

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

The Dalit population constitutes India's most vulnerable group, estimated at 138 million people. Dalits are also referred to as Scheduled Castes (SCs) after a schedule drawn up by the Government of India, and are placed at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy of the caste system. Due to their place within the caste system, this group has suffered discrimination and exclusion in all its dimensions for centuries. This group has been historically deprived of access and entitlements not only to economic rights but also to social needs such as education, health and housing. Discrimination and exclusion in access to sources of income (land, capital and education) has led to high levels of economic deprivation and poverty among Dalits.

In an era when issues relating to human rights have been under critical focus, literary depictions of the experiences of marginalized groups have acquired great significance. The recent spurt in Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence and poverty of the Dalit. Expressions of these experiences have long been silenced, often with religious and social sanction and relegated to the margins as non-literary. More recent is the trend to deny their existence altogether. The growing corpus of Dalit texts, poems, novels and autobiographies, however, seek to rectify this phenomenon by examining the nuances of Dalit culture. Dalit literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post-independence India. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these so called 'untouchables' to a self chosen identity as Dalit is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the two towering figures in the pantheon of Dalit history, were the

first to appropriate the word 'Dalit' as a noun and as an adjective, in the early decades of the 20th century to describe the extreme oppression of untouchables.

The term 'Dalit literature' was first used in 1958, at the first ever Dalit conference held in Bombay. However as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers and activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The name expressed their feelings of kinship and solidarity with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-American rights in U.S.A. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of the Dalit Panther movement, writes:

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (264)

Dalit literature serves the purpose of Social intervention and carries strong militant connotations. The nature of these connotations varies depending upon the writer's personality, motives and inspiration to write the changing socio-cultural contexts. It is essentially for a right understanding of Dalit autobiographies while keeping in mind the historical, social and cultural setting to which they belong. The context, perspectives and characteristics of the historical trend differentially set the quality of the concept of autobiographies vis-a-vis the western definition of the genre. Here the subject is an individual among many who share the same types of cultural ostracism, physical repression and social stigma, the result being that he/she is kept out of the legitimate boundaries of human society. The inner quest for identity, denunciations of the traditional Hindu dispensation and the social struggles to assert

one's human dignity take various forms according to the will, vision and capacity of the writer. The term 'Dalit' literally means "oppressed" and is used to refer to the "untouchable" casteless sects of India.

The word 'Dalit' has its origin in Sanskrit implying the state of being ground, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. It was first used by Jyotiba Phule in 19<sup>th</sup> century in context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile "Untouchable" castes of twice born Hindus. Dalit writers have formulated a Dalit literary theory, a framework within which Dalit writings should be read and evaluated. Dalit literature is propagandist because it is written to bring about social change and the experience is articulated in a collective form. It is full of anger because the torments of Dalit life can't be expressed in sweet poetic stanzas.

The history of Dalit literature can be traced back to centuries. But Dalit literary cultural expressions were never taken into consideration due to the hegemonic nature of the field of literary production. The emergence of Dalit as a political category and identity coincide with the emergence of Dalit literature. (Ambedkar 57)

Dalit literature, for a long time, was disregarded and not taken seriously in the literary circles. The publication of translations from modern Marathi literature titled *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle with a prefatory note by Gail Omvedt had already sparked debates in the literary circles. Under the impulsion of such academics as Arun Prabha Mukherjee who translated Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) into English in 2003 and wrote an introduction to it, the initial reluctance to accept new literary genres by the dominant literary discourses has over time given way to wider acceptance and circulation of Dalit literature in and outside India. The recent volume on Dalit writings from two South Indian states *No Alphabet in Sight* edited by Susie

Tharu and K. Satyanarayana, opens up a new debate on the long history of Dalit literature and its current prominence in the contemporary scene of literature and politics. It also shows how Dalit literature moves beyond the usual discourses of literary modernity. The new category of writing 'Dalit literature' has established itself as a new literary movement in several regions in India in the last four decades.

The literal meaning of the word 'Dalit' is one who has been trampled under feet or who has been oppressed, exploited, insulted, humiliated and thrown outside the pale of civic society, i.e., turned into an untouchable, riff raff of the society. All those who are born in the Dalit community will not be considered Dalits; we have to stress the category of 'Dalit' as a historical construction. Dalit writing is revolutionary in its aims; the destruction of the caste system and the establishment of equality in the social and political spheres. Dalit critics and writers have raised a number of critical questions about Indian literature and Indian literary history. Alok Mukherjee, a literary theorist and a human rights activist, aptly sums up the significance of Dalit writing:

Indian literary history and theory as well as the teaching of Indian literatures are spectacularly silent about Dalit literature. Yet, Dalit cultural and critical productions make a significant critical intervention in the thinking and writing about Indian society, history, culture and literature. (43-45)

He identifies two of the important functions of Dalit writing:

Firstly, Dalit writing attempts to deconstruct the dominant, castiest constructions of Indian identity & secondly it constructs a distinct Dalit identity. Dalit writing presents a Dalit centric view of life and

constructs Dalit identity in relation to Colonial identity and Indian identity. (48)

Similarly, Victor Premasagar defines the term ‘Dalit’ as the expression of their “weakness, poverty and humiliation as the hands of the upper caste in Indian society” (Premasagar, 108). The broader meaning of the term justifies its association with the portrayal of the wider experiences of one’s marginalization. However, those who have the first hand experience of Dalit exploitation are hard to convince on the broader meaning of Dalit. Therefore, the term ‘Dalit’ still refers exclusively to the victims of the caste-ridden society. Caste discrimination is not confined to India but it is prevalent in the whole South Asia. Other countries in South Asia like Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka also face caste discrimination and Untouchability. In different countries ‘Untouchables’ are given different names. For example, in Nepal, they are commonly addressed with many derogatory terms in the typical Nepali language. A study titled “Caste based Discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Nepal” reveals that in Nepal:

Dalits are called ‘paninachalne’ (water polluting), ‘achhoot’ (Untouchables), avarna, doom, pariganit, tallojat etc. They are looked at through the language of development and termed as uppechhit (Ignored), utidit (oppressed), pacchadiparck (lagging behind), bipanna or garib (poor), nimukha (Helpless), Simantakrit (Marginalized), Subidhabatabanchit (Disadvantaged) Alpasankhyak (Minorities) or Banchitikaranmapareka. (Rao 98)

Similarly, Bangladesh has an elaborate set of names for its Dalit – both Hindus and Muslims. Hindu Dalits are kept under the category of Harijan; the Muslim Dalits are classified as Arzals. Some of the occupations in Bangladesh are associated with

specific groups or communities and occupy 'low' position in the status hierarchy of occupation. These are sweepers, Barbers, washers, Dryers, Blacksmiths, Cobblers, Oil pressers, Boatmen, and Butchers etc. Obviously, in Pakistan also, caste continues to be an important category of community classification and Dalit question is a little more complicated. There, the categories with which Dalits are identified are not completely alien to Indians. For Example, Mochi, Pather (Brick maker) and Bhangi are mostly Muslims and considered 'lower' caste on the basis of their family occupation. There are other titles also like Musalman Sheikhs, Mussalis (Both used for Muslim Dalits) and Masihi (Christians) which refer to the specific group of people who are called Untouchables. In Sri Lanka, the untouchable communities are known by their community names. The Indian influence on the local discourse on caste in Sri Lanka seems minimal. Neither Harijan nor Dalit are used to describe the (Untouchable) castes. (105)

There have been serious debates and deliberations to bring the term closer to the essence of 'Subalternity' in larger context but the Dalit activists remain adamant to maintain their separate identity as according to them only a Dalit can understand as to what it is to be a 'Dalit'. Dr. Suryanarayan Ransubhe a well known critic in Hindi literature, who does not agree with the liberal definition of Dalit, contends:

The Dalit Literature is the Literature written by the Dalit but we believe that the literature in which the sensuousness of Dalit age is described and depicted most vividly is the Dalit literature irrespective of caste and base of the author, who has written it. (Chikhalikar 2)

The debate between Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), one of India's foremost revolutionaries, an untouchable and a fierce critic of Gandhi, is a major event in Indian history. Ambedkar famously said 'Mahatma, I have no

country'. Fictionists like Avinash Dolas and others have explored the depth of this theme. This discussion between Ambedkar and Gandhi has provoked debates on nationhood and Hindu religion. The well known book by D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, is a case in point. Although untouchability was abolished with the adoption of Constitution of India, Ambedkar's experiences continue to be those of the lot of India's 170 million Dalits today.

Dalit literature in its initial stages was identified as specific protest directed against everyday humiliation that individual Dalits and Dalits as a community face. In this context, contradictions between Marxism and progressive literary movements with Dalit literature (and Dalit movements) have to be taken into serious consideration. Most of the debates about Dalit Literature have failed to adequately acknowledge the new vocabulary of imagination and aesthetical sensibility produced by these literatures. Dalit literature cannot be reduced to an engagement with victimhood. In the hands of poets like S. Joseph, it has spawned new literary canons by disturbing the usual language available in the pre existing canonical literary circles. Dalit Literature today has established itself as a new mode of literary/aesthetic imagination and writing.

The fact that John Berger, Arundhati Roy and Joe Sacco saluted the publication of the graphic novel *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* may be the sign that something is changing in the context of Dalit literatures. The visual, the literary and the political dimensions closely intertwine in this graphic biography of Ambedkar. The artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, together with Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand for the story, crafted a book that has broken new ground, not least because it did so in a controversial way. The publication of *Bhimayana* could be a signal that:

Dalit cultures are edging out of the restricted areas where they were formerly circumscribed. This could also be an opportunity to examine Dalit expression and literatures in a renewed way and from different perspectives. (Peter 83)

### **A. Mythological Concept**

The term is generally used to represent the exploited lower castes in the hands of upper caste Hindus in a caste based society stratified according to the design provided by *The Manusmriti*. The Hindu epic *The Manusmriti* described the origin of the various castes from the body of the creator Lord Brahma. (Qtd. in *The Untouchables of India* 24)

The caste system in India broadly divides the population into four major groups, known as Varnas. From top to bottom these are: Brahmans (priestly castes), Kshatriyas (warrior castes), Vaishyas (trading and artisan castes), and Shudras (laboring and servant castes). The laws include descriptions of what items can or cannot be accepted by a person from a particular caste, what one can and cannot eat, with whom one can or cannot eat, and, perhaps most importantly, who one can and cannot touch. The term 'Untouchable' signifies that mere sight of their shadows was thought to be polluting. These names come from ancient times and were utilized to indicate a certain class of people. The word and prefix 'Antya' indicates an untouchable. The exclusive members of the religion known as "Sanathan Dharma" are referred to as Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors) and Vaishyas (traders). Shudras (Bahujans) are those peoples subjugated as lower castes by the above mentioned members of Sanathan Dharma, but Dalits (Panchamas) are descendants of indigenous peoples who are discriminated as untouchables by all of the above four groups including the Shudras. All these people were erroneously classified as



belonging to the same legally codified religion of “Hinduism” by the British, despite Dalits and Bahujans having no scriptural or sacramental right of membership in Sanathan Dharma, the religion which was legally codified as “Hinduism”.

Additionally, there is one other group that is sometimes referred to as the fifth caste but technically has no caste standing at all. Traditionally, this population is referred to as untouchables or out-castes. Today, they are better known as Dalits, Scheduled Castes (SC's), or Harijans. Membership in these groups is determined by birth and, as a result, cannot be amended. The myth behind birth of caste out of mouth, arms, thigh and feet of the Lord aimed at impelling upon structural gradations of the society in ancient India. Untouchables stood at the bottom to comply with the commands of all the three castes ranked in order. For long, Indian society took such classification as a model for the vested interests whereas the low castes were condemned to serve degradations in public life. Utterly humiliated, they were identified with various titles like ‘Harijans’ as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi; ‘Depressed classes’ by the British; ‘Chamar’ means ‘Cobbler’ in Oriya; ‘Chuhra’ or ‘Bhangi’ implying scavengers in northern states and ‘Mahar’ in Maratha of Indian languages. Later, the term Dalit is redefined by Gangadhar Pantwane in a letter to Elenor Zelliot where he defines the ‘Dalit’ as:

To me, Dalit is not the caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holly books teaching separatism fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does not believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change & revolution. (268)

In an attempt to write back against the mainstream literary discourse, Dalit Literature started getting shape & structure after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s speech at

Mahad Satyagraha (demanding equal access to water & abolition of caste discrimination) on 25 December 1927. It was a day that was concluded with the burning of the symbol of Brahminic slavery - *The Manusmriti*, a day still celebrated in many parts of India as 'Manavmukti Divas'. Dr. Ambedkar himself called the Mahad Satyagraha, the beginning of the 'Untouchable Liberation Movement'. There arises a question that if Dalit literature originated with Dr. Ambedkar then why the Dalit Literary movement could flourish only after Dr. Ambedkar's death on December 6, 1956. Out of the reasons suggested by the scholars for this development is that earlier the untouchables led a life of poverty, ignorance and misery with hardly any conscious grudge against the discriminatory social construct. It was Dr. Ambedkar who awakened the man in Dalit enabling the common Dalit to join the movement with all his strength. The radical and progressive thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar instilled the fighting spirit among the people who had never known life as normal human beings, and who had no cultural or literary legacy, and no literary consciousness. He was strongly opposed to the caste based discrimination in different walks of life. He asserted that "Caste is therefore a harmful institution, in as; it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules". (264)

### **B. Historical Concept**

Untouchability was initially introduced for the purpose of segregating what Indian society perceived as two individual races. Vedic literature classified India into the Aryan race and the Anaryas or Dasyus race. The segregation of the two was based upon specific phenotypic differences such as skin pigmentation, the shape of the lips, and the nasal bone. As time passed, skin pigmentation became the most distinctive dividing line and continues to remain so today. Of the two races, the Aryan

populations are light skinned and traditionally form the first three Varnas of the caste system. These three original levels represented class and social distinctions within the Aryan race. For example, the highest members of society were part of the Brahman caste, the next highest were part of the Kshatriya caste, and so on. It is suggested that around 2,000 B.C., partial Aryan descendants, known as the Shudras, were also allowed entry to the caste system in an extremely restricted sense. They were made the fourth and last caste of the Aryan community. In opposition to the Aryan population, those labeled as Anaryas and Dasyus were dark skinned and traditionally functioned as a slave class. Because of their low status in the Indian social structure, this group of people was shifted and isolated away from the Aryan houses and living areas. As a result they were separated physically and socially from caste members. They were given the names of Antya, Antyaja and Antyavasin, which mean untouchable, isolated, and non caste. This was the initiation of untouchability in India.

Untouchability has been practiced in Hindu society for many centuries.

The most notable justification for the continuation of this practice is the desire of Brahmans to maintain purity and to avoid pollution. In an effort to preserve caste structure, the ancient Code of Manu (*Manusmriti*) details thousands of rules describing acceptable social intercourse among different castes. The Code of Manu is an ethical code maintained by classical Hinduism. It teaches that the caste system is divinely ordained and the only means of transcending the caste system is through repeated incarnations. (Anthony 371)

The philosophy of caste is contained in the *Manusmriti*, a sacred Hindu text dating from the second century BC. The Dalit's pariah status derives its strength and justification from religious texts. In the *Manusmriti*, the Dalit is described as

“polluted,” in the same way as a menstruating woman, a widow, or a person who has recently been bereaved is polluted. The Dalit is considered “unclean” from birth. While the “Untouchability” of the menstruating woman or the bereaved is temporary and he or she can escape the untouchable condition after the period of “pollution” is past, the Dalit can never escape his status: he is perpetually filthy. ‘Untouchable’ outcast communities were forbidden to join the religious and social life of the community and were confined to menial polluting tasks such as animal slaughter and leather working. The introduction of Islam in India in thirteenth century AD led to widespread conversions by many low caste and ‘untouchable’ groups, and subsequently by the mid nineteenth century, about one quarter of the population was Muslim.

The Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit’s struggle against castiest tradition has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first Vachana poet of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words:

Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish:

Such, they call caste people.

Those who eat the Sacred Cow

That showers frothing milk for Shiva:

Such, they call out castes. (Mishra 46)

### **C. Social Concept**

Dalits have been destined for inferior activities such as leather work, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste by this so called civilized Hindu society. Dalits work as manual laborers like cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. For example, they could not enter in a temple or a school and were required to stay outside the village. The untouchability was practiced everywhere in the society. Even a Dalit could not draw water from a public well; instead he had to wait until a touchable person showed favor and offered him water without any touching. Even the shadow of a Dalit polluted the pious people of the society. To avoid this, a Dalit had to come in the village in afternoon when his shadow would be at his feet only. All this shows that Dalits had been living a life of animal in those societies for many centuries.

The first steps toward social change for Dalit populations were undertaken by the Britishers in the 1930s and 1940s. A body of legislation referred to as Protective Discrimination was instituted by the British colonial government so that untouchables would be allowed some upward mobility within the Indian educational system and government.

Universally 'Untouchability' was practiced on large scale by the civilized Hindus. Untouchables were all those who belonged to the lower caste community. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar defined untouchability as the class struggle between caste Hindus and untouchables. Untouchability was born somewhere around 400 A. D.

Earlier, it was based upon location, but in Peshwa's regime, it was the worst time for Dalits as they were treated like animals.

Dalit social life is expressed through dance and music which are full of fiery spirit, spontaneity and humour without the inhibitions and rigid classical structure that characterizes Hindu music and arts. A Dalit song celebrates life but laments their life conditions, while frankly exposing the realities of life, in a style full of humour and sensual zest, by using simple instruments and vocals. In modern times, Dalit poetry and writing by social and political activists have taken centre stage amongst the educated activist community.

The caste structure in India is extremely complex. In addition to the four varnas, there are well over 3000 diverse sub-castes or jatis in India. Every jati is an element of the four varnas or the Dalit non caste. They are differentiated by region and are based on inherited occupation, religious convictions, and social proscriptions. Purity and pollution are the ideological constructs upon which the caste hierarchy has relied. The Brahmans were traditionally considered the purest human subjects, while untouchables and women of any caste were considered to be the most depraved and polluted.

### **Exploitation & Living Condition of Dalit Children**

Dalit children mostly indulge in back breaking manual labour such as stone breaking, farm labourers, cleaners of latrines, manual scavenging, bonded labour, etc. They live in the most congested and cramped slums in villages, towns and urban areas consisting of huts or ghettos which are damp and cramped. Dalit children live in the most insanitary conditions with no access to public health and sanitation amongst

open sewers and open air toilets. There are no state sponsored public housing rights or public health rights in India.

Untouchability related discrimination can be measured in terms of experiences at different units of the health centre and during home visits by the health workers through qualitative questions. Exclusion of discriminated groups in accessing certain type of services where touch is involved will also reflect on the traditional notion of polluted and pure. (Bhowmick 68)

Dalit children suffer from atrocities both from the wider Hindu society that ostracizes them and also from state authorities. They suffer from arson attacks, rape, torture, stigmatisation and ostracisation, murder and mass killings. Several of such atrocities have been recorded by the media. The state machinery in the form of police, bureaucracy and judiciary either actively perpetrate these atrocities or connive with the culprits. In many cases, even Dalits who go to the police station to give a complaint have been arrested, tortured and falsely implicated in a crime. Extra judicial killings, arbitrary detention and torture of Dalits by the state police are common in India.

The social and economic conditions in India make it difficult for people to find jobs, especially due to an overcrowded population. On top of this general situation, there is still the unfortunate circumstance of the hundreds of years in which the lower castes were denied proper education, if they were allowed any education at all for that matter. In light of this outright disability, the lower castes will not have been as adequately prepared as people within higher castes for competing for the same jobs. Therefore the people within higher castes would receive

the job, leaving lower castes to stay hidden and forgotten in the shadows of India's filthy gutters. (Ellyn 136)

Dalit children do not have access to education due to the lack of mandatory means and they do not have access to universal primary and secondary education in India. Even in rural areas where there may be schools, Dalit children are ostracized, oppressed and stigmatized from attending school. Dalit Children are also subjected to atrocities such as rape, physical abuse and murder. Dalit children have a high level of malnutrition and ill health. They live in very cramped living conditions. They are also exposed to oppression and atrocities just as Dalit adults are. They are frequently forced into sexual abuse in rural areas, and also ordained into temple prostitution as a part of religious rituals for exploitation by non Dalit men of the village or town.

During childhood, Dalit children may not be exposed to the labels like caste or untouchability. However, parents and adults are anxious that the child should not be hurt by transgressing the existing caste boundaries in innocence, hence the child is fed with many instructions of 'Do's and Don'ts' like 'don't go there', 'don't enter such house', 'don't enter the temple', 'don't play with so and so', 'don't play in a specific place', 'don't touch something/someone', 'don't sit around such a place', 'don't argue with so and so', 'don't answer back so and so', 'don't fight with so and so' and a whole lot of protective and preventive instructions more specifically to the girls, like 'don't dress like this', 'don't sit like this', 'don't come in notice of dominant caste' etc. There are certain do's like 'bow before so and so', say 'Namaste', 'stand when so and so comes', 'do services when demanded', 'do physical labor when demanded', 'do menial work', 'agree when in conflict', 'say good things about so and so', 'praise so and so'. There are thus clear instructions of physical distance and geographic boundaries a Dalit child is taught to maintain.



## **Literacy and Level of Education of Dalit Children**

Dalit children, being disproportionately poor, most heavily suffer the ills of an inequitable and ineffective education system in India. The Indian constitution pledges to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen. Education represents one way to break out of cycles of poverty and distress, but it is also a byproduct of such economic conditions. Even when Dalits are allowed access to school, Dalit students face substandard conditions. Ninety nine percent of Dalit students come from government schools that lack basic infrastructure, classrooms, teachers and teaching aid. In contrast, it is common for non Dalit children to seek private tutoring or to access private education of generally better quality. The motivation to do so comes from the fact that most primary government schools are considered as low quality schools. Few Dalits are able to access such supplementation to their education; this furthers the education gap. Once enrolled, discrimination continues to obstruct the access of Dalit children to schooling as well as to affect the quality of education they receive. (Qtd. in *Caste and Economic Discrimination: Theory and Evidence on Rural Labor Market* 124)

A relatively high drop-out rate and non enrollment among the SCs indicates that 'economic deprivation and poor social conditions coupled with inadequate support from the government and agencies at the school level has created extremely unfavorable conditions for children from these sections of the society to continue studies at the school level. (Thorat 167)

## **State of Health and Nutrition of Dalit Children**

As the saying goes “Health is Wealth” and rightly so as ill health may lead to loss of income especially to poor families living on daily income. Importance of health cannot be over stated especially for children as it leads to better attendance in school and to higher level of knowledge attainment, which leads to better paid jobs and larger benefits to future generations. The WHO has defined health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental, and social well being and not merely absence of disease or infirmity’. This definition was accepted in the Alma Ata Declaration of Health (AADH) by the 31st World Health Assembly in 1978, according to AADH:

Which primary healthcare is a key to attaining ‘Health for all by 2000’? Has that happened for Dalits and their children? What is the health status of Dalits in comparison to that of non Dalits? Do Dalits have equal access to the healthcare facilities as non Dalits do? Do Dalit children under the age of 3 have an equal access to life saving vaccinations as non Dalit children do? (Acharya 38)

The caste system that was established in India forced many people who belong to the lower castes into poverty. There are approximately 180 million to 220 million people who are considered to be in the lowest caste in India. These lower castes or Dalits (broken people) are essentially shunned from society. It is not that they have earned such isolation; they experience absolute exclusion from the cradle to the grave.

## **State Oppression**

Police oppression and indifference, prejudice by the judiciary, and caste fanaticism of state bureaucracy has resulted in either active oppression of Dalits or denial of Justice to them. Arbitrary killings, torture and rape by the Police, arson

attacks and murder while the state machinery looks the other way, false implication in crimes, arbitrary detention or torture are some of the common atrocities suffered by Dalits due to the prejudice of the state apparatus. This has led some Dalits to mobilise themselves into political and social activism.

### **Dalit Children in Rural India**

In the level of deprivation in terms of poverty and its factors like access to capital assets, employment, wage earnings and education, Dalits are the disadvantageous group in each factor that determines the level of poverty. For instance, access to capital assets like land is particularly low among the SCs due to their traditional exclusion from ownership of property. This feature, in turn, determines the 'kind' of occupation that is pursued: limited access to fixed capital assets for this social group has led to an exceptionally high dependence on manual wage labor for their source of income.

Moreover, Dalit Children also suffer from high rate of under employment and low wage earnings; hence the cumulative impact of these handicaps is reflected in high degree of poverty. Historically, Dalit Children have also faced restrictions in attaining education which is reflected in their low literacy rates and level of education. Low level of human capital among the SCs affects their capacity to participate in better economic activities such as regular salaried jobs and leads to dependence on irregular daily wage employment. Empirical evidence indicates that children from the SC social group suffer from exclusion and discrimination in terms of education, incidence of child labor, good health and access to health services.

## **Urban Migration**

A steady migration of Dalits from rural and semi urban areas to cities has caused an expansion of urban slums in big metropolises. In these city slums, Dalit Children live in the same despicable living conditions with lack of sanitation, housing and health, while providing the much needed annual labour for construction, transport, heavy industries and also other menial work such as domestic work that fuels the creation of urban wealth and development, while they are rewarded with squalor and a pittance.

Dalit women suffer double discrimination-as Dalits and as women. They are exposed to sexual abuse at the hands of the so called “caste” Hindu men and also men who work for state authorities such as the Police, while also being subjected to stigmatisation and labour exploitation like Dalit men.

Atrocities such as rape of Dalit women in police custody, bonded labour and physical abuse are common in India. Dalit women do all the back breaking work society expects Dalits to do, such as manual scavenging, farm labour, stone breaking, etc., and in addition they have to bear domestic responsibilities as mothers and wives, while also enduring sexual abuse and oppression from the wider society.

Childhood of Dalit children is marred with the differences which is evident from the various perspective of the concept of the term ‘Dalit’ whether it is historical, mythological or social. The mythological concept of four Varnas is not a fabulous tale but a bitter reality of Indian society. More than 200 hundred million people in India are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation & violence simply because of the caste into which they were born. The tag of low caste haunts a Dalit child throughout his life. The discrimination faced by Dalit children in the historical context is not

confined to the history but it has taken more acute & active form in modern times. Caste-based divisions force Dalit children to perform tasks deemed to “polluting” or degrading for non-Dalits. This is the worst irony that however intelligent a Dalit child may be, his destiny is to clear human waste from dry pit latrines, manual scavenging etc.

### **Constitutional Protection to Dalit Children in the Independent India**

Over one-sixth of India's population, some 170 million people, live a precarious existence, shunned by much of Indian society because of their rank as “untouchables” or Dalits—literally meaning “broken” people at the bottom of India's caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land and basic resources, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of police and dominant-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection.

Historically, the caste system has formed the social and economic framework for the life of the people of India. In its essential form, this caste system involves the division of people into a hierarchy of unequal social groups where basic rights and duties are assigned on the basis of birth and are not subject to change.

Dalits are ‘outcastes’ falling outside the traditional four classes of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, & Shudra. Dalits are typically considered low, impure & polluting based on their birth and traditional occupation, thus they face multiple forms of discrimination, violence, and exclusion from the rest of society. (Chatterjee 67)

Beginning in the 1920s, various social, religious and political movements rose up in India against the caste system and in support of the human rights of the Dalit community. In 1950, the Constitution of India was adopted, and largely due to the

influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (chairman of the constitutional drafting committee), it departed from the norms and traditions of the caste system in favor of Justice, Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity, guaranteeing all citizens basic human rights regardless of caste, creed, gender, or ethnicity. The implementation and enforcement of these principles has, unfortunately, been an abysmal failure.

Despite the fact that “untouchability” was abolished under India's Constitution in 1950, the practice of “untouchability” and the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes remains very much a part of rural India. “Untouchables” may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms, and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste. Most Dalits continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunities for better employment or education. With the exception of a small minority who have benefited from India's policy of quotas in education and government jobs, Dalits are relegated to the most menial tasks, as manual scavengers, removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers, and cobblers. Dalit children make up the majority of those sold into bondage to pay off debts to dominant-caste creditors.

Dalit women face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Dalit girls have been forced to become prostitutes for dominant-caste patrons and village priests. Sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are used by landlords and the police to inflict political “lessons” and crush dissent within the community. Less than 1% of the perpetrators of crimes against Dalit women are ever convicted.

The plight of India's “untouchables” elicits only sporadic attention within the country. Public outrage over large-scale incidents of violence or particularly

egregious examples of discrimination fades quickly, and the state is under little pressure to undertake more meaningful reforms. Laws granting Dalits special consideration for government jobs and education reach only a small percentage of those they are meant to benefit. Laws designed to ensure that Dalits enjoy equal rights and protections have seldom been enforced. Instead, police refuse to register complaints about violations of the law and rarely prosecute those responsible for abuses that range from murder and rape to exploitative labor practices and forced displacement from Dalit lands and homes. Laws and government policies on land reform and budget allocations for the economic empowerment of the Dalit community remain largely unimplemented. Dalit Laws are described as:

Dalits who dare to challenge the social order have often been subject to abuses by their dominant-caste neighbors. Dalit villages are collectively penalized for individual “transgressions” through social boycotts, including loss of employment and access to water, grazing lands, and ration shops. For most Dalits in rural India who earn less than a subsistence living as agricultural laborers, a social boycott may mean destitution and starvation. (Narula 217)

The present time is an historic moment, not only for Dalits, but for all those committed to basic human rights and principles of justice, equality, liberty, fraternity. India, a rising star and increasingly important player on the world stage, must not be allowed to ignore the injustice and oppression within its own borders any longer. Together, we must unite, nationally and internationally, to force the Indian government to rise above an entrenched caste-mentality and to properly enforce its laws, implement its policies, and fulfill its responsibility to protect the basic human rights of all of its citizens.

Among the Dalit community and its supporters & sympathizers, Dr. Ambedkar's statement resounds louder today than ever:

My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality. It is in the fullest sense spiritual. (*Jai Bhim 31*)

The present research is an attempt to capture the agonizing strains in the lives of Dalit Children as depicted in the texts under study.



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## Chapter II

### DALIT MOVEMENTS & DALIT LITERARY WORKS

The earliest known Dalit reformer was Lord Gautama Buddha, who preached the abolishing of untouchability. The earliest known reform motion within Hinduism happened during the medieval period when the Bhatia movements actively engaged in the participation and inclusion of Dalits. In the 19th century, the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission actively participated in the emancipation of Dalits. Saint Kabir, Mahanubhava sect, and Varkari sect in Maharashtra rejected the term untouchability and embraced Dalits as brothers. Maharashtra state was the key state in the reformation of Dalits or of the transformation of untouchable to touchable. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Rajashri Shahu Maharaj, V. R. Shinde and the towering figure Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar were the prominent social reformers in Maharashtra. In the 1950, Ambedkar turned his attention to Buddhism and converted thousands of untouchable people in Buddhism with himself. In west Bengal, Chaitanya Prabhu initiated a movement called 'Namo Shudras movement' (bow to Dalit) which changed an attitude towards untouchable community. Overall, Dalit reform movements had been in India since ancient period right from Gautama Buddha. Still it is in course of reforming state by creative efforts of social reformers. (Qtd. in *From Untouchables to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movements* 96)

Dalits experience an exceptionally high dependence on manual wage labor for their source of income due to restriction in access to fixed capital assets, low level of skill due to restrictive access to education and high unemployment, underemployment and low wage rates due to discrimination in the labor market. Research indicates that in the post liberalization period (1999-2000), 35 percent of Dalits in India were living