



Dalit Autobiography: An Indictment of Caste System in India

Lahane Panjab Baburao

Raje Sambhaji Secondary & Higher Secondary School,
Jewkheda Theng, Tal. Jafrabad, Dist. Jalna

Indian social milieu has deteriorated on the account of graded inequality and hegemony of a specific caste that systematically dominates and segregates the thousands of castes under the pretext of religion. Therefore in India Caste is a very important factor. It is the byproduct of the poisonous tree named as 'Varna System'. This Varna System developed slavery since thousands of years. Humans were treated as untouchables and untouchability got institutionalized in the name of religion. For Dalits, their motherland is India, but in their motherland they were treated like animals and this was sanctioned by religious hegemony. They did not know about liberty, rights and dignity, they were not allowed to be educated. After experiencing maltreatment and oppression for generations, Dalits started feeling haunted with questions like whether India is our motherland or not? If India is our motherland, why have we undergone exploitation, untouchability? They are in search of answers to these questions. The stupendous efforts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to abolish untouchability helped Dalits to take education in a formal way. These efforts can be early located in Dalit literature. Education enabled them to rise and they rose up from the darkness of illiteracy, exploitation and maltreatment. Words became their weapons and with the help of words they fought against inequality. This helped them to locate their lost identity and liberty. The protagonists of all the selected autobiographies chosen for the study exemplify this.

Dalit Autobiography is the life story of individuals who have experienced maltreatment, sufferings and sorrows on the basis of caste hence; it becomes an authentic tool to depict the

contemporary social conditions. Dalit autobiography thus becomes an important historical context and social discourse of indictment. It depicts the hegemonic caste structure that emerged in the early phases of Indian civilization. Dalit society was forced to stay away from the historical mainstream and was deprived of access to education. They were not only forced to stay away from history but also from any kind of leisure which is indeed a critical source in the creation of the culture of community

The intrusion of castes onto the untouchable community fragmented them so hopelessly that despite living in a common administrative identity imposed upon them, first during the colonial rule and subsequently by the religious authorities of India, for nearly seven decades, they do not reflect any kind of unity, so much so that even an emancipatory identity like Dalit is rendered nearly meaningless. The hierarchical structure to the touchables within the untouchable's villages was the acutest strategy of the worst accident that lent the entire caste system its self-straining character.

The autobiographies have discussed the bitter and unwanted experiences and reaction of the author. Every autobiographer protests against the realities of the world which is surrounded him. Those realities are embodied in a dominating father figure. An autobiography has been a favourite form for the Dalit writer, about their experiences as member of a community of the despised and their struggles to solve their encyclopaedia of social wrongs.

Against the metal darkness and systematic pathology of caste the Dalits forged various weapons of survival, armed insurrection, crime, wily accommodation and fearless self-assertion. Dalit autobiographies are remarkable portraits of men and women under siege who create dynamic identities, despite social handicaps that would have stopped less resolute person in their tracks.

Only autobiographies play a vital role in the communication network by linking the Dalit writers to his or her audiences. The autobiographies also articulate emerging forms of personal identity which pose new issues for social scientists and philosophers of caste in Varna System and Culture.

One of the greatest Dalit leaders Dr. B. R. Ambedkar started the revolutionary social movement as well as a wave of writing that exploded in poetry, prose, fiction and autobiography of a raw vigour, maturity, depth and richness of content and shocking in its exposition of the bitterness of their experiences. His writing inspired many Dalit writers. He showed the way to break caste bounding and to live life as a human being.

Ambedkar's main battle was against the caste system. Caste had made Hindu society stagnant. Due to the caste system, Hindu society is unable to accommodate outsiders. This drawback poses permanent problems for integration. Even internally, the Hindu society fails to satisfy the test of a homogeneous society. Caste is an obstacle in the growth of national spirit. Most importantly, caste system perpetrates injustice on the lower castes. It does not allow progress of the lower castes. Lower castes receive nothing but contempt. This has resulted in moral degradation and demoralization of the lower castes. The untouchables in particular era became the constant object of injustice. They are denied education, good livelihood and human dignity. The caste system has dehumanized them thoroughly. The very idea that the mere touch of one human being pollutes another shows the gross level of inequality and brutality to which the caste system had sunk. Therefore, the battle for the removal of untouchability becomes the battle for human rights and justice.

Dalits become the victims of hierarchical caste structures of Varna System which forcefully applied by High caste Hindu society. They were historically excluded from the Varna System of Hindu society as the untouchables, who came to emulate this structure with loose identity of a Pancham or Fifth Varna so called as 'Atti-Shudra'. During the last century, the glorious

Dalit movements that sprouted during the colonial times variously sought to forge a separate identity for themselves from the one ordained by the Hindu society. All kinds of menial jobs allotted for Dalits. So they performed the job and provided sanitary services within a largely self-sufficient village unit and received. Unlike tribes who had their own world in the forested lands, geographically distant from the mainland. Settlements of the so called civilized, Dalits were a part of the village system, living in relative proximity to these people, albeit in carefully segregated settlements. Their restrictive transactions were regulated by an intricate code that claimed divine sanctity. This code specially and exploitation of Dalits was co-terminus with their life and it flowed integrally with their living.

The autobiography is an example of its own experiences, which places trust in the word and invests it with a life of its own. The self in the autobiography is alone, but so is the reader to be alone and counts on it because whatever else may separate them from each other, their states of loneliness are mutually recognizable. Dalits were exploited, whipped, stared, chained, tortured made to watch atrocities against loved ones, sexually assaulted, hunted by dogs, beaten to the death, deceived and betrayed under all kinds of circumstances by the upper caste Hindu society.

Dalits were frequently barred from education and practicing skilled trades not allowed to enter in Temple, Village or any public place, to wear new clothes, and to purchase daily needs. The whole system had been devoted to keep them ignorant and fearful and they had to discover some means within themselves to free their minds as well as their bodies from this legacy. The identity of the narrator grows around his desire for freedom. The act of resistance is the backbone of his selfhood, and his opinions, goals, politics, dreams and accomplishments extend from that act like the bones of an embryo, like a new heaven.

In all the three autobiographies have various details about the life of the personality of the autobiographer took a particular shape or form, for example first comes historical background

the family surroundings, birth of the individual, early childhood, education, youthful exploits and finally the internal and external conflicts. Laxaman Mane belongs to the Kaikadi Community, whose autobiography opens with childhood description, family conditions, customs and tradition of his community. Laxaman narratively shares his school life, efforts to cope with hunger and his unequal social conditions and his struggle for education. He describes how his parents fight for completing their daily need. He narrates his experience of youth from his college life, his parent's insistence for marriage and his elopement from home to complete graduation, inter-caste marriage, efforts to manage day to day expenses, joblessness and thought of suicide, remarriage according to customs and traditions of Kaikadi community. All these incidents are very simply, lucidly, truly and in a straight way described by Laxaman Mane. No fictitious and artificial language is used. Laxaman spent his entire life in struggle against high caste people at large and his own family members.

Laxman Gaikwad starts his autobiography with his birthplace describing his family condition and place of residence from which one can understand to intensity of oppression. Gaikwad narrates his and his family's oppression, exploitation sexual and mental harassments by upper caste people and by police force, his schooling life, struggle for education in unfavourable condition. He spent his life continuously fighting with other society people and his own community people. And also did hard work for getting social status in Indian social caste system. His journey from a worker to union leader, up and downs in youth, oppression and supersession due to low caste, social work for an uplift of the community, married life, problem in married life because of unnecessary interferences of family members, selfishness of family members, struggle to achieve equality, identity, dignity and pride, internal struggle, harassment by police, prejudices of thieves. Laxman very artistically described each and every incident from his life in the autobiography. Laxman Gaikwad is the first person to bring to the forefront the problems of Uchlya Community.

Sharankumar Limbale opens up his autobiography with a rising question of his own identity. He compares his life with Karana in Mahabharata. This book is thoroughly a life story of a disinherited born of sexual exploitation of lower caste woman by a upper caste Maratha man. Sharankumar Limbale's own experiences demonstrate his struggle to establish own identity in the world of poverty and starvation, treachery and discrimination. He fights on the battlefield of life with his own father, mother, uncle, sister, brother and his own community people for his own identity. He extremely presents lower caste women are sexually harassed and exploited by the light caste Patils, only for the small piece of bread, which they want to feed their children. Mahar community which comes in fifth step in hierarchy of Varna System faces the eighteen world's poorness. They were not able to fulfil their basic need of day to day life. They were deliberately thrown from the caste system, for starvation. They were taken away from stream of education. He loves to his maternal grandmother who is only care taker of him. His separation from his father, mother, custom and traditions of Mahar Community, oppression and suppression by family members and whole society, school life and college life experiences of oppression illegitimate relation with men of his mother, grandmother and sister. All these incidents are described by Sharankumar Limbale very honestly and without any hesitation.

'Against all Odds' an autobiography by Kishor Kale in which he portrays the miserable condition of women in Kolhati community. Kolhati are a low caste in Hindu class-caste system in the state of Maharashtra in the mid-western region of India. Their womenfolk have been professional dancers for ages. These dancers, as the author describes, are bourn almost purposefully and bred deliberately by men of the caste who force their mothers, daughters and, sisters into dancing cum prostitution business, and then acting as their pimps live a comfortable, purposeless irresponsible life of consumption, tobacco and gambling. Pathetic and ironically as it may seem, these women, acquire the skills of dancing to make money; make it substantially through performances but also partly by subjecting themselves to prostitution with the upper caste people as audience that attend their shows; and then

voluntarily give away almost all of their earning to the alpha male of the group, while they themselves along with their children suffer starvation, disease and indignity. Children are born, often out of wedlock to supply new dancers. If they happen to be boys, they grow to become general purpose handymen. Some among them create their own harem and herd eventually. Some women rebel and try to escape their fate by becoming mistresses of wealthy audience-clients, only to be thrown back on the tribe when they no more can serve as sex machines for their adapted masters. The end of their lives is also the climax of their misery because now they find themselves rejected by both, by their masters for having become useless, and by their tribe for having betrayed it.

“The Prisons We Broke” is the first work that comes in Dalit Literature which is written by a woman, Babytai Kamble. It is because of that itself, the book deals with the two major problems of the society: firstly, the oppression and exploitation of the Dalit by the upper class: secondly, the discrimination towards women in a patriarchal society. In the memoir, the retrospections of the author flow out profusely in beautiful colors. She talks about the life in her village, called Veergaon. In her memory, the Maharwadas never had a prosperous life. On one side, ignorance and lack of reasoning ruled them, on the other side, the Maharwadas life was dominated by poverty and epidemics. Death rate was high because of the ceaseless starvation and lack of medical facilities for the fatal epidemics. More over superstitions adorned their blindness.

Hindu Religion and gods considered Mahars as dirt. Poverty was an unresolved problem among the Mahars. They were fated to eat left-overs. The stale bhakris, and the rotten rotis were their common food. Upper caste considered them as the dirt in the garbage where others throw away their waste materials. Mahars had to fight with the animals like cats, dogs and vultures for their food. They were the masters of the dead animals. The upper caste Brahmins wiped away all the human qualities from the Mahars and converted them into beasts. They were enclosed in dark cells, and their hands and foot were in the chains of slavery. Mahars

also valorize the prestige of Yeskar stick. And they thought that it is their duty to work for their masters. They never had complaints. They lead a very satisfactory life. They ate the leftovers and were content. They accepted their fate as part of their life. They considered themselves as untouchables. For their hardships, and laborious work for their masters, they earned miseries and abuses as remuneration. Even in their poverty stricken life, they never forgot to love each other and show kindness to their fellowmen. Generations after generations, the Mahars served their masters very obediently. The upper caste community threw abuses at the Mahars, if they did not fall at the feet of their masters, or if they did not give the way to their masters when the masters came across in their way.

And also the condition of the Mahar women was miserable as well as helpless. They had to do all the house hold duties, and go for selling wood to earn for their daily bread. They collected all the left over from other places to give them to their children. Most of the time women had to go on hunger unendingly. When a ritual comes, the work of the women got doubled. They had to plaster their house with cow dung, and clean the utensils and the clothes. Girls got married at the age of eight or nine. And they became pregnant at a very tender age which created a lot of complications in their first delivery. They lead a very pathetic life in their husband's home. If a girl could not do the house hold duties, she was abused by her in-laws. She could not go back to her home also, in the fear of scolding from her father and brothers.

Though all Dalit autobiographies have focused on the social, economical: and cultural condition of Indian societies, the key functions of Dalit autobiographies are to expose an indictment of caste system in India, to strip naked the hierarchy of Varana System and the Liberation of poor and low caste people, human right, exploitation, discrimination. It is not only offering unlimited freedom to the author for the human right and liberty but also highlights the autobiographer's contemporary life.

Autobiography is the representation and product of full consciousness and memory that is, possession of the past. The autobiographer, through autobiography not only describes the past but also struggle viz struggle for achieving the desired goal. Dalit autobiographers desired to obtain identity and dignity in the society form which they were intentionally kept away from ages. They, along with struggle portrayed social conditions. They have expressed humanitarian approaches in totally and to a full harmonious perfection. Dalit autobiographers through autobiography demanded humanitarian treatment for them and described their struggle to achieve it.

The whole logic of Dalit autobiography is based on the notion that a person is what he is because of and through the other people. There is collectiveness, and union among the citizens of the state, a class of tribe formed according to class, caste and race. Dalit autobiographers executed portrait of life shared by the group, who lived countless times before, in their exploitation, maltreatment, sufferings and sorrows.

A very important aspect of Dalit autobiographies is that, autobiographers were born in poverty, struggled against injustices and rose from unfavourable conditions and indictment over the society and in pre-emption. The autobiographies are indicated the writer's intellectual struggle and the social fervour to bring to the front the acute sufferings of the oppressed classes, their psychic disruptions and their systematic strive to create a space for themselves and their respective cultures and communities. At a larger level, these autobiographies open up ideological debates and sharply criticize the violation of human rights and human dignity in a society that is, ironically, supposed to be highly civilized society. This caste system needs to be devalourized and sharply opened with the help of these autobiographies otherwise these will become a saga of indictment rather than a social discourse.

All these autobiography have focused on the social, economic and cultural conditions of Indian societies, the key functions of these autobiographies are the liberation of poor and low caste people, human right, exploitation, discrimination. It is not only offering unlimited freedom to the author for the human right and liberty but also highlights the autobiographer's contemporary life.

References

1. Dangle, Arjun. Ed. *Poisoned Bread*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Publisher, 1992.
2. Gaikwad, Laxman. '*Uchalya*'- *The Branded*, translated by Kolharkar P.A. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi press, 1998.
3. Kale, Kishor. *Kolhatyache Por- Against All Odds* translated by Sandhya Pandey. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
4. Kamble, Babytai. *The Prisons We Broke* translated by Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Orient Blak Swan, 2008.
5. Limbale, Sharankumar. '*Akkarmashi*'- *The Outcaste* translated by Dr. Bhoomkar, S.A. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi press, 1997.
6. Mane, Laxman. '*Upara- An Outsider* translated by Dr. Kamat, A.K. New Delhi: Sahitya Akedami press. 1997.