹¹

Both Kalyana Rao and Bama wonder from when the people in this country had been divided as “touchables” and “untouchables”. Both of them raise doubts about the historical reasons as to why, when and how dalits had been stigmatized and segregated as “untouchables” in India. Commenting on Ellanna, Kalyana Rao’s ancestral figure, the author says, “Ellanna’s life falls at the bottom side of the dividing line. We do not know when his ancestors were pushed down to this side of the line” (13). I argue that the dividing line between *ooru* and *cheri* marks the social elevation of caste Hindus and social degradation of dalits in villages.

Siddalingaiah mentions that his village, like any other village in India, has been divided on the basis of caste lines. The roads and buildings department of the government unquestioningly ratifies such unequal caste arrangements in Indian villages. Siddalingaiah points out one such example from a village where he was born and his early formative years of childhood were spent.

Though he does not dwell much in his narrative upon such an anti-social and anti-secular aspect, he hints that the Indian State endorses the existing unequal social hegemony and caste prejudices. Siddalingaiah remarks thus: “A tarmac road, laid by the government, divided the village and the Holey colony. On that side were houses of caste people” (9). Siddalingaiah uses the tarmac road, laid by the government, as a

¹¹ All references to G. Kalyana Rao in this chapter are from his autobiographical narrative, *Antarani Vasantham*, Vijayawada: Virasam, 2000.

modern metaphor that reifies the spatial division between the caste Hindus and the “outcastes”. Children from both sides of the road used to stand and watch the buses, but they never attempted to cross the road and befriend the children standing on the other side of the road. Without attaching any kind of seriousness to the caste prejudices operating as an undercurrent in the frozen childhood relations, he suggests, in a subtle manner, that children too are indoctrinated with caste Hindu ideology.

What is more interesting about the village structure is that the dominant caste people do not have to visit the dalit *cheri* for anything as everything has been well arranged for the benefit of the dominant castes in their own locality. In many ways, village structure proves beneficial for the dominant castes while it proves detrimental for the dalits. Modern institutions such as “[t]he post-office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools—all these stood in their street. So why would they need to come to our area?” Bama asks (6). “Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper-caste children,” Bama says (6). Is this what is meant by “unity in diversity”? Does the notion of “diversity” take into account the deprivation and stigma of the other? When dalits are treated as “untouchables” and their presence is deemed polluting, how will they claim access to modern public resources and make use of them? How can a modern secular government allow such monopolization of common resources?

By the very nature of the village geography, dalits face various disadvantages and are prone to several kinds of humiliation. Without even a minimal disruption of the asymmetrical village structure, modern institutions of the State find their place in the dominant caste locality, thereby conforming to the dynamics of the caste system in

Indian villages. No one questions such a biased arrangement. Caste system in India absorbs many such things including modernity. Not only does it usurp the modern State but, I think, the caste system even helps *facilitate* the smooth functioning of the governance as people have already been divided so as to be *governed* without much difficulty. The monopoly of power by dominant castes, especially, at the micro level—village and small towns— often gives rise to atrocities against dalits and other marginalised castes.

However, as Ravikumar rightly points out, “a dalit person has to make sure he does not touch any other person in the village and remain untouched by others, and yet is forced to consider the village as his own (‘native place’).”¹² There are several incidents in dalit autobiographies under study that illuminate Ravikumar’s point. Autobiographies of Siddalingaiah, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Aravind Malagatti, and Sharankumar Limbale portray incidents that demonstrate indignities, abuse, dishonour and exploitation of dalits in villages. For example, Siddalingaiah writes that during a ceremony in an upper caste home, dalits are not allowed to sit and eat along with others in the party. They wait until everyone finishes eating only to collect the leftover food that they should take home and eat. Except dalits, all other castes including shudras eat in the pandal. Such practices are still prevalent in villages¹³ and, moreover, they signify the structural humiliation of dalits in villages.

¹² See Ravikumar’s “Foreword” to *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*, Chennai: Navayana, 2003, 3.

¹³ In an interview by Gomathi Kumar and Sanjay Kabir, Manjula Pradeep, Executive Director of a Gujarat-based Dalit organisation Navsarjan, reveals “Dalits are not allowed to sit on the chair or cot before any non-dalit. They necessarily have to sit on the ground. The other practice that comes out very prominently is on food. Dalits are

Thus, by the very design of a village, dalits are pushed to its periphery in matters of economy, culture, politics and power. Culturally they are outsiders. They cannot enter the village temples and participate in the village festivals.¹⁴ As Urmila Pawar describes in her autobiography, dalits should only observe from a distance and they cannot take part in the celebrations along with caste Hindu people of the village. If dalits want to imitate the upper caste and celebrate their festivals, they can do so only in the dalit locality but not in the village where the savarnas alone should perform. We can find innumerable instances from dalit autobiographies, such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Bama's *Karukku*, illuminating this point.

generally not invited in the community meals, if invited they are seated separately and have to carry their own vessels. They are served tea in cups ironically called *Ram patras* that are kept separately in non-dalit households. Then we find untouchability being practised against Dalits in providing basic amenities like drinking water, use of ration shops, postmen not providing their services, not allowed to touch the vegetables in shops etc. Every one knows that there is untouchability in our country but somewhere this whole issue is being put aside and portrayed as a thing of the past. So we carried this study to give authenticity to our claim that untouchability practices are not only alive and kicking in this country but also present everywhere and in every sphere of our social life. We cannot just wish away from the reality.” See <http://blog.insightyv.com/?p=1023>.

¹⁴ We can find many such practices across India. Manjula Pradeep answering a question on the findings of their recent study in Gujarat villages, says, “Our study on the practices of untouchability covered 1655 villages in Gujarat and took three years to complete. We have shared some of its findings with the media to create awareness. In the study, we found 99 different practices of untouchability and have tried to identify the specific regions where these are practised. Most prevalent practices are related to right to equality in religion and religious affairs. In more than 90 % of the villages, Dalits are not allowed to enter the temples or to touch the idols and worship articles. They are not allowed to participate in the religious processions and other rituals.” See <http://blog.insightyv.com/?p=1023>. Not only sociological data such as this, but dalit autobiographies also point out such discrimination and exclusion of dalits from the Hindu religious space and conditional access for dalits to some Hindu festivals. For example, see Urmila Pawar's autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, for her account of conditional access for dalits to participate in celebration of Holi, a Hindu festival.

Caste and Division of Labour

Apart from the tacit social divisions based on caste, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Kalyana Rao and other dalit writers show that the labour too gets distributed according to the social standing of each caste. For example, taking away carcasses of animals from village, sweeping roads, taking away gutter, cleaning toilets and so on are the exclusive domains assigned for dalits in India. Baby Kamble, for example, elucidates the social role of dalits in *Bara Balutedar* system in Maharashtra. Dalits are forced to do various odd and stigmatised jobs as part of the caste system. Dalits are paid with leftover food, worn out clothes and so on for their services to the village. In his book, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar rightly argues:

Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers...* It is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers.¹⁵

Many dalit autobiographies vindicate Ambedkar's argument that caste system is a division of labourers. In *Antarani Vasantham*, Kalyana Rao narrates an incident where Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha go to the Buckingham canal in search of work. They feel happy seeing a large group of people digging the canal. Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha stand there with a lot of hope that they too will get some work like the other labourers. They see a plump person there monitoring the labourers. It becomes clear to them that

¹⁵ See Ambedkar's essay "Annihilation of Caste" in Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, sixth edition, New Delhi: OUP, 2009, 263.

he is the supervisor. From his appearance, this supervisor looks like a man from a dominant caste. Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha go near and bow before him four times. After a while, the man looks at them enquiringly. Sivaiah asks for work and says that they came from a long distance. Then the man takes out a register and begins to write down their names. Sivaiah tells him his name. The supervisor enters Sivaiah's name in the register and raises his head and looks at Sivaiah. Sivaiah deciphers the meaning in his look and says: "I am a Mala from Ennela Dinni" (126). The supervisor stops writing and stares at them as if they are demons. He starts screaming. The only words comprehensible for Sivaiah are: "This son of a Mala wants a job here" (126). The moment the labourers working there hear the supervisor's words, they stop working and start pelting mud stones at Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha. A couple of the labourers come running with crowbars. Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha realize that they are under threat and run away from there.

In fact, even those labourers who throw stones at Sivaiah and Sasirekha have come there walking miles for livelihood. They too are ordinary labourers. The question that arises then is this: Why are Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha chased away by the labourers? The reason is simple. Sivaiah and Sasirekha are "untouchables". It is for this specific reason that the caste Hindu labourers do not concede to the Malas and Madigas working along with them. Just as they have chased Sivaiah and Sasi Rekha away, they have chased away every Mala and Madiga who came for work at the Buckingham canal.¹⁶ In this country, Kalyana Rao says, "Hunger too has untouchability. Labour too has untouchability" (127-128). This is precisely why

¹⁶ In order to give work for the deprived Malas and Madigas, the Baptist Mission specifically takes up digging a four-mile long canal at Rajupalem near Ongole. See Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantham*. Vijayawada: Virasam, 2000, 132-133.

Ambedkar says that “Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers.*”¹⁷

As a result of the caste system and “its unnatural division of labourers into water-tight compartments” (to use Ambedkar’s words), the caste Hindu society assigns menial work for dalits even in modern times.¹⁸ Stigmatised labour¹⁹ to dalits and non-stigmatised labour to caste-Hindus is a peculiar condition due to the caste system in India. Not just one but many dalit autobiographies vindicate this point. To mention a few, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, G. Kalyana Rao and Sharankumar Limbale give detailed accounts of this peculiar situation in India. What are the immediate consequences for dalits because of this kind of an unnatural division of labour? Especially in villages, where this division of labour is upheld by the society, dalits remain perpetually poor and for many things they depend on caste Hindus.

As a result of poor economic and socially degraded status of dalits, they struggle even for a proper living place in both villages and cities in India. However, there are two factors that impact lack of decent housing for dalits; one is poverty

¹⁷ See Ambedkar’s essay “Annihilation of Caste” in Valerian Rodrigues, ed. *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*, sixth edition, New Delhi: OUP, 2009, 263.

¹⁸ For detailed accounts of stigmatized and menial labour assigned for dalits in India, See Vijay Prashad’s *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community*, New Delhi: OUP, 2000, and Gita Ramaswamy’s *India Stinking: Manual Scavengers in Andhra Pradesh and Their Work*, Chennai: Navayana, 2005.

¹⁹ Taking away carcasses of animals from village, sweeping roads, cleaning the gutter, cleaning toilets and so on are the exclusive domains assigned for dalits in India. It is still the dalits who are cleaning the modern toilets in cities and both government and corporate offices in India.

owing much to the stigmatised and cheap labour and the other is social surveillance over dalits.²⁰ Thus the dominant caste people oppress dalits in the village.

Having described the structural division between the *ooru* and *cheri*, I will now show the detrimental effects of such a graded social system on dalits who struggle at the bottom of this social structure.

Social Gradation and Its Detrimental Effects on Dalits

In many parts of the country, dalits perform traditional village services. They serve the dominant castes in their lands and homes. All the dirty work in the village is forced upon dalits. They are the source of cheap labour for the village. Despite their services to the village, dalits cannot claim any space legitimately in the village. More importantly, they are forced to restrict themselves to the dalit *cheri* and live according to the norms of the village. Defiance of village norms will have serious consequences for dalits.

²⁰ Kalyana Rao's narrative mentions that even when dalits could afford to erect their huts and arrange them properly, they could not do so for fear of violation of the village norms. A normative village order does not allow dalits to live a decent life. Keeping the height of Lingalu in mind, the prospective bride of Errenkadu, Boodevi asks her brother to increase the height of the entrance of the house. But Errenkadu and other Malas hesitate to do so even though they realize that Lingalu will have to bend her body to enter the hut. Errenkadu asks, "Wouldn't the egos of Kapus and Karanam get hurt if we raise our entrance?" (14) Boodevi also knows that it is not allowed. If the entrance of a Mala's hut is tall enough to enter without bending the body the information somehow reaches the village. Kalyana Rao says that the logic stops at the Shastras. If the village heads come to know any such defiant behaviour of the Malas, Malas would have to suffer its consequences in their future. Lingalu marries Errenkadu and begins to live in their hut bending her body each time she crosses the entrance. Errenkadu listens to each suggestion of his sister, Bhudevi, but in this matter he fails to implement her suggestion. See G. Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantham*. Vijayawada: Virasam, 2000, 14.

G. Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantham* presents in the very beginning of the narrative, an incident where Ellanna, an ancestral figure of the successive dalit generations in the text, is attacked from all sides by the upper caste boys and chased away from the village. Ellanna, with a bleeding body runs for his life without minding the thorns, streams and hot sand that hurt his feet. What does Ellanna do that attracts such severe punishment by the upper caste boys? All that he does is that he unconsciously "transgresses" the spatial boundaries which tantamount to a violation of village rules. Out of curiosity, like other young children from the upper castes, he too goes near the street play performers to see their ornaments from a close angle. Until this part, it looks like an ordinary and routine scene anywhere. But in the case of Ellanna, this routine children's curiosity is understood by the upper caste children as an offence.

The upper caste children, like their elders, take offence at Ellanna's spatial and social "transgression". Hence they attack him from all sides. Ellanna, instead of running back to his Malapalle, mired in a kind of trepidation, starts running away from the attackers. What is most striking in this incident is that Ellanna does not understand why he is beaten up! He comes to know of it only in his adulthood. He learns that it is purity-pollution ideology that governs the social life in villages. Not only does this ideology restrict the social mobility of dalits, but it also deprives dalits of dignity and natural resources.

Social Degradation of Dalits

As a result of a social division based on caste and purity-pollution ideology, dalits are made to depend on the mercy of upper caste people for many things including water, leftover food, worn out clothes and work. Perpetual dependency on the dominant caste people for work, leftover food, worn out clothes, and even water makes dalits their “willing” slaves as dalits do not have any alternate structures of survival to escape from the caste-bound social order. Dalits have to be subservient to the dominant caste people as it is these people who possess most of the wealth and power in villages and have a firm control over the (agricultural) production and distribution processes in their villages. Dalits remain at the bottom of the social order, literally, begging for the help of the dominant caste landlords in Indian villages. Being at the bottom of the caste-bound social order literally means denial of (legitimate) access to natural and cultural resources and obeying the commands of the dominant castes. Consequently, dalits living in villages, having no escape routes, are subjected to unthinkable amount of pain and degradation.

Siddalingaiah juxtaposes the poverty-stricken living conditions of dalits with the robust lives of the upper castes who symbolize abundance of food and wealth in his village, Megalahatti, in rural Karnataka. While describing Ainoru’s land that stretched out beyond the dalit colony which has broken walls with thorny bushes and small huts, Siddalingaiah says:

On that land was Ainoru's beautiful house with a huge well and a pumpset cabin. The water from this pumpset irrigated his lands. As for

the people of our colony, it was a big thing if we got any water to drink. Our people trudged to a flower garden some distance away and fetched water from the well by its side. I never saw anyone but the dalits fetch water from this well. (1-2)

Dalits in this village are mostly landless daily labourers. They work in the fields of upper caste landlords. The very opening scene of *Ooru Keri* stands as testimony to the plight of illiterate dalit men in the village. Siddalingaiah shocks us by beginning his narrative with a picturesque portrayal of his own father being tied to the yoke and ploughing the land of an upper caste landlord. He narrates it thus:

One day, as we stood on the squat walls calling out to our parents, we noticed something strange. A man had fastened a yoke onto the shoulders of two others, and was ploughing Ainoru's fields. It was amusing to watch the two men trundle on like bullocks, while the third followed them swinging a whip and making them plough. A strange agony gripped me the moment I realized that one of the men carrying the yoke was my father. Some women who came to where we were standing and sighed, "What a plight has befallen poor Dyavanna!" This doubled my agony. When Appa returned home after toiling like a bullock all day, Avva heated some oil and smeared it on his shoulders.

(2)

It may be strange and shocking for Siddalingaiah, who was a child then, to witness such an incident but it does not appear so for his mother. Without any

expression of shock or surprise she smears the warm oil on his shoulders to render him some sort of relief from the pain and swelling. Though Siddalingaiah looks back at his childhood experiences in retrospect, he refrains from making any comments over the incidents that shock him in his childhood days. Siddalingaiah's mother's silence makes the incident appear ordinary.

Even as Siddalingaiah simply presents the incident without commenting much on it, he wants to convey that the world of miserable feelings and pain is made so common that the "common sense" of the village renders it "natural" for the dalits to do, what should otherwise be perceived as uncommon. However, by unpacking the process of "naturalizing" such uncommon acts, the author is also presenting the sociology of caste in India.

In order to meet the daily expenses of the family, his parents go to nearby villages for work. Siddalingaiah says that whatever they could buy with that day's earnings would go into preparing food for the family. He says, "Some days we cooked and ate sweet tubers. On others, we ate some kadle puri, drank water and went to sleep" (5). Being painfully aware of his family condition, he rues, "The money my parents earned from working as labourers was simply not enough to maintain the family. My mother would sometimes go to the Savandurga forests to collect firewood, which she sold at the shandy" (5). Thus, his parents struggle hard doing several odd jobs for survival. Not only is Siddalingaiah's family poor, but many other families in their colony are as poor and starving as his family. He narrates an incident from his childhood that stands as a testimony to the social and economic status of dalits in the village. Often, Siddalingaiah goes to the garden where his father used to work:

One day, I returned from the garden and stood on the tank embankment. People were at work on either side of the tank. Someone gave out a yelp, and in a flash, women, men and children started running, at the speed of arrows, towards the Brahmin house with the pumpset. I was scared, and couldn't run as quickly as the others. I reached the house a little later than the others. Dalits sat in a row a little distance from the front yard. People from Ainoru's house were giving away leftover poori and chitranna. I was disappointed to be the last to get there, but was overjoyed to see my parents receiving the eats and coming away before all the others (3).

This incident explains much about the nature of dalits' poverty and hunger. In such a deplorable condition of life, dalits seem to so easily yield to the structural humiliation and unequal treatment without showing any signs of resistance.

In the early days of Siddalingaiah's childhood, his father used to cultivate a Brahmin's land as a sharecropper. The owner of the land used to live in the nearby Magadi town. Siddalingaiah likes the owner of this land and feels he was very generous, because he would give Siddalingaiah the discarded clothes of his son and the leftover food of the previous night, whenever Siddalingaiah's family visited the Ainoru (a respectful way of addressing upper caste people), i.e., the Brahmin house in Magadi. Siddalingaiah recounts:

When Appa, Avva and I went to town and stood in front of his house, he gave us the chitranna and poori left over from the previous night. I

had never tasted these delicacies before. They were tasty, oh so tasty. A strange gratitude overwhelmed us. Occasionally, Ainoru also gave me some old, tattered shirts and pants that his son had discarded. I was younger than his son, and the clothes fitted me very loosely. Yet I wore them folded up, looking odd among my companions. (3)

Dignity, self-respect and resistance are values unknown to dalits outside the Dalit movement. I think it is only after Ambedkar's movement that dalits came to know of self-assertion, dignity and self-respect.

In many villages in India, there has been a separate "glass" system in hotels where the untouchables should themselves bring their tea glasses and drink their tea sitting away from the caste Hindus at those hotels. Sometimes, the hotel manager will keep a separate set of glasses for them, where after drinking the tea the untouchable customers have to wash the glasses themselves and keep them back in the hotel. In *Akkarmashi*, Sharankumar Limbale narrates his own experience of humiliation of having to drink tea in a separate glass kept outside for untouchables and wash it by himself.²¹

Siddalingaiah, the author of *Ooru Keri*, too experiences this sort of discrimination at hotels in his village. It seems that Siddalingaiah's father has friends

²¹ Even though, Sharankumar Limbale, as a child, goes to a nearby police station to lodge a complaint against a hotel owner for practicing untouchability, police do not accept his complaint let alone taking action against the dominant caste owner. To know more about this incident, see Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, trans. Santhosh Bhoomkar, New Delhi: OUP, 2003, 76-78.

from non-dalit castes. He would sometimes take his son, Siddalingaiah, along with him to his friends and hotels in the village. Siddalingaiah narrates:

When he went to see his friends in the upper caste colony, he stood in front of their houses. They made me sit on a stone bench and gave me things to eat. Father would occasionally take me to the hotel in the village. The people who ran the hotel would make the two of us sit some distance away from the others. I was ecstatic eating the idlis they gave us. Lost in the pleasure of the idlis' shape, softness and taste, we were oblivious to all else. (10)

The power of this experiential narrative lies in the manner, subtle still effective, in which the author presents it. He does not lament over the “untouchability” factor and the attitude of the caste prejudiced hotel owner. Instead, he narrates that experience as a common everyday social reality. However, it is important to note the culminating sentence of the passage where the author says, “Lost in the pleasure of the idlis' shape, softness and taste, we were oblivious to all else.” There are several layers to this experience.

At one level, it can be interpreted that, being conscious of their untouchable social status, they get used to such discrimination and public humiliation. Siddalingaiah indicates at various places in his autobiography that “untouchables” got fully indoctrinated into the Brahminical ideology and that they would voluntarily follow the “purity” and “pollution” philosophy effectively. At another level, one can understand that they persistently compromise with their self-respect in the public

domain for material needs. Siddalingaiah narrates incidents where the dominant caste Hindus throw occasional feasts on some special occasions. “During such feasts, the Holeyas were made to sit in a corner. We were noticed only after people of the upper castes had been served. I felt contented with whatever little food came my way, and wouldn’t think too much about the discrimination,” he says (7). Siddalingaiah’s narratives of starvation and dalit poverty render the concerns of self-respect marginally important.

Through these accounts, Siddalingaiah points out the absolute choicelessness of dalits in choosing between leftover food and human dignity. Siddalingaiah wrote his autobiography after he had finished his term as a Member of Legislative Council in Karnataka. Therefore, I think, his recounting of these accounts of poverty and hunger in dalit communities is done with a specific political goal of criticising the modern democracy which promises equality and its social welfare policies that work with the aim of eradicating poverty and starvation in India.

A Search for Freedom from Caste

As far as the childhood and upbringing are concerned the individual self in Dalit autobiography seems inseparable from the dalit community. Until they move away from the village, dalit children hardly experience any social mobility and self-worth even while they go to school. However, education does hold a promising future for dalit children, at least, in terms of breaking away from the traditional hold of caste-ridden village structure.

But as long as they remain in the village and pursue their school education there, dalit children do not experience much difference in life. They grow up learning traditional ways of living in villages. For example, they learn that dalits are inferior to the upper castes and therefore they must be obedient and subservient to the dominant castes in the village. For instance, once in his grandparents' village, Siddalingaiah, when he was a small kid, follows his grandmother to the main village. His enthusiasm suddenly dissipates when a caste Hindu stops him and warns him against his "carelessness". Siddalingaiah recounts his first encounter with caste in the following manner:

One day, I was running along the streets as at a wind speed. My hand brushed against the clothes of someone coming from the other direction. The man stopped in anger. I stopped too, but in fright. He went away only after Ajji had begged his forgiveness over and again. She was afraid we might have to face the wrath of the upper castes because of my carelessness. She said I should never ever run. She ordered me to join my hands and say "Namaskara, swami" every time I came across someone big. I followed this policy without fail and won everybody's praise. (14-15)

Thus, in very early stages of childhood, dalit children are forced to learn that they are socially inferior beings and they must be subservient to dominant caste people in the village. Dalit children are "taught" to behave in a docile manner when they go out of the dalit street. If they do not learn this lesson quickly, they will have to face the wrath of caste Hindu people as it happened to Ellanna in *Antarani*

Vasantham. Therefore, they learn the “difference” between dalits and caste Hindus very early in life. Such lessons of “social obedience” seem to “discipline” dalit children according to the purity-pollution ideology.

Bama comes to know the impact of purity-pollution ideology in her very first encounter with caste in her village. Ironically, it appears quite amusing for her when she sees an elderly person from her street walking in quite a funny manner. Bama says:

I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion. I guessed there was something like vadai or green banana bajji in the packet, because the wrapping paper was stained with oil. He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it...the elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadai. (13)

After she goes home, she tells this story in all its comic detail to her elder brother. But her brother does not feel amused by her recounting of the story. She says, “Annan told me the man wasn’t being funny when he carried the parcel like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did they would be polluted. That’s why he had to carry the package with its string” (13). The very next moment she stops laughing at the Paraya man. A series of questions haunts her on the social status of dalits in society. She feels so

angry that she wants to go and touch the wretched vadai herself. She begins to question as to why dalits should work for such arrogant caste Hindu fellows who humiliate dalits in their everyday life.

Compared to Bama's approach towards purity-pollution ideology Siddalingaiah's approach to it seems quite different. For an uncritical reading, it apparently seems like Siddalingaiah unquestioningly complies with the caste Hindu social norms whereas Bama questions them overtly for their adverse impact on dalits. It may also be noted, however, that Siddalingaiah shows his radical indifference towards such social norms by pretending to concede to them. The fact that he chooses to narrate this incident and the tone he adopts to do so stand evidence to his radical indifference. Thus both of them are forthright in condemning the purity-pollution ideology as they think that it makes dalits docile and sub-humans.

Bama continues her questioning of the purity-pollution ideology from her first encounter with it. Both her grandmothers work for Naicker families as servants. Bama gets infuriated whenever she sees the tiny Naicker children call her grandmother by her name and order her about. It is here that she comes to know, for the second time, how her own grandmothers are treated scornfully by the Naicker women. She recounts:

Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths...It was a long time before I realized that Paatti was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to

throw away...Paatti placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted. Sometime later, I said to Paatti, she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see. (14)

But when Bama tells her grandmother to assert her dignity with the Naicker women, her grandmother asks: "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower-caste? Can we change this?"(14) What is important to note here is that the illiterate dalit women like the grandmothers of both Siddalingaiah and Bama believe that dalits have been inferior to the dominant caste Hindus for a very long time and that there cannot be any discernible change at the level of social relations in the village. I think their internalisation of servitude functions as a hindrance to their self-assertion and to their claim for equality.

Another reason for their uncritical submission to the dominant caste Hindus is their lack of knowledge about the anti-caste movements that introduce new idioms of protest against structural inequalities. On the contrary, Baby Kamble's grandmother, who also belongs to the same period as Bama's and Siddalingaiah's grandmothers, for example, does not concede to the caste Hindu supremacy. More importantly, she draws courage and motivation for self-assertion from the Ambedkarite movement.

Another reason for her self-assertion may be due to her non-dependence on caste Hindus of her village.²²

Urmila Pawar's mother too does not feel subservient to the caste Hindus. It could be due to her non-dependence on them for material needs. She bravely questions a dominant caste teacher in public for punishing her daughter without proper reason. Thus, both the non-dependence of dalits on caste Hindus for material needs and exposure to anti-caste movements, i.e., defiance of Hindu religious codes, enable dalits to maintain certain critical distance from Hinduism. Baby Kamble's autobiography provides many examples. The discursive arbitration at the dalit chawdi between traditional Mahars and Ambedkarite Mahars on matters of dalit emancipation serves as a classic example in this regard.²³ Therefore, I argue that "self" is not the same for everyone; one's historical awareness, economic independence, social standing and cultural memory play a crucial role in determining one's self-worth and sense of self.

Such a defiance of social norms, however, is not without any threat or counter-resistance from the caste Hindus. Not accepting *joothan* (leftover food), for example, would be considered a serious offence. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee notes, "High caste villagers could not tolerate the fact that dalits did not want to accept their joothan

²² Baby Kamble's maternal grandfather used to work as a cook for British administrators. He used to send his salary to his wife in the village so that she lived independently and respectfully. Dalits in her village used to depend on her for money, food and other help. Her family gets a special recognition in the village due to her husband's job in white sahib's house. Baby Kamble grows up at her grandmother's house and feels like a queen in the dalit colony wearing good clothes.

²³ To know more about the points of disagreement between conservative Mahars and Ambedkarite dalits, See Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, trans. Maya Pandit, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 66-68.

anymore and threatened them with violence if they refused it.”²⁴ Not only Omprakash Valmiki, but, Kalyana Rao too in *Antarani Vasantham* depicts how caste Hindus take offence at the dalits’ refusal to comply with the traditional code of conduct. Thus, dalits self-assertion might, sometimes, lead to violence against dalits.

Despite such threats, educated dalits who have been exposed to civil rights, anti-caste philosophies and liberal discourse in cities pose serious challenges to the traditional village norms. For example, Bama’s elder brother, Raj Gauthaman, who has finished his M.A., comes home for the holidays. Bama writes about this:

He would often go to the library in our neighbourhood village in order to borrow books. He was on his way home one day, walking along the banks of the irrigation tank. One of the Naicker men came up behind him. He thought my Annan looked unfamiliar, and so he asked, “who are you, appa, what’s your name? Annan told him his name.

Immediately the other man asked, “Thambi, on which street do you live?” The point of this was that if he knew on which street we lived, he would know our caste too. Annan’s reply was sharp, like a slap in the face, “I am a Paraya from the Cheri street.” Then he walked off, as fast as he could. Naicker was furious. He felt he had been shown up. He asked someone else there, “Who is this fellow?” (14-15)

²⁴ See Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit Life Story*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya, 2003, xxxi-xxxii.

The Naicker man does not like the way in which Bama's brother has replied. Then he comes to know that he is Rakamma's grandson. The next day, when Bama's grandmother, Rakamma, goes to work at the Naicker's home, he expresses his anger against her grandson's "disrespectful" behaviour towards him: "How dare your grandson talks to me so arrogantly?" (15). As if she has been waiting for such a radical change in dalits' attitude towards the caste Hindu oppressors, Bama's grandmother goes on to justify her grandson's behaviour by replying to the Naicker: "See, Ayya, he's an educated lad; these college boys will talk like that" (15). Rakamma seems to believe that modern education would provide a breakthrough for dalits from the feudal social relations. This can be marked as a significant change in the thinking of dalits. It is also during this time that the caste Hindus begin to "look at Paraya lads from the Cheri street in a certain way, with certain contempt," Bama says (15).

However, when Bama's brother goes to a local library to return books, he adds his degree, M.A., to his name on an impulse. Seeing this, immediately the attendant brings him a stool to sit on, and begins to address him as "Sir". Dalits' access to modern education does seem to provide a breakthrough or a disjuncture in the social relations between dalits and caste Hindus. However, it should also be noted that from some quarters there is special recognition for dalits if they are highly educated and there is also contempt from others, the dominant castes' domain.

Even though education does not fully emancipate dalits from the dominant caste oppression of dalits, it does help dalits to make a dent in the hitherto unquestioned caste Hindu supremacy. Education thus provides partial relief for dalits

from the codes of rigid social hierarchy. The caste Hindu contempt against dalits due to their exposure to education and modernity, on the other hand, has major consequences to dalits. There are instances where large scale atrocities are heaped not only upon individual dalits who defy caste rules but on the whole dalit community.²⁵

In order to escape such dominant caste oppression and for better social mobility, modern employment and education, dalits choose to migrate to cities. Even though there might not be a qualitative change in fulfilling their material needs, dalits certainly experience relative freedom in cities. Siddalingaiah, for example, feels rejuvenated with his thrilling experiences in Bangalore. Freedom and anonymity that he enjoys in Bangalore grant him much hope for a better life. The cinema theatres, big roads, traffic and hotels in Bangalore fascinate him the most. Though he does not have money to watch films, he goes around the theatres and gazes at the building.

Siddalingaiah finds a friend in the same slum where his family lives. This friend of his often shares his food and worries with Siddalingaiah. One day this friend comes home and calls him out and invites him to a hotel:

It was the first time I had been to a hotel. It was probably the first visit for the others too. We stepped in anxiously but in high spirits. We sat around an empty table. My friend placed orders with self-confidence. My delight knew no limits when I saw the idli, dosa, chutney, sagu and the many other eats. I didn't know that the chutney and sagu were side

²⁵ Tsundur massacre in Andhra Pradesh is an example of caste Hindu intolerance of dalits' access to modernity and assertion of self-respect.

dishes to be eaten with idli and the dose. I devoured them as though they were the main dishes. I was filled with gratitude, and began to feel this friend was our real leader. (34)

No one at this hotel asks them to sit at a distance from others unlike in his village.²⁶ Not only this, contrary to how it happens in his village, he is not treated as an untouchable at this hotel in Bangalore. They are *served* with delicious food and chutneys at their table. His anonymous identity in Bangalore city thus gives him both freedom and human dignity. Here he does not have to choose between food and human dignity. Rather he enjoys both at a time unlike in the village where it is the exact opposite.

Life in the city, therefore, seems emancipatory for him. Not only that, he gains self-confidence and he begins to assert himself gradually. He does not want to reveal his caste identity to others in the school. It is not that they would not find out but, given a choice, he does not want to submit himself to the dominant caste people. The government school that he attends is located near a graveyard, a sign enough to make out who attends that school. A dominant caste teacher called Andalamma seems to show compassion towards the poor students in this school. Siddalingaiah recounts one such instance: “One day she asked all poor students to stand up. Some stood up.

²⁶ Siddalingaiah narrates a childhood experience of untouchability at his village hotel. He recounts his experience: “The people who ran the hotel would make the two of us sit some distance away from the others. I was ecstatic eating the idlis they gave us. Lost in the pleasure of the idlis’ shape, softness and taste, we were oblivious to all else” (10). Siddalingaiah is good at complicating matters. He makes it difficult for the readers to find easy answers for the dalit problems. On the one hand, he points out the prevalence of untouchability based on purity and pollution. On the other hand, he directs readers’ attention to his pleasure of eating delicious idlis. He implicitly asks this question as to whether he should bother about self-respect or enjoy this rare food.

Madam distributed among them the free pencils and books that had come from the government” (31). Even though Siddalingaiah belongs to the same economic class as the other students, he remains sitting because, as I said earlier, he does not want to reveal his caste identity. However, Siddalingaiah could not conceal his caste identity for much longer. One day his father comes to school looking for him. Siddalingaiah’s teacher sees his father and feels sad. She asks Siddalingaiah, in annoyance, why he had not responded when she asked poor boys to stand up. Siddalingaiah says: “My father’s tattered clothes, his submissiveness, and his unshaven, pleading face proclaimed his poverty” (32). Further he says, “Her affection increased after she came to know that I was the son of an utterly poor man” (32). Siddalingaiah’s father here is seen by his teacher as an embodiment of poverty and attracts her sympathy, precisely what Siddalingaiah hates so much. The submissive body language of his father indicates his untouchable status in addition to his poverty. Thus his true identity is “found out” by his teacher after seeing his father. His yearning for an anonymous identity ends thus. “Slum” and “poverty” here function synonymously with the lowered caste status.

Like Bama’s grandmother, parents of these slum children fervently wish their children to study and come up in life. “A man would make his school-going son sit in front of a kerosene lamp, place a book before him and tell him to read. The boy’s mother and brother would assemble for the reading. He was already in the fourth standard, but had not learnt the alphabet properly,” Siddalingaiah writes (132). Even though he doesn’t know the alphabet properly, “[h]e would read out all sorts of things...Pretending to read, he would speak whatever came to his mind. His father felt proud. For every line of fake reading, the father, mother and brother—one after the

other—handed him money as incentive” (132). Such is the fascination among dalit families towards education. But, dashing their hopes the government school teachers do not bother to train these students in any useful way apart from showing sympathy for their poverty and tattered clothes!

As we have seen in this section, well-educated dalits, like Bama’s brother, mark the distinction between traditional village life and the urban modern life. While the urban space, in a way, enables them to claim their human rights and freedom, village appears as a site of monotonous routine where dalits lead lives of poverty, hunger and exploitation in spite of their daily hard work. Their daily earnings are barely enough for feeding their families. Unlike in the village, people can find various kinds of jobs in the city, though they may be temporary.

Some students like Siddalingaiah and a few others pursue education with a lot of passion and hope. Therefore, they take up part time jobs in factories or any small work that fetches them money to buy books and clothes. Some sell ice-candy, while Siddalingaiah works in a soap factory and even works for the municipality to dump the muck during the nights. Thus they continue their education and settle in decent white collar jobs like Siddalingaiah, who becomes a professor. Diverse ways of earning in the city help them work hard and succeed in life. Thus the metropolitan cities give them freedom, relative dignity and unprecedented highly paid and well respected jobs.

However, all of this would only reveal the better and positive side of the urban dalit story. There is also a negative side to it. Let us see how dalit autobiographies unpack this negative side of the urban dalit story.

Untouchable Citizens

Apart from food, housing is another problem that bothers dalits consistently. Like food and money their shelter too appears impermanent or tentative. In cities, for example, poor dalits can only afford temporary make-shift shelters. They erect huts barely sufficient to spread their legs while sleeping. The entire family huddles together to adjust within the space. Siddalingaiah's is one such family that struggles hard to subsist in Bangalore city due to lack of a regular job. His parents do several odd jobs in the city.

Let us see how scavengers live in cities. Some dalit women from Urmila Pawar's village work in Mumbai as scavengers. In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar narrates hardships of such scavenging dalits. She writes:

They got suffocated in their 8 by 10 feet one-room flats where two or three families stayed together. The room would be divided into two or three sections with partitions of hanging saris or covers, one section for each family. Men would sleep on footpaths or somewhere outside in the ground in dry months. But in the rains they all had to cram themselves into the small room. (151)

Further she writes, “Bhikiakka used to tell us, ‘We sleep with our legs raised against the wall’ ” (151). Urmila Pawar asks, “How could they sleep with their feet raised against the wall at 90 degrees? Don’t their legs ache?” When she asks them these questions, they laugh and say, “Of course, they ache! When they do, we pull them close to our stomachs and turn on the side. Later we have to erect them against the wall, in the same position” (151). While some illiterate dalits thus continue to suffer in congested and badly constructed single room houses, some others, like Siddalingaiah’s family, adjust with make-shift huts in cities.

Whatever money they earn in cities working as scavengers or as daily-wage workers does not suffice to their food and other basic needs. And these stigmatised occupations do not offer much in way of material improvement of the life of illiterate dalits. Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography elucidates how illiterate dalit women are trapped into prostitution and lead miserable lives in Mumbai.

Not only prostitution but scavenging also has adverse impact on the human dignity of dalits. Ironically though, scavenging is shown as a modern profession in India. Gandhi’s attempt to spiritualise scavenging as a “profession” in modern times is another important factor that romanticises scavenging like never before. Let us see what this modern hype and Gandhi’s romanticization of scavenging hides behind it.

When Urmila Pawar shifts to Mumbai she comes in touch with various social activists. Someone called Ramesh Haralkar, a leader of scavengers, becomes a good

friend and frequently goes to her house to share the problems of scavengers.²⁷ Apart from the social history of scavengers in Mumbai, Haralkar also narrates his own experience as a scavenger in Mumbai. He recounts:

When I was a scavenger myself, I was cleaning in a narrow corridor between two buildings, collecting the slush crawling with maggots from the drains in a basket. Suddenly, some woman from upstairs threw a used sanitary napkin down. It dashed against my face and then fell down into the drain...my sweat trickled into my mouth...there was a funny taste on my tongue...as something else tricked into my mouth along with the sweat...! (225-226)

Gandhi's romanticization of scavenging is thus very far from reality. Gandhi's insistence on retaining the caste system and caste-bound occupations as the ideal structure for India in modern times, undoubtedly, contributes to adverse impacts and "social hazards" on dalits both in villages as well as in cities. If the condition of illiterate dalits who do scavenging in cities is so deplorable, educated dalits too suffer another kind of hardships. They face problems in finding houses for rent.

Urmila Pawar and Sharankumar Limbale present a detailed account of their hardships in small towns and cities in Maharashtra. Pawar describes her humiliating

²⁷ Haralkar tells Urmila Pawar and her husband many things. For instance, he tells them that "a huge number of people who worked as scavengers were from Konkan region, their comparative ration with the workers from other regions, their addiction to alcohol, the reasons for their untimely deaths, the percentage of women scavengers, P.T. women workers, their sexual exploitation." See Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, trans. Maya Pandit, Chennai: Stree, 2008, 225.

experiences with her caste Hindu house owners in Chiplun, a town.²⁸ Both the landladies who humiliate her happen to be shudra women. As Sharankumar Limbale rightly says caste follows dalits like an enemy. When Limbale goes to Latur on transfer, he experiences blatant caste discrimination. When he goes around searching for a room for rent, the Hindus tell him frankly, “We don’t want to rent out our house to Muslims and Mahars.”²⁹ In a big town like Latur, Limbale does not get a single room. Reflecting on this experience, Limbale says that every town and person is caste conscious. Limbale says that “[t]his city [Latur] was made of herds of castes. Even localities in this city are identified by castes” (107). Both Urmila Pawar and Limbale are treated as outcastes in the Hindu localities. Unable to find a room in any of the Hindu colonies of Latur, Limbale finally settles down with a dalit community in Bhimnagar.³⁰ Limbale says, “People from my community lived here under tiny roofs. I too lived in such a dwelling” (107).

Thus, cities too have a similar structure like villages, with localities demarcating Hindus and dalits. And here too, much like in villages, Hindus live in posh localities, while dalits live in filthy localities. Thus, cities too have debilitating effects on dalits who migrate in pursuit of modernity and self-respect.

²⁸ For a detailed account of caste discrimination, see Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, trans. Maya Pandit, Chennai: Stree, 2008, 204-207.

²⁹ Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, trans. Santhosh Bhoomkar, New Delhi: OUP, 2003, 106.

³⁰ Bhimnagar is a dalit locality. It is located adjacent to the graveyard of the Marwari community.

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In this chapter, I have discussed dalits' socioeconomic conditions and their varied efforts for attaining freedom from caste Hindu domination, i.e. the context that shaped dalit subjectivity. I have problematised dalit subjectivity in all its contradictions. I have foregrounded the differences between the hegemonic Brahminical epistemology and the counter-hegemonic dalit epistemology which have in turn produced conflicting knowledge domains.

I have discussed elaborately, using dalit autobiographies, the meanings of Ooru and Cheri for dalits. I have marked and discussed the means, modern education and employment through which dalits try to achieve social autonomy, mobility and self-respect. However, I also emphasise that these avenues for advancement have their own pitfalls and limitations, since Indian social order is ridden with brahminism that does not allow a single national community come into being.

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CHAPTER 4

From Untouchable Culture to Dalit Culture

In this chapter, I argue that unlike the self-asserting dalit culture, untouchable culture does not find problems with Hindu society for imposing stigmatised social roles and stigmatised labour on dalits. On the contrary, it persuades dalits to meekly submit themselves to the Hindus. Furthermore, it uncritically celebrates the self-less rendering of dalits' services to the society. A critical evaluation of the untouchable cultural traditions is required to understand the reasons for dalits' regressive thinking and behaviour in the Hindu society. Until Ambedkar came to the rescue of dalits and proposed certain radical changes in their culture and thinking, dalits have continued to grope in the darkness of ignorance and superstitious living.

In the first part of this chapter, I will try to present a lucid picture of the demeaning social and cultural horizons of dalits outside the Ambedkarite tradition and in the second part, I will discuss Ambedkar's propositions that led to the emergence of dalit culture and demarcate the difference between untouchable culture and dalit culture.

Dalit autobiographies vividly depict the retrogressive impact that the socially imposed stigmatised identities and untouchable culture have on dalits. I attempt to make a critical assessment of the fundamental aspects of untouchable culture and the stigmatised identities that deprive dalits of dignity and humanness. In the first part of this chapter, I will indicate the distinct qualities of the untouchable culture— dalits' beliefs, customs and superstition— and show how this cultural distinctness pigeonholes dalits in stigmatised identity and turns them into objects of pity and social oppression. This oppression can be understood through the stereotyped social and cultural markers which also signify dalits' servitude to the Hindu civil society. In the last part of this chapter, I undertake a critical evaluation of the untouchable cultural traditions and customs that throttle dalit communities with multiple social indignities and prevent them from revolting against the Brahminical Hindu oppression.

Let me first consider an important observation by R. S. Khare, a social scientist, who points out that a configuration of critical Indic notions (i.e., *dharma*, *karma*, *maya* and *samsaara*) guides the recognition of all distinctions and differences between the dalits and the Hindu society. Most importantly, R.S. Khare argues that

[t]he Indian Untouchable, though increasingly estranged from the caste Hindu, continues to share this civilizational framework. But it produces wrenching paradoxes for him in independent India. His radicalism begins to dissipate before it can take a clear direction; his

ambivalences become confounding; his political assertion harbours self-doubts.¹

I argue that the untouchable culture and stigmatised socio-cultural roles assigned for dalits signify both the distinctness of dalits in Hindu society and the paradoxes surrounding the dalits. I feel that a critical understanding of these retrogressive elements will enable dalits to search for a better cultural alternative. My attempt in this chapter to critically understand the untouchable culture and the stigmatised identities of dalits envisages the above stated objective.

First of all, it may be inevitable to ask as to how these Indic civilizational notions produce a paradoxical situation only for dalits. Why haven't the social movements paid attention to resolve these paradoxes and have not assisted dalits to strengthen morally, socially, culturally and politically? Apart from Phule and Iyoothee Thassar who made some significant attempts to address these civilizational anomalies, it is Ambedkar who has meticulously engaged with these "civilizational anomalies" and strived to provide a meaningful way out for dalits from these anomalies. He has not only strengthened them morally but he has also guided them towards egalitarian cultural alternatives. Before going into the details pertaining to Ambedkar's propositions for the emancipation of dalits, let me first elucidate what constitutes the Indic civilizational anomalies with regard to dalits and show how the Indic notions produce wrenching paradoxes for dalits, through my reading of dalit autobiographies.

¹ R. S. Khare's *The Untouchable As Himself: Ideology, identity, and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, xi.

To begin with, in its more recent meanings the word “culture” denotes “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”² Following this conception of culture, in his book, *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*, Chinna Rao Yagati, a Dalit historian, says that when we look at the detailed moorings and the deeper aspects of dalit culture, we find their culture entirely different from Brahminical culture.

As Chinna Rao says there are distinct differences between the Brahminical culture and what he calls the “dalit culture”³. Like Kancha Ilaiah⁴, a dalit bahujan ideologue, Chinna Rao argues that dalits have a distinct culture, beliefs and rituals unrelated to Brahminical Hindu religion. Let me first state the most prevalent distinctions between the Brahminical Hindu culture and the “untouchable culture”.

Dalit rituals, for example, do not require a Brahmin priest and Sanskrit slokas, without which a Hindu ritual is incomplete. Therefore, the religion of the untouchables in its very nature, Chinna Rao argues, is antithetical to the religious

² See Chinna Rao Yagati’s, *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Kanishka, 2007, 122. All the references to Chinna Rao are from this book.

³ My understanding of “dalit culture” is different from Chinna Rao’s. What he describes as “dalit culture” is according to me the “untouchable culture”. My understanding of dalit culture owes much to the anti-caste epistemology and Ambedkarite philosophy. Therefore, I have differentiated it from the “untouchable culture” and discussed it separately in the latter part of this chapter.

⁴ Kancha Ilaiah makes a pioneering attempt in criticizing the brahminical Hindu culture and establishes shudra culture and dalit culture as distinct from the brahminical Hindu culture. Thus Kancha Ilaiah’s *Why I am Not a Hindu* deconstructs the notion of Hindu religion, beliefs and practices of Brahminical Hindu culture.

system of the Hindus, and is devoid of the fundamental aspects of Hindu religious system⁵, hierarchical temple structure, authoritarianism of the priestly class and the domination of male divinities.

Chinna Rao considers the absence of idol-based worship and absence of priestly intervention a distinct feature of dalit religion. He maintains that “though a dalit religious system diametrically antagonistic to the Hindu religion which existed in the past was marginalized and integrated into the mainstream as a result of Aryan imperialism, its distinctness continues to the modern period, maintaining its original beliefs and ideals in their practice as well as folklore” (129). What are the distinct features of dalit religion that continue to exist in the modern period? Does it still remain autonomous or has it got intermeshed with antagonistic elements of Brahminical Hindu religion? What do the occasional ritualistic practices of dalits signify? Does this refurbished dalit religion guide dalits to prosper in life? What do their rituals and beliefs entail? How radical and egalitarian are the gods and goddesses that the dalits worship? How different are they from the Hindu gods and goddesses?

Following Chinna Rao and Kancha Ilaiah, one can undoubtedly notice the apparent differences between Hindu culture and untouchable culture. First and foremost, unlike Hindus, dalits worship their ancestral gods and goddesses.⁶ Dalits

⁵ Chinna Rao explains that until Missionary-sponsored modern education and Babasaheb Ambedkar’s theory of reservation, learning the alphabet has been literally prohibited and reading a book is, therefore, unknown to Dalits. This confirms the fact that religious texts did not at all exist among the Dalits.

⁶ These village goddesses are without any written histories and without any incarnations, e.g., Muthyalamma, the pearl Goddess, Chinnintamma, the goddess who is head of the house, Gangalamma, Polamma and Sunkalamma. Poleramma, the goddess who protects the village, Peddamma, the goddesses of chicken pox were

take their deities along with them wherever they migrate. Thus they continue to worship those deities. Siddalingaiah's autobiography and Baby Kamble's autobiography provide ample examples in this regard.

Siddalingaiah's family, for example, takes their deity along with them when they migrate to other parts of Karnataka. Thus they continue to worship the deities that their ancestors have worshipped. Siddalingaiah says, "Manteswamy is our family deity. We are all his devotees... Manteswamy tradition is not so common in the Magadi region, but it is widespread in Mandya and Mysore districts" (6).⁷ More importantly, he says that Manteswamy is a Holeya by caste. Thus, in his autobiography, *Ooru Keri*, Siddalingaiah shows that dalits have a different lineage of deities, unrelated to the mainstream Hindu gods and goddesses, and that they celebrate different kind of festivals unlike the caste Hindus who celebrate Hindu religious festivals.

Caste Hindus neither celebrate the festivals that dalits celebrate nor do they worship the gods and goddesses related to dalits. However, it appears that as Chinna Rao mentions about dalit religious traditions, traditions such as Manteswamy tradition

common goddesses of every village in the south. They pray to these Goddesses because they keep them secure and protect them. Nobody knows who their husbands are or how they look. Dalits or for that matter any commoner could directly communicate with their goddess without any kind of mediation from the priests. See Chinna Rao Yagati's, *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Kanishka, 2007, 131.

⁷ All the references to Siddalingaiah are from his autobiography, *Ooru Keri*.

are integrated into the mainstream by the Hindus.⁸ As a result, this religious tradition has gone into the control of Hindus.

On the other hand, marginalisation of the pre-modern “dalit religion” that Chinna Rao mentions involves marginalisation of its deities as well. Therefore, unlike the Hindu gods and goddesses, the deities that dalits worship do not have architectural buildings. Unlike the Hindu deities, the dalit deities are stigmatised and therefore they usually find their habitation outside of the village, on the roadside, on canal bridges, under old trees and so on. This means that along with dalits, their deities too have been “outcast” from the Hindu dominated village space.

On the other hand, mainstream pantheon of Hindu gods finds its temples properly built and well maintained in the village for the convenience of the upper caste people. Moreover, these temples are projected as sites of purity; hence the people belonging to the untouchable castes are prohibited entry into these temples.

On the contrary, the gods and goddesses that dalits worship are free of purity-pollution paradigm in which notions of holiness are not attributed either to the place of worship or the “symbols” placed there. The sense of community is more important

⁸ This process of appropriation is a recent phenomenon and it has come as part of the Hindu nationalist political and religious agenda. This process of imposition of Brahminical culture on others is part of Hinduising hitherto non-Hindus, dalits and other ritually and socially stigmatized castes, those who are outside the four-fold Varnadharma of Hinduism. Anti-caste intellectuals oppose this process. Kancha Ilaiah’s famous book, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, belongs to this anti-caste intellectual tradition.

for dalits than the place of worship or symbols. However, these deities are quite unpopular among Hindus. In Siddalingaiah's village, for example, dalits build a small shrine or a temple for a goddess called Mari, in their colony. Except dalits, no one from the village worships this goddess nor do the Hindus show any curiosity to know who this goddess is.

Another defining feature of untouchable culture is "possession". "Possession" is an exclusive domain of the stigmatised communities like dalits. Many dalit autobiographies give a comprehensive account of the custom of "possession". They also delineate superstitious beliefs of dalits, their fears and other retrogressive effects that entail dalit deities. When someone from dalit community gets "possessed" the deities demand the sacrifice of a goat or a sheep or a buffalo, in order to propitiate them. Most of these dalit deities are meat-loving and it is rather easy to appease them. However, various questions pop up in one's mind while reading the narratives of "possession" in dalit autobiographies as to why the custom of "possession" becomes a part of untouchable culture and not there in the Brahminical Hindu culture. What purpose does it serve in untouchable culture? Why do the deities choose ritually "impure" or untouchable women? Are the deities too from an impure clan? Mostly the deities associated with dalit women's "possession" are treated by Hindus as devils or evil spirits.

Having delineated the distinct differences between the Hindu culture and untouchable culture, I will now define what I mean by the term untouchable culture. According to me, untouchable culture is that which accepts dalits' degraded social status as a given and their stigmatization as fate. Unlike Chinna Rao and Kancha

Ilaiah, I argue that untouchable culture is not an autonomous and self-evolved culture because a careful examination of its features makes clear that it is indeed an ascriptive culture like the ascriptive identities of dalits in Hindu society. There is ample evidence in dalit autobiographies to substantiate my argument.

Continuation of the social degradation of dalits, I argue, is also because of dalits' uncritical acceptance of the ascriptive untouchable cultural traditions as their own cultural legacy. Consider, for example, "Matangi", "Potraj", and "Jogini" traditions. It appears that in order to humiliate dalits these traditions have been deliberately imposed on them by the Brahminical society.

What makes me think that these traditions are Brahminical impositions?

Dominant caste Hindus applaud the father of the dalit girl who is married to the local deity. They provide monetary and other livelihood support for the parents of such dalit girls who are made "Devadasis" and "Joginis". As Baby Kamble discusses in her autobiography conservative dalits⁹ believe that these traditions are part of their cultural legacy and consider the marriage of young dalit girls with the local god a rare privilege.

⁹ As a response to Ambedkar's call for dalits to abandon the stigmatized social and cultural practices, the dalits in Baby Kamble's village debate the issue of devoting dalit girls and boys to the village gods in the name of "Matang" and "Potraj". The conservative dalits who believe in purity-pollution ideology and untouchable subordination passionately argue in favour of those practices and the Ambedkarites oppose those practices on the rational grounds. The conservative dalits maintain that those traditions have been handed down by their ancestors and, more importantly, they say that renouncing them will cause harm to the village. At last, the rationalist Ambedkarite dalits succeed in stopping those practices.

Even “Potraj” tradition as part of which dalit boys are devoted to local gods in Maharashtra has strong economic reasons behind it. Dalits look up to the Potraj as he is seen as someone who shoulders the responsibility of feeding his family. Even here, the parents of the potrajas are appreciated and seen as the blessed ones. These traditions are first and foremost superstitious and subject dalit communities to humiliation and their women to the worst kind of sexual exploitation.

Having assessed the consequences resulting from these traditions, Ambedkar has advocated dalits to stop indulging in all of those maligning practices. Therefore, it is only after the emergence of the Ambedkarite movement that dalits’ beliefs about “Matangi”, “Potraj”, “Jogini” and many such socially imposed superstitious cultural practices, have begun to change and became a subject of serious debate in the dalit counter-public.

As I have mentioned in the context of “Devadasi” and “Potraj” traditions, one of the reasons as to why dalits have become the scapegoats in Hindu society is due to their unending dependence on dominant caste Hindus for livelihood purposes. Material deprivation, caste Hindu coercion and superstitious beliefs are significant reasons for dalits’ lack of resistance to such dehumanising traditions. Another pertinent reason for it is internalization of purity-pollution ideology. Internalization of this ideology misleads dalits to think of these traditions as their own and so to think that it is their duty or *dharma* to keep those traditions alive. The tone in which the illiterate dalits endorse the “Devdasi” system is a good example. They also think that it is part of their *dharma* to serve the village and guard the Hindus from evil spirits. It

is this sentiment that leads them to take pride in serving the Hindus in any which way even if it robs them of their dignity and basic human qualities.

Thus untouchable culture promotes ignorance, superstitions and more importantly dalits' servitude. It is for these reasons that Hindus encourage dalits to uphold the untouchable customs. Moreover, these customs act in compliance with Brahminical Hindu supremacy. They indoctrinate dalits with the feeling that Hindus are superior to dalits and so they must treat them as masters. Thus the ignorance of dalits, their dependence on Hindus for material needs and indoctrination of Brahminical ideas make dalits willing slaves to the Hindus. Therefore, the caste Hindus unfailingly keep a strict vigilance on dalits' behaviour in public domain.

I will discuss a few instances from dalit autobiographies to show how caste-Hindus impose their superior social status over dalits and also discuss the ways in which dalits have been relegated to the sub-human status in a predominantly Hindu society.

Markers of Servitude

Untouchability is an important factor that marks dalits' servitude in caste Hindu society. There are several ways in which untouchability is brought into effect. One way it is effectively enforced is through prohibition of dalits' entry into dominant caste space—private and public. In order to restrict dalits to the exterior there will be an elevated platform or threshold before each caste Hindu household in villages. As Gopal Guru says: "The dominant caste homes are designed with a double purpose of

providing a secluding interior to confine their women within it, and an exterior to keep the dalits outside.”¹⁰ If dalits have to enter the premises of dominant caste houses, they must stand in the courtyard and announce their arrival.¹¹ Dalits are thus subjected to untouchability in the dominant caste spaces. The most common site of such recurrent humiliation in villages is a caste Hindu shop. When dalits go to grocery shops in the village they are supposed to stand in the courtyard and beg the shopkeeper to sell them what they want. Baby Kamble, for example, presents a detailed account of a Mahar woman’s plight thus:

Standing in the courtyard, keeping a distance from the shopkeeper, she would pull her pallav over her face and then, using the most reverential and polite terms of address, she would beg him with utmost humility to sell her the things she wanted. “Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin?” The shopkeeper’s children would be trickling out into the courtyard for their morning ablutions. He would give the innocent children lessons in social behaviour, “Chabu, hey you, can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t

¹⁰ Gopal Guru’s “Afterword” in Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 166. All the references to Baby Kamble and Gopal Guru are from this book.

¹¹ Almost all dalit autobiographies describe this humiliating routine in some detail. Bama mentions how the Naicker women make her grandmothers stand away from the threshold and drop the leftover food into their baskets across the drainage. Urmila Pawar delineates how she is made to stand for several minutes outside the Brahmin pickle vendor’s house. Not only the homes but the shops also construct an elevated platform in front of the shops so that dalits are restricted to the exterior. Aravind Malagatti and Siddalingaiah discuss their experiences of untouchability at the dominant caste shops. Malagatti is never allowed to climb up the steps to check if the merchant is not cheating him. The merchant tosses the things into Malagatti’s shirt from the entrance. When he misses to catch them they fall in the dust.

you touch her. Keep your distance.” Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, “Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.” The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav, which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him! (14)

The Mahar woman’s body is a site of contempt for caste Hindus.¹² Not only is she supposed to stand away from the threshold but she must also take all the care not to let the children of the shopkeeper touch her body in order to avoid the children being “polluted”. The purity-pollution ideology leads dalits to self-hate and endless compromises. It compels dalits to take moral responsibility to announce their stigmatized social identity and get out of the path of a caste Hindu like how the Mahar woman at the shop does. Hinduism thus holds dalits accountable for the caste Hindu callousness.

It should be noted that the permeability of the practice of untouchability is strikingly enormous. The interface between dalits and caste Hindus is marked with untouchability. Wherever dalits encounter dominant castes they must get away from the path in order to avoid dominant caste person being “polluted” by the shadow of

¹² Urmila Pawar mentions in her autobiography how illiterate shudra labour women look at Mahar women disdainfully while walking on the road. Even though the shudra women too are poor and illiterate like the Mahar women they look down upon Mahar women and practice untouchability.

the dalits. Baby Kamble says, “When somebody from the (upper) castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside” (52).

Another important aspect of dalit servitude is dalits’ body language in public sphere. The folded body language of dalits in the public spaces in villages denotes their degraded social status and submission to dominant caste hegemony. Dalits have to keep their bodies folded before dominant caste people as a sign of their humble submission to the social and ritualistic authority of the dominant castes. As Baby Kamble describes while walking on the road Mahar women have to “cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52). Baby Kamble says that this is like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times, even to a small child if it belongs to a higher caste. This is a village custom and all dalits must oblige. If someone fails to do so the entire dalit community will have to face the wrath of dominant caste people. If a new bride who is ignorant of such a custom does not behave in the stipulated manner, the dominant caste person, Baby Kamble says, “would march straight to the Mahar chawdi, summon all the Mahars there and kick up a big fuss. ‘Who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she passes me without showing due respect?’ ” (52-53). Then the girl’s father-in-law and other elderly people from the community would fall at the dominant caste man’s feet in utter supplication and beg for mercy. After repeated

pleas and asking forgiveness the dominant caste man would warn them not to transgress their limits again.¹³

Thus even the new bride's ignorance can cause harm to dalits. They cannot afford to be ignorant of such customs. Not showing due respect to the dominant caste people is considered a crime in villages. Not only in Maharashtra but in other places also dalits are supposed to follow a certain kind of body language when they encounter dominant caste people in public spaces. Siddalingaiah, for example, narrates how he has been taught to salute the dominant caste people. Whenever he encounters them he would bow down before them and say, "Namaskara Swamy". Thus the caste Hindus strictly enforce the practice of untouchability and demeaning social identity of dalits through some of these customs and codes of body language. Dalits are threatened of punishment if they do not conform to the purity-pollution ideology.

It is inevitable to ask then—What makes dalits accept their ascribed demeaning social status and behave subserviently before the dominant castes? How far does dalits' dependence on dominant castes for food and work subject them to such humiliation?

¹³ The dominant caste person reprimands them saying thus: "It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn't it?...What do you take us for? Are we Mahars like you or do you take us for naïve children? Daring to pass by me without bowing! Think twice before doing any such thing again!" (Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 53.) Siddalingaiah's grandmother also begs forgiveness when Siddalingaiah, in his childhood, accidentally touches a dominant caste man on the road.

Dalits' dependence on dominant caste people is a structural one. Dalits are structurally tied up with dominant caste people in village set up economically, culturally and socially. Dalits' dependence on the dominant castes for the leftover food and other livelihood sources seems to subject the dalits to perpetual submission to the dominant castes. Illiterate dalits who believe in the traditional Brahminical belief system tend to believe that it is part of their *dharma* (duty) to be subservient to the Hindus at the cost of their self-respect. The in-laws of the new bride, for example, reinforce their faith in the supremacy of dominant caste by brainwashing her thus: "They are our masters, do you understand? We must behave according to our custom, that's our religion!" (Kamble 54) What kind of customs and religion are they that support dalits' dehumanization? Have they been self-made or ascribed? I think that untouchable customs have been mostly ascribed than self-made. They appear more like conditions for dalits' survival in villages. These customs, I think, reflect Brahminical imposition of a "social pact" between dalits and dominant caste Hindus. I believe that Dalits' subservience is due to their material deprivation and the untouchable customs.

It has been both the materialistic reasons and the untouchable customs that contribute or influence dalits' social behaviour and servitude in society. Untouchable customs endorse dominant caste supremacy, purity-pollution ideology and dalits' servitude. They cannot motivate dalits to fight for freedom and self-respect. It appears that the untouchable customs are by design incapable of questioning dominant caste oppression of dalits. Therefore, I argue that caste Hindu supremacy and untouchable culture are not in conflict with each other but they are rather in consonance with each other. Let us see the consequences of this confluence on dalits.

As a consequence of this confluence, dalits tend to internalise purity-pollution ideology and believe in their degraded social status and dominant caste supremacy. The basis for dalits' demeaning body language in public space lies in the untouchable culture that approves of dalits' demeaning social status. For example, the moment the Yeskar Mahar¹⁴ enters the feudal space, he bends his back in honour of the upper caste and rings a bell to announce his arrival in the public sphere. In his "Afterword" to Baby Kamble's autobiography, Gopal Guru argues that the "public space" has a diminishing impact on the Yeskar Mahar. He says, "Mahar's body begins to undergo painful compression because the public sphere is occupied by the upper caste presence, both physical and metaphysical. The Mahar is possessed by the fear of the upper caste, who keeps scaring him even if the latter is not physically present in the public sphere" (165). Dalits participation in the traditional village duties thus results in depletion of dalits' moral capacity to assert their dignity in public sphere.

Baby Kamble says that the higher castes have created an illusion among the Mahars that the Yeskar's stick is like a royal staff. Each Yeskar, she says, considers this stick as a mark of honour for his family. Yeskar duty and Yeskar stick are symbols of honour in untouchable culture and society. All the Mahar families share the Yeskar duty every year. The family with sixteenth share, for instance, becomes the Yeskar Mahar for six months and the remaining months of the year would be divided among other families. Baby Kamble says: "The next man receives the stick with great

¹⁴ Yeskar Mahar is both an embodiment of untouchability, social degradation in public space and a symbol of status in dalit space. Yeskar Mahar is supposed to serve the caste Hindus in village and accept leftover food and carcasses as payment for his services. Yeskar Mahar holds a stick with a bell attached to it and wears a black blanket as a marker of his identity. Similarly, Mahar women are identified by the copper bangles that they are forced to wear as sign of their Mahar identity.

pride. His wife would worship it with haldi and kumkum and pray to it with folded hands (77).” Yeskar duty is thus considered an important aspect of untouchable culture. In this manner, dalits worship the symbols of their stigmatization and humiliation.

If Yeskar Mahar’s stick and black blanket indicate his stigmatized and degraded social status in caste Hindus space, they indicate respectful position in Maharwada. I think it is because of the positive cultural image of the Yeskar Mahar in untouchable culture that, “[t]he Maharwada would give him the confidence to use his black blanket, which he would use for collecting leftover food, like the black attire of a modern barrister.”¹⁵ Gopal Guru further says that “[t]he moment he entered the maharwada, his chest would swell with pride. He would twirl his moustache and clear his throat as if he was a very important man. His voice changes from infrasonic to supersonic” (165). Thus the untouchable customs endorse practices, attitudes and behaviour patterns that need to be condemned in a civilized society.

But, does all of this indicate dalits’ “cultural consensus” regarding practices emanating from the purity-pollution ideology in Hinduism? Or, can we see this as an ascribed social and cultural phenomenon? Apparently, it seems there is a consensus among the dalits about their subordinate status in the village. But this “consensus” is forced upon dalits. It signifies dalits’ helplessness and fear of the loss of livelihood resources and social ostracism from the village. It does not signify the total approval of the caste system and Hindu culture. However, some scholars like Louis Dumont

¹⁵ See Gopal Guru’s Afterword in Baby Kamble’s, *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 165.

and Michael Moffat have interpreted the internalization of purity-pollution ideology and acceptance of dalits' subordinate status as cultural consensus. There is caste hierarchy among dalits too but even the topmost dalit caste does not expect or command this kind of subservient behaviour from their subordinate castes. I argue that this "consensus" is out of fear but not out of respect for such a system.

Ghan Shyam Shah, a social scientist, maintains that scholars who follow the "culturological structure-function paradigm" assert that dalits share "cultural consensus" with upper-caste Hindus. A prominent scholar in this area, Louis Dumont, argues that hierarchy can be apprehended as a positive value and therefore it could be satisfying for actors throughout the system, even for those at the bottom.¹⁶ Following this theoretical framework, Michael Moffat argues:

Untouchables do not necessarily possess distinctly different social and cultural forms as a result of their position in the system. They do not possess a separate subculture. They are not detached or alienated from the "rationalization" of the system... They recreate among themselves the entire set of institutions and ranked relations from which they have been excluded by the higher castes by reason of their extreme lowness. Replication is a stronger indicator of cultural consensus than complementarity, since it operates within the

¹⁶ See Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007, 26.

untouchable subset of castes, where the power of the higher castes does not directly operate.¹⁷

It is important to remember that Brahminical culture justifies and defends the caste system for its benefit and to the others' detriment. In order to suppress resistance to it, it imposes the hegemonic values on dalits in various ways. One way in which it does this with regard to dalits is by bringing a confluence between the hegemonic Hindu culture and the untouchable culture. A careful examination of the untouchable culture helps trace the consequences of such a confluence. Instead of looking at this confluence as an imposition from the above, some scholars have understood it as the "cultural consensus". The "Cultural consensus" theory fails to distinguish between the forms of hegemonic impositions and the distinct characteristics of anti-caste cultural traditions among dalits and other marginalised groups.¹⁸

We must note that foreign scholars who observe and study Indian caste system come to understand the system and its diverse practices in an overtly objective or abstract manner. They come to study the "field" having been informed by an already existing body of knowledge on Indian social structure and its institutions which rationalise the caste system.¹⁹ Some feel, therefore, that the caste system is a unique

¹⁷ Quoted in Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007, 26.

¹⁸ Read Gail Omvedt's *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2008, for a comprehensive understanding of the alternate cultural traditions.

¹⁹ Anti-caste intellectuals like Phule and Ambedkar have pointed out the distortions in the mainstream knowledge domain and Indian history. They have reinterpreted the social institutions, Indian history and culture differently. The mainstream theories and studies on caste system do not take these anti-caste intellectuals' reinterpretations or reconstructions of Indian history into consideration while understanding the ancient

institution that has the “consensus” of all castes and “rationalization” at various levels of the stratified social system. This observation has been held up by many scholars as they have viewed, among the lower castes, the operation of “the entire set of institutions and ranked relations from which they have been excluded by the higher castes by reason of extreme lowness”,²⁰ as a replication by conscience and choice.

This view is rather contentious and it has already been contested by some social scientists like Robert Diliege, Kathleen Gough and Joan Mencher. We need to recognize the phenomenon of “replication” of the social gradation as an intractable imposition of the system on the lower castes by the ruling caste elite as it is essential for the caste system to survive and manage the subordinate groups without much difficulty because such a phenomenon would restrain any kind of resistance to the caste hegemony. It appears that the studies on “cultural consensus” theory have not taken history of resistance to the Brahminical caste hierarchy into cognizance.

Therefore, some scholars hold “the consensus theory to be a view from above.” Robert Diliege, Kathleen Gough and Joan Mencher, contest the “consensus theory” and provide us with a much larger picture of the subject and argue that the untouchable communities do not support the rationalization of inequities and of the

and modern Indian history and the caste system. In this dissertation, I have drawn insights from the anti-caste epistemology, in order to understand caste system and its institutions. This would inevitably mean a proper understanding of the nature of dalits’ submission and resistance to the brahminical caste system. Therefore, I make a critical evaluation of some of the mainstream theories (on caste system) which influence the understanding of dalit emancipation.

²⁰ Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007, 26.

fate of the soul after death. Above all, as Joan Mencher argues “those at the bottom of the hierarchy have less need to rationalize its inequities.”²¹

Moreover, the dominant caste monopoly of natural resources, wealth, knowledge and power threatens dalits to behave in accordance with the Hindu social and cultural ethos. Consequently, dalits have been relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy and remain perennially dependent on the mercy of the caste Hindus for their survival. It is this fear, helplessness and deprivation that forces dalits to emulate the dominant castes despite the fact that it imposes systemic violence on dalits. Dalit autobiographies testify this fact.

The material deprivation and the systemic humiliation of dalits shape the untouchable culture. This is one of the main reasons as to why the untouchable culture does not motivate dalits to revolt against the Hindu social and cultural ethos. It encourages dalits to be subservient to Hindus and to perpetually depend on the Hindus for their livelihood. Consequently, dalits have been subjected to social stigma and relegated to dehumanising physical and mental conditions. Among the several markers that indicate dalits' subjection to slavery, their acceptance of the leftovers (be it clothes, food or anything), due to their poverty, from the dominant castes is the most significant one. Offering the leftover food to dalits is culturally built into the caste system and the same has made way into the untouchable customs in villages.

²¹ For more details on this subject see Ghan Shyam Shah's introduction in *Dalit Identity and Politics*.

Balutedar system²² in Maharashtra and *jajmani* system in North India are classic examples in this regard.

These systems of enslavement make dalits servile and fasten them to the charity of dominant castes. According to these systems, each dalit family has to have a pact with a dominant caste family to carry out both domestic and agricultural work. For doing such tasks, dalits will be paid with leftovers— either it is leftover food at homes or leftover grains in the agricultural fields of the landlords. Baby Kamble writes of this in her autobiography:

In the morning, the Mahars would have to go once again to sweep the pandal clean. Again the leftover food from the previous night would be given to them. The dal, the sweet puran and other things would have been spoilt by this time. Yet Mahar women would carry this home in huge clay pots placed over their heads and eat it somehow. (77)

Begging for leftover food is not confined only to Maharashtra. Aravind Malagatti, Omprakash Valmiki and Bama also describe the prevalence of such practices in other parts of the country. Escape from this practice seems impossible unless dalits renounce the untouchable customs and revolt against the Hindu oppressive social order. For example, even though Urmila Pawar's father has hated

²² In the *Balutedar* system, dalits are entitled only to cast off clothes or the cloth that is used for wrapping the corpse. Stale bakris, dead animals are given away to the Mahar of the sixteenth share or a *Yeskar* Mahar. The house of the Mahar of the sixteenth share buzzes with activity. The dried meat strips are brought inside the house and stacked in heaps. Women would spend the day drying the meat pieces.

this begging tradition and moved to the city in search of self-respect, his elder son's family who continues to stay in village does not escape this systemic humiliation.

However, it must be noted that dalits who consciously distance themselves from the untouchable culture tend to search for avenues of freedom, autonomy and equality while others who repose faith in the untouchable culture tend to suffer the age-old humiliation and oppression.

Just as the Hindu religion deprives dalits of social security and material well being, the untouchable culture too deprives them of the moral courage to fight against the social and political injustice. It will not be an exaggeration to say that dalits survive in the village because they do not question the Hindu culture and the hegemonic village norms.²³ Dalits live a dehumanized life in villages depending on the mercy of the landlords' families for food and livelihood. They live there as if they are outsiders, undeserving of wealth, respect and humanity. In other words, caste Hindus live like masters and dalits live like slaves.²⁴

²³ In Urmila Pawar's autobiography, we come across an instance where a dominant caste person washes his cattle in the water canal meant for dalits' drinking water. Dalits come to know of this and some of them get infuriated but due to lack of courage to question the dominant caste people, they keep quiet and agree to forget what has happened. One of the fears lurking in their minds if they make it an issue is social ostracism. See Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, Kolkata: Stree, 200, 85. This fear is very common for dalits and it applies to all dalit communities across the country. Even though, Ambedkar has led the historic Mahad satyagraha to transform this fear into resistance and politicized dalits' right to natural resources and went to the extent of winning the legal battle on this issue, as many of the dalit autobiographies show, dalits still suffer from the prohibition of access to the water resources in villages.

²⁴ It is for this reason that Ambedkar has advocated dalits to evict villages and migrate to cities where they can experience certain degree of anonymity and freedom.

A Critical Evaluation of Untouchable Cultural Traditions

Some of the major fallouts of the most demeaning untouchable cultural traditions that subject dalits to structural humiliation are the Potraj and Devadasi systems. Baby Kamble describes in her autobiography both the Potraj and Devadasi traditions, which bring disrespect to dalit self.²⁵ During the Ambedkarite movement, a mass mobilization against this system takes place. Among the dalits themselves arise differences of opinion on the elimination of the Devadasi system. Conservative Mahars oppose the efforts to demobilize common dalit masses from this system. The conservative Mahars, who have internalised the values of the caste system and purity-pollution ideology, defend the system by elevating it spiritually and taking pride in this tradition. They argue that marriage of a dalit girl with the God is a rare privilege, while the Ambedkarite Mahars argue that this elevation is a reduction of a human being to the worst form of exploitation.²⁶

This system is still in practice in remote areas of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Aravind Malagatti describes the plight of the young dalit girls whose lives are ruined by the dehumanising Jogini system in Karnataka. To ritualise and to mobilise social consent for the Jogini system, the jogini women are made to practise the ritual of begging twice every week in the village. Thus, the women in these

²⁵ In the Devadasi system, young dalit girls are married either to a god or goddess. This ritual gives a social sanction for the sexual exploitation of these girls by the caste Hindus of the village. In the Potraj tradition, the eldest boys from dalit families are devoted to the village deity. These boys are trained to beg from higher castes by going from house to house. They are taught the craft of begging while playing dimdi, a musical instrument and praising the higher castes.

²⁶ For a critical evaluation of the changes in dalit culture see Gopal Guru's "Afterword" to Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008.

traditions are condemned to subsist on begging and subjected to the worst kind of sexual exploitation.

Potraj tradition is another dehumanising tradition imposed on Mahars in Maharashtra. Potrajas²⁷ are legitimate beggars who go around begging from village to village. The eldest sons in Mahar families would be offered to the village deity as “potrajas”. “To offer the son as *vaghya* or *potraja* is considered a great honour and prestige for the family,” says Baby Kamble (19). What would the potrajas do? What sort of recognition and respect do they enjoy in villages? The fact that only dalit communities offer their children as devadasis, joginis and potrajas proves that these traditions are social impositions on dalits. But why do illiterate dalits in remote areas sacrifice their children to these dehumanising traditions?

As Baby Kamble says, “For Mahar families, giving away the child in the service of the deity would sort out the problem of earning a livelihood. It was like making a provision for generations to come.” (19) Thus there is an element of poverty too involved in the illiterate dalits’ acceptance of these traditions. Apart from this, there is a huge hype created around the Jogini, Devadasi and Potraj customs.²⁸ Let me show in some detail as to how these customs are ritualised and surrounded with a lot

²⁷ Like the women in the Jogini tradition are called jogathis, those men who are ritualistically devoted to the village deity are called potrajas.

²⁸ Potrajas are decorated in a specific style. The father of the child would teach his son how to carry on his head the *devhara*; how to dance, bend and revolve balancing its weight; and how to sing the prayer to the mother goddess; how to conduct the *dhupa arti*, beating the brass ring worn on his thumb to keep rhythm. For a detailed description of this tradition, see Baby Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, Chennai: Orient Longman, 2008, 19-21.

of hype as if these are symbols of honour. In her autobiography, Baby Kamble delineates how Potrajas are trained and respected among dalit communities.

The child's training in the "art" of being a Potraja would begin when he is seven years of age. The first Tuesday in Ashadh is chosen to initiate the son into the ritual. The relatives, Baby Kamble writes, "gazed upon the child, now become a potraja, with eyes brimming with admiration and love. Among the Mahars, there was great respect for the boy who became potraja. Mothers would show the "child-potraja" as a role model for their young sons" (21). A demeaning tradition such as this and the Yeskar Mahar duty have been valorized and followed by dalits as a special "privilege" and "honour" until Ambedkar has deconstructed such demeaning cultural practices and advocated dalits to stop such practices.

These untouchable cultural traditions and rituals have made the emancipatory goal of dalits even more difficult as they prevent dalits to unite against Hinduism. More importantly, they have helped contain dalits within the Hindu fold by making them participate in the festivals. Urmila Pawar's narrative of the celebration of Holi comes to mind in this regard. Mahars participate in this festival very enthusiastically. The main reason for their participation was that Mahars too have a role to play in the preparations for the festival.

Indeed the festival preparations begin with Mahars. It is considered the duty of the Mahars to go to the forest and bring the stem of a tree to plant in front of the village temple. Their role ends with bringing the log to the temple from the forest. The rest of the preparations would be carried out by the caste Hindus of the village.

Even though Mahars have such a limited role in the festival preparations, Mahars consider it a big honour for their community. Nowhere in the latter part of the preparations are Mahars allowed to participate and the caste Hindus take over the entire celebrations. They remain mute spectators of the rest of the celebrations. Mahars are kept away from pulling the *ratham*, God's carrier. They are made to sit far away from the caste Hindus when dramas on Hindu mythology are performed in the village, during the festival celebrations. Notwithstanding the humiliation meted out to Mahars in the festival, they again "participate" with equal degree of enthusiasm in the next year's celebrations.

What we find in this festival is an unequal participation of different castes and the social discrimination of dalits. Thus the Hindu festivals render the traditional social practices legitimate and uphold the Brahminical ideology. What kind of an honour is there in bringing the logs from forest? Indeed, in the name of honour, the social roles and caste stigma are "ritualized". Thus the Hindu rituals and festivals publicly humiliate or dishonour dalits by making them do the demeaning acts.

Another act of public humiliation and dishonour is in making dalit women exhibit the upper part of their body in public. A festival called *Okuli* has been celebrated in Karnataka. Describing this custom in his autobiography titled, *Government Brahmana*, Malagatti says: "There are interesting equations between the traditions of the village and the traditions of the untouchables. These equations work to the detriment of dalits and to the advantage of others" (42).²⁹ In the guise of having

²⁹ All the references to Aravind Malagatti are from his autobiography, *Government Brahmana*.

given a role to the dalits in the affairs of the village, they put their lives in a fix—like areca nuts placed between the twin blades of a cutter—and slice them up. Opinions of dalit women are divided regarding the *Okuli* like the opinion of dalit men about the Devadasi system in Maharashtra. Some women feel elated while others don't. In this festival, Malagatti says

[d]alit women had to remove their blouses and wear andugachche, a lower garment worn above the kneecaps, hemmed tightly and tucked into the waist band. A sari was worn to cover the waist and the loose end of it was used to cover the head. These women had to hold several long branches of the lakky tree... standing opposite these women were non-dalit and non-brahmin men, who also wore andugachches and had a big sack waterproofed with sticky raala and sere on their shoulders. This group usually comprised the notorious elements of the village... the men filled their sacks with yellow-and- red-coloured water and splashed it with force on the women. The women were expected to dodge and beat up the men with the long canes they held in their hands. This was a sort of traditional sport. As the men splashed coloured water on the women repeatedly, the women chased them to take revenge, not bothering about their wet bodies and loose end of their sari falling down from their heads. Their wet bodies, breasts and thighs—all bared to give free entertainment to the lecherous audience and the lustful players. (42-43)

Malagatti says that the numerous decrepit pits around the temples in his village will stand witnesses to the past glories of *Okuli* even today. He observes that the villagers believe that *Okuli* has to be celebrated every year. Otherwise, there would be no rain — crops would be infested with pests and the village would be plagued by diseases and *Shani*. Malagatti opines that the dalit men and women who fear these superstitions, would fall prey to them in the name of tradition. When Malagatti narrates this tradition to his friend, who was doing a Ph. D., he brings another tradition prevailing in his village to Malagatti's notice. It is a game like *Okuli*. Even here, dalit women are necessary, and the game has to be held before Hanumantha, the bachelor god. Malagatti describes it in his autobiography:

In this game both male and female had to be nude and dance together. Following this the female had to sit on the male's shoulders, peel a plantain and put it into his mouth. When the male tried to bite it she had to pull it away. Both of them would lick the plantain and later it would be eaten up by the upper caste male. This was a significant aspect of this tradition. (44)

All these aspects of untouchable culture point out how dalits have been forced to take pride in the demeaning social roles and, paradoxically, they are thus encouraged to celebrate the public nudity of dalit women as sexual objects. These traditions expose dalit women to more risks and vulnerabilities. These traditions cater to dominant caste men's lust for dalit women's bodies. I argue that Dalits' humiliation is thus structurally built into the caste system. To put it differently, these negative roles symbolise dalits' subjection to humiliation in Hinduism.

Another tradition that is equally dangerous or detrimental to dalit women is “possession”. It is widely believed that a truly “possessed” woman will not bother about her actual physical conditions. Therefore, being unmindful of their clothes, where they are and what they are doing, dalit women tend to get “possessed” with spirits and dance in public.

As many authors have shown in the dalit autobiographies, generally ghosts “possess” women more than men. And this ritualised facade of “possession” gets repeated quite often in dalit streets as many of the “possessed” women belong to dalit communities. From the very early days Dalit children witness “possession” and they get quite excited when they watch this drama. Baby Kamble says, “We kids used to rush from place to place to see women getting possessed. It wasn’t an ordinary thing, getting possessed. The screams would be heard from a long distance” (22).

The entire drama of dalit women’s possession gets further animated with the Potraja’s rhythmic beating of his dimdi, a musical instrument! That would arouse curiosity and create a commotion in dalit streets. Why do “untouchables” entertain such a regressive tradition? It seems the spirit that “possesses” Mahar women demands them to offer their male children to the god as “Potraja”. Thus these untouchable customs cause a lot of harm to dalit women and rivet dalit communities to superstitious thinking and make them victims of stigmatization.

Whatever may be the reason for Dalit women’s “possession”, it serves the purpose of Brahminical social agenda quite well. Not only do the untouchable cultural traditions prove detrimental to untouchable communities but the dominant castes

make use of these traditions to stigmatize and dehumanize dalits. These superstitions keep the “untouchables” under perpetual ignorance and social servility and aid the Brahmins and other “twice-born” jatis to exploit them.

There may be several factors that incite or provoke dalit women’s “possession”— their poverty, sexual exploitation, humiliation, oppression, domestic violence, frustration, hunger and so on. This superstition has continued in Maharashtra until Ambedkar has awakened the dalits from the superstitions. Ambedkar appeals to dalit women to stop being obsessed about the superstitions.³⁰ Instead, he asks them to take the responsibility of sending their children to school so that they can pioneer a new beginning for dalit future. Thus Ambedkar initiates a cultural transformation among dalit communities.

Having been exposed to Ambedkarite philosophy, dalit writers are beginning to deconstruct these traditions so as to condemn them and produce an incisive critique of the age-old untouchable cultural traditions. Baby Kamble, for instance, critically analyses the untouchable customs and rituals performed by the Mahar community. Being aware of the dehumanising conditions of Mahars resulting from Hinduism, Baby Kamble records her annoyance with them in her autobiography thus:

Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their
garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest

³⁰ Following Ambedkar’s message, dalit writers have been writing against the untouchable cultural practices which are otherwise being flaunted by others as signs of Indian social and cultural diversity.

conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts. For our poor helpless women, the haldi-kumkum in their tiny boxes was more important than even a mine full of jewels. We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on. And yet no one tried to understand us. Our minds somehow kept on hoping against the hope—that we too would be able to live like the upper castes, that we also would be able to enjoy wealth like the Patil's wife and practice the same rituals as them. But when our very bodies were considered worthless, who was going to spare a thought about our minds? (18).

As Baby Kamble points out, dalits tend to believe that they could achieve higher social status and respectability through the emulation of dominant caste rituals and habits. Thus the untouchable culture stands in compliance with Brahminical Hindu hegemony. All that it seeks to achieve most of the time is caste Hindu sympathy and charity which amounts to leaving enough room for the Hindus to humiliate and exploit dalits.

Turning Point: Emergence of Dalit Culture

Ambedkar's anti-caste movement gives rise to a rebellious dalit culture. Dalit culture is fundamentally opposite to the untouchable culture, hence, it defies deity-centric rituals, untouchability, purity-pollution ideology, ascriptive caste identities, and brahminism.

In the following few pages, I will describe the moment of transition from the regressive untouchable culture to the self-asserting dalit culture effected through Ambedkar.

In order to enlighten dalits, Ambedkar himself tours across Maharashtra in the 1930s and the 40s. In one of the meetings organised at Jejuri, a pilgrimage of god Khandoba, Ambedkar makes the following appeal to Mahars who have come to the jatra. Baby Kamble recounts Ambedkar's speech thus:

'My brothers and sisters, all you folks, including the old men, women and children who have come to Jejuri from far off places. You walked barefoot for eight to ten days to get here. While on the way, you were tired, your feet ached,...yet you kept on walking and finally reached Jejuri. Why? Because you wanted to see your family deity Khandoba. But tell me, did Khandoba see you?... Did he see your suffering?...Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return from this god?' (64)

Ambedkar's speech creates a shock among the Mahars as they do not expect to hear any such criticism on their household god, that too from a person of their own community. Ambedkar appeals to the dalit women to give up the superstitions and take up the role educating their children. He says: "Our women have had a major role in being superstitious, but I'm sure they will now give up these superstitions and take

a lead in educating their children. They will have the honour of being the first to take this step forward. Let all our women take this step.”(65). Ambedkar’s tells them to discard all such customs that strengthen their ignorance. He asks them to stop eating carcasses and stop cleaning the filth of the village.

Having made them think critically about the traditional caste duties and superstitions, Ambedkar asks dalits to part with the superstitious caste beliefs and think about new ways of living. He says:

From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The results will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. (65)

After listening to Ambedkar’s speech, “the young activists, under the influence of Babasaheb’s ideas, started enrolling their children in schools en masse,” Baby Kamble says (106). People begin to discuss and disseminate Ambedkar’s message to their counterparts in the villages. With a lot of vigour and enthusiasm they go on repeating to people about educating all Mahar children and reforming the community. Mahars take the lead in parting with the untouchable customs and asserting their human dignity.

After listening to Ambedkar, Urmila Pawar's father-in-law, for instance, has vowed never to perform the traditional *Mharki* duties. Urmila Pawar, in her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, writes that "[t]his probably was at the root of his sense of self-respect" (159). Thus the untouchable customs have been renounced in Maharashtra after Ambedkar's repeated appeals to the dalits.

Ambedkar thus motivates dalits to revolt against the stigmatised caste duties and to eradicate the untouchable cultural traditions. Ambedkar's ideas could radically transform dalit lives and guide dalits towards freedom and an autonomous dalit culture which is fundamentally opposed to the Hindu beliefs and customs. Such a transformation marks the emergence of dalit culture not only in Maharashtra but also in other states. Dalits have achieved this transformation through various methods, viz. through religious conversion, through embracing modernity, migration to cities, so on and so forth. It should be noted that dalit culture is in a state of transition and it is yet incomplete. To mark the areas of change in dalit lives and in their culture, I will describe a few instances that reflect the distinctness of dalit culture.

As part of this transformation towards a distinct dalit culture, dalits in Maharashtra begin to celebrate Ambedkar's Jayanthi on the day of the traditional Hindu New Year. Dalits declare that they would not celebrate *Gudhi Padva*, the traditional Hindu New Year; instead, they resolve to celebrate 14th April as the day of their new year. Baby Kamble says that on this day, dalits would buy new clothes, clean their houses, decorate their courtyards with rangoli, cook *puran poli*, a sweet dish, and invite people from all the eighty-four villages for a festive lunch. Different kinds of musical instruments would be played on this day and in the evening bullock-

carts would be decorated with Ambedkar's photograph in front of the carts. Baby Kamble described one such occasion thus: "A band – the halgi, lezim and ghumki troupes – walked in front of the cart with the khaki-clad boys following behind. The visitors followed them. The procession passed through the town and people watched it in stunned surprise" (112).

Overwhelming presence of the guests in the dalit-street and in procession reflects a jatra in Phaltan town. People of Mahar community begin to work with "one voice and one mind" as Baby Kamble expresses. That is why, she thinks "the entire community grew in strength. One body with one soul!" (113). The invited speakers from the cities would address the community where local participants too would share their feelings and thoughts on the changes taking place in the dalit community. The school-going Mahar children would enthusiastically come up on the dais and sing songs against the gods that they have previously worshipped in ignorance and praises would be showered on Ambedkar. Mahars believe that it is "Ambedkar who finally breathed life into the lifeless statues, the Mahar community." Thus, this day, Baby Kamble says, "Symbolize[s] the celebration of the spirit of Bhim" (127).

Dalits were thus beginning to change slowly and steadily. They discard the loincloth of their children and begin dressing them up in pyjamas. They start cutting the hair of their young daughters in English style. The youth play a more radical and responsible role for the burgeoning changes. The custom of eating dead animals begins to cease. This is a result of new awakening which has begun to take shape after dalits start engaging with Ambedkar's ideas.

In order to provide an egalitarian cultural path for dalits, Ambedkar starts discussing the idea of conversion with them. Ten months after Ambedkar's declaration about conversion, and after making sufficient efforts to awaken the public conscience, Ambedkar participates in a conference on 31st May 1936 in Madras, to discuss the idea of conversion with dalits. In that conference, he asks the gathering as to how many persons are willing to leave the Hindu fold.³¹

He also explains in that conference that each caste among the "Untouchables" needs to think and come to their own judgement on conversion. Ambedkar says: "In order to materialize the problem of conversion, it is very necessary to judge public opinion. And I believe, public opinion judged through meetings of each caste separately will be more representative and reliable than the opinion arrived at through a common meeting of all the Untouchables." (116)

Ambedkar seems to have realised that, unlike Mahars, many others did not understand the necessity for conversion. So, while addressing the conference in Madras, he says: "For a common man this subject of conversion is very important but also very difficult to understand... It is not an easy task to satisfy the common man on the subject of conversion. Hence, it is difficult to bring the idea of conversion into reality, unless you are all satisfied" (117).

Having understood Ambedkar's concern, Mahars discuss the idea of conversion in villages and towns across Maharashtra. Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar

³¹ See Hari Narke et al, comp., and ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, Part 3, Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 2003, 115.

and Vasant Moon describe this phenomenon in their autobiographies. These discussions reflect the disparate opinions of Mahars. Baby Kamble mentions that during the year 1938-39, the Mahar chawdi would overflow with people. In those days, she writes that “Dr. Ambedkar was the most favoured topic for discussion among the Mahars” (106).

Further Baby Kamble writes, “the chawdi started getting a newspaper and reports of Baba’s public meetings and speeches began to be read out to the public” (106). Thus, thorough discussions on Ambedkar’s ideas and activities including the subject of conversion have taken place among the Mahars before they decide to convert to Buddhism along with Ambedkar. Hence, as Gopal Guru rightly argues in the “Afterword” to Baby Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, it is wrong on the part of Indian historians to argue that Ambedkar has imposed *his* decision of Buddhist conversion on dalits. While analyzing the significance of Mahar *Chawdi*, Gopal Guru argues thus:

As the [Baby Kamble’s] autobiography shows, the chawdi as the Dalit public sphere has played an important role in questioning the distorted reading of Ambedkar’s movement in Maharashtra. For example, the reference to Buddhist conversion in Kamble’s story challenges the biased reading of some of the scholars, according to whom dalit conversion to Buddhism was Ambedkar’s personal decision. To put it more bluntly, it would suggest that Ambedkar imposed the decision of conversion on the dalits from Maharashtra. (163-164)

This kind of an ahistorical reading, Gopal Guru argues, might suggest that the common dalit had no moral responsibility to own up their decision of conversion. He shows Baby Kamble's autobiography as a testimony which provides evidence to the contrary.

After conversion, dalits experience a change in their own self-image. Before conversion, not only the society but dalits too used to perceive themselves as "inferior" to the dominant caste Hindus. But after conversion, they no longer believe that they are "untouchables" nor do they uncritically accept the domination of caste Hindus. I feel this is a significant change in terms of their socio-cultural and political subjectivity that came with conversion.

As Baby Kamble says Ambedkar's struggles yield three jewels—humanity, education and the religion of the Buddha for dalits. She says that "[b]y giving us this religion [Buddhism], Baba led us back into the lap of our real mother from whom we had been estranged for so long" (122).

Baby Kamble says: "It was as if Ambedkar was the god people had come to pray to, for bringing about a change in their lives" (68). Like Phule, Ambedkar too advocated a simple low-cost marriage procedure. Baby Kamble's marriage was conducted according to Ambedkar's idea of a simple marriage ceremony. After the conversion into Buddhism, however, dalits began to conduct marriage rituals according to the Buddhist tradition. Urmila Pawar's marriage was conducted in a Buddhist fashion as both her parents and in-laws converted to Buddhism. She

describes the transition of dalits from the old Hindu style marriage system to the new Buddhist kind of marriage ceremonies and culture.

The inter-caste marriage among dalits was taken up as an important programme. Ambedkar used to discuss this issue with Vasant Moon and other dalit activists. The young Vasant Moon wrote an article on this topic. It was published in one of the magazines that Ambedkar used to run. Ambedkar read it and complemented Vasant Moon. Vasant Moon has then decided to marry a girl from another dalit caste and he married Meenakshi Moon.

Urmila Pawar too marries a man from another dalit caste that is considered lower than her caste. It has to be noted that inter-caste marriage among untouchable castes was an anathema prior to their transformation as dalits under the aegis of Ambedkar. Urmila Pawar's and Vasant Moon's marriages were conducted according to the Buddhist customs. Thus dalits gained freedom, self-respect and socio-cultural autonomy after their conversion into Buddhism.

Thus I argue that Ambedkar's anti-caste movement has provided the context for dalit cultural transformation. Ambedkar's critique of the imposed caste slavery and degrading untouchable culture calls for radical changes in dalit life, beliefs, customs and thinking. As opposed to the untouchable culture, dalit culture fosters an assertive self, free will and independent living and thinking in dalits. Dalit culture aims at eradicating the caste barriers, tries to build dalit unity and encourages inter-caste marriages among dalit communities. Ambedkar's philosophy is central to dalit culture. Dalit culture liberates the "untouchables" from the demeaning untouchable

customs and empowers them to defy the caste domination. On the whole, it enables dalits to live with dignity and socio-economic independence.

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In this chapter, I have dealt with the markers of caste-servitude, the untouchable customs that Hindu caste society imposed on dalits which they also have internalised, the moment of transition from untouchable culture to dalit culture under the leadership of Ambedkar, especially through dalit conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism. I have also discussed the distinct differences between untouchable culture and dalit culture as documented in dalit autobiographies.

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CHAPTER 5

Autobiography and Dalit Identity

Dalit identity is characterised by two fundamental aspects viz., dalit consciousness and dalit assertion. A critical understanding of untouchability as an ideology and the will to overcome untouchability and caste oppression constitutes dalit consciousness. It encourages dalits to participate in the public realm and makes them claim their civil and political rights. Dalit assertion involves a sense of self-respect and moral capacity to demand human treatment and equality in public domain.

Overthrowing Brahminical Hindu hierarchy, fighting against caste-induced oppression and construction of a culturally and politically autonomous dalit community constitutes dalit identity. Dalit identity calls for a conscious and wilful refusal of untouchable cultural traditions. It motivates dalits to rebuild a culture that fosters dalits' social mobility and collective action in both cultural and political domains. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which dalit autobiographies record and address these aspects of dalit identity.

Firstly, I will summarize the discourse of anti-caste intellectuals like Phule, Ambedkar and Iyothee Thassar on the social and cultural factors that lead to stigmatization of dalits in Brahminical Hindu society and the remedies that they have proposed for the emancipation of dalits. Secondly, I will discuss various efforts of the dalit community to overcome the stigmatized social and cultural status and to achieve social equality and freedom.

Prelude to Dalit Identity

As historical and sociological data shows dalits have been stigmatized and demonized by the Brahminical Hindu society and its dogma. Historically, they have been ascribed a variety of stigmatized names and meanings across regions. Brahminical hegemonic culture and its scriptures have attributed a basis or logic for the condemnation and stigmatization of dalits in the caste-ridden society. However, anti-caste intellectuals like Jotirao Phule, Ambedkar and Iyothee Thassar have, in a major way, discursively and culturally challenged the basis of Brahminical scriptures and their logic behind the stigmatization of dalits.¹ They deconstruct the mainstream interpretations of ancient Indian history and Brahminical Hindu scriptures. It is in this process of challenging Brahminism and deconstruction of Indian history and culture that dalit identity and a demand for annihilation of caste have emerged. Let us first see

¹ Ambedkar has produced a range of material on this subject some of which include, "Untouchables: Who are they and how they become Untouchables," in vol. 7, and "Annihilation of Caste" in vol. 1, in *Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, published by the Government of Maharashtra. Also see Jotirao Phule's *Slavery*. Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1991, and G. Aloysius, *Dalit-Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity: Iyothee Thassar and Emancipatory Buddhism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004.

the discourse on dalits' stigmatization and anti-caste epistemological challenges to brahminism.

What have been the historical roots of dalits? Why have they been subjected to humiliation and social oppression? Phule, Iyothee Thassar and Ambedkar have presented fascinating accounts on the dalits' stigmatized social and cultural status. While Phule redefines the "Atishudra"² identity and argues that dalits are the original inhabitants of the Dravidian race, Iyothee Thassar asserts that dalits are originally Buddhists who have been conquered and enslaved by the Aryan-Brahmins.³ But Ambedkar denounces these originary theories of such a conflicting racial basis for dalits' social degradation. He argues that dalits have been the defeated Buddhists who were denigrated in all spheres— social, cultural, economical and political— and condemned to the untouchable social status. Why have the dalits, whom Ambedkar identifies as the final vestiges of Buddhism, been stigmatized and relegated to a dehumanized social status?

While deconstructing ancient Indian history and other domains of knowledge and culture, Phule brings forth this question of who constitute the indigenous inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent and who constitute the foreign invaders.

Phule's understanding of ancient Indian history is divided by this binary division of

² "Ati-shudra" means the greatest foe. According to Phule, dalits are the descendents of indigenous warriors who gave the greatest challenge ever to the Aryan Brahmin invaders. Phule argues that dalits have been stigmatized and punished severely by the descendents of Aryan Brahmins for these historical reasons. However, Phule uses the term, "Atishudra" to denote both the historical clash between the Brahmins and indigenous radicals and also to redefine it to build an organic political community with "shudra-atishudras".

³ See G. Aloysius, *Dalit-Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity: Iyothee Thassar and Emancipatory Buddhism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004.

“Shudra-atishudras” and “Aryan-Brahmins”. He analyses the social conflicts in India as primarily a racial conflict between “Shudra-atishudras” and “Aryan-Brahmins”. He argues that Brahmins are the descendents of Aryan invaders who have conquered the indigenous Dravidians with treachery and established their hegemony over the indigenous people.

Having conquered the indigenous people, Aryan-brahmins have destroyed the indigenous knowledge systems and continued to suppress the “shudra-atishudra” social and cultural resistance to the Brahminical hegemony, its culture, philosophy and history.⁴ Phule thinks that caste system is a creation of the Aryan-brahmins who have divided indigenous people into various castes for the purposes of both suppressing the opposition to Brahminical hegemony and subjecting the militant groups to material deprivation and social enslavement.⁵

Thus the caste system has provided a convenient way for suppressing the indigenous radicals.⁶ Not only have the indigenous radicals opposed Brahminical political hegemony but they have also resisted the Brahminical knowledge systems

⁴ In the “Introduction” chapter, I have discussed briefly how the counter-hegemonic literatures have been suppressed by mainstream literature and culture. Read the section titled, “Purpose and Politics of Literature” in the “Introduction”.

⁵ As Anupama Rao rightly observes: “In Phule’s account, the abject position of the Dalits was historically produced through the foundational conflict between Aryan-Brahmins and the autochthonous Dravidian communities. Phule also talks about various markers of servitude in this regard.

⁶ Among those indigenous radicals who have given a tough fight or resistance to the Aryan-Brahminical hegemony are “Shudras” and “Atishudras”. The word “Sudra” means an enemy or a foe. “Atisudra” means “the greatest foe”. According to Phule, the relegation of Shudras and Atishudras to the bottom rungs of the hierarchy is a consequence of their resistance against the establishment of the Aryan-Brahminical hegemony. Unlike Phule, Ambedkar locates the roots of the stigmatization and subordination of “untouchables” in the defeat of Buddhism by the Brahmanism.

which contrive to both socially and morally weakening people on the basis of purity and pollution ideology and attributing sacred or stigmatized genealogies to each caste.⁷

Furthermore, Phule thinks that a permanent and an irreconcilable hostility between Brahmans and *Shudra-Atishudras* characterizes caste society from its inception.⁸ Thus, steadily deconstructing Indian history, Brahminical monopoly of knowledge, caste system and culture, Phule has built an ideology for fighting against Brahminical hegemony in Hindu society, culture and its politics. As Anupama Rao rightly mentions in her essay titled, “Who is the Dalit? The Emergence of a New Political Subject”, through the category of *shudra-atishudra* Phule tries to produce a new ethical community, which would also be a political constituency that could be united in the struggle against Brahmanism.⁹ Thus, with his organically-perceptive and ideological critique of caste system, Phule holds Brahmins accountable for the social inequalities and the sustenance of Brahminical socio-cultural oppression.

⁷ Phule criticises Shivaji, an indigenous shudra king, for conceding or falling into the Brahminical trap of the four-fold Varna philosophy. In order to overcome the social stigma of being a shudra (king), Shivaji bribes brahmin pundits to rewrite his genealogy as a Kshatriya.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on Phule’s *Shudra-Atishudra* paradigm, see G. P. Deshpande, ed. *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*. New Delhi: Left Word, 2002, Rosalind O’Hanlon’s *Caste, Conflict, And Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, and Anupama Rao’s essay, “Who is The Dalit? The Emergence of a New Political Subject” in *Claiming Power from Below*, ed. Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus, Delhi: OUP, 2008.

⁹ Kancha Ilaiah’s famous book titled, *Why I am not a Hindu: a Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, delineates possibilities of constructing an ethical community by uniting dalits and shudras as an alternate cultural and political constituency.

However, Ambedkar disagrees with the originary theory of Phule who sees Brahmins as a distinct racial class, i.e., Brahmins as descendents of Aryans and “shudra-atishudras” as indigenous Dravidian race. Unlike Phule, Ambedkar consistently maintains that India is a nation with a common racial stock, and that castes are not racially distinct. Ambedkar does not prescribe to Phule’s theory of Aryan-Brahmin antagonism with the *Shudra-Atishudras* because he believes that such a racial theorization of Indian history and politics evades the most crucial historical questions, such as the role of Buddhism in Indian history and social inequalities within the *shudra-atishudras*.

Ambedkar also finds Phule’s paradigm problematic, especially, on the account of showing the Brahmins as the principal oppressors of the society. Moreover, unlike Phule, Ambedkar recognises the complicity of non-brahmin classes with the Brahmins and other Brahminical Hindus in furthering their political goals and sustaining exploitative graded social inequalities to keep the shudra power over dalits intact.¹⁰ Ambedkar therefore does not accept Phule’s binary division of *Brahmin* and *Shudra-Atishudra*. On the contrary, Ambedkar classifies Indian society into “Touchables” and “Untouchables”. Ambedkar’s theorization of Indian society thus

¹⁰ Bama’s autobiography, *Karukku*, describes this complicity of shudras in furthering their set political objectives in society. She narrates the hostility between Parayas and shudras in her village where Parayas and Shudras live in some sort of regular conflict with each other and go to the extent of killing one another. Shudras influence the State machinery such as police to unleash the institutionalized violence on dalits. Moreover, unlike what Phule has imagined, there are no significant attempts to build an “ethical community” with Shudras and dalits. In *Karukku*, we come to know that dalits and Nadars (shudras) go to separate churches. Not only have they separate churches, like the Naickers who run separate schools meant exclusively for dominant caste children, Nadars too establish separate educational institutions for their communities in cities. Thus the complicity of the Shudras with Brahmins and other Brahminical castes to sustain their power and caste inequalities can be observed not only in *Karukku* but in other dalit autobiographies as well.

takes Brahminical Hinduism into consideration and marks a paradigmatic shift in understanding Indian history and social gradation based on purity-pollution ideology. Ambedkar therefore addresses problems of dalits with what I call the “Sacred-Stigmatised division” of labour, dalit identity and culture from a non-modern and non-liberal philosophical epistemology and rationality.¹¹

It is important to note that Ambedkar addresses the caste-Hindu violence against dalits and their stigmatization in Brahminical Hindu society quite differently from his contemporary thinkers and philosophers. As I mentioned earlier, according to Ambedkar, the “Untouchables” are a distinct group of Buddhists who belong to a group of wandering tribesmen who have been defeated in battles with brahmins. As a consequence, those wandering communities have become dependent on eating dead cattle for survival, for which they have been later stigmatized. However, Ambedkar repudiates the Brahminical theory that dalits became “untouchables” because of their meat-eating habit. Instead, Ambedkar argues that the Vedic Brahmins were primarily

¹¹ I argue that Ambedkar is a distinct phenomenon in Indian history, therefore, his ideas and philosophy must be understood from the non-Western or non-liberal frameworks precisely because his insights and philosophical and historical explorations have a discernible engagement with Brahminical Hindu hegemony from an indigenous Buddhist philosophical framework. Ambedkar’s classification of the Brahminical Hindu society into “Touchables” and “Untouchables” is inconclusive and it has no finality like Phule’s binary division of “Aryan-Brahmin” and “Shudra-Atishudra”. The fact that Ambedkar addresses the hierarchy and prejudices within Brahmins and other “Touchable” castes and recognizes such a maligning tendency to be “anti-social” demands a re-examination of Ambedkar as a distinct social and political phenomenon. Ambedkar does not assume that liberation of one caste among the social cluster of untouchable classes would mean the liberation of all dalits. He neither assumes nor insists that all the “untouchables” would follow his cultural and political path. Instead, he explains to dalits why they should renounce Hinduism. Ambedkar believes that each untouchable community should strive for itself and socially and politically mobilize its members to fight for freedom and equality. Thus one needs to be attentive to the nuances in Ambedkar’s philosophy to understand Ambedkar as a distinct phenomenon and thinker. Therefore, I maintain a critical distance from the existing studies on Ambedkar.

meat-eaters, and they have adopted vegetarianism for a specific political purpose, especially, as a ploy to defeat Buddhism. Therefore, Ambedkar argues that the real reason for the stigmatization of dalits lies in their refusal to accept Brahmin hegemony.

Iyothee Thassar also believes that the “untouchables” in ancient times have been Buddhists¹² and he thinks that they must revert to their earlier religious culture than embracing any other religion.¹³ For instance, in a petition to a Brahmin official in the British government, Iyothee Thassar, opposes the officer’s suggestion that all the Parayas should convert either to Islam or Christianity. He seeks clarifications as to how the Parayas can progress if converted to either of these religions. And most importantly, he asks, why *only* the Parayas should convert! He states succinctly that Parayas’ conversion to either of these religions cannot solve their problems, rather he says, it may lead the Parayas to more adverse conditions.¹⁴

Iyothee Thassar argues that as a result of the collusion between Brahmin and the British, the British rule has been detrimental to the Parayas. Therefore, he opines that even though Parayas convert to Christianity their social status would not change. He shows that the British law has incorporated the Hindu laws both in content and the

¹² See Aloysius, *Dalit-Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity: Iyothee Thassar and Emancipatory Buddhism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2004 and M.S.S. Pandian’s book, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

¹³ Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism in 1956 is thus a return to a religion that he describes as an indigenous democracy that propagates egalitarian principles in social, economic, political and cultural spheres.

¹⁴ Iyothee Thassar’s speculations seem to bear some truth, especially, in the context of increased politicization of the anti-Christian Hindutva politics of the recent times.

spirit. Therefore, it has even empowered the illiterate Hindus to threaten Parayas if any marks of progress or improvement in their life are shown. While citing certain sections from the book, *Epitome of Law*, relating to village officers, Iyothee Thassar writes:

It is stated that such class of men as carpenters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths&Co., should not be put under wooden fetters (Tholoovoo), but only Paraiyahs for the space of 6 hours. The day-labourers as well as owners of small pieces of land among this class...become afraid of their caste neighbours and ever shrink from the thought of making progress in civilization and material comforts. For, the illiterate caste villagers not regarding these unhappy people as human beings treat them always like brutes, and when once a Parayah appears before them with any marks of improvement about him, he is at once accused of some crime or other and made to bear the wooden fetters.¹⁵

Thus, the Hindus discover various methods to suppress dalits either by brute social force or by law. From Iyothee Thassar's petition, we can understand that dalits in Tamil Nadu have always been suffering under the surveillance of Hindus. Through his petition, Iyothee Thassar brings out the fundamental social antagonism between the "Touchables" and the "Untouchables" in the colonial Tamil Nadu. In Iyothee

¹⁵ See Iyothee Thassar's "Open Letter" written in 1893 to a Brahmin official serving as an Inspector General, in the British government, published in G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: Buddhist Movement among Tamils under Colonialism*, New Delhi: New Age International, 1998, 197-204.

Thassar's opinion, this antagonism cannot be resolved through Parayas' conversion to Christianity. Instead, he thinks that dalits should revert to Buddhism.

On the whole, the three important proponents of anti-caste philosophy, Ambedkar, Phule and Iyothee Thassar, think that dalits should disassociate themselves from Hindu society and formulate a distinct identity by embracing an egalitarian socio-cultural order. A similar line of thinking can be identified in the political realm among dalits in Uttar Pradesh. Ramnarayan Rawat, a historian, observes that through their struggles in the 1920s and 1930s

Dalit activists and organizations in Uttar Pradesh gradually formulated an agenda that addressed the concerns of their community. In claiming that achhuts were the original inhabitants of India and descendants of the *dasas*, *asurs* and *dasyus* mentioned in Brahmanical Hindu texts, Dalits were challenging, both colonial and Hindu interpretations of their identity. Achhut was declared as the identity of all 'untouchables', separate from the Hindu community.¹⁶

It is from this historical and political context that the term, *dalit*, has emerged. However, the contemporary debates around the term *dalit* tend to overlook the historical and political specificity of dalit identity. Dalit Panthers' definition of *dalit*, for instance, considers women and all those who experience oppression by the Hindu religion to be dalits. Such a definition of "dalit" shows a glaring lack of understanding of the historicity of the caste system and dalits' uniqueness in it. It should be noted

¹⁶ Ramanarayan Rawat, "The Problem." *Seminar* 558, February 2006, 15.

that caste is a collective social consciousness that all Hindus, including Hindu women and Hindu lower class people live with. Prejudices based on caste, therefore, are a universal phenomenon in Hindu society.

Though upper caste women are subjected to a subordinate status by the Hindu religion, they would still prefer to be part of their own communities and they are complicit with the Hindu normative culture. The Hindu women, despite the patriarchal oppression, rarely walk out from their community and form a common alliance with the victims of the caste system in order to pose challenges to Brahminical Hinduism. For Hindu women, it is only the prevalence of patriarchal oppression that seems bothersome but not the prevalence of caste. Indeed, caste is a matter of their privilege. Hence, Hindu women share a privileged social status and exercise power over those below them. On the contrary, Brahminism makes social life miserable for the untouchable castes for whom, caste functions as a marker of stigma and disprivilege.

This way, it can be said that dominant caste women share a double consciousness—a consciousness of ritualistically higher social status and a consciousness of relative gender subordination within their own socio-cultural configuration, but never can they share a *Dalit consciousness* that demands abolition of social and economic inequalities.

Dalit feminism amply demonstrates the tension between dalit women and non-dalit women in social, cultural and political domains.¹⁷ One of the reasons for this tension is that dalits and non-dalits, i.e., “Touchable” castes, share conflicting epistemological positions. Hence, this epistemological conflict will certainly sustain its influence over the perception and the politics of both dalits and non-dalits. For example, as an eminent Dalit thinker, Ravikumar, observes, “The word ‘Dalit’ refers to caste when used by non-dalits and rejection of caste when used by Dalits”.¹⁸ Therefore, it is necessary that the term *dalit* is redefined in the context of the anti-caste philosophical tradition which, I think, is central to the emergence of dalit autobiography. Let us consider the following two definitions of the *Dalit identity*.

As Gangadar Pantawane, the founder-editor of *Asmitadarsh* (*Mirror of Identity*) says that “A dalit does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatism, Fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.”¹⁹ On the other hand, challenging the definition of *dalit* by the Dalit Panthers, Ravikumar argues that only those who suffer the untouchable status can reject the caste system and take up dalit identity. He says:

¹⁷ See Alisamma Women’s Collective’s essay, “Different Sisters” published in a Chennai-based magazine titled, *The Dalit*. Chennai: Dalit Media Network, March-April 2002; and Swathy Margaret’s editorial article titled “Dalit Feminism” in a Delhi-based dalit student journal, *Insight*, March-April 2005.

¹⁸ See Azhagarasan’s Introduction in Bama’s novel, *Vanmam (Vendetta)*. Trans. Malini Seshadri, New Delhi: OUP, 2008.

¹⁹ Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Delhi: Manohar, 2005 (1996), 268.

Only victims of “untouchability” can deny the caste system and take on the subjectivity of a “Dalit”. One can never become a feminist because one is born a woman. The feminist position is one that is taken up consciously. Only a woman can take that position. In the same way, only an untouchable can take the position of a “Dalit”.²⁰

However, it should not be assumed that all the victims of untouchability would customarily take up the dalit identity. First and foremost, the “untouchables” should rise up to the belief that untouchability is inhuman. Secondly, they should understand why and how they have been relegated to the status of “untouchables”. This means that “victims of untouchability” would wake up to the malicious consequences of the ideology of untouchability and retaliate against caste inequalities and institutions of untouchability—ascriptive social identities, Brahminical public domain, temples, caste occupations, stigmatised labour and so on. It is in this process of retaliation that the “victims of untouchability” will be able to demand self-respect, dignity, equality, autonomy and liberty.

As a result of this realization, “untouchables” would be enlightened to take a moral stand against the untouchable culture—customs, beliefs, occupations, and all the symbols that cause public disgrace to them. In case they rush to claim dalit identity without overthrowing all the markers of social disgrace, i.e., an ascripted caste identity, stigmatised occupations and duties, and the ignominious customs, it might, as Ravikumar fears, lead to ruining of dalit identity as a caste identity. In order

²⁰ Quoted by R. Azhagarasan in his Introduction to *Vanmam*, Trans. Malini Seshadri. New Delhi: OUP, 2008, xxv- xxvi.

to avoid this probable danger, they will have to mend their selves in accordance with Ambedkar's egalitarian philosophy. And it is only those people who feel repulsive towards brahminism and the purity-pollution ideology who would be able to understand the importance of dalit identity and empathise with people who assert it as a political identity. Therefore, I differ with the Dalit Panthers' definition of "dalit".

After a thorough evaluation of the caste system and the Brahminical systems of governance, Ambedkar has come to the conclusion that the untouchable castes should leave Hinduism and tread new paths for their emancipation. It is from this conviction that Ambedkar has formulated the mores of dalit identity and tried to awaken the "victims of untouchability" to their rights as human beings. To put it in Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar's words, "Babasaheb first awakened a consciousness of their rights and a sense of identity among the untouchables."²¹

This process of awakening, I think, is a precondition for the "victims of untouchability" to claim dalit identity and foreground it as a political identity. *Dalit* is a political identity because it calls for radical structural changes in India. For a dalit, dalit identity signifies a radical transformation from within; for a non-dalit, it signifies recognition of the violence embedded in the caste system and their own complicity in perpetuating the system. Gleaning from the Ambedkarite philosophical tradition, I argue that a *Dalit* is an *oppressed-turned-equaliser* who walks against the surge of brahminism with a moral commitment to restore equality. The following lines of Ambedkar might epitomize it aptly:

²¹ See Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar's *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008, 349. This book is a pioneering attempt by dalit feminists to understand dalit women's role in Ambedkar's movement.

“Kites rise against and not with wind.”

“The eagle surveys the sky against the direction of the wind.”

“The rights one has lost cannot be regained by begging, one must fight fearlessly against those who have taken those rights away.”

“Remember goats and sheep are sacrificed, the tiger is not.”²²

Thus, on the one hand, claiming dalit identity requires a moral capacity to stand against the Brahminical oppression. On the other hand, it fosters a dalit consciousness among dalits in order to enable them to challenge both the institutions and the principles of brahminism. Dalit identity involves a firm conviction on the part of dalits to rebuild their self, character and culture. To put it differently, dalit identity calls for a thorough refashioning of dalit communitarian self and a critical appraisal of the Brahminical Hindu society. This entire process is steered by Ambedkar’s political dictum— *Educate, Agitate, Organise*— which lays a strong foundation for dalit identity and dalit culture. What does this process involve? What kind of challenges do dalits encounter while refashioning a dalit self?

²² Ambedkar’s words, as quoted in Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar’s *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008, 348.

Contours of Dalit Identity

Freedom, self-respect and equality are the fundamental aspects of dalit identity. Claiming dalit identity involves a wilful rejection of untouchable identity. Rejecting untouchable identity means renouncing stigmatised occupations and customs, which amounts to denying caste system and moving away from the fold of Hinduism.²³ This causes a serious rift between Hindus and dalits in society. The dominant caste people would not allow “untouchables” to disown their caste occupations and customs that surrender “untouchables” to the Hindus. Unwilling to leave “untouchables” from their grip Hindus resort to violence against them and try to pull them back into the fold of Hinduism.²⁴ Claiming dalit identity, therefore, is a process which inevitably involves a rejection of the caste system and Hinduism; hence it occasionally leads to violence against dalits.

²³ Caste occupations, inter-mixture of social customs and reverse social obedience are the foundation for caste system. Following Ambedkar, “untouchables” have shed the markers of servitude by renouncing untouchable customs and withdrew from reverse social obedience by renouncing caste occupations. These are radical actions as far as Hinduism is concerned and they denote rejection of the caste system. Moreover, abandoning caste occupations signifies death of Hinduism. It is for this reason that the Brahminical Hindu state offers subsidy on the bank loans for caste occupations such as mending chappals, making baskets, rearing pigs and so on. Another way is to offer “Reservation” for educated SCs, STs, BCs in order to hold them from leaving the caste system. These are discreet and institutionalized methods of recuperating caste system for Hinduism.

²⁴ In the political realm, Gandhi made such efforts through “harijan” identity to reclaim untouchables as Hindus. “Reservation policy” for Scheduled Castes in education and jobs is another way of withholding and reclaiming dalits as Hindus. However, it needs to be mentioned that the reservation policy in employment is implemented most religiously in the lowest cadre of sanitation departments in both government and private institutions, thus, relegating dalits to the lowest rungs of society even in modern spaces.

Those untouchables who have not renounced caste occupations and untouchable customs cannot realise the violence embedded in the caste system and those of them who claim dalit identity by rejecting Hinduism and caste occupations cannot escape organised Hindu violence. Even when they suffer the violence embedded in the Hindu customs, “untouchables” cannot resist it being in acquiescence with the purity-pollution ideology.

In Urmila Pawar’s autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, she talks about a Hindu custom that animalises Mahars. A Mahar couple comes to meet Urmila Pawar’s sister and her brother-in-law from a village called Anaav. Pawar recounts the incident thus: “The husband had wrapped a loincloth around his waist. There was a huge gaping wound on his bare back...It seemed that in their village there was a ritual. An upper caste man would inflict a big wound on a Mahar man’s back and his wife had to cover the wound with some cloth and go on walking around, howling!” (86) Urmila Pawar’s brother-in-law, a school teacher and a Buddhist, tells the couple to resist this custom. He says that “[t]his ritual is symbolic of some old sacrificial rites! The Mahar symbolizes the animal sacrifice!” (86) In order to resist such rituals, he advises them to get converted. Then, he says, such dehumanising Hindu customs will automatically stop affecting the Mahars.

It might be true that dalits will be able to avoid such humiliating and violent Hindu customs by converting to Buddhism. However, it cannot be said that the conversion will insulate dalits from the recurrent Hindu violence. Hindus will take out their resentment on the converted dalits through other means. Firstly, all the erstwhile “untouchables” who have converted to Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism are declared

punishable by Hindu forces. Secondly, the Hindus will either impose social ostracism or subject dalits to organised acts of public disgrace.

In Andhra Pradesh, after their conversion into Christianity, dalits have stopped performing caste-specific duties such as removing the dead animals from the village, mending footwear for the landlords in exchange of the meat of the dead animals and so on. Dalits have gradually changed their old habits and customs too. As a result of this transformation, dalits refuse to eat carrion. Hence, when an animal belonging to a Hindu landlord dies in the village, Sinenkadu, one of the protagonists in *Antarani Vasantham*, takes it away from the landlord's house but buries it in a pit without taking its meat and the skin. When the landlord asks him when he would mend chappals for him, Sinenkadu replies, "Bone and meat has been buried" (144), which implies that since he has not taken the meat of the dead animal he is not obliged to give the pair of chappals to the landlord. The landlord retorts saying, "Didn't you take the meat to eat" (144). Sinenkadu replies in the negative.

The landlords who have gathered there to discuss among themselves what this act of defiance amounts to and they pounce on Sinenkadu, and chase him to the pit where the dead animal is buried. They force him to take out the soiled meat and make him eat the soiled raw meat. Caste occupations are thus, by their design, oppressive and humiliating for dalits. Caste slavery has been thus imposed on dalits through caste-specific duties and it will not be easy to escape from it. Experience of Sinenkadu stands testimony to this. Unable to overcome the humiliation embedded in the caste-specific duties and occupations, Sinenkadu runs away from the village in search of self-respect and anonymity.

Leaving both caste occupations and caste specific duties and customs is primarily a sign of renouncing Hinduism and, for the “untouchables”, such an act denotes emancipation. By leaving the village and caste occupation, Sinenkadu registers his resistance to the Hindu religion. Thus, Sinenkadu shows signs of dalit consciousness and revolt against Hinduism.

On the one hand, this consciousness prepares dalits to seek freedom from untouchability. On the other hand, it creates anxieties among the dominant castes about loss of their slaves, a factor which leads to violence against dalits.

How can dalits escape this violence at the time of their exit from Hinduism? Unlike the more typical experience of Sinenkadu’s lonely battle against Hindu casteism, dalits in Vasant Moon’s narrative gets the aid of a social reformer in revolting against Hinduism.

In his autobiography, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, Vasant Moon records a few important incidents that mirror this strife between Mahars and dominant caste Hindus during the 1930s, the time of Mahars’ socio-cultural transition in Maharashtra. Around 1930, when dalit consciousness was blossoming after Ambedkar’s Mahad satyagraha, Dasarath Patil, a social reformer and follower of Ambedkar, has given a call for reform. Responding to his call, Mahars have stopped carrying away dead animals. In every village, boycotts were imposed on these rebels by caste Hindus. Mahars who went to the market could not make purchases. Mills in the villages had been closed to them and they began to be beaten up. In such dreadful circumstances, Dasarath Patil made preparations to sustain Mahars’ revolt against caste system, and

opened a separate market for those “Mahar”²⁵ rebels in front of his own house. Dasarath Patil himself, with various well-to-do Mahar farmers, travelled miles to the small towns of Sindi and bought enough supplies from his own pocket—all the household goods, lentils, grain, vegetables, etc.—to bring them to the village. Angry Hindus who were determined to punish the Mahars, hid themselves in the bushes and looted the carts. The village watchman, Babalya, somehow escaped the goons and went to Dasarath Patil with a message: “Master, all your goods were looted by Hindus on the way. Murderers are hiding to kill you. Don’t go to the village.” (12)

In order to save their lives, all of them entered the nearby forest of *nagfani* trees. Dasarath Patil hid for three days in the forest. Finally, the police of Sindi provided protection for Dasharath Patil to come out of the forest. Patil met the police commissioner in Nagpur and brought police to provide protection to all the Mahars in his village. He also arranged for work such as breaking rocks and repairing roads as an alternative for the boycotted Mahars.

Given the vulnerable social condition of dalits, they would find it an extremely daunting task to fight the dominant castes who wield social, economic and political power while dalits have none of these. Nevertheless, in her autobiography, Baby Kamble talks about the contribution of dalit youth in motivating dalits to stop eating carrion and renouncing caste-specific customs and superstitions.

²⁵ According to Phule, “Mahar” is an ascribed identity which means great foe (of Brahmins). All the caste names of “untouchables” are ascribed names, hence they signify a stigmatized social identity. Both Phule and Ambedkar have actively encouraged dalits to abandon the ascriptive or stigmatised social identities.

In Baby Kamble's village, young Mahar men who are influenced by Ambedkar's ideology, begin to argue about the custom of eating dead animals. Baby Kamble says that "[t]hey [Mahar youth] were convinced that this custom had to be discarded" (69). But "[t]here were some families who would secretly obtain carcasses," Baby Kamble says (69). In such circumstances, it seems the young men of the community would start excommunicating those families, which means they would not be allowed to attend weddings and many such community functions. Whenever those people give up such stigmatised habits and mend their ways, the community would again accept them back into its fold. Thus, by following Ambedkar's ideas, the Maharwada undergoes transformation in that they abandon the untouchable customs and inculcate new habits. As Baby Kamble says, "Everybody took the oath never to eat dead animals and the atmosphere resounded with the slogan, 'Bhimrao ki jai!' and from that day onwards the Mahars of Veeragaon stopped eating dead animals (70). Thus, following Ambedkar's ideas, they reconstitute dalits' habits, thinking and culture in order to resignify their lives as human beings. In this process, Mahars determine to abandon all the stigmatised customs, habits and the duties that are considered their *Varna dharma*, because they realise that abandoning them can serve as the first step to their emancipation.

It is important to note that the dalit youth in Baby Kamble's village who participate in Ambedkar's movement display their strength through their unity of purpose in their rejection of caste duties and thus avert caste Hindu retaliation.

Now I shall give an account of the plight of dalits who convert into emancipatory religions like Buddhism registering their protest against Hindu caste

order, as it comes across in dalit autobiographies. It is to be noted that the majority who converted to Buddhism are dalits and thus Buddhism came to be associated with dalits and it is deemed as a dalit religion—a peculiarly reverse identification of a religion with a community, a caste-specific phenomenon in Indian religiosity.

As Urmila Pawar's brother-in-law assumes, Mahars overcome the dehumanising customs of Hinduism after their conversion to Buddhism. However, due to lack of social strength and political power, Mahars continue to fear the Hindus in the village set up. Hindus take advantage of dalits' material and social vulnerabilities and continue to put down the dalits even after their conversion to Buddhism. Urmila Pawar addresses this tension in her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*. She narrates an incident which shows the resentful attitude of Hindus towards converted dalits. She writes about it thus:

The savarnas in the Konkan region were very resentful of dalits leaving the Hindu religion to become Buddhists. They deliberately tried provoking the dalits in many ways. The dalits were supposed to collect drinking water from a particular part of the river. One day, early in the morning, people from the Maratha community deliberately took their buffaloes and bullocks to the designated part of the river to wash them. The dalit women from the wadi had to wait for a long, long time before the muddied water settled down and they could collect some clean drinking water. (85)

Mahars convene a meeting to discuss this issue. After a heated brainstorming session, they come to a conclusion that Marathas are powerful and it is beyond the capacity of dalits to confront them. Seeing such a timid attitude, Urmila Pawar criticises dalit men calling them “spineless” for retreating without any resistance! Thus, even after conversion, dalits do not attain enough confidence and power to resist the recurring Hindu violence on them. What facilitates this violence? Why do Hindus retaliate violently against dalits when they convert to other religions? This question gains significance especially since dalits had been punished if and when they followed caste Hindu practices like listening to Vedas or reciting them, learning archery and so on. A historicist reading of this shift in the attitudes of caste Hindus would help understand the politics of such violent inclusion of dalits into the Hindu fold as they exit the religion en masse.

The modern form of governance which India enters in the 20th century makes the numerical strength of communities cardinal important for securing political power. In such a context, the elite Brahminical castes saw to it that India becomes a Hindu majoritarian nation-state. In this project, Gandhi was the most successful politician in developing a new language that shaped India as a Hindu majoritarian/Brahminical polity. In order to make it Hindu majoritarian, Hindu reformers like Gandhi tried to appropriate dalits into Hinduism by giving a nomenclature like “Harijan” to dalits. Elite Brahminical castes grabbed this new language to include dalits into Hinduism to increase the numerical strength of Hindus while still continuing to discriminate against dalits. Aravind Malagatti explains how the dalit assertion of their liberation from Hinduism by embracing a religion like Virasaivism with egalitarian prospects is subsumed into Hinduism simultaneously

keeping their untouchable status in tact within the new order of recognition. Therefore, he feels that dalits can never remain anonymous. He argues that the caste Hindu society, the state and its institutions ensure that they remain identified as dalits through a kind of surveillance over them. The title of his autobiography *Government Brahmana* makes the point evident. Malagatti explains how it happens in various domains in Karnataka:

Lower caste people who got converted during the era of Basavanna, the twelfth century socio-religious reformer of Karnataka, have remained as sub-sects of particular castes. In the same manner, though Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism during the period of Indian Independence, he became neo-Buddhist, not a Buddhist. In the same period, my ancestors were drawn into Veerashaivism and became Veerashaivas. But now we are Veerashaiva Harijans! (46)

Thus Malagatti criticises the Indian society which gives derisive names to dalits in order to cage them in the stigmatised social status even after their conversion to relatively tolerant and egalitarian religions such as Virasaivism.²⁶

In order to attain both moral and political strength, dalits need to work towards lessening their dependence on dominant castes and live an autonomous social and

²⁶ It appears to me that after Ambedkar declared publicly that he would convert to another religion, there seems to have been attempts to convert dalits to pro-Hindu or Hinduised religious sects, in different parts of the country because, during the same period, many Dalits in Karnataka converted to Veerashavism. Both Aravind Malagatti and Siddalingaiah mention such attempts in their autobiographies.

economic life. In order to achieve this, as Ambedkar advocates, dalits have to send their children to schools and explore new avenues of economic sustenance.

As Ambedkar suggests, one of the ways to acquiring economic independence is through the creation of self-employment. Baby Kamble, for example, follows Ambedkar's suggestion and opens a grocery shop in Mahar chawdi. Through her earnings from this business, she provides college education for all her children and leads an independent life. Her independent living not only empowers her to acquire confidence, it also enhances opportunities for her to participate in dalit movement and politics. Urmila Pawar's father and mother too run their own independent business in Ratnagiri town. Alongside his priestly duties and the school teacher's job, Urmila Pawar's father does seasonal business such as selling raw mangoes. On the other hand, Urmila Pawar's mother weaves a rich variety of cane baskets and sells them. Thus, even after Pawar's father's death, her mother feeds her children and provides them higher education.

Similarly, Baby Kamble's father goes to cities and earns money through civil contracts. Not only does Baby Kamble's father support his own family through his civil contracts, but being an Ambedkarite dalit, he also provides employment for many dalit families and supports them to lead independent lives. Thus, socially and politically conscious dalits explore means of dignified self-sustenance and work towards emancipation. Exploration of modern means of livelihood, self-employment and independence helps dalits assert their dalit identity and lead an autonomous social life.

Inspired by Ambedkar's thoughts, Baby Kamble sends all her children to school. All her children, boys and girls, are very well settled doing white collar jobs in cities. She remembers how Ambedkar used to exhort the importance of education for dalit emancipation. She writes:

In public meetings, Baba used to tell us. "Educate your children. They, in turn, should spend one per cent of their salary in improving the lot of poor children. Only then will their education benefit the community and the generation next to theirs will be educated...And I am sure my sisters and mothers will carry out this task with an iron resolve." (135)

Like Baby Kamble, most of the dalit women take Ambedkar's thoughts seriously and send their children to school. They might starve and get beaten up by their husbands but they would not compromise on sending their children to school. dalit women would sell their food grains or borrow money from the pawn brokers to pay their children's school fee. Thus, dalit community shifts its attention from superstitious beliefs and caste occupations to education as they perceive education to be an important tool for dalit emancipation.

In his autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, Vasant Moon also narrates the conviction of the dalit community in Ambedkar's vision. People from his colony send their children to school even though some of them find it extremely difficult to meet their daily needs. In such circumstances, the community people would come forward to support such children. Vasant Moon too grows up in such a context. Talking about his community in Maharpura of Nagpur, Vasant Moon says:

“Here I came into being and grew, from small to big. This community gave me food and gave me the store of experience with which I have made my life’s journey” (175). When his mother fails to pay for his books and school fee, the community takes up that responsibility and supports him. Thus the dalit community of Maharpura implements Ambedkar’s ideas and stands as a role model for others. After Vasant Moon becomes an officer, he too contributes to the education of poor dalit children.

As Ambedkar envisions, education has brought paradigmatic changes in dalit life and culture. Having graduated from school and college education a small section of educated dalits in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat have developed dalit literature to articulate and project their distinct identity. Through poetry, novels and other forms of literature, they give outlet to their emotions, grievances and sufferings. They articulate their perception of the present and future, reconstruct history, project their aspirations and evolve new symbols and idioms. This literature provides them with new strength and vigour to revolt against Brahminism. As Ghanshyam Shah observes, “it is an important medium in their search for identity.”²⁷ It must be noted that dalit consciousness and dalit identity have sprung from Ambedkarism. Dalit identity therefore is inseparably intertwined with Ambedkarism.

Ambedkarism not only makes dalits discard the traditional untouchable duties but it also promotes dalit consciousness. What constitutes dalit consciousness? A critical understanding of untouchability as an ideology and the will to overcome untouchability and caste oppression constitutes dalit consciousness. It encourages dalits to participate in the public realm and makes them claim their civil and political

²⁷ Ghan Shyam Shah, ed. *Dalit Identity and Politics*, Delhi: Sage, 2007, 210.

rights. How does the Brahminical public domain react to dalit participation in the public sphere? How do dalits encounter the Brahminical challenges?

The “purity” of the Hindu dominated public sphere, for the first time, comes to be challenged by dalits’ overwhelming presence after Ambedkar’s movement.²⁸ Dalit children begin to attend school. Dalit women begin to assert their dignity and humanness. Such an assertive dalit presence in the public sphere causes repulsion among the Hindus. Baby Kamble’s experiences in school give us a sense of Hindus’ hostility towards dalits. Talking about her school, she says: “A majority of girls in our class belonged to the higher castes...They treated us like lepers... If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose, mutter ‘chee, chee’ and run as if their lives were in mortal danger” (108). Aravind Malagatti transcodes this repulsive feeling of upper caste women in a slightly different manner. In his autobiography, *Government Brahmana*, he says that looking at dalit women, the Hindu women feel “as though they had seen a snake” (28). Thus a sight of dalit women in the public domain causes a nauseating disgust and fear among Hindu women.

As Urmila Pawar recounts in her autobiography, the root cause for such disgust towards a dalit woman does not lie in her seemingly “unclean” body because, for that matter, even the working class Hindu women too move around with “unclean” bodies. Hindu women’s disgust and fear towards dalit women is rooted in the purity-pollution ideology which stigmatises dalit body as the epitome of “untouchability”.

²⁸ After the Mahad satyagraha in December 1927, dalits’ insistence on access to public sphere such as temples, common water tanks and other resources disturbs the Brahminical public domain in an unprecedented manner.

Therefore, the appearance of dalit women in the public realm causes fear, anxiety, repulsion and contempt in the Hindus.

Despite such overwhelming disapproval of and contempt for dalit women's bodies in the public domain, Ambedkarite dalit women do not concede to the Brahminical supremacy. They do not hesitate to assert their identity and demand recognition as fellow humans. What does such a dalit assertion involve? Dalit assertion involves a sense of self-respect and moral capacity to demand human treatment and equality in public domain. Baby Kamble's account of dalit women's upfront attitude in Rani Lakshmbai's Mahila Mandal will aptly describe the essence of dalit assertion.

Baby Kamble presents an incident from her experience where she witnesses the courageous attitude of the dalit women who demand their due respect in the Mahila Mandal established by Rani Lakshmbai of Phaltan. Rani Lakshmbai organizes the Mahila Mandal meetings in her own bungalow. In her autobiography, Baby Kamble recounts an incident that takes place in one of those meetings:

All the Brahmin and Maratha women had occupied the chairs. They would not allow the Mahar women to sit on the chairs. Helpless, our women stood on one side. At the same time, the rani sahib started to move towards the stage, accompanied by her other followers Godbole, Velankar and Bhabndarkar. Our Thakubai rushed forward. She shook the rani by her shoulder and told her, 'Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand

our rights. I am going to forcefully remove your women from the chairs and seat my women there.’ The rani sahib was taken aback for a moment. But she immediately arranged chairs in the front for all of us. (133)

Not only have the dalit women begun to take part in such local activities, but they have even participated in the satyagrahas that Ambedkar organized in Amaravati, Pune, Mahad, and Nasik in large numbers. They have ascertained saying, “When we left our homes to enter the struggle it was not to turn back but to fight till the final victory.”²⁹ Thus Ambedkarism transforms dalit women from *being* superstitious and ignorant to *becoming* the warriors of freedom and political rights. Ambedkar has told them to stop believing in the purity-pollution ideology and superstitions and start thinking about themselves as humans who possess intellect and reason. Ambedkar’s advice to the dalit women includes injunctions to educate their children and remove from them any inferiority complex, not to have too many children, and to let every girl who marries “claim to be her husband’s friend and equal and to refuse to be his slave.”³⁰

Dalit consciousness instils self-respect in dalits and they take pride in asserting themselves as Ambedkartires. In his autobiography, *Akkarmashi*, Sharankumar Limbale depicts the moral strength that Ambedkarism fosters in dalit youth. Limbale says that his youth has assumed a new meaning with his initiation into Ambedkarism.

²⁹ See Pawar Urmila and Meenakshi Moon. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008, 350.

³⁰ See Eleanor Zelliott’s essay, “Dr. Ambedkar and Empowerment of Women” in Anupama Rao (Ed) *Caste and Gender, New Delhi: Kali for women*, 2003, 206.

Dalit consciousness and Ambedkar's ideology help him think about his own mother and the atrocities against dalit community in a new light. He says:

The blood flowed like hot lava through my body. My mind burned with myriad thoughts in silent protest. Babasahed filled me with reverence. I felt I was meeting my mother of the last seven births. I burned within myself whenever I heard news about the atrocities against Dalits. It made me very impatient. (86-87)

Limbale awakens to oppressive social reality and begins to feel agitated about the atrocities against dalits. He starts understanding his own mother's miserable condition as a concubine of a Hindu landlord after he comes to learn about the dalit women's vulnerabilities in society. His thinking undergoes a paradigmatic shift after he becomes fully aware of the consequences of the caste system on dalits and Ambedkar's vision for dalit emancipation.

From finding fault with his mother for the "illicit" relationship with the landlord, Limbale starts claiming his father's caste identity in public by suffixing his father's last name to his proper name. By taking his father's name to the public knowledge, Limbale tries to hold his father, a dominant caste Hindu man, accountable for the sexual exploitation of his mother, a Mahar woman.

On the contrary, conventional Mahars find fault with his mother and subject her and her children to public disgrace. Believing in the purity of blood, none of the Mahar families show willingness to marry his sisters. Limbale himself is subjected to

humiliation on various occasions for his “bastard” social status. Even the Dalit Panther movement, which came in the wake of Ambedkarism and Marxism, is not free from such caste beliefs and Limbale charges the Dalit Panther movement on this account. Thus, Ambedkarism influences Limbale to re-examine the social relations embedded in the caste system and the causes of dalit suffering.

Politics of Naming

Changing the stigmatic names given to dalits in their childhood is a conscious political act for the dalits. It is a way of asserting equality and humanity. Name-changing of dalits emerges from two cultures. On the one hand, dalits within untouchable culture aspire for upward social mobility through sanskritising practices like vegetarianism, taking Hindu names, worshipping Hindu gods and so on. On the other hand, Ambedkarite dalits who assert that they are not “untouchables” and claim a distinct dalit culture adopt non-Hindu names and reject everything that implies Hindu identity.

Claiming Hindu names is seen partly as an alternative and more importantly it is seen as part of claiming a positive self-image. So, as Ravikumar in his book, *Venomous Touch*, says, “Dalits must have been given the names of Gods only to register their protest against the unlawful laws of casteism which forbade their having such names” (90). Shedding demeaning caste names may be a sign of registering protest against the caste Hindu subordination, but how does claiming Hindu names really help the emancipation of dalits? Doesn't it lead to imitating Hinduism instead of defying it? Indeed, as Ravikumar himself points out: “The peculiar evil of

Hinduism lies in the way it exercises power, not only by segregating the untouchables but also by absorbing them within its fold, and devastating them by appropriation (90).

However, dalits accepting Hindu names must be seen as part of the cultural appropriation of dalits into the Hindu fold, especially so in the context of modern Hindutva politics. The appropriation of dalits into Hindu fold through the process of “Harijanisation” may be seen as an example in this regard. While the anti-caste movements have been rejecting Hinduism, Gandhi, through the “Harijanisation” politics, connives at naturalizing the dehumanization and servitude of dalits in Hinduism.

As Ravikumar says, “To name is to define and bring under control; the allocation of names creates the world in the image of he who is named. By naming something we posit an identity that gives us an understanding of that object.” (90). By naming the “untouchables” and specifying what names they could be permitted to have, the Hindus aimed to bring the “untouchables” under Hindu control. In this sense, we must see Gandhi’s act of naming the “untouchables” “harijans” as a continuation of Manu’s strategy. Ambedkar’s resistance against the term “harijan” and coining of the term “Dalit” must therefore be understood in this historical milieu of naming.

Dalits were beginning to change their names after the Buddhist and Western style. Urmila Pawar points us to the most discernible shifts in naming, thus:

English had been advantageous to our community in many ways. People from the previous generation used to have names either like Kacharya (meaning dirt); Dhondya (stone); Dagadya (stone); Bhikya (beggar); or they were given the names of gods. Then names began to be written with English initials, like R.L. Tambe, K.D. Kadam, G.B. Kamble, and so on...My sister changed her husband's name from caste name Kamble to a caste neutral place called Dabholkar, to indicate his town Dabhol rather than his Mahar caste. That would help his lawyer's business more, she thought. Even I was going to change my name from Pawar to Bhirwandeekar but since Pawar is a surname among the Marathas as well, the plan did not materialize. (149)

Rejecting names denoting stones, dumbness and beggar, and adopting English style and English names such as Martin, Ruth, Ruben etc. after their conversion into Christianity announce dalit urge for equality and self-respect. Nonetheless, caste Hindus would prefer to continue to address dalits only as untouchables.³¹

Similarly, the Indian state adopts Gandhi's "harijan" upliftment ideology which results in opening Harijan schools and Harijan hostels. These "special" schools and hostels and harijan scholarships contribute more towards damaging the self-

³¹ Even though her last name was "Pawar," in order to put her down, an illiterate shudra watchman of her house owner, whenever he came to collect rent, used to call her "Powar" which is an untouchable caste name. Thus, caste Hindus usually don't hesitate to demean the educated dalits. Not only do the names of "untouchables" carry their stigmatized social status, they also carry references, as Pawar has shown, to the lack of intelligence and dehumanization. In order to overcome the scorn and dehumanization embedded in those names dalits nowadays are carefully selecting names that imply positive meanings.

confidence of dalit children rather than empowering or uplifting them.³² The welfare measures that the State undertook are Gandhian in nature and thus allow no space for dalits to achieve a radical break from caste system.

In order to refrain from being herded into Hinduism through the Gandhian Harijan politics, Ambedkarite dalits affirm their self-respect and dalit identity. Vasant Moon talks about this assertion in his autobiography. When the class teacher asks the harijan students to stand up and give their names for Harijan scholarship, none of the dalit students give their names. In this context, the dalit children vehemently reject being tagged as harijans. Vasant Moon rises and says, “Sir, we are not ‘Harijans’, and we don’t want the scholarship of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. None of us like to be called Harijans” (37). Another dalit student, Pralhad Rangari also asserts, “We are followers of Babasaheb Ambedkar. None of us want ‘Harijan’ scholarships.” (37).

Thus, dalit identity and dalit consciousness leads dalits to not only changing their proper names but also to assert their self-respect and rename dalit colonies, universities and colleges after Ambedkar and other anti-caste intellectuals. Vasant Moon talks about the change of his colony name from Maharpura to Anand Nagar, after dalits’ conversion to Buddhism.

³² In his autobiography, *The Scar*, Gunasekaran says that during his high school days, whenever the students of his hostel went out to simply roam in the Elayankudi market streets, they were asked by the senior students not to divulge the place where they lived if somebody asked for it: “If we were asked about where we stayed, we were not to divulge information about the Harijan hostel,” Gunasekaran says. See K. A. Gunasekaran’s autobiography, *The Scar*. Chennai: Orient Blackswan, 2009, 6. Staying in Harijan hostels is like staying in an untouchable street, where their caste identity is on display for anyone to see.

Both Limbale and Urmila Pawar, on the other hand, elucidate the impact of the *Namantar* movement on dalits in Maharashtra. Dalits encountered hard times during this movement. Dalit women had also gone to jails along with their men and children but did not give in to the violence and pressures that they were subjected to. For dalits, therefore, *naming* signifies equality and emancipation for which dalits have been struggling since ages.

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In this chapter, through a critical analysis of dalit autobiographies, I have discussed different methods that dalits have adopted in pursuit of self-respect and for freedom from caste system. I have delineated the crucial role that Ambedkarism and dalit identity have played in dalits' pursuit of freedom, autonomy and self-respect.

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

The genre of dalit autobiography represents the life and the socio-economic conditions of the dalit community. Limbale rightly describes that every dalit autobiography is “a representation of a caste, a group. It gives expression to the group’s language, culture, traditions, the injustices of status quo, the suffering or exploitation.”¹ These narratives of dalit experience, for the first time, have brought into public new dimensions of Indian life through the depiction of dalits’ experiences with the caste system and modernity. These experiences have never been articulated in Indian literature before the emergence of Dalit literature in India.

I have argued that dalit autobiographies embody the history of India constituting the conflicts between the oppressive caste Hindus and the dalits, as opposed to the mainstream historical accounts which valorise the caste Hindus and invisibilise the dalits. In this dissertation, I propose that dalit autobiography has to be read from a dalit perspective which is necessarily informed by a knowledge of the

¹ Quoted in Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. *Postcolonialism: My Living*. Toronto: TSAR, 1998, 44.

history of the dalit movement and its struggles and of the historical and philosophical genealogy of dalit identity, culture and politics.

In the introductory chapter, I have discussed the already existing discourses and counter-discourses on the genre of autobiography, the context of the emergence of dalit autobiography and its distinctness from Western autobiography. I have critically looked at how the dalit presence in the brahminical public sphere, both physical and symbolic, as in literary fields, is understood and controlled by the dominant caste Hindu elite and others. I have discussed at length the purpose and politics of literature, the emergence of a new language of talking about caste as developed by the brahminical elite and recorded the critique of anti-caste philosophers on brahminical knowledge and power. I place dalit autobiography within dalit writing that is embedded in the Ambedkarite anti-caste tradition and I have explained how dalit autobiographies expose the elite brahminical nature of the nation as imagined by the caste Hindus and I have analysed the reasons why I look at dalit autobiography as a historical document that marks the transformation of dalits from being oppressed untouchables to self-asserting dalits.

In the chapter titled, “Readings of Dalit Autobiography: A Critique from Dalit Perspective”, I have dealt with diverse readings of dalit autobiographies and I have presented my own critique of both dalit and non-dalit readings of dalit autobiography. As opposed to the Brahmin-non-brahmin framework (M. S. S. Pandian), Marxist dalit reading (Anand Teltumbde), dominant caste reading (S. P. Punalekar), orientalist and dominant caste anthropologist readings of dalit autobiography, I have given my

reading of dalit autobiographies placing them in the political and cultural milieu of anti-caste Ambedkarite egalitarian struggles.

I have also presented a political and philosophical trajectory of dalit autobiography which shapes dalit epistemology. This historical reading informs how I decipher the evolutionary process of dalit autobiography. I argue that dalit autobiography is much more than an individual story, as it has been employed by dalits to reconstruct dalit history and mark the changes in dalit culture and politics. Moreover, dalits use this genre to show their struggles for equality and freedom in a positive light as opposed to the dominant narratives which see such struggles as divisive and anti-national.

In the chapter titled, “Dalit Subjectivity: History, Context and Contradictions”, I have discussed dalits’ socioeconomic conditions and their varied efforts for attaining freedom from caste Hindu domination, i.e., the context that shaped dalit subjectivity. I have problematised dalit subjectivity in all its contradictions. I have foregrounded the differences between the hegemonic brahminical epistemology and the counter-hegemonic dalit epistemology which have in turn produced conflicting knowledge domains.

I have discussed elaborately, using dalit autobiographies, the meanings of Ooru and Cheri for dalits. I have marked and discussed the means of modern education and employment through which dalits try to achieve social autonomy, mobility and self-respect. However, I also emphasise that these avenues for

advancement have their own pitfalls and limitations, since Indian social order is ridden with brahminism that does not allow a single national community into being.

In the chapter titled, “From Untouchable Culture to Dalit Culture”, I have dealt with the markers of caste-servitude, the untouchable customs that Hindu caste society imposed on dalits which they have also internalised, the moment of transition from untouchable culture to dalit culture under the leadership of Ambedkar, especially through dalit conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism and discussed the distinct differences between the two as documented in dalit autobiographies.

In the chapter titled, “Autobiography and Dalit Identity”, through a critical analysis of dalit autobiographies, I have discussed different methods that dalits have adopted in pursuit of self-respect and for their freedom from the caste system. I have delineated the crucial role of Ambedkarism in the emergence of dalit identity and dalits’ pursuit of freedom, autonomy and self-respect.

The following are some of the challenges that I see for the dalit movement. The agenda of dalit feminism needs to be worked out and elaborated so that the dalit movement can widen its horizons by strengthening its democratic base. It is true that dalit women have to struggle, from within and outside, more than dalit men, to succeed in their respective fields. Dalit women’s struggles are not merely about their “inclusion” in the public sphere. Even when they are included, it will not be without limitations. I think dalit women’s questions to the dalit men and the public sphere are hinged on democratizing the dalit public sphere as well as the national resources.

However, it is imperative to ask whether dalit women's autobiographies are all about the "exclusion" of dalit women from the dalit public sphere and the mainstream public sphere. Or do they have anything more to offer beyond the rhetoric of "exclusion" and "inclusion"? Do they want mere inclusion, or can they exercise their agency and radically transform the nature of public sphere itself?

Asking these questions is not only inevitable but it is important because these questions will also lead us to the next level: Who excludes dalit women and why? Are dalit men spared from exclusion from the mainstream public sphere? Should the dalit men and dalit women compete for the tiny number of "reserved positions"? Or should it be appropriate for the dalit communities to fight amongst themselves for the reserved political and cultural space like the Malas and the Madigas in Andhra Pradesh? We need to ask these questions to be wary of and to avert the danger of falling into the brahminical trap of the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

In this dissertation, I have identified the above questions as important challenges that the dalit movement has to deal with. However, I have not discussed these issues comprehensively as my thesis is to establish my reading of dalit autobiography as a historical document and these questions are too huge to be dealt within the purview of my present study.

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