

## **Dalits: Bottom to Pyramid**

### **Historical Background of Casteism**

All human societies are more or less ridden with the prejudices on the basis of race, nationality, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, age or caste. Among these, caste has been the prime source of inequality in India since ages as it is hard not to think of caste here in India. This glaring caste system segregated the Dalits and positioned them at the lowest rung of the society denying them even the basic human rights that one must enjoy in order to ensure one's bare existence. The Varna/caste system being rigid and complex, it is quite difficult to understand the rationale behind sustenance of caste-based discrimination. In view of the difficulty of the task the researcher attempts to give an overview of the Indian caste system with particular focus on untouchability. Although, the term 'caste' has its origin in Spanish and Portuguese word "casta" which means 'race', 'breed', or 'lineage'. There is no exact translation of the word 'caste' in Indian languages. In the Indian context, there are two most proximate terms i.e., 'Varna' and 'Jāti'. But there is much confusion between the two yet both constitute the basis for the caste system. The term 'varna' literally means colour i.e. the colour of the skin but later on this varna theory played a considerable role in rising of social divisions because the roots of varna system lie in clash of races.. Basically, there are two opposite views regarding the origin of the caste system. One view is called the western or historian's view, and the other one is, the Brahmanical view. The western view is centred on the Aryan invasion theory invented by the German Indologist and it proclaims that Dravidians (the inhabitants (dasas) of the land) were defeated by Aryans and were gradually transformed

into the 'shudras'. S. Charles Morris came out with a detailed explanation of this theory in the book *Dalit Phobia: Why Do They Hate Us?*. He explains:

A Caucasian race of nomadic warriors, known as Aryana.... invaded Northern India somewhere between 1800 BC and 1500 BC....The theory further proposes that this race displaced or assimilated the indigenous pre-Aryan people and that the bulk of these indigenous people moved to the southern reaches of the subcontinent or became the lower castes of the post-Vedic society. (31-32)

It was supported by Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *Discovery of India*. He connected the Indus Valley people with the Dravidians and talked about their fusion with the Aryans. Anand and Shobhna Iyer, in their edited and annotated book *Riddles in Hinduism*, define Aryan supremacy as:

Several scholars and philosophers in the west from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche believed in Aryan supremacy at a time when the whites were trying to justify both racism and imperialism. Even Gandhi during his South African years espoused the innate superiority of high caste Indians.... This sentiment was to then fuel the racist ideologies of Hitler and Mussolini. The point is that Brahmanic Hinduism even before it assumed the garb of Hindutva, had a fascist tendency. (25)

But later on, Max Muller withdrew this Aryan invasion thesis and defined it as a linguistic category. Ambedkar too rejected it and said that caste is neither racial nor

economic. He observed that Dalit-non-Dalit divide has no racial content and people belonging to all social categories belong to the same racial stock. But Dalits as 'Dasas' and 'Dasyus' formed a different social block, although they belonged to the same race. In his book *Who Were the Shudras?*, he defines that, "the present day Shudras are a collection of castes drawn from heterogeneous stocks and racially different from the original Shudras of the Indo Aryan society" (7). In this way, colour conscious Aryans degraded them and the 'trivarnic' society became 'chaturvarnic', and later on split into a large number of castes and sub castes within the framework of their fourfold system of society. They enslaved, oppressed and ostracized the native population. Giving a different dimension to the question of caste in India, Driks argues that:

Caste is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule....It was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing and above all systematizing India's diverse forms of social identity, community and organization....in short, colonialism made caste what it is today. (Qtd.in Deshpandey 7)

Gradually, Indian caste system established itself with this chaturvarnic model and as a result, majority of upper castes people still see Aryans as their ancestors. In this context, Dr. Ghurye states, "Caste is a Brahminic child of Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and thence transferred to other parts of India." (10). What we call caste system today is known in Hinduism as 'varnasharma dharma' or 'chaturvarna'. As the Tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda* i.e. 'Purusha Sukta' introduced the Chaturvarna as, "The

Brahmin (priestly class) was his mouth, both his arms were the Rajanya (all Kshatriya, the warrior), his thighs became the Vaishyas (traders), from his feet the Shudras (serving caste) was produced” (Qtd. in Dangle xx). This Chaturvarnya model further becomes more severe with strict Brahminical laws like fixed statuses and occupations with social immobility firmly solidified by rules of endogamy. All these features are strictly backed by the religiously governed principles of 'purity' and 'pollution' which automatically render a social structure to the concept of untouchability. Similar discriminatory laws were articulated in *Manu Smriti*, which is the guiding text for formulation of Hindu laws by the British government.

The Brahmanic view is the mythological-religious theory. Its roots are buried so deep in a dim and distant antiquity that we can trace numerous instances of discriminatory status of dalits as a result of divine sanction. It is believed that the practice of untouchability began during the rule of Pushyamitra Sunga (187 B.C. onwards) who killed Bruhadatra and established Brahmin rule with the help of Manu who codified all inhuman and unethical laws against the Shudras in the name of religion in his work *Manushastra* or *Manusmriti*. This was the beginning of Brahminism. During this time, Brahmins were given the highest status in society and caste divisions were enforced by the kings. The role of the king was seen to be in protecting 'dharma'. In this context, dharma was interpreted as '*varnashrama dharma*' or the law of the castes (and ashrama or stages of life). To keep the vested interest of the upper castes intact, *varnashrama dharma* was often supported, propagated and reinterpreted through the *Sutras*, the *Smritis*, and the *Puranas*, which are collectively known as the *Dharma Shastra* today. But in the era of the *Upanishads*, the supremacy of brahmins was challenged in various

overt and covert ways. In *Chandogya Upanishad*, we find a story in which a procession of white dogs holding the tail of preceding dog in his mouth is pictured like Brahmins singing 'vahishapavamana' hymn. However, in Varna scheme, there are only four varnas and there is no mention of untouchables. But in Vedic literature there are references of 'chandal', 'nishada', and 'ayogava' etc. In 'Chandogya' Upanishad, dalits are called 'Chandal' (outcaste). The four castes are presented in the following pattern:

Those who are of pleasant conduct will enter a pleasant womb either the womb of a Brahmin or the womb of a Kshatriya or the womb of a Vaishyas. But those who are of stinking conduct here... they will enter a stinking womb either the womb of a dog or the womb of swine or the womb of a chandal. (Qtd. in Massey 107)

The Upanishadic period was succeeded by well-known Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which are replete with archetypal Dalit symbols. In Uttarakanda of *Ramayana*, it is mentioned that Samvuka was slain by lord Rama because despite being a shudra, he was making penance which was forbidden to him by Vedas. Traditionally, a shudra was not entitled to study the Vedas or hear it being pronounced and if he did so intentionally, his tongue was cut off and molten lead was poured into his ear. They had no right to 'Upanayana' (sacred thread ceremony). Shudras were always subjected to humiliation and exploitation. In *Mahabharata*, Eklavya (shudra) was tricked by his Brahmin guru, Dronacharya who asked him to cut off his thumb and offer it to him Guru 'Dakshina'. In fourth chapter of *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna clarifies the origin and purpose of the caste system in Sanatana dharma on the basis of difference in their qualities and actions. The shaloka runs like this, "Chaturvarnyam maya srishtam

gunakarmavibhagasah tasya kartāram api maam viddhya kartaram avyayam” (Chapter 4, Shloka 13). These instances are capable of stirring the sensibility of a common reader. Thus, through the centuries, the ancient *Dharma Shastra* of the Hindus imposed a series of social, political, economic and religious restrictions in form of exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation on the lower castes, making them completely dependent on those above them in caste hierarchy. As a result, the Panchamas were relegated to menial occupations only; they lived outside the village and fed on the leftovers of the high caste people. Physical contact with the untouchables was said to be 'polluting' and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling. They had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools, markets, temples etc. They were not permitted to cover the upper part of their bodies. Ironically, the men of privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of Untouchable women. In case of Dalit women, it seemed as if, “Love is polluting. Rape is pure.” (25)

The most perverted practices of untouchability are described by Arjun Dangle in the introduction of his book *Poisoned Bread*. He narrates the agony of Dalits and the untouchables who were compelled to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputa should not fall to the earth and pollute others. Another such practice was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them. All these forced conditions made them destitute, deprived and the most depressed section of mankind. As a result, they remained socially degenerate; economically impoverished; and political servants of the upper castes.

In this way, 'casteism' has entered into the psyche and bones of a sizeable section of the society, particularly among Hindus not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed but because they are deeply religious. It crumbles down the process of development by encouraging corruption, nepotism and blind caste loyalty as defined by Dr. Ambedkar who sees caste as, "An artificial chopping of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy" (Qtd in Mandal, 43). The very notion is depicted by Kaka Kalekar as: "Casteism is an overriding, blind and supreme group loyalty that ignores the healthy social standards of justice, fair play, equity and universal brotherhood." (Qtd. in Thorat)

Apart from monopolizing state power and property, the upper castes of ancient times made the Sanskrit language (the repository of their knowledge and wisdom) their exclusive terrain, where untouchables, the Shudras and women were denied access to learning of Sanskrit. In such circumstances, Buddha was the first social revolutionary who challenged Vedanta philosophy based on magic and rituals because Buddhism is seen as a kind of protestant Hinduism based on rationality and ethics. Its defining feature is the adoption of Dalits as its own and rendering service to uplift them on par with generality. In the medieval period, radical thinkers and mystic reformers of the Bhakti movement challenged the Varna system and stratification of human society on the basis of caste. Many of the well-known poets, singers, and saints in the Bhakti cults were Chokhamela, Eknath, Namdev Dhasal, Kabir, Raidas, Mirabai, Tukaram, Surdas etc. Chokhamela, a thirteenth-fourteenth century saint was a Mahar from Maharashtra. He, launched his protest against untouchability through his abhangas. He questions the very basis of the caste system and interrogates the rigid notion of purity and impurity as:

The only impurity is in five elements

There is only one substance in the world.

Then who is pure and who is impure?

The cause of pollution is the creation of the body.

...

Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure? (Abhanga 11 Qtd.in Zelliott 5-6)

The poems in which the Mahar is the speaker are Johar poems, beginning with the greetings used by Mahars to their superiors. As Chokhamela uses the customary right of Mahar to receive any discarded food as a way to worship Vitthal. He says:

Johar, May-Bap, Johar.

I am the Mahar of Your Mahars.

I am so hungry I have come for Your leavings.

...

Chokha says: I have brought a bowl for Your left –over food. (Abhanga

71, Qtd.in Zelliott 7)

Next important figure of the Bhakti cult was Shri Eknath Maharaj (C.1533- 1599) who belonged to a Marathi Brahman family. He wrote some three hundred bharuds, dramas and poems which were meant to expose untouchability. His writings make it clear that there is no caste distinction in the sight of God. Similarly, Namdev (1270-1350 A.D.)



who belonged to Shimphi (tailor) caste from Maharashtra exposes the hypocrisy of Varna system as quoted in the introduction of *The Outcaste* as:

I curse you, curse your book.

Curse your culture, your hypocrisy.

I wasn't going to say this,

But now my hands have woken up. (Qtd. in Limbale xx)

Kabir (1398-1518 A.D.), who born in a Muslim family, was a weaver from Uttar Pradesh who asserts:

We eat by touching, we wash

By touching, from a touch. The world was born.

So who's untouched?

Asks Kabir.

Only he who has no taint of Maya (Qtd in *Buddhism in India*, 194)

Kabir wrote about untouchability in a way that took up and transcended earlier Dalit laments and caste inequalities as unjustified in his popular songs:

baman se gadaha bhalla, aan jaat se kutta, mulla se murag bhalla, raat  
jaagaave suta

(A donkey's better than a Brahmin, a dog better than other castes, a cock  
is better than a mullah to tell us night is past)

janmate maanus hot sab, yah jaanat sansaar, bancak suud karaavahii,  
kahai kabiir pukaar

(All are born as human beings, this is known by all, Sudras are made by  
lying rogues: this is Kabir's call.) (Qtd. in Omvedt, 99-100)

Raidas (a contemporary of Kabir) was a cobbler from Uttar Pradesh. He was the first radical Bhakti saint who formulated an Indian version of utopia in his song 'Begumpura'. Sena (another contemporary of Raidas) and a barber from Uttar Pradesh and renowned bhakti poet Mirabai accepted Raidas (dalit) as their guru without thinking about caste hierarchies. Tukaram (born in 1608 A.D.) from Maharashtra says that god made him a Kunbi otherwise he might have died an arrogant hypocrite. These saint-poets used local languages (colloquies) for their songs, *dohas*, and *abhangas*. Thus, with the growth of nationalism and the awakening interest in the upliftment of the depressed classes, Bhakti movement is still very much alive. Mahadeo Govind Ranade, a judge and a member of the reformist religious group, the Prarthana Samaj, wrote about the historic importance of the Bhakti movement:

.... like the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century,  
there was a Religious, Social and Literary Revival and Reformation in

India ....This Religious Revival was not Brahmanical in its orthodoxy; it was heterodox in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works....At its head were Saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shop-keepers, barbers, and even Mahars. (Zelliot 8)

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Bhakti movement was dying out without reforming the caste-ridden society because of their eclectic and metaphysical worldview. With the birth of new sects, Indian society became more rigid and stratified. Like Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity also subscribe to the theory of stratification and demean the human beings on the basis of caste. It is at this juncture of time that India came directly in touch with the British. As rulers, the British studied the nature of Indian society and life of its people. They had a tough time with Indians in the governance of the country. For getting intermediaries Macaulay's famous *Minute* (1835) made a strong case in defence of the English language as the medium of education. Their sole motive was to create an official class "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and intellect" (Qtd.in Krishanswamy 32). Thus a new hierarchy was established where competence in English would be the crucial factor for financial security and social status. But this new opportunity opened up by the colonial government was grabbed largely by those who were already on the top of the traditional social structure.

By the time British were convinced that the people of India are religious at heart, they started popularizing Christianity among the people by applying the formula 'meet the Father through the Son'. They gave a lot of allurements like job, food and shelter to convert the common Indians into Christianity. They built schools, hospitals and many churches at Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and the whole of the North East came noticeably under the influence of the missionaries. As in Africa, the coastal regions of India such as Kerala, the coastal part of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu became the centres of their activity. But today, 'ghar-vapsi' or re-conversion is a common trend. There are evidences of mass re-conversion from tribal belts of Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. However, forced conversion or re-conversion is against the Indian Constitution. Article 25 states that all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and have the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion. Justice Ray interpreted the word "propagate," to mean "to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets," but not to include the right to convert another person to one's own religion. "It has to be remembered that Article 25(1) guarantees 'freedom of conscience' to every citizen. Of course, it is observed that the neo-converts have nothing to cheer about because repression is the constitutive feature of conversion. It would be appropriate to say that the phenomenon of conversion is like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Some of the novelists of the 1930s like Shivram Karanth and Mulk Raj Anand in their respective novels *Chomana Dudi* (Kannada, 1933) and *Untouchable* (English, 1935), while depicting the lives of their heroes, rejected Christianity as a viable alternative. Even M.K. Gandhi, who was believed to be the champion of the cause of the untouchables, was against conversion for his own reasons. Forester quotes one of Gandhi's articles,

published in *the Harijan* in December 1936 where he advised, “a missionary to pray for the Harijans, but not to try to convert them because they did not have 'the mind and intelligence to understand' what the Gospel said. He would say that, “Would you preach the Gospel to a cow?” (Qtd. in Raj Kumar 210). The dalit Christians are known as Rice Christians. An eminent scholar of alternative religious movements, Gauri Viswanthan, in her book *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, defines conversion as not just a spiritual phase but as a political activity. She critiques secularism as a most flawed project in colonies like India which believes in heterodoxy. She says:

Conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community, whether it is forced or voluntary or whether it is result of proselytization or inner spiritual illumination. Not only conversion alter the demographic equation within a society and produce numerical imbalances but it also challenges an established community's assent to religious doctrines and practices with the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat as just as forcefully as if its beliefs had been turned into heresies.

(Vishwanthan 1)

In this way, conversion is not a way of resurrection or renunciation whether it is forced or voluntary India's first Dalit billionaire, Rajesh Saraiya says that people should change themselves from within and look around the world full of so many opportunities.

But the British Indian Empire gave some reform schemes to the historically disadvantaged men and women. They passed the “Government of India Act 1935” and identified the untouchables as Depressed Class or the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. During their reign British Government offered basic advantages like education, employment, and franchise to Dalit community. In addition to political identity, the Dalit discourses highlight caste based problems in the national and international forums. The writers and researchers were brought out to understand the social discrimination and debated on the issues. Dalit literature has been producing new forms of intellectual representation in various languages. It voices social and political consciousness and monitors the Dalits' welfare.

In nutshell, the period between fifteenth to seventeenth centuries was dominated by radical saints who preached the ecstasy of devotional Bhakti songs, freeing them from Brahmanic ritualism and laid the foundation for new values of equality and rationality. But these saints could not achieve the use of reason that gives a socio-historical analysis of caste. It was only with the British that history took place. The shift from Kaliyuga to Colonial Yuga was also a shift from an ahistorical cyclical vision of time and cosmology to historical, creative one in which human, rather than the divine agency, was predominant. In this way, colonialism itself was a boon for Dalits and non-brahmins, since it gave them the economic and political power to break away from brahmanical dominance.

## **Perspectives of Change**

No doubt, British enlightened Indians and infused them with new secular and democratic ideas. Different ideological strands like Gandhian, Ambedkarite and Dravidian are the legacy of the anti-colonial struggles. Mainly, these movements can be divided into two segments: Non-Dalits and Dalits.

### **Non-Dalit Response: Integration in the Fold of a Reformed Hinduism**

After Bhakti Movement, Neo-Vedantic Movement came into being. It attempted to re-interpret the doctrines of Hinduism to cleanse its evils. Its exponents are Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda. These movements attempted to remove Untouchability. Under the impact of the Brahmo Samaj initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy, meaningless rituals of pantheistic worship were given up and doctrines of *karma* and *samskara* were rejected. Though he attacked some of the evils of the caste system, but he concentrated more on the issues pertaining to the upper castes, e.g. sati, child marriage, widow remarriage etc. The movement was mostly confined to Bengal and, therefore, it could not succeed in removing untouchability. Those who felt attracted towards the new faith were basically the educated and westernized class.

Later in the 19th century, Dayanand Saraswati founded rationalist Arya Samaj in 1875 to fight against orthodox Brahmanism. Arya Samaj appealed the people to "Go back to the Veda" by debunking myth and idol worship. It was intended to revive the glories of Hinduism and to counter the influence of Christianity and western values. To achieve this

goal, Dayanand was ready to reform the caste system and abandon the *Puranas* and *Shastras*. He advocated the abolition of untouchability, the emancipation of women, and the development of education in Sanskrit and Hindi. He also preached worshipping of a single god and condemned polytheism. He also organized the *shuddhi* movement where the persecuted untouchables, who were once known as the outcasts, were given sacred threads to wear like the three upper castes to become caste Hindus. However, the agenda of the Arya Samaj, like the Brahmo Samaj was limited to reforming Hinduism and hence it could not widely spread across all castes.

Another, widely acclaimed mystic, Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1834-1886) abhorred the practice of untouchability. He said that no one was born high or low. During the early stages of his penance, he could not overcome the pride of his superior birth. In order to scorch this disturbing trait of his personality, one day he went to the hovel of an untouchable and swept the courtyard, not with a broom but with his own long and overgrown hair. His disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902) condemned untouchability in unequivocal terms. According to him, untouchability was a strange and astounding belief and it did not form part of Hindu religion. It was neither in the *Vedas* nor in the *Puranas*. He was of the view that untouchability was the cause of India's downfall and made Indians coward and thoroughly contemptible. He prescribed a conception of an ideal Indian society taking goodness of all the four castes - *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudras* and rejected their evils. This view of Vivekananda seems to be the same as other religious reformers mentioned earlier in defending the 'religious idealist philosophy' of Hinduism. During the freedom struggle, leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak too castigated untouchability in unmistakable words. Tilak, for



example, believed that untouchability had no connection with Vedic dharma and it was due to ingenuity and insolence of ancient Brahmins that untouchability could be born. He was a Chitpavan Brahman by caste and wrote a book *Gita Rahasya*, supporting Hinduism but criticizing 'brahmanism'. It is said that his book, especially dealing with the origin of the Aryans, was so much appreciated by Queen Victoria of Great Britain that she set him free from imprisonment which he had to undergo due to his political activities. Later, Tilak introduced Ganapati as well as Shivaji festivals to be celebrated annually to bring unity among Hindus in his home state of Maharashtra. The attempt was a great success. Even today, the tradition of celebrating these festivals is in practice though the Hindu fundamentalists have started using these festivals for their caste politics.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many prominent writers sporadically took up the cause of the untouchables. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a very important Bengali writer once wrote that for the oppressed, oppression by high caste countrymen was not less galling than oppression by arrogant foreigners. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), in his essay on nationalism, condemns the unjust social order of Indian society and seeks justice for the lower castes. He observes that it is a narrow mentality to deny social, political or cultural rights to certain groups. In his poem, *Gitanjali* (1913) he lashes out at the humiliation meted out to untouchables in our country, predicting that the asymmetry borne out of the caste system will one day drag down the privileged upper caste to the same level of degradation. His play titled *Chandalika* (written between 1925 and 1933) deals with the subjectivity of an untouchable girl whom a Buddhist monk asks for water to quench his thirst. Bhikku's request is something undreamt of by the girl. In the deft hands of the poet, her pathos and poignancy turned into hope and aspiration and she

started believing that social tyranny, however unbearable, was worth suffering if only a person like Bhikku could befriend an untouchable.

Gandhi (1867-1948) acknowledged untouchability as a reproach to Hinduism and believed that it was a pathological growth that had nothing to do with the essential nature of the caste system which was a framework for the division of labour. He defends the Indian caste system as:

.... The spirit behind caste is not one of arrogant superiority.... It is the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress. Just as the spirit of the family is inclusive of those who love each other and are wedded to each other by ties of blood and relation, caste also tries to include families of a particular way of purity of life (not standard of life, meaning by this term, economic standard of life). Only, it does not leave the decision ... Caste does not connote superiority or inferiority. It simply recognizes different outlooks and corresponding modes of life .... (Qtd. in Ramashray Roy 111)

To elevate the social position of untouchables, he gave them a new name '*Harijan*' which means the 'children of God'. However, this could not challenge the deep-rooted caste-structure, which was accepted as the foundational social-order. This clearly indicates that the social situation of Dalits is not just confined to the strong social stratification, but their position in the society is inextricably connected with the religious legitimization of social order given by the upper castes and governed by the laws of Manu. Thus, the so-called reform movements in India, which began with Raja Rammohan Roy and continued till Gandhi down to his followers, were mostly led by the upper castes who were worried

about the 'decadent' Hinduism of their day. Though all of them talked about social equality and other things, their main objectives were updating Hinduism, modifying it in tune with an idealized Vedic belief. This condition generally led to, what is termed as the 'Renaissance' or 'Awakening.'

Sociologists acknowledged another avenue open for social change that is 'Sanskritisation'. But it is not a free and spontaneous step on the part of the untouchables or other backward castes, but an induced process which sees Hindu way of life as an ideal practice to be followed and internalized. For instance, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujrat, after owning economic progress, a whole class of peasants including several lower castes claimed to be Patel caste that is higher in rank. But as a social process 'Sanskritisation' may account for change for some extent, but it is another variation within the walls of caste-prison. It alienates the Dalits from their authentic self and leads them to assume a false identity. It is clear by now that the Dalit movement in pre-Independence period had achieved a respectable status through reformative movements like the Bhakti movement, the Neo-Vadantic movement, and Sanskritization. These movements proliferated political consciousness among Dalits for the Dalit Liberation movement whose agenda include recognition of human existence, social mobility, political participation, social change and establishment of an egalitarian society.

### **The Non-Brahmin Movement**

Along with the upper caste reformist (Renaissance) movement, another movement named 'Non-Brahmin Movement', or 'Enlightenment' or 'Anti-Caste' movement was also led by the lower caste leaders like Phule, Periyar, Narayan Guru and Babasaheb Rao Ambedkar. These leaders talked about creating a new society and followed a belief

system forwarded by the French Revolution based on ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’. This Non-Brahmin movement was inaugurated in Maharashtra by Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), the first theoretician of the caste and the father of Indian social revolution who hailed from *Mali* (gardener), a shudra community. He led the Dalit Bahujan struggles against brahmins by establishing the ‘Satya Shodhak Samaj’ (Society for Truth Seekers), in 1873 because he considered education the only way to demolish the roots of caste hegemony. He defended Tarabai Shinde who attacked Hindu Patriarchy in her, ‘Stri-Purush Tulna’ (Comparison of Women and Men) and Pandita Ramabai who founded Arya Mahila Samaj and later converted to Christianity.

Phule simply views the ancient history of India was nothing but the struggle between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. He asserted that the ‘Shudras and Atishudras’ simply listed as ‘Kunbis, Malis, Dhangars ... Bhils, Kolis, Mahars and Mangs’, were the original inhabitants of the country, enslaved and exploited by conquering Aryans. They formulated a caste based Hinduism as a means of deceiving the teeming masses and legitimising their own power. Officers like Manu were anxious to maintain the sanctity of the regulations laid down by Brahma. Hence they composed many imaginary stories about Brahma. He attacked empty demystification of the Hindu concepts. His central point was that Brahmanical system is bipolar and that caste or ‘varna’ is a relationship of power and dominance and has to be attacked at that level. In his ballad, *Priestcraft Exposed*, Phule endowed the same story with an enormous emotional appeal:

Lawless men leagued together

They made Brahma their chief

... Beating the people and bringing them to their knees

Degrading them into slaves

See, these are the Shudras

The rest left over, a tiny number

Rose up and challenged Parashuram

They took care to remain united

Of their countrymen, their beloved brothers,

Many were slain

The shudras no longer cared for unity

The maha-ari aatacked Parashuram

Many women became widows

Parashuram routed the maha-ari

In constant fighting he broke their spirit

... The great enemies of the twice-born

Came to the end of their strength

Thrust down and defeated

Those that were left were punished severely

Abused as Mangs and maha-aris, great enemies

See, these are the Kshatriyas of the olden days. (Qtd in O'Hanlon *Caste Conflict and Ideology*, 143)

Another powerful critique of caste system is found in the writings and campaign of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879-1973) known as Periyar led this anti-caste or Non-Brahmin Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu seeking to discard the priestly service of the Brahmins by asserting Dravidian culture far superior to the Brahmanic Aryan culture. He demanded a separate non-Brahmin or Dravidian country. He attacked all religions more than Phule and denied the existence of god by calling the worshipers of god barbarians. Another contributor to this Non-Brahmin movement was Narayana Guru, the founder of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, popularly known as S.N.D.P. movement originated in the late nineteenth century, among the Ezhavas (toddy tappers) of Kerala who suffered from different types of caste disabilities. They were not allowed to worship in the temples of caste Hindus; women were not allowed to cover their breasts; and the Ezhavas could neither wear any footwear nor build pukka houses until the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. Even today, tapping is considered a defiling occupation. He preached that worship of God should not be denied to any individual or caste group. An offence in this regard was an offence against God. He tried to give equal opportunities to the untouchables by establishing many temples of Lord Shiva and by appointing them as cooks. He asked his followers (Ezhavas) to abstain from eating meat, drinking liquor and worshipping lesser deities and spirits.

B.R. Ambedkar, as the saviour of the 'broken men' and being the chief architect of Indian constitution, played a key role in anti-caste movement. Throughout his life he struggled relentlessly against unjust features of Hindu society to ensure religious, social, economic and political equality among all the downgraded untouchables. Gandhi described him as 'fierce and fearless' and Nehru acclaimed him as a 'symbol of revolt against all the oppressing features of Hindu society'. Being an indefatigable defender of human rights, he was of the view that society should be based on the three fundamental principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. In his book *The Untouchables* (1948), he defines that the two roots for untouchability are contempt and hatred for the broken men and continuation of beef-eating by them. For destroying caste, he started many periodicals like *Mook Nayak*, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, and *Equality and Janata* to give a voice to millions of voiceless people. The poems and songs published in his weekly *Jana* described how Dravidians were suppressed at the hands of Aryans and how the 'Brahmins', 'Kshatriyas' and 'Vaishya's' became all powerful and he also depicted anti-caste radicalism with calls for class struggle:

...

Congress", "Hindu Mahasabha", "Muslim League" are all agents of the rich,

The "Independent Labour Party" is our true house...

Take up the weapon of Janata

Throw off the bloody magic of the owners' atrocities,

Rise workers! Rise peasants! Hinduism is ours,

Humanity will be built on labour,

This is our birth right! (Qtd. in Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, 50)

His first organized attempt was his establishment of the central institution Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha. He launched several protest movements like Satyagraha in Maharashtra to worship in Hindu temples without hindrance. Another very significant movement was Mahad March from the Chawdar Lake to assert the rights of Dalits to take water from public watering places. He also established the Samaj Samata Sangh to achieve social equality among untouchables and to encourage inter-caste marriage. On 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1927, he with thousands of his follower's burnt copies of *Manusmriti*. That is why 25<sup>th</sup> December is celebrated annually as *Manusmriti Dahan Din (Manusmriti Burning Day)* by Ambedkarites and Dalits. In 1930, the temple entry movement was launched with the attempt to enter the Kala Ram Mandir at Nasik. In this way Ambedkar is seen as another incarnation of Jesus for the Dalit–Bahujan masses of India. In his article entitled “First the Pillars, Then the Base” he invoked the base-superstructure architectural model. It was reprinted again in *Janata* as “The Illusion of the Communists and the Duty of the Untouchable Class”. It clarifies that in economic relations a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building constructed on it has to be knocked down with the change in base. In this way, the economic relations of society can be changed by destroying the existing social, political and other institutions.



But he was not a fierce opponent of Marxism. In the World Buddhist Conference held in Kathmandu in November, 1956, he spoke on 'Buddhism and Communism' and maintained that the two are similar and the only difference is that Marxism subscribes violence to achieve power while Buddhist employs non-violence. By the time, he came to realize that unless this socially suppressed section of the Indian society secured political power it was not possible to completely wipe out all social, legal and cultural disabilities from which they suffered. That is why his slogan was: "Be a ruling race"(). But, political power which Ambedkar wanted for the untouchables during the British rule could not be obtained due to the stiff resistance of the Congress with its caste Hindu character. He characterized it as a full-blooded and blue-blooded Hindu body. After a long deliberation towards the end of his life on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956, Ambedkar, along with his five lac followers took *Diksha* in Buddhism at Nagpur. It is his first and foremost contribution to establish Buddhist demography in Indian society. In his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he wrote,

Society has to choose one of the three alternatives. Society may choose not to have any Dhamma as an instrument of govt....this means society chooses the road to anarchy. Secondly, society may choose the police, i.e. dictatorship, as an instrument of Govt. Third society may choose Dhamma plus the Magistrate whenever people fail to observe the Dhamma. In anarchy and dictatorship liberty is lost only in the third liberty survives. Those who want liberty must therefore have Dhamma. (Qtd. In *Buddhism in India* 19)

Ironically, however, his dream could not be materialized even after more than six decades of the introduction of the Constitution. The suppression and torture inflicted on Dalits today stand testimony to the fact that Dalits are yet to achieve the desired emancipation. Post-Ambedkarite movements and parties such as Dalit Panthers, BSP revival of RPI and other alternative efforts attempted to create an alternative socio-cultural structure where caste domination is eliminated and every person can lead a dignified life. Some notable dalit leaders who came into being are Kashi Ram, Jitan Ram Manjhi and Mayavati. To mention a few, Babu Jagjivan Ram became Deputy Prime Minister of India from 24 March 1977 to 28 July 1979. K. R. Narayanan was the first Dalit President of India (1997), K. G. Balakrishnan (Dalit origin) was appointed Chief Justice of India on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2007. In the same year, Mayawati, a Dalit, was elected Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

### **Literature during the Freedom Struggle**

During the Indian freedom struggle, many literary organisations came up in different parts of the country but none of these lasted long except an all India organisation that came to be known as the Progressive Writers Movement. The writers of this movement viz. Manto, Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, Ahmad Ali, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Amrita Pritam and Sahir Ludhiannvi etc. were basically influenced by the socialist philosophy. In 1936, the first meeting of All India Progressive Writers Conference was held in Lucknow. It was presided over by the doyen of Hindi literature, Premchand (1880-1936), who read a paper entitled "Sahitya ka Uddheshya" (The Purpose of Literature). There he laid stress on a new kind of writing that would help the Indian

society to fight against all kinds of inequality and establish a new social order. The writers who met at this conference pledged to highlight in their writings the condition of the poor and the oppressed and work for the eradication of inequality in society. As a matter of concern, writers like Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand wrote about the oppressed and exploited with empathy and understanding. Premchand wrote *Godan*, “Thakur Ka Kuan”, “Kafan”, “Mukti Marg” and many other interesting novels and stories to portray the miseries of untouchables, women and exploited masses. His most controversial story “Kafan” (The Shroud) portrays Ghisu and his son Madhav insensitive and inhumane who instead of buying ‘kafan’ for Budhia celebrates her death with drinking and eating. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), can also be taken into account in this regard. *Untouchable* is considered to be the first novel which exposed the religious bigotry and hypocrisy of caste Hindus. It deals with the single day life story of an untouchable boy Bakha who is fed up with the pranks of upper-caste and finally accepts: “For them I am a sweeper, sweeper untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!” (Anand, 43). The representation made by these non-dalit writers of the poor and the downtrodden were bound to be different from the self-representation of the poor—a trend which began in the post-independence era. Anand's novel *Untouchable* exposes the indignities against untouchables. In this connection E.M Forster observes:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound to his master and forever born into a state, from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social inter course and the consolation of his

religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them.  
(Forster iv)

### **The Post-Independence Condition of Dalits**

The Indian Dalit–Bahujan masses, who constitute a great majority of the national population as it is published in *The Hindu* that every sixth Indian is a Dalit. Despite the legal abolition of untouchability in independent India (the Untouchability Offences Act passed in 1955 followed by the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act in 1976 and the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) 1989) and various statutory provisions against exploitation of Dalits continue even to this day in rural India the untouchables are still struggling to assert themselves in the orthodox rural caste structure while their urban counterparts are getting a little better treatment and are unitedly agitating against the various caste discriminations practiced against them. Some contemporary dalit intellectuals like Gopal Guru and Kancha Ilaiah, presented dalit analysis. They are of the view that the insertion of Indian society into global capital through the workings of free market, subaltern communities are getting lines of upward mobility. But it is sad that it has not effaced their age long experiences of caste oppression. In this context, Wankhde presents the analogy with the predicament of the tragic hero who works between “silence (the horror of caste discrimination and empowerment as caste communities in electoral states” (5). Kancha Ilaiah reviewing the post-Independence caste phenomenon, thus writes:

... by 1947 itself an all India 'upper caste elite' - the new 'bhadralok' was to take over the whole range of post-colonial political institutions. From

the village institutions of panchayat and patwari to tehsil officers... to state legislatures and the central Parliament, each institution was made the preserve of 'the upper' caste forces, with Brahmins being in the lead in many of these institutions. The neo Kshatriyas, while co-existing with them, accepted their hegemonic role in lawmaking and interpreting history. (Ilaiah, 49)

There are numerous instances of non-dalits suppressing the protests of Dalits and untouchables. What is more amazing is that, in recent past, the untouchables are also the victims of state-sponsored terrorism, which is carried out subtly but systematically in the guise of various developmental programmes. To quote Ilaiah again:

In post-colonial India.... Parliamentary democracy in essence became brahminical democracy. Within no time the colonial bureaucracy was transformed into a brahminical bureaucracy....They recast their Sanskritized life-style to anglicized life-styles, reshaping themselves, to live a semi capitalist (and at the same time brahminical) life.... All apex power centres in the country were brahminized and the power of the bureaucracy greatly extended.... Such top brahminical elites were basically unconcerned with the development of the rural economy because it would result in changing the conditions of the Dalit-bahujan masses and thus new social forces might emerge. Thus the anglicized brahminical class also became an anti-development social forces. (Ilaiah, 51-52)

In this way non-dalit writers and reformers like Gandhi, and other social and religious reform movements, instead of curbing caste system, only depict the evil of untouchability in isolation. There is an urgent need to uproot the caste system because it is necessary to crush the head and not the tail to kill a poisonous snake. The partial strikes on its body may further intensify the ferocity of the devilish creature. As B.R Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste* says that caste is not a physical entity to be pulled down, rather it is a notion and a state of mind to be changed.

### **The New Dalit Movement & Dalit Literature**

Today, the term untouchable has been substituted with Marathi word 'Dalit' (broken People) which is in turn used interchangeably with Scheduled Caste. In this context, Rupa Viswanath points out that it is incorrect practice because the term Dalit includes converted untouchables whereas Scheduled Caste does not. According to Wikipedia, the word "dalit" is derived from the Sanskrit past participle adjective दलित (dalita), and it means 'divided', 'split', 'broken', 'scattered', and it is derived from the meaning of the verbal root दल भेदे - to divide. It is found in *Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary* (1813) in its reprint of 1975 meaning "ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally" (54). It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now it is widely used to substitute the word untouchable as Negro is replaced by Black. Over the years, there have been several terms used to describe the people of untouchable community, such as 'Ati-Shudra', Panchamas,, Avamas, Antyajas, Untouchable, 'depressed classes', 'exterior castes', 'Harijan' 'Scheduled Castes' etc. Dalits are called by different names in different parts and languages of the country like 'Chura' or 'Bhangi' implying scavengers in northern states, 'Mahar' in Marathi, 'Mala' in Telgu and

‘Periyar’ in Tamil. Later on, the term was revived and extended by radical Dalit Panthers in their Manifesto in 1972. This movement included schedule castes, schedule tribes, poor peasants, neo-Buddhists, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. But, the term exclusively refers to the victims of the cast- ridden society. The main objective of this movement was to create an atmosphere of a counter culture and to bring a separate identity for the Dalits in the society. Therefore, before talking about dalit literature it is pertinent to talk about dalit consciousness (dalit chetna) because dalit literature is the product of ‘dalit chetna’ and caste oppression. As Toral Jatin Gajarwala, in his book *Untouchable Fictions*, says, “Dalit chetna implies an anti-casteist, anti-feudal and anti-capitalist position, and a challenge to traditional aesthetics... (2)”. The journey of dalit consciousness is generally studied in two different phases. In the first phase, dalit thinkers, and non-Buddhists reinterpreted the history as they were the autonomous inhabitants of the country and some claimed that dalits were originally Buddhists. As it is reflected in political understanding of Swami Acchutanand who used to start his address with:

Sabhya Sabse Hind Ke Pracheen Hakdaar Hum;

Tha Banaya Shudra Humko, Theya Kabhi Sardar Hum;

Ab Nhi Hai Vo Zamana, Zulum Harihar Mat Saho;

Tod do Zanjeer, Jakde Kyon Gulaami Mein raho. (Qtd. In Sharma 84)

In the second phase, the efforts were extended from reinterpretation to assert dalitism in terms of art and culture. It is used in book titles, in newspaper and reports to

depict both violence against Dalits and their accomplishments. The term Dalit is not merely a rejection of the very idea of pollution or impurity or 'Untouchability', it reveals a sense of a unified class, of a movement toward equality. Dalit consciousness became more blatant by getting impetus from Karl Marx, Russian literature, Black Literature and Ambedkar. The term 'Dalit literature' was first traced in the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha In 1958. The founder editor of 'Asmitadarsh' says that dalit is not a caste, rather, it is a symbol of change and revolution. The call given by the Panthers for a social reconstruction was further activated by the Dalit writers, poets and activists through their writings and speeches in various forms. Thus emerged "Dalit literature" in Maharashtra, which subsequently spread to the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and others. The emergence of Dalit autobiography gives a new dimension to the study of autobiographies. Apart from being marginal, Dalits have been denied education for quite a long time in the Indian caste society. Now, that they are getting educated, and some of them have been using writings as weapons for their social assertion, sense of identity and mobilise resistance against different forms of oppression. Dalit literary movement gained colossal momentum by the writings of Baburao Bagul. His debut collection of stories *Jevha Mi Jat Churoli* (when I had Concealed My Caste) is considered epic of dalits while others compared it to the 'jazz music of the Blacks'. He contemplates that the established literature of India is Hindu literature while Dalit literature is revolutionary to bring about a total transformation. The first poem on dalits is 'Achut ki Sikayat' by Hiradom. The first major autobiography by a dalit writer is Daya Pawar's *Baluta (Social Claim)*. Some of the major contemporary dalit writings include *Changiya Rukh, The Prison We Broke, Untouchable God, Joothan, The*



*Outcaste, Growing Up Untouchable in India, Murdaiya, Mera Bachpan Mere Kandho Par, The Grip We Change and Serious Man*. Apart from these, some contemporary non-dalit writers like Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi and Vijay Tendulkar eloquently presented the agony and exploitation of dalits in their writings *The God of Small Things, Outcaste: Four Stories and Kanyadan*, respectively. But there have been an ontological war between dalit writers and non-dalit writers because non-Dalit writers presented Dalits as the meek sufferers, having no voice of their own. Therefore Dalit writings by non-dalit writers are always doubted. This is not only true of non-dalits but also of educated, elite dalit Brahmins who are affected by White Collar attitude. In this context, Sharatchandra Muktibodh remarks, “There is as much a difference between a Dalit view and Dalit vision as there is between having a look at the map of a city and actually living in that city” (Muktibodh 271). The above discussion shows that dalit literature is the literature of ‘anubhava’ (experience) not ‘anumana’ (speculation). Instead of relying upon conventional Walter Pater’s notion of aestheticism ‘art for art sake’ it believes in ‘art for life sake’. Contextualising the intent and content of Dalit literature, Limbale rejects the aesthetics of mainstream literature on the sociological ground as:

Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature—an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. In other words, Dalit writers have demanded different yardsticks for the literary appraisal of their works. It is the firm conviction of the Dalit writers and critics that if yardsticks change, the concept of aesthetics will change too. (*Towards an Aesthetics* 19)

Dalit writers explore grace of their literature with the portrayal of frustration, humiliation, suppression, anguish and revolt against pollution, Karma and justified caste hierarchy felt by marginalized section of the society. Because of crude language and graphic descriptions the dalit writers are often attacked for their lack of ‘aesthetic sophistication’, lack of variety, reactive and propagandist. With the advent of marginal literatures, the entire debate regarding aestheticism in literature has taken a new turn. It is observed that-

The very concept of aestheticism is being defined differently because instead of form, symbols and artistic features, what is considered crucial, is the social sensibility and representing the people belonging to the underprivileged communities who were earlier considered as ‘unrepresented’ and voiceless. Here, the questions of essential human dignity, representation, identity, subject hood, existence and survival, remain more important than the idea of beauty— aesthetic or otherwise.  
(Kumar 15-16)

In this context a leading scholar on caste in modern India Gopal Guru, in *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*, highlights the need to make humiliation an object of academic interest. He concludes by encouraging us to reject rejection through self-respect and a strong moral courage to stand up to an oppressor. Baby Kamble, through her writing *Jeena Amucha* translated as *The Prisons We Broke* in 1986, represents her community and critiques the Hindu caste system. It is one of the first Dalit women autobiographies which talks about position of women in Indian patriarchal construct. She talks about the life of a woman of the Mahar community. Mahars suffered from

ignorance and starvation, they never saw a prosperous side of life. They were always considered as dirt by upper caste Hindus while Mahars considered upper caste people as pious as God. Baby Kamble wrote her autobiography in order to speak out her misery and expresses her resistance towards age long traditions of suppression. She describes the posture a Dalit has to adopt before the upper castes: “He had to stand with his back bent all the way and greet anybody who happened to pass that way...He had to bend down, till his head touched his knee...” (78). Another dalit collection of stories is *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* by a Telugu writer Gogu Shyamala. It looks at the lives of the most deprived people of the Madiga community of Dalits. Her descriptions of the everyday village practices, like the beating of drums or the right to wear slippers in the presence of the upper castes, are touched with pathos and a grim sense of humour. She also looks at the world and its big problems — water crisis, irrigation and gender violence — that besiege the poorest of the poor. She is able to put human faces to these social evils, making them real and poignant to her readers. The graphic biography of Ambedkar *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* by Srividya Natarajan and others pieces together the story of the pioneer of India's Dalit movement using his autobiographical notes and mind-blowing artwork. In spite of his origins and early years as an untouchable, Ambedkar battled poverty and institutional discrimination with incredible gusto and fortitude, going up to Columbia University in New York for higher education and travelling across the world. A fierce campaigner for the rights of Dalit people, Ambedkar went on to draft the Constitution of India. This book is a must-read for the tumultuous times.

The present chapter studies the seminal works, *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* by Sharan Kumar Limbale and *Karukku* the first Tamil dalit autobiography by Bama Faustina Soosairaj. Limbale is a well-known dalit writer, activist, poet and literary critic. He has penned more than forty books, but he is known for his autobiography *Akkarmashi*. His critical work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004) is considered as the most important resource book on Dalit criticism. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* is a well-known contemporary classic. Just after two years of its publication, Limbale wrote an article, “Chronicle of a Fatherless Being” in which he writes, “I have sown the events, incidents and experience from my life of twenty seven years... This is the story of my life, an expression of my mother’s agony and an autobiography of a community. Being fatherless is as much my fate as it is to be in a general ward (in the hospital) of suffering” (Limbale, xxiv). Primarily the autobiography deals with the identity of the author who is an outcaste or illegitimate child born out of illicit relationship between Masamai, a Mahar and upper caste Hanumanta Limbale, the Patil of Baslegaon. It also deals with hunger in a philosophical way with two different perspectives i.e. lust and hunger of food. Sharan Kumar Limbale is an offspring of lust. To be a Dalit in a caste-ridden society is a curse and to be an illegitimate within the Dalit community is to be doubly cursed. It is the record of “the woes of the son of a whore” (ix). He says, “In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me ‘akkarmashi’. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as the offspring of one” (62). He expresses his longing for the identity as, “A man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste or his father. I had neither a father’s name, nor any religion, caste. I had no inherited identity at all” (59). At last, he owes his father’s name ‘Limbale’ from his sympathetic teacher

Bhosale, the headmaster. He represents his dilemma and narrates his enigma in words: “The girl I married needed to be a hybrid like me to ensure a proper match. A bastard must always be matched with another bastard. No one else will marry their daughters to a bastard like me” (98). Even his mother, Masamai treats him like a stepson. He says, “Half of her was my mother and the other half a woman for that Patil. She had to satisfy the Patil. Her milk meant for me went dry even as her arms were busy embracing the Patil. My mother was snatched away from me” (65). Another baby of lust, an offspring of Devki, a Devadasi, was buried under the garbage like a sow that eats her own piglet. In tune with Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Limbale’s *The Outcaste* exposes sexual politics of upper class people. Uma Chakravarty a well-known historian in her seminal work *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* explores the relationship between caste, gender and patriarchy. She describes the cultures of violence that gives rise to an unequal society. The Brahmanical patriarchy regulates the sexuality of women through the caste system. It also influences the labour of women and the transfer of gendered resources within the society. The practice of endogamy reproduces multiple forms of discrimination against the women. The married life of a beautiful dalit lady, Masamai was wrecked by an upper caste Patil, Hanmant Limbale. Later on, he deserted her and she was kept by another Patil. Limbale pities her lot as, “What sort of life had she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex” (59). It also depicts that dalit women are not only victims of upper caste male lust but also males of their own community who take part in their degradation. Limbale even talks about incestual relationships and exploitation of daughter by a father. Dhanavva woman from his village became a victim of her father’s

lust. Shankar, her father, says, “I have sown the seed from which she has grown as a plant. Now why shouldn’t I eat the fruits of this plant?”(67). Author’s loving maternal granny Santamai and Chandamai were blood sisters. Their marriages were failures because Chandamai was barren and Santamai gave birth only to a daughter. Later on, his sister Nagi had to marry a man old enough to be father of two kids. The marriages of his sisters Pami, Indira, and Vani were broken up like a game of dolls because their mother Masamai was a ‘Mahar’ by caste. While discussing about hunger, Limbale says that starvation is written in their lot from very moment of their birth. He describes:

Most of the time all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything. Nobody woke them up for dinner, because there was nothing to eat. I at least ate something. Mother gulped only water. Dada satisfied his hunger by smoking bidies. At the sight of my sisters who had gone to sleep hungry, I lost my appetite and couldn’t sleep. I felt like giving a portion of my food to my sisters. (21)

The author says that he survives even by swallowing his own saliva. It is the hunger which makes a woman whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes ‘you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit’ (8). Further, he depicts hunger in a philosophical way as:

Bhakari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is vaster than the seven circles of hell.... Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch (50).

They cannot afford 'chapaatis' and usually eat 'bhakaris'. Even Santamai eats bhakari made from the Jowar collected from the dung without showing any sign of nausea. He also talks about the paradox of stealing like, "The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they had enough to eat would they steal? Black-marketers become leaders, whereas those who are driven to steal by hunger are considered criminals" (21). The starvation leads them to do business like illegal brewing and selling wine for the sake of belly. The only remuneration for their labour is begging or picking up whatever they could from the market because village council never paid them. The Brahmanic society projected the vegetarian food as 'divine' food. The taste of vegetarian food has been written about and such food has been eulogized and glorified as pure food, whereas the tribal food culture has been condemned as that of uncivilized people. Spiritual democracy does not discriminate between different food cultures. In a spiritual democracy on the other hand, notions of the divine are related to all positive, health-centred food habits of the people. Neither beef nor pork is prohibited food, nor do they pose hurdles in one's becoming a priest of a temple. "if a tribal gave up eating meat it was tantamount to getting 'sanskritised', but if a Brahman started eating meat and fish he/she was not 'tribalised'. If at all they are changed, they just got 'westernized'!" (Ilaiah, *The Post Hindu* 6)

It also represents that there are so many caste factions even in educational institutes. Limbale says that Mahars could not join the upper caste boys in playing Kabbadi. He says, "We played one kind of game while the high caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds" (2). During school picnic, they were not allowed to sit under the banyan tree among high caste boys rather they have to sit under a tattered tree like owls seeking leftovers.

Leftover food is nectar for them. They were made to sit at the entrance in the class and on Saturdays the teacher asked them to smear the floor and walls with cowdung paste. They were called by names like ‘son of bitch’, ‘base born’, bastard or ‘akkarmashi’. The similar naming strategy is described in *Joothan* by Omparkash Valmiki where the Tyagis don’t address them by name and they call them out as, ‘Oe Chuhre’ or ‘Abey Chuhre.’ Even the non-dalit writer Arundhati Roy, in her Booker winning novel *The God of Small Things*, portrays this ugly treatment meted to Dalits. It is for the first time under the leadership of Velutha that untouchables demanded not to be called as, “.... Achoo Para van kelan Para van on Kuttan Pulayan but just as Achoo, or Kelan or Kuttan” (Roy 69). Limbale exposes the illogical and double standard of caste Hindus. Mere touch of untouchables makes them impure or pollute. But untouchability does not bother them when they penetrate dalit women. They worship cow as mother but when mother cow dies they need a Mahar to dispose it off. The autobiography poses the question, “Is it man who is a hindrance to religion or is it the other way round? Is the premise of religion greater than man’s? Is religion made for man or man made for religion? Does man cause religion to degenerate, or is it religion that degenerates man? Can’t man exist without religion and caste?” (39-40). At last, Limbale asks, “Why this labyrinth of customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow?”(113). Limbale also analyses the dimensions of caste and gender in his *Chhuachhut* translated by Nishikant Thaka. This collection of short stories is divided into three sections. The stories of the first section are written from the viewpoint of an upper class, the stories from second section are from the Dalit point of view and the third section stories are about Dalit women. It represents the



victimization of the Dalits, their self- colonization and their confident rejection of the same i.e. decolonization.

Another Dalit feminist writer, Bama Faustina Soosairaj is famous for her autobiography *Karukku*. Subsequently, she wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003). In her oral autobiography *Viramma* (1997), she beautifully portrays the plight of Dalit. Her texts focus on the Dalit caste of the Paraiyars, one of the largest “Untouchable” castes in Tamil Nadu. In her extraordinary work *Sangati* (2005), Bama represents the difficult lives of paraiya community women in South India. In the very introduction of the book she acknowledges that it is not only about the sorrows and tears of dalit women but also about their rebellious culture and eagerness to swim against the tide. It is about self-confidence, self-respect and their passion to live life with vitality. *Sangati* seems to be the most outrageous in its exposure of the sexual violence, violent domestic quarrels that often underpins the language of her female characters. In this way, Bama’s *Sangati* explicitly performs an intersectional critique of both the caste system and patriarchy where the lines of solidarity and opposition constantly shift. The text condemns and explains often brutal behaviour of Dalit men towards the women of their caste community. Here Paatti reflects:

Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us

under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. (*Sangati* 29)

In her autobiography, she adopts confessional mode to avoid a linear narrative. She vociferously condemns all forms of oppression, be it caste, class, gender and predicament of dalit Christians. Pramod K Nayar finds *Karukku* closer to a testimonial than an autobiography. He asserts:

Generally in autobiographies narrator has a social status but testimony described the common man/woman who stands in for the community. In testimony in place of 'problematic hero' 'problematic collective situation' is found. And that problematic collective situation in *Karukku* is caste. (85)

The title of her autobiography signifies the validity of the world she lives in. The word 'karukku' is a pun in itself that means the saw like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf and another Tamil word 'karu' means embryo or seed which also suggests freshness or newness. In the preface to the book she brings the connection between the saw edged palmyra leaf and her own life. She recollects: "Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra 'karkku' in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book" (Bama xiii). According to Bama, the embryo refers to the dalit consciousness to regain their lost dignity. Bama, at the very beginning, focuses on the different caste formations of her village. She depicts as to how the upper caste

communities and the lower caste communities were separated like different parts of the village. People meticulously followed caste rules while carrying out their day to day socio-cultural and economic activities. Bama asserts, “We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the church, and the schools-all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area?” (7). The lives of the Parayas entirely depended upon the mercy of the Naickers. If Naicker families did not call them for any agricultural labour then they would go up to the woods on the mountains, and make a living by gathering firewood and selling it. Either way their earnings were meagre and poverty was rampant in dalit families. Except during harvesting seasons most of the families went hungry. Even their food was different. During rainy days when the streets were overflowing with fish, people sold all sorts of fish like ‘silabi kendai’, ‘paaruku kendai’, ‘keluti’, ‘ayirai’, ‘koravi’ and ‘viraal’. But in the streets where Bama lived most of the people bought and cooked curries out of silabi kendai and paambu kendai, the cheapest they could get. On the other hand, the upper caste enjoys keluti, ayirai and viraal. Each Paraya family was attached to a Naicker family as ‘pannaiyaal’, bonded labourers. Bama remembers how people of her community labored hard to produce grains for the rich upper caste farmers while they themselves went hungry or gained leftovers. When Bama came to know that both her grandmothers were regularly given leftovers by the Naicker families in return of their hard physical labour, she was horrified and protested. But she gets reply from her grandmother Paatti who said, “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? (17).

Bama laments that there is no place that is free of caste. Even in the so called temples of learning, it is considered that all unsocial activities are done by 'Cheri children' (lower caste). In the narrative, Bama was blamed to steal coconut from the tree. When she approached the priest for permitting her in school he says, "After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it" (19). The warden-sister of the hostel often scolds Cheri children for no rhyme or reason. She says, "Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home-just skin and bone!" (20). When Bama asked for permission to go home for the 'First Communion', of her sibling, she was humiliated by warden as, "What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion? (22). If we see the plight of dalit woman she is dalit among dalits and gets triple exploitation on the basis of caste, class and gender. No doubt, people belonging to dalit community work hard from sunrise to sunset and find themselves unable to earn the two meals a day. In spite of article 39 (a) and (d) which secure equal right to work and equal pay for equal work, a woman is always paid less than man for the same work. It is not necessary that only upper caste people exploit them but the people of her own community also don't respect her dignity and labour.

The man named Udan from their community is known to all, "Because every day he'd drag his wife by hair to the community hall and beat her up as if she were an animal, with his belt"(61). There is a fight between the Paraya community and the

Chaaliyar community over the ownership of cemetery. The Chaaliyar stabbed Izhava's husband, the stout man of the Paraya community. They challenged the Chaaliyar to fight face to face and not like cowardly women. The Chaaliyar bribed the police to beat Paraya black and blue. The police behaved deplorably towards Paraya Women as, "They used obscene language and swore at them, told them that since their husbands were away they should be ready to entertain the police at night, winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies"(40). In this way, at home they have to pester their husbands and children and outside, the landlord.

She also depicts that education, marriage, professional career and growth of an individual girl depend on the mercy of the patriarchal set up. Bama was not allowed to go for further education on the plea of her parents as, "It would be difficult for them to find a husband for me in my community" (74). She also talks about the sorry state of a single woman who faces difficulties of being alone in this man centred world. She says, "If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere , all sorts of men gather around her showing their teeth"(119). While exposing the hypocrisy of Christianity she says that she had firm faith in Christianity and its rituals, be it Catechism, Pusai, Benediction, Midnight service at Christmas and Easter, Communion etc. She joins convent with high aspirations of serving humanity, but, there she finds that her convictions do not match the meaningless prayers in beautiful and decorative language without connection between prayer, worship and life. Her perspective is different as she says, "We should never believe in one thing and do another. We should speak up about what we believe and act according to that. That is being true to oneself" (105-6). There she also finds a wealthy Jesus with no connection between God and the suffering poor.

They claim that God was born into a poor family, lived among the poor and died poor. But she says, “If by accident a poor and lowly person appears within the precincts of the convent or the school, they’ll fall upon that person like rabid dogs” (107). After her sojourn with them she understood the lack of humanity in their piety. She feels that she has come to Naicker house where she, “couldn’t act or speak or even eat independently” (111). She discovers that, “In the churches dalits are the most in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least. It is the only upper caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the church” (80). Even conversion in Christian Religion fails to wipe out the tears of dalits. She is shocked to find that all the sweepers, attendants and the lower rung officials in the church were dalit Christians and the higher officials who control them were from the upper castes. She is not happy the way Jesus has been made to belief:

All those people who had taught us had taught us only that God is loving, kind gentle and who forgives sinners, patient, and tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous is angered by injustice, opposes falsehood never countenances inequality. There is a great deal difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (94)

In the Convent, the nuns are required to make three vows- poverty, chastity and obedience. But in truth these vows have become a means of control and enslavement. She says, “ Inside the convent I could not see even the traces and tracks of poverty, we could

only go round and round always within our luxurious cages, trapped in comfort”(113). Ultimately, after serving seven years in the convent she decides to leave it because she thinks that it is better to lead a life weeping real tears than to live with a fraudulent smile. She describes her departure from the church through a series of comparisons as she is transformed from a strong teak tree to a feeble murunga tree. She feels like the fish that has at last returned to water. She also feels like a bird with broken wings which can only flap and is unable to fly. She concludes very positively, “For the time being I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it is possible to live a meaningful life” (122). She appeals to the dalits that, “They too are created in the likeness of God. There is new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind”(109).

Bama also portrays dalit women as brave and confident. Even the police were furious to know that the women were smart enough to attend their usual work, child rearing and caring, and the responsibilities of the house in absence of their husbands. She highlights the importance of unity and solidarity of suffering dalit women to face challenges. When a woman who feels apprehensive for digging the grave, the old lady Patti replies, “If we go together at evening time and stand together, they won’t come out, even to shit”(42). Unlike *The Outcaste*, dalit women in *Karukku* are more assertive, awakened, confident and progressive. Their awakened consciousness enables them to go to the court to defend the cases filed against their people and to ultimately win the trial. Both autobiographies show that the dalits are deprived of basic amenities, Roti (food), Kapda (clothes) and Makan (house), which is in gross violation of their human rights.

The question of dignity comes later. Limbale had to wear patched shorts and had to sleep in stinking bed sheets. His granny Santamai had to wear a torn blouse exposing her breast. Her sisters had to bath in open. Bama also gets humiliated by her class mates for wearing her only skirt, jacket and daavani for a whole week. She could not attend 'Collge Day' celebration because of dress code i.e 'Silk Sari'. After leaving her job, she feels like a mongrel in search of clothes, food and a safe place to live. Paradoxically, the mainstream society does not allow the literary or cinematic representation of human rights violations of Dalits. A documentary "Caste on the Menu Card" made by TISS's students from Mumbai was the only film to be denied permission from screening in Jeevika Asia Livelihood Festival in Delhi. It was not about beef eating, rather, it attempts to portray the prevalence of caste discrimination as seen in the food choices of people in the city, and touches upon concerns related to livelihood, social inclusion and human rights. Both the autobiographies reflect that dalit women face discrimination at both hands being woman and being dalit, as Ashwani Deshpande in his book *The Grammar of Caste* argues:

The caste system not only determines the social division of labour, but its sexual division as well. For instance, in agriculture, women can engage in water regulation, transplanting and weeding but not in ploughing....the concepts of purity and pollution segregate groups and also regulate the mobility of women. Indeed the prescribed social sanctions against anuloma marriages (upper-caste men marrying women of lower caste) are not as censorious as those against pratiloma marriages (the reverse), since the purity of the upper caste woman is not violated in the former. (107)



The 'I' in Dalit autobiographies stands for the 'we' and represent the experiences of the entire community. As Limbale in the introduction of *The Outcaste* acknowledges that they are not autobiographies, rather, they can be best described as 'social epiphanies' which delineate the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils. Dalits constitute nearly 17% of Indian population out of which Dalit women number more than 100 million. Author-activist Arundhati Roy in her Film Review entitled, "The Great Indian Rape Trick", questioned the right to "restage the rape of a living woman without her permission", and charged Shekhar Kapur with exploiting Phoolan Devi and misrepresenting both her life and its meaning. According to Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against women:

The reality of Dalit women and girls is one of exclusion and marginalisation ... They are often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence. They are often displaced; pushed into forced and/or bonded labour, prostitution and trafficking. (Manjoo)

Article 46 of Indian Constitution specifically stipulates that the State shall promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes with special care to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. In spite of discrimination protective laws like free and compulsory education to the children under the age of 6-14 in article 21, Right to Education Act 2009, providing 25% reservation under section 12(c)

to the children of deprived sections in the private schools, people still face caste based discrimination. Despite the passage of the Anti-Untouchability Act of 1955 and the Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989, the pain of untouchability is strongly felt even today. S.K Thorat, only the most serious and well-publicized acts of caste discrimination receive the attention of the Indian authorities while most of the cases go unreported, because dalits in rural areas still live under feudal systems and cannot risk angering their high-caste landlords.

On 14th April 2012, Video Volunteers' launched its 'ARTICLE 17 Campaign'. Since then, Community Correspondents have captured 52 cases of caste-based discrimination. In a serial titled *Satyamev Jayate* hosted by Aamir Khan, it is highlighted that not only illiterate but educated dalits like Dr. Kausahal Panwar, Professor of Sanskrit in DU and Balwant Singh an IAS officer, are the dalits first and professionals later. The problem of manual scavenging is also highlighted. Perhaps the telecast of *Satyamev Jayate* and featured programme on Dalits motivated the government to introduce Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Rehabilitation Act, 2013. It was to correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by these communities by providing alternate livelihood and other assistance. Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh Sanitation and Social Reform Movement crusader for human rights and dignity to millions of scavengers, provides safe and hygienic human waste disposal system to India. Anustup Nayak, Vice President at XSEED Education at Jaipur literary festival highlighted that the future of a clean India lay in the hands of young people who believe in democratic ethos and equality for all. Despite all, Ravi Nair, Executive Director of the South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre agreed that employment

discrimination against dalits has decreased over the last decade, while access to housing often remains caste-based. It is often seen that dalit hamlets are at the end of the main village or in the outskirts of village. Limbale, even after getting job faces the problem to get house on rent. He had to hide his caste, individual identity and culture. He started greeting people with a 'Namaskar' instead of 'Jai Bhim'. He says, "We lived keeping our caste a secret. I felt the house we were living in was like the Lakshagruha" (Limbale 104). The same is the destiny of the writer of *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki.

The dalit movement in literature, with its all unconventional aesthetics, has become so influential that almost every Indian university has dalit text in their curriculum. The academic interest has gone global with dalit texts making their way in international universities in the US, the UK, Canada and France. Acclaimed historian, Gyanendra Pandey recently started a course at Emory University, US, juxtaposing Dalit history with that of African Americans. It is a matter of great relief that, according to BBC News, two dalit widows named Lakshmi and Chandravathi were appointed priest at the Kudroi Temple under government of India's 'Dalit Priest Project'. Apart from it, various NGOs and organizations are working for the upliftment of dalits like All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), International Dalit Solidarity Network, Dalit Sangh, National Confederation of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR), Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Navsarjan, Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra (SSVK) etc. In this way, the present research hopes for a bright future of dalits and establish dalit literature as a revolutionary trend in Indian traditions of writings aiming at destruction of caste system constructed through the complex hierarchies of labour, sexuality and knowledge. It also delineates that untouchables have acquired a new sense of humanity and are forging

ahead to shape a new modern India. However, it depicts the problematics of dalit human rights and opens new vistas for further research and poses questions necessary for literary representation and deliberations.

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