Chapter II

A Socio-Political History of Dalit Writings in India

The attempt is not to trace the literary tradition of Dalits, as Dalits do not have any documented literary tradition of their own but to locate the socio-political factors that have given rise to Dalit literary Movement in Twentieth Century. Dalit Literature has evolved as an offshoot of Dalit political movement spearheaded by Ambedkar. In fact, Ambedkar’s movement is a culmination of various anti-caste movements led by lower-caste social reformers like Ayyankali, Narayan Guru, Periyor E.V. Ramasamy and Jotiba Phule, to name a few. It is essential to trace the origin of various Dalit Literatures from these movements to locate their thematic and ideological concerns. The socio-historical background in the twentieth century in India that was conducive to the production and popularization of Dalit Literature also need to be elaborated.

There are various social and political causes for the emergence of Dalit Literature as a powerful category. The aim, therefore, is to trace the historical forces that shaped the Dalit writers’ and critics’ sensibility. The reason why Dalits are devoid of any literary tradition of their own is not because Dalits had not been active in literary pursuits but because the mainstream tradition had not recognized the Dalits’ writings, as it did not meet their literary and aesthetic standards. To put it differently, Dalit writers were written off from history and whatever Dalit Writings are available
remain elitist versions of the Dalit experience. Hence, the Dalits in India, in spite of their having rich oral and folkloric tradition, actually have no documented literary heritage.

The literal meaning of the word "Dalit" is "cut off," "oppressed," "downtrodden," "broken" or "reduced to pieces." It comes from the Sanskrit root "dal." Thus, the word represents those separated or distanced from the rest of humanity (Kanipayyur, 540). The term in general is used for castes and classes who have been held inferior by "Varnashrama Dharma." Dalits, therefore, constitute the most oppressed downtrodden castes in India. The self-degradation of these people finds a voice in Dalit Literature. The ultimate goal of Dalit Literature is the liberation of Dalits, who have been, for centuries, subjected to the hegemony and inhuman ill-treatment of the upper-castes. According to Limbale, "Dalit Literature is the writings about Dalits with a Dalit consciousness" (Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, 19) and its primary motive is the liberation of Dalits.

According to Prof. Arun Kamble, "Dalits are those who have been oppressed religiously, culturally, economically, socially and philosophically by the unjust established social organization" (Narasaiah, 7). Prof. Kamble includes in the purview of the term the oppressed subaltern castes and classes which include SCs, STs, BCs and even minorities. Dalits were variously named earlier by different people — "Harijans" by Gandhi, "Depressed classes" by the British, "Scheduled Castes, and Tribes" by the Indian
government. There were several other descriptions of Dalits like “Pariahs,” “Mlecha,” “Chandala,” “Panchama,” “Avarna,” and “Adishudra” and so on, all upper-caste labels expressing contempt and subhuman status of Dalits. Thus, the term “Dalit” is now used as an umbrella term that encompasses several caste groups of different social ranks. However, the common thread that connects them all is the fact that they were all invariably discriminated and treated as untouchable by the established Hindu social order. Hence, they constitute the marginalized sections of the Hindu society.

Though the term “Dalit” appeared in the journalistic writings in the 1930s, it was first officially used in 1958 at the first ever literary conference of Dalits (Mukherjee, xii). There are those who believe that it was Ambedkar who used the term for the first time in order to refer to scheduled castes (Massey, 6). Dalit was originally applied to the Mahars of Maharashtra. Nevertheless, the term got in the public consciousness in the 1970s with the emergence of Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. It was a radical anti-caste movement that sought to revive the creative impulses of Dalits. The Panthers drew their inspiration from the movement of Ambedkar for the Dalits’ liberation as well as the Black Panther movement in America.

It was Namdeo Dasal, a Marathi Dalit poet closely associated with the Panthers that expanded the meaning of the term “Dalit” to include the scheduled castes and tribes, the neo-Buddhists, the landless peasants and other exploited classes (pambirikunnu, 13-14). Gail Omvedt drawing on the
manifesto of the Panthers has defined the term to include "all those who are oppressed and marginalized economically, socially, culturally or in any other way" (Omvedt, 72) which include the poor peasants, the working class, women and all those who are oppressed and marginalized economically, socially, culturally or in any other way.

The various subaltern castes have found the term "Dalit" acceptable because it is dignified and replaces all other descriptions, which connote the caste-stigma. Gandhi's preference of "Harijan" too was rejected as it was found too patronizing. The term "Dalit" rejects the idea of pollution and untouchability embedded in the above-mentioned descriptions. In addition, it emphasizes a consciousness of belonging to a common identity and social background. The term is symbolic of a revolutionary phase in the movement of untouchables led by Ambedkar for freedom and self-respect. Prof. Gangadhar Pantawane, editor of Asmitadarsh (mirror of identity), which was the chief organ of Dalit Panthers, has clearly elaborated on the contemporary significance of the term:

To me Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, Holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. (Zelliot, 268)
According to this formulation, the term Dalit has many implications. Dalit is a political identity as opposed to a caste one. It expresses Dalits' consciousness of themselves as oppressed people and their fight to transform the system that oppresses them. Arjun Dangle, a Marathi Dalit writer and editor of *Poisoned Bread*, an anthology of translations of Marathi Dalit Writings, observes:

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

(Dangle, 264-65)

The term “Dalit Bahujan” proposed by Dalit critics like Kancha Ilaiah has wider acceptance. Ilaiah thinks that the term “Dalit should not remain confined to the untouchable alone, it should be expanded to describe all those poor and marginalized people” (Mukherjee, xxiii). Kanshiram, the founder of Bahujan Samajwady Party (B.S.P), originally used the term “Bahujan.” In fact the Bahujans are not “castes” because they are not Hindus. Only those castes, which are found in the Hindu social system, are known as castes. The Bahujans were the original inhabitants of India even before the arrival of “Aryans.” In this sense, they are outcastes which means they are outside the caste system. It is because of their social and economic backwardness that
they are classified as SCs and STs. The tendency in Dalit Writings is to use the compound Dalit-Bahujan that include both lower-castes and Bahujans.

From the above definitions of the term Dalit, we understand that it refers to subalternity of people in terms of class, caste gender etc. Nevertheless, in Dalit discourses, the emphasis is on the caste subalternity of those people, the erstwhile untouchables who have been oppressed for centuries by the ideology of caste system. These “wretched of the earth,” to use Fanon’s famed phrase, were denied even their basic human rights on account of their lower-caste position in the caste hierarchy. The philosophy of Manu taught them that they were to live a life of slavery serving the upper-caste people. Manusmriti, the first document on jurisprudence in India, has broadly classified the duties for each caste. Accordingly, the duty of Shudra (untouchable) is to serve the other three castes selflessly. The upper-caste people demanded their service but treated them as untouchables since their very presence was found to be polluting their caste purity.

The situation is similar to the discrimination of the Blacks by the White race in many ways. Nevertheless, while the Blacks were discriminated because of their racial difference alone, the discrimination of the Dalits in India is rooted in social, economic and cultural grounds. Denied of all necessities of life, the Dalits have been leading a life of social, political, religious and economic deprivation since several centuries. Thus, we can say that Dalits are those who have been oppressed religiously, culturally,
economically and socially by the unjust Hindu social system. Therefore, speaking in caste terms, the term Dalit consists of those who form the lowest strata of Hindu society. Eleanor Zelliot uses the term in this wider sense. She observes, “Dalit means ground down, down-trodden, oppressed but it now is used by the low castes of India in a spirit of pride and militancy” (Zelliot, 269).

The reason for the subalternity of Dalits, according to Ambedkar, is the caste system. Hence, he calls for its annihilation. He maintained:

The root of untouchability is the caste system; the root of the caste system is religion attached to the Varnashram; and the root of Varnashram is the Brahminical religion; and the root of the Brahminical religion is the authoritarianism or political power. (Rajshekar, 12)

He continues: “Turn in any direction you have caste. Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reforms, you cannot have economic reforms, unless you kill this monster” (Narasaiah, 7). He questions the upper-caste hegemony in social, religious, and cultural domains and rejects the ideology of caste that brands a large section of masses as “untouchable.”

Prior to Ambedkar’s revolutionary movement, the arrival of the British had shaken the caste system though they could not dismantle it. The universalizing principle of the colonial government in the field of education
had made educational opportunities accessible to the backward sections of the Hindu society, who were forbidden from acquiring knowledge by the dictates of casteism. Christian missionaries also had started schools for the lower-castes. Their access to education created an awareness of their subordination within Hindu society and they began to question it.

Another important historical event that weakened the hold of caste system and encouraged liberal thinking was the introduction of printing. With the invention of printing, vast numbers of European books on literature, history, philosophy and so on were translated from English into Indian languages and they reached the hands of all. The Dalits came in touch with the progressive ideas of the West through these books. Printing also made possible the spreading of ancient Indian classical texts. Those ancient books of Hinduism, which were stored up in the private libraries of upper-castes, in Agraharas, and Mutts, got printed too, and they reached the hands of all classes of people. Thus, the Dalits who had no right even to touch them got a chance to study them.

The shift in economic production from agricultural mode to industrial mode introduced a new era of colonial modernity. Industrialization forced people to work in the factories and offices together without the barrier of untouchability. Since the migration from villages to the more industrialized cities in search of employment opportunities, the caste became an unimportant matter. Replacing of agricultural economy with an industrial-
based economic system gave a severe jolt to village economy, which had earlier based on feudal-peasant relations, the system that consolidated the entire land in the hands of the upper-caste elite and rendered the vast number of lower-caste peasants to become mere bonded labourers.

British government also introduced a legal system, which replaced the old one that was based on religious restrictions. The practice of caste discrimination and untouchability was made illegal although nothing was done to enforce the law strictly in order to avoid the displeasure of the high-castes. Highlighting this paradoxical situation, Phule titled his first book *Slavery Under the cover of Brahminical Religion in Progressive British Rule*. The text critiques the colonial order and the Hindu social order, which it sustained for trampling on the human rights of the lower-caste people.

There were also attempts from within the Hindu society to reform the Hindu religion to get rid of its divisive caste orientation. The introduction of Western education inculcated in the people values of democracy and helped them to re-examine human relations in the light of ethical values (Joanna and Joshi, 80-85). As a result, several upper-caste people came forward to oppose the practice of untouchability and other dehumanizing practices based on caste. Introduction of English gave the Indian intelligentsia access to European Humanism, which changed their attitude towards the lower-castes and they called for a humanitarian approach towards the Dalits.
However, the upper-caste social reformers of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayananda Saraswati restricted their social reform movement within the upper-caste society. They were more concerned about the redressing of the problems of child marriage, *Sati*, problems of widows and removal of various superstitious practices that plagued the society rather than the eradication of untouchability. Simultaneously there were also attempts to revive Hindu religion and spirituality. The Organizations like *Prarthana Samaj*, *Brahma Samaj*, *Arya Samaj*, and *Sarvajanik Samaj* were founded with this goal in mind. This was necessary in order to take the high-caste people forward to participate in the social, economic and political changes ushered in by the colonial administration.

The social and religious movements of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century questioned the foundation of caste system. Several indigenous Yogis and Sadhus tried to deny the centrality of caste in Hinduism. Shishunaala Sheriff, Kaivara Narayanappa of Karnataka and Sri Narayana Guru of Kerala are some examples. The reason why these indigenous Yogis and the social reformers as Swami Vivekananda and Swami Dayanada Saraswati were unable to influence the historical process in any significant way as Ambedkar could is that they, unlike Ambedkar, did not see the problem as a political one. They were merely concerned with the task of regenerating Indian society as a whole. For them the task of fighting caste system had been a mere spiritual requirement of the tradition.
Gandhi had earlier defended caste system as a unique system that organized the whole society on the basis of the division of labour, which helped to avoid cutthroat competition among the people. He wrote, "There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution and at one time, they served a very useful purpose, as perhaps, they are still doing now to a certain extent... They are no bar to the spiritual progress" (Qtd Nagaraj, 11). However, later on he admitted that "caste system is harmful both to spiritual and national growth" (*Harijan*, 1934: 354). The Gandhian solution to the problem of untouchability was a religious one. He considered the movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification, "The Movement for the removal of untouchability is one of self-purification" (*Harijan*, March 11, 1933: 5). Rabindranath Tagore too had vigorously attacked untouchability and the discriminations based on caste distinctions in his novel *Gora*.

All the above-mentioned reformers looked at the problem of caste from an outsider's perspective and it was only in the latter part of the Nineteenth century that any attempt to examine caste oppression from an insider's perspective began. During this period, there emerged a number of lower-caste social reformers in different parts of the country: Jotiba Phule, Periyar E V. Ramasamy, Ayyankali, Sri Narayana Guru, and Dr. Ambedkar are some of them. It is from the ideas of these great reformers that Dalit Sahitya has
finally taken its roots. Therefore, it is important to examine the ideology of various anti-caste movements ushered in by these Dalit reformers.

Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) is one of the earliest Dalit ideologues to radically question the validity of caste system. He launched a fierce movement of lower-castes against caste oppression in Maharashtra. He re-examined the Hindu religion, attacked the caste system and started a movement for the liberation of untouchables. In his book *Gulamgiri*, written in Marathi with an English introduction, he observes:

... The cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indian on their first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India in the advent of Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines... This, in short, is the history of Brahminical domination in India. They originally settled on the banks of the Ganges where they spread gradually over the whole of India. In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste and the code of crude and inhuman laws to which we can find no parallel among the other nations. (Phule, 118-120)

Phule here considers the Brahmins as invaders of the land and lives of the aboriginal Indians, the Dalits. Therefore, he makes a downright condemnation of Brahminism for its cruelties committed towards the Dalits.
The book describes in detail the various dehumanizing practices of the Hindu society against the Dalits. Jotiba Phule, strictly speaking, was not a Dalit. He belonged to the Malis, the gardeners by traditional occupation, classified as OBC now. He worked among the untouchable castes, organized them and started schools for them. He started the Satyashodak Samaj in 1875 to inculcate rational thinking among the Dalits to enable them to renounce Brahminical rituals.

Phule was also a great writer who wrote many plays, poems and essays. His poetry attacked Brahmanism. He wrote a ballad on Shivaji. His most important work is Gulmagiri, which focuses on caste. Though he tried to unite the Shudras and the Adishudras as the oppressed and exploited masses against Brahmanism, he was aware that the Adishudras were more oppressed and down graded. He forwarded Aryan race theory as an explanation for caste in Indian society.

According to him, Brahmins were descended from the Indo-European invaders who conquered the native Indians. His subversive re-reading of classical Indian mythology provided a strong critique of Brahmanism. He interpreted the various avatars of Vishnu as stages in the conquest of the nation and the rakshasas, as the heroes of the natives who fought the invaders. He used the myth of Mahabali or Bali Raja, which was popular in Maharastra and in South Indian states like Kerala as an example of the treachery used by the invading Aryans to conquer the native inhabitants. The literary re-
interpretations of the popular myths of Hinduism like the myth of Mahabali appealed to the people’s imagination, as they were well known to all sorts of people in connection with some festivals like the Onam in Kerala.

Phule criticized not only the Aryan conquest but also all other invasions including the British, all of which exploited the masses, especially the backward sections of the society. In the case of Brahminical hegemony, both religion and state power were invoked to exploit the lower-caste people and peasantry. The colonial Government also supported the high-caste proprietors in exploiting the poor peasantry and lower-caste people who worked in their lands for meagre wages. While Govt. officials levied excess taxes, the local moneylenders sucked away all their earnings. Phule describes the poverty of the peasants and workers, and condemns their exploitation by Government, landlords and high-caste people alike (Joshi, 81).

Phule advocated the social mobility of women and their empowerment through education. He set up schools for the education of the lower-caste girls. He defended the women activists like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde who fought for the rights of women in the upper-caste communities especially for the empowerment of widows ("Reconceptualizing Gender . . ." 142-163). He criticized both Brahminical patriarchy and patriarchy among the subalterns. He questioned the unequal gender relations within the Dalit communities where women were expected to remain loyal to their husbands
while men enjoyed greater sexual freedom in taking as many wives as they wanted.

As a spokesperson for Dalits and low castes, Phule was aware of the need for an alternate religion to replace the Brahminical Hinduism, a religion that every one could follow. In his *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, he deals with his egalitarian religious concept, which is also based on gender equality as opposed to patriarchal Hindu religion (“Reconceptualizing Gender . . .” 167). In his book, he attacks Hinduism, challenging its legitimacy and questioning its existence. To Phule, Hinduism is not a legitimate religion but merely practice of a set of superstitious beliefs based on the most objectionable mythology. He found in it a weapon of domination, which reduced the millions of Shudras and Adishudras to social slavery. Therefore, he argues that it has no right to exist as a religion. Phule advocated knowledge and modern education as weapons of advancement for the Dalits and other exploited masses. According to him, knowledge was in direct contrast with the Brahminical ritualistic shastras. He believed that knowledge would help the movement of subaltern classes for equality, freedom and economic development. Therefore, Phule favoured modern education to free the Dalits from their mental slavery (Joshi, 8).

The greatest influence on Dalits was Dr. Ambedkar and the emergence of Dalit Literature can be directly related to his political movement for human rights for the Dalits. Although Ambedkar has acknowledged Phule as one of
his gurus, very little of Phule’s influence can be seen in Ambedkar’s writings. Ambedkar can be considered as the sole inheritor of the heritage of the non-Brahmin movement initiated by Phule. In the 1920s and 30s, a number of Dalit movements began in several states in India. Nevertheless, the mobilization of the Dalits and other exploited subaltern classes that Phule had dreamed of materialized only under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, which is known in history as the Dalit political Movement. Before examining Ambedkar’s contribution to the formation of Dalit selfhood and Dalit consciousness from which Dalit Literature has emerged, it is essential to examine the various non-Brahminical movements prior to Ambedkar in India. It will help to trace the evolution of the tradition of Dalit movement in India and the emergence of Dalit Literature from it.

In Maharastra, inspired by Phule’s ideas, many Dalits and lower-caste people identified themselves as non-Brahmins against Hindu ideology, casteism and Brahminical hegemony. Nevertheless, the most powerful non-Brahmin movement was in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, it was not motivated by Phule’s ideas. Few outside Maharastra had heard of Phule due to lack of communication network among lower-castes and also because of the hostility of the Brahmin elite towards his ideas. This is one of the reasons why the non-Brahmin movement of 1920s, which took place in various parts of the country, did not consolidate to a very great Dalit movement nationally.
Periyor E. V. Ramaswamy launched the non-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu. The theme of Aryan conquest propagated by some of the Orientalist historians in the Nineteenth century was a common factor that connected the non-Brahmin movements in Tamilnadu and Maharastra and the similar movements in the rest of the country (Thapar, 9). The use of the discourse of Aryan conquest by elite historians was evoking a common response among the Dalits in different parts of India. As a result, these non-Brahmin movements used Aryan conquest and Brahmin exploitation as common themes. They all emphasized the aboriginal Indianness of Dalits. Hence, “Adi” is a common prefix with the names of these movements. For example, Adi-Dharm in Punjab, Adi-Hindu in U P, Adi-Andra in A P, Adi-Dravida in T N, and Adi-Karnataka. A brief survey of these various anti-Brahmin movements formed for resisting the Aryan/ Brahmin culture and reviving the original Dravidian culture, which culminated in the political movement of Ambedkar and later in the emergence of Dalit Literature, is relevant. In this context, Gail Omvedt has dealt with the history of the non-Brahmin movements in India in *Dalit Visions* (7).

Second only to Maharashtra, the vibrancy of non-Brahmin movement was most powerfully felt in the state of Tamil Nadu. Periyor E. V. Ramaswamy, a low-caste trader from Erode built it into a massive political movement of the untouchables. He gave it a regional i.e. (South v/s North) and linguistic (Tamil v/s Hindi) twist. He had participated in the Vaikom
Satyagraha of the 1920s, which sought for the right of the lower-caste people to enter the Vaikom temple. Through his journal *Kudi Arasu*, he condemned Varnashrama Dharma and casteism. He attacked the Congress party for having an orientation for the upper-caste and called for its dissolution. He also called for the destruction of Hindu religion as it is based on the hegemony of the Brahmins. Like Phule’s “Satya Shodak Samaj,” Periyor also formed a “Self-Respect League” in 1929 aimed at resisting of Brahminism, destroying of caste and liberating of women (Omvedt, 56). This shows that both Phule and Periyor had ushered in similar programmes of social action.

In contrast with the Saivism of the upper-castes, Periyor preached atheism for propagating rationalism and scientific thinking: For he believed that, it is the religions that perpetuate the exploitation of the poor and lower-castes (Omvedt, 56). He emphasized Humanism – a philosophy that centres on man instead of God. In doing so, he was influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment Humanism. The social reformers of the Nineteenth century India were certainly influenced by the Western ideas and the similarity in their views can be attributed to their common access of colonial knowledge systems.

However, the social reform movement initiated by Periyor in the form of “Self Respect Movement” for empowering Dalits took a twist to radical Nationalism and many literary icons like Bharati Dasan were inspired to write
about original Tamil values. Periyor spoke powerfully on egalitarianism, casteism and atheism, which won him a large following of lower-caste youths. Nevertheless, later on, he switched over to Tamil Nationalism and founded the *Dravida Kazhagham* to achieve the goal of independent Dravidian Republic. Thus, the anti-caste, Adi Dravida movement started by Periyor took on a political line and after his death the movement lost its anti-caste edge (Geetha, 184-203).

Ayyankali, a *Pulaya* leader, organized the Dalits in the erstwhile Travancore state. As in other parts of the country, in Kerala, too, the lower-castes were attributed sub-human status and were treated as untouchables. The untouchables had no access to the public ways, wells, educational institutions and temples. They were not allowed to wear any dress above their waist. Women were not permitted to cover their breasts nor were they allowed to wear any jewellery. The Pulayas and Parayas who are the most backward castes among the untouchables were made to work in the fields of the upper-caste people for meagre wages. They were even bought and sold in public as slaves (pampirikunnu, 42 - 43). They were punished severely for minor offences and were even killed sometimes. Arundhati Roy gives vivid descriptions of the pitiable conditions of Paravans, one of the most backward untouchable communities in Kerala, in *The God of Small Things*:

Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when paravans were expected to crawl
backwards with broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping to a paravan’s footprint. In Mammachi’s time, Paravans like other untouchables were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They have to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. (73-74)

What is explicit from the above description is the fact that the conversion to minority religions like Christianity to escape untouchability did not help the untouchables as they were treated with double standards in these religions and categorized as “Dalit-Christians.”

They had no right to study and so Ayyankali, too, could not learn to read or write. Nevertheless, this was not a hindrance for him in organizing his fellow people against the upper-caste atrocities. He organized a revolutionary army of the untouchables for fighting against the upper-castes known as “Ayyankali Pada.” He also started an organization Sadu paripalana Sangam in 1907 in the model of S N D P started by Sree Narayana Guru, a great religious and social reformer who organized the Ezhavas, one of the largest lower-caste communities in Kerala. The Sadu Paripalana Sangam started schools for the Pulayas and tried to educate them. It was Ayyankali’s dream that at least 15 Pulayas with BA degree emerge from his community.
Ayyankali was the first nominated member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly who represented the untouchable communities. The untouchables, until then had no representation in the Legislative Assembly from Pulaya community. He organized the Pulayas for a strike in 1913 demanding their basic human rights like right to education, right to use public places and right to a decent earning. This was the first successful ever-labour strike in the history of Kerala (Chentharassery, 49-59). He also initiated many social reforms in the Pulaya community to bring it to the mainstream of the society. Along with the great social reformers of Kerala like Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan and Sahodaran Ayyappan, he led the social reform movement of the lower-caste people.

Ayyankali made the Pulayas and Pariahs conscious of their rights and dignity. They had developed a slavish mentality owing to their Centuries-old subordination to the upper-castes. The Pulayas, who worked in the fields of the high-caste Hindus like Nairs and Nambudiries, and did all sorts of menial, dirty jobs like scavenging, were treated worse than animals. They had to accept whatever was given to them for their hard work. They were discriminated in all walks of social life. Ayyankali reformed them from their superstitious age-old customs and ritual thereby giving them a modern selfhood.

Sree Narayana Guru was another great social reformer who tried to empower the Ezhavas, one of the largest lower-caste communities in Kerala.
He preached the doctrine “one caste one religion, one God” (Omana, 7). Though Sankara’s Advaida Vedanta influenced the Guru, he gave it his own version and preached that God is in all human beings irrespective of any caste differences. While Adi Sankara believed in the caste hierarchy and emphasized the superiority of Brahmins, Narayana Guru, emphasized the equality and unity of all human beings. Hence, he insisted that there is only one caste, one religion and one God that is the human caste the human religion, and one supreme God for all human beings (Omana, 34). As a great social reformer, he not only built separate temples of worship but also formulated a parallel iconology of Hindu Gods for the Ezhavas to worship. While constructing temples for the lower-castes to worship Guru also built educational institutions for them. He exhorted them to get enlightened through knowledge. He constantly reminded them that it is through education and organization that they can be empowered. He also advised them to conduct trade and business to advance economically and called for the fair treatment of women.

It is important to understand that the ideology that animated the anti-caste movements in different states of India were different. The social reform movements set forth by Narayana Guru and Ayyankali were not motivated by the Adi ideology as in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu. Ayyankali and Narayana Guru were fighting for the social and religious rights of the lower-castes within the fold of Hindu religion. In other words, they were fighting
for the rights of the lower-castes as Hindus only. The same religious ideology of Hinduism, which had inspired the upper-caste social reformers of the Nineteenth century motivated them too. The anti-caste thinking of the progressive elites had influenced them too. However, compared to their upper-caste counterparts, both of them were consistently radical in their anti-caste thinking. Besides, Narayana Guru’s reform movement was not confined to the religious sphere alone, as were most of the upper-caste reform movements of the Nineteenth century. It had a social, economic and cultural agenda. In fact, Narayana Guru represents the convergence of both the spiritual and the secular traditions of the East and the West. However, this can not be called a result of the influence because Guru was proficient neither in English nor in Sanskrit.

Narayana Guru’s ideas resulted in the moral and social transformation of Ezhava community in Kerala. The agony of the Ezhava community, as well as the hopes of a better future was articulated through the writings of Kumaran Asan, a disciple of Narayana Guru. Guru’s socio-cultural movement for the empowerment of Ezhavas and the eradication of untouchability inspired the poetry of Asan. The theme of most of his poems is based on the sufferings of low-caste people caused by caste distinctions. The emotional appeal in Asan’s poetry is a result of the fact that he himself was a victim of caste oppression as he came from a low caste community.
Therefore, his poetry articulates the concerns of the caste subaltern in an authentic manner.

In a long poem entitled “Duravastha" (1922), Asan foregrounds the human sufferings caused by the rigidities of the caste system. “Duravastha” is quite radical in its theme. A Nambudiri girl, who runs away from her home during the historic Moplah revolt, takes refuge in the hut of a Pulaya. As she has visited the house of a Pulaya, an untouchable, she has lost her caste purity and cannot return home, as she will be regarded as a fallen woman in the eyes of her community. Gradually she is attracted towards the Pulaya youth because of his noble character. His anxiety and love for her really touches her heart. Asan seems to suggest mixed marriages, based on love and compassion, as a tool for breaking down traditional walls of social discrimination.

Asan’s “Chandala Bhiskshuki,” too, explores the question of caste. This poem is based on a Buddhist legend. Ananda, a disciple of Buddha accepts drinking water from an untouchable girl. She falls in love with him and finally becomes a Bhikshuki. Though there is opposition against her entry to the order, Buddha himself intervenes so that the Chandala, the outcaste, is ordained a nun. She is called chandala bhikshuki henceforth.

Another poet who is also influenced by Narayana Guru’s teaching is Mooloor Pammanabha Pannikar, who may be considered the first major poet in Malayalam from a low caste community. A few other important early
twentieth century Malayalam writers who hailed from low-caste communities and who were all inspired by the ideas of Ayyankali and Narayana Guru were Potheri Kunhsmbu, K. P. Karuppan, T. K. C. Vaduthala, and V. K. Kalath. However, they had not received any recognition from the upper-caste dominated Malayalam literary establishment during their literary career.

This brief survey briefly sketches the lower-caste social reformers like Jotiba Phule, Periyor, Ayyankali and Narayana Guru, who pioneered the Dalit Movement in India. Most of them were influenced by the Western liberal ideas in opposing Brahminical hegemony. They were motivated by the ideals of Humanism that emphasized the dignity and worth of all human beings and held that all individuals are entitled to equal social, economic and political rights.

The “Adi” concept of lower-caste as the original inhabitants of India and the upper-castes as descendants of Aryan conquerors was a discourse common to each non-Brahmin movement, except that of Kerala. Nevertheless, these movements never became a single, unified, powerful, national movement capable of taking forward the struggle of Dalits for their rights. The main reason is that these movements had divergent ideologies and programmes owing to differences in their origin, political background and regional specifications. There was also the absence of a unifying central leadership to bring these disparate movements together for the common cause. As a result, these non-Brahmin movements lost their historic relevance.
later and their attention got diverted to other non-caste issues. They were divided into various formations and were appropriated by elite political parties and organizations dominated by upper-caste interests. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement lost its anti-caste tradition as it got divided into DMK and AIADMK, neither of which has any consistent anti-caste agenda or ideology. In Kerala, too, after Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, there was no capable leader to carry on the fight of the backward castes. The Communists appropriated the situation as they emerged as the sole authority to fight for the workers, farmers and the backward sections. The Dalits joined the party in the hope of better prospects and toed the party line as its loyal cadres. In other words, it was in the ground already prepared by social reformers like Ayyankali and Narayana Guru that the Communist party in Kerala had taken its roots. The Communists were indeed able to capitalize on their ideas.

The movement of the above-mentioned Dalit Radicals had a two-pronged Agenda. On the one hand, they advocated social reforms within the Dalit communities, exhorting the Dalits to give up drinking, immoral trafficking and emphasizing equality of Dalit women with men. On the other hand, they organized Dalits against the upper-castes for fighting and obtaining their democratic rights. Workers in factories and mills were organized and they demanded better wages and better working conditions. Peasants and farmers resorted to strike for more wages and rights as workers. Although
some of these movements had links with reformist movements started by the upper-castes and Nationalist movement, they all had in common an anti-Brahmin ideology based on non-Aryan social theories, which provided them with a framework, barring the case of Kerala.

In Kerala, the Dalit Movement was purely a social reform movement under the leadership of Ayyankali and Narayana Guru for obtaining more religious, social and democratic rights for Dalits. It was not much influenced by the Adi Dravida ideology of the neighbouring state, Tamil Nadu. Narayana Guru and Ayyankali fought for the rights of Dalits within the Hindu tradition. For example, while fighting for temple entry during Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagraha, the Dalits were identifying themselves as Hindus as they were demanding their legitimate rights to worship Hindu Gods in Hindu temples.

The failure of the anti-caste movements prior to Ambedkar was due to the influence of Gandhi, whose approach to the Dalit problem was not at all radical. Gandhi considered the Dalits as part of the Hindu community and so he merely demanded more space for Dalits within the Hindu society. Nevertheless, his caste reform programmes had attracted vast number of Dalits to the Congress party. Along with this, there were campaigns from the Congress party, dominated by the upper-caste Hindus, to emphasize Hindu unity irrespective of caste hierarchy. For this purpose, they called for a more sympathetic approach towards the Dalits and under the insistence of Gandhi,
the Indian National Congress adopted a resolution for the removal of untouchability. There were also attempts, especially in Bengal, from the Hindu Reformist organizations like *Arya Samaj* and *Brahma Samaj* to win over the lower-castes who had already been converted to Christianity to escape the caste discrimination and for reasons of financial security. Tagore’s novel *Gora* vividly portrays the centrality of Hindu religion in the practices of *Brahma Samaj*.

The organizations like *Brahma Samaj*, *Arya Samaj* and *Prarthana Samaj* primarily aimed at sanscritization and hence an emphasis on the greatness of Hindu philosophy, religion and culture. They identified Dalits as part of the Hindu order to prevent their erosion to other religions like Christianity and they tried to bring them back to Hinduism. As part of this project, there were also conscious attempts to emphasize the lower-caste origin of some of the classical writers like Valmiki and Vyasa. This was to demonstrate that Dalits too, had their share in the creation of the great cultural tradition of Hinduism.

On the other side, there were the Left parties with their proletarian discourse, which attracted peasants and workers from Dalit and other subaltern classes, especially in states like Kerala. However, those at the forefront of the left party’s leadership were mainly the upper-castes. This was because in the early days the Left parties mainly consisted of the ex-Congress men who were mainly high-castes. They left the Congress party after being
influenced by the ideas of Marx and the success of Russian Revolution. Upper-caste people like M. N. Roy and Satyr Bhakti founded the Indian Communist Party in 1924. The militant campaign of Communist party for an egalitarian society attracted people in large numbers from the subaltern classes. Nevertheless, they failed to recognize ‘caste’ as the main cause of the exploitation of the subaltern classes in India. The class-based approach of the Communists is quite inadequate in analyzing the social, cultural and economic backwardness of the Dalits. The Communist parties borrowed the Marxian concepts in their raw form without re-orienting them to suit the Indian situation.

As mentioned earlier, Marxist class theory favoured the industry-based working class at the expense of ignoring agricultural labourers, rural peasantry and workers of the unorganized sector who were seen as backward and termed as “lumpen proletariat.” Consequently, the Communists while they targeted the capital forces, the so-called private property owners such as landlords, moneylenders and owners of industrial units and factories, failed to recognize other forms of exploitation based on caste. They also ignored the exploitation of peasantry and working class by state machinery through taxation and bureaucratic interference. Thus, the Communists did not recognize caste as a mode of exploitation and oppression in India. In other words, their focus on the economic activity resulted in rejecting the caste as they considered it a non-economic factor.
The “Adi” identity theories put forward by Dalit Radicals rejected Hinduism as the religion of the upper-castes, seeing it as a tool of exploitation against the lower-castes. The Indian Communists did not share this view and they recognized Hinduism or at least they all considered themselves as Hindu atheists. They did not acknowledge the democratic revolution of the Dalits because of its centrality of caste, instead of class. Therefore, they failed to realign themselves with the Dalits in their fight against the Indian elites. Besides, they branded the Dalit and non-Brahmin movements as pro British, especially, after Ambedkar hailed the colonial modernity for its emancipatory effects on Dalits. Gail Omvedt has observed:

Thus, two opposing ideologies prevailed among the toiling masses— one arguing from the standpoint of being original inhabitants or non-Aryans, and other basing itself on the theory of the class struggle. With the failure, in particular, of the more all encompassing Marxist theory to incorporate the problems of caste in India, the broad movement of the oppressed was split into a class movement and a caste movement. There was no synthesis, no development of an integrated ideology and as a result those lower-castes/classes who was drawn into the national struggle or the left-led working class movement, gave up the sharpness of their anti-caste fight. Beneath the folds of the Congress and its hegemonic claims over almost all other
political movements, a large number of forces and identities simmered but remained unconnected and ineffective. . . (Dalit Visions, 2006: 42)

It was left to Dr. Ambedkar, a second-generation Dalit leader to formulate a National movement for the liberation of Dalits. He succeeded in consolidating the various Dalit movements of the country into a single largest political movement after Nationalism. It succeeded in forging a national consciousness of Dalits as oppressed subaltern castes. Ambedkar came to the forefront of Indian politics claiming the heritage of the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. As we have seen, Phule was the first modern Dalit voice who called for social equality of Dalits and women as the two marginalized categories within Hinduism. While Phule’s ideas of the Dalits’ liberation were confined to the social, literary and cultural domains alone, Ambedkar advanced the ideology of Phule on to the political sphere, too. Nevertheless, there was no similarity in the course of action of these two great Dalit leaders, although Ambedkar always considered Phule as one of his gurus (Moon, 45).

In the ideology of Ambedkar, one can find the philosophic outlook of Buddha, Phule, Periyor, Narayana Guru and Ayyankali in a synthesized form. According to Ambedkar, in India, it is not the economic condition that determines people’s social status, but the social status that determines their economic condition. Human beings are what they are because of caste into
which they are born. Caste system generates a sense of superiority or inferiority in relation to the “Other” because one feels superior or inferior as based on the principle of caste system provided in Hindu dharma sastras. In this context, Ambedkar’s observation is quite appropriate. He says, “The Indian society was formed with an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. It gives no scope for the growth of the sentiment of equality and fraternity” (Narasaiah, 7). One’s caste determines one’s economic position. Therefore, Ambedkar calls for the annihilation of caste in order to establish a society based on equality.

It is on precisely this point that Ambedkar had ideological difference with Gandhi. Ambedkar considered Hinduism anti-ethical since its philosophy, practices and scriptural authority support and perpetuate discrimination on the basis of caste. Although Gandhi disapproved the practice of untouchability, invested his faith in the Hindu scriptures and in the effectiveness of reforms to redress the problems related to caste. Gandhi held the view that caste system and untouchability were distortions that could be purged from Hinduism without discarding varna ashrama dharma, which he believed to be a unique gift of India to the world. The debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi through the volumes of Harijan clearly brings out these differences. In this regard, Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes:

Whereas Gandhi believed in the removal of untouchability through penance and acts of social services by caste Hindus, as
opposed to mandated changes in the law, Ambedkar used the language of rights and legislated remedies. Similarly, while Gandhi and the Congress thought in terms of temple entry, inter-dining, and inter-caste marriages, Ambedkar linked untouchability constantly reiterating how they were denied access to education, ownership of land and jobs above the level of scavenging, sanitary and other menial occupations and were also forced to provide their labour against their will and without any control over wages. (Mukherjee, xx)

It is also on the question of caste that Ambedkar had fundamental differences with the Indian Marxists. He accepted Max’s view that history is running dialectically through the struggle of faction against faction. While the Communists categorize factions in terms of economic class, Ambedkar claims that caste and not class is the key analytical term in the specific Indian context. In other words, in India, one’s belonging or not belonging to a particular caste determines one’s economic condition. Therefore, the upper-castes are rich and powerful, and lower-castes are poor and powerless. Ambedkar comments:

They (the upper-caste) own land in this country. They control trade and they own state. They control every source of revenue and profit. Other communities and particularly the untouchables are just hewers of wood and drawers of water.
The social system helps Hindus to have a monopoly on every thing. (Narasaiah, 4).

The views of Ambedkar with regard to Marxism have similarities with Fanon's views as expressed in The Wretched of the Earth. While Marx categorized social factions in terms of economic "class," Fanon considers "race" as key categorical term. Fanon believes in the need for the struggle on the part of the native Blacks against the White colonizing power in order to put an end to their exploitation. In other words, the anti-colonial struggle should begin by resisting the cultural and racial hegemony of Europeans because colonialism was justified by asserting the superiority of whites over the blacks. Thus, according to Fanon "race" and not "class" is at the root of the exploitation of the colonized. He observes:

Economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race. (The Wretched of the Earth, 40)

According to Ambedkar, unless caste system is destroyed there cannot be any democracy and socialism because the values and beliefs that preserve caste system are too deeply rooted in Hindu religion that perpetuates the exploitation of Dalits by the Brahmans. Ambedkar also rejected the non-Aryan identity of the Dalit radicals of the 1920s and of his time. He rejected
their theory about the origin of caste arguing, “The Aryans were not a race. The Aryans were a collection of people. The cement that held these together was their interest in the maintenance of a type of culture called Aryan culture . . . .” (Rajshekar, 6)

Thus, according to Ambedkar, Dalits could be socially, politically and culturally empowered only through the denial of caste system and Brahminical superiority, which is enshrined in Hinduism. This requires the rejection of Hinduism as a religion of unequal social relations and the adoption of an alternative religion — Buddhism. Finally, to achieve these goals, he founded an autonomous movement of Dalits, workers, peasants and other backward castes and classes who were socially, economically and culturally exploited.

Dalit Literature owes its immediate origin to the revolutionary ideas of Ambedkar. Ambedkar’s revolutionary movement gave the Dalits a self-awareness and self-respect. Dalit Literature is the literary expression of this new consciousness of Dalits. Dalit Literature is concerned with the hopes and aspirations of Dalits for freedom and their protest against social, economic, political and cultural inequality. It is characterized by rebellion against the establishment dominated by upper-caste ethos. Hence, Dalit Literature has to be studied from a socio-historic perspective and a purely academic and literary approach to it is not useful in comprehending its relevance.
It is possible to relate Dalit Literature to a tradition, stretching it beyond Phule and Ambedkar. Although Dalit Literature evolved in Marathi as a distinctive mode only in the 1970s, the concern for the untouchable can be traced back to the Fourteenth century. Buddha of the second century BC, Chokhamela, a 13th century Marati Mahar saint poet and Kabir, a Mediaeval saint poet, who wrote in Hindi may be considered the pioneers of Dalit literary Tradition as they were the first to reflect their concern for the untouchable Shudras (Dangle, 237). While Chokhamela protested against untouchability, Kabir gave vent to his protest against caste through the medium of devotional verse. Shimpi Namdeo who was a contemporary of Chokhamela and Kumbi Tukaram of the 17th century were the other most well known poets of lower-caste origin.

The Bhakti movement that prevailed throughout India was anti-orthodox. However, it was confined to the religious domain alone and had little concern for equality at the social sphere. Yet, it had taken a radical stance by opposing traditional piety and revolting against formal rituals of Hinduism. The movement also included the Shudras and the women in its fold. However, it had failed to transform the condition of those marginalized on the basis of caste and gender as it had upheld the tradition that had established the social distinctions and unequal gender relation. Therefore, even those compassionate poet-saints like Chokhamela and Tukaram could do little to alter the condition of the untouchables. The writings of the
untouchables prior to Ambedkar and the Adi Dravida writings cannot be classified under the category of Dalit Writings since they lack the radical political thrust associated with the term "Dalit." Therefore, only the literature that is produced after Ambedkar can be called Dalit Literature.

Ambedkar is the main inspiration behind Dalit Literature because it is his ideas that impelled the Dalits to give creative expression to their experiences powerfully and collectively for the first time in the history of Indian literature. It is no coincidence as Ajin Dangle, the founder member of the Dalit Panthers, has observed:

The Dalit Literature sprouted in Maharastra, the birth place of Ambedkar's liberation movement. Ambedkar's revolutionary movement stirred to action the Dalits of Maharastra and gave them a new energy. Dalit Literature is nothing but the literary expression of this energy. (Dangle, 238)

Therefore, Ambedkar may be rightly called the father of Dalit Literature. It was Ambedkar who decolonized the Dalit's mind from its slavish mentality to the upper-castes, which it had developed because of age-old subservience to casteism. Through his speeches, writings and anti-caste movements, Ambedkar was able to implant in them a sense of pride in their Dalit identity and to infuse a feeling of self-respect. Ambedkar began his anti-caste movement by putting up a fight for Dalit's democratic rights. In 1924, he started Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha for the moral and material progress of the
untouchables. In 1927, he led a Satyagraha to establish the right of the untouchables to draw water from a public tank at Mahad. He publicly burned *Manusmriti* (Complete Works. Vol. 2, 76). Ambedkar’s burning of *Manusmriti* was a symbolic act towards decolonizing the mind of the Dalits from its centuries-old subordination to Brahminic hegemony.

He fought for separate electorate for the untouchables but Gandhi vehemently opposed it and on the basis of historical “Poona Pact,” Ambedkar had to give up his claim. Ambedkar challenged Gandhi’s right to represent the Indian Dalits at the Round Table. On 13 October 1935, Ambedkar declared, “I was born a Hindu not out of my choice, but would not die a Hindu” (Complete Works, Vol. 2, 88). Later, he got converted to Buddhism along with thousands of his followers. His spirited speeches and writings were aimed at rousing Dalits’ consciousness against upper-caste oppression. Dalit Literature is a literary manifestation of this consciousness.

Dalit Literature therefore, has to be studied on the above-mentioned philosophical background of Ambedkarism. Dalit Literature reflects Dalit culture, which is set as a foil against the hegemonic culture. The Dalit writer consciously embraces a Dalit identity in a resolve to destroy caste system, which discriminates against Dalits and attempts to rebuild society on the principles of self-respect, dignity and equality. This radical thrust in Dalit Literature is explained by Arjun Dangle, a Marathi Dalit writer, “Dalit Literature is marked by revolt, negativism since it is closely associated with
the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality” (Dangle, 264-5).

The activist nature of Dalit Literatures is inherited from the legacy of Ambedkar’s political movement for the emancipation of Dalits. In this context, Omprakash Valmiki has noted:

_Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for a thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit Literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits._ (xxv)

Since Dalit Literature has this credo, it is bound to be different from other mainstream literatures in India.

This radical thrust makes Dalit Literature different from the non-Dalit writings about Dalits. The question arises whether the non-Dalit writer has any right to speak for the Dalits. In other words, can the writings of the upper-castes about Dalits be considered part of Dalit Literature? Dalit critics argue that the mainstream writer writing about the Dalits is guilty of appropriating the voice and experience of Dalits and the critics claim authenticity for their representation of their lived-experience. In chapter, IV entitled “Dalit and Dalitist Writings” an in-depth analysis of the issue of appropriation of Dalit voice in non-Dalit Writings has been attempted.
Although Ambedkar is considered the father of Dalit Literature, Dalit Literature evolved as a collective movement only after the death of Ambedkar. It is because the Dalit writer lacked any concrete aesthetic tradition to lean on and the mainstream literary tradition was dominated by upper-caste ethos. It took sometime for the Dalit writers to formulate a distinctive Dalit aesthetic suitable for the creative expression of Dalit experience. Ambedkar's call to "unite, educate and agitate" had influenced a number of creative minded Dalit youth in Maharashtra and they founded the Maharastra Dalit Sahitya Sangh in 1950 (Complete Works, Vol. 1. 106).

This however did not result in the production of a literary discourse that dealt exclusively with the Dalit problems. They rather exhibited the influence of the language and aesthetic system of upper-castes. In other words, Dalit writers in the early phase of Dalit Literature tried to consciously imitate the upper-caste writers forgetting their cultural past. Their writing had no ring of authenticity as it lacked the hue of Dalit experience. The range of their creativity was limited as they only peripherally discussed Dalit issues. They were also constrained by readership mainly consisting of the upper-middle class sections that were attuned to the upper-caste literary values and aesthetic standards.

During early the Twentieth century, upper-caste writers dominated the Marathi literary field. Some of them had expressed concern for the marginalized Mahars. For example, Kesharsut, the first major Marathi poet
had written poems entitled “Labourer,” “A Worker Forced to Starve,” “New Soldier” and “The First Question of the Untouchable Boy.” Brahmin reformers like M. G. Ranade and G. G. Agarkar too had expressed serious concern for the pitiable conditions of the Mahars. These benevolent upper-caste leaders expressed their compassion for the poor Mahars by representing their problems through their writings from a humanistic perspective. However, there was no attempt to challenge Brahminism. It was left to the lower-caste writers like Gopal Baba Walangkar and Pandit Kondiram to criticize the caste establishment for the wretched condition of the untouchables.

The 1960s produced some of the great Dalit writers like Baburao Bagul, Balanchandra Nemade and Shankarrao Karat who were associated with the little magazine movement in Maharashtra. They openly questioned the mainstream critics and boldly published their works in the little magazines. Bagul’s collection of stories “When I had concealed my caste” and “Death is getting cheaper” revolted against the ills of the social system. The pitiable social conditions in which the Dalits lived are depicted in all its stunning and harsh reality in his stories.

Marxist writers who were associated with the “progressive writers” movement” consciously tried to render the life of the untouchables with an air of social realism. Writers like Anna Bhau Sathe and Narayan Sarve in Marathi, Thakazhi in Malayalam, Premchand in Hindi and several Bengali
writers inspired by Marxist philosophy have portrayed the problems of the oppressed down trodden castes very poignantly. Although ideologically a Marxist, Sathe’s involvement with Ambedkar’s movement makes him a writer with a difference when compared to other Marxist writers who were not born Dalits. These writers mainly acted as spokespersons for the cause of the oppressed working class and there was no attempt to address the specific issues affecting the caste subalterns. They portrayed mainly the class conflict between the rich capitalists and the poor labour class, rather than the conflict between the high-castes and the low castes.

These writers were progressive only peripherally for they did not experiment with the language, style and narration. They continued to write in the socially accepted modes and genres. Besides, their over-reliance on Realism prevented them from entering the cultural world of caste subalterns—of gods and goddesses, of spirits and fairies, of myths and rituals, of tribal arts and folk legends. As a result, their writing turned out to be mere social documentaries about the oppression of working class and other socially marginalized classes.

Nevertheless, the Marxist writers’ sociological approach to literature had brought about a revolutionary change in the literary approaches. The earlier approach that viewed ancient literature as sacred had changed and literary works were more objectively assessed for their representation of human life, rather than for representation of Hindu mythology and classical
tradition. The new approach to literature was historical and materialistic and it related a work to the existing social structures. Social Realism helped the emerging Dalit critics to re-read and re-interpret the earlier writings and undo the upper-caste ideology they embodied.

At the same time, there was a host of mainstream writers, besides the Marxist writers, who honestly supported the Dalit cause. Some of them are P. K. Atre, D. K. Bedekar, G. T. Madkholkar, Vijay Tendulkar, Dilip Chitre, Balachandra Nemade and V. Madgulkar. In spite of their good intentions, these writers’ portrayal of Dalit life is far from realistic, as they lacked access to the interior world of Dalit experience. These towering writers of the Marathi literary establishment eclipsed the untouchable writers of the period and were labelled as the sole representatives of the Dalits. For instance, Venkitesh Madgulkar whose works abound with themes and characters drawn from lower-caste community established himself as a Dalit writer. His forte was dispassionate objectivity and his characters put up with oppression, as they never protest. However, his stories abound with poignant exposures of the rural Mahar.

In the 1950s, Dalit insiders were making their presence felt. S M Mate published two books highlighting the problems of the untouchable Mahars. He wrote with such intensity that he eventually came to be known as “Mahar Mate.” Shankarrao Karat published excellent stories on the life of the untouchables, presenting them from an insider’s perspective. A comparative
study of Karat and Madugulkar is taken up in chapter four entitled “Dalit and Dalitist Writings.” The sixties and seventies marked a spurt of Dalit creativity with such great writers like Cokha Kamble, Durga Bhagwat, Waman Nimbalkar, Daya Pawar, Gangadhar Pantawane, Kisan Bansode, Shivaram Kamble and Namdeo Dhasal challenging the upper-caste dominance in culture.

The second wave Dalit movement started with the advent of Dalit Panthers. American Black Panthers and Black Literature influenced the movement called the Dalit Panthers. Like the American Black Panther movement, this Dalit school of Literature was characterized by a new pride in Dalit self and the assertion of Dalit identity and culture. Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale founded it in 1972. Other writers who came to be associated with the movement were Arjun Dangle and J. V. Pawar. The Dalit Panthers had a strong revolutionary manifesto that articulated thus:

... we do not want a little place in Brahmin Alley. We want the rule of the whole land. We are not looking at persons but system. Change of heart, liberal education etc will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary man, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant man will come the tidal wave of revolution. (*Dalit Visions*, 73)

The manifesto in its beginning condemns Hinduism, especially its feudalistic orientation.
Although it began as a Dalit literary movement, it soon acquired a political dimension as the atrocities against Dalits in the villages were on the increase. Dalit Panthers sought to counter them. In whatever form, a new militant movement was taking shape against the upper-caste’s oppression of Dalits in different parts of the country. Tension was built up between the Dalits and caste Hindus and there were several encounters in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, and Gujarat. The Dalit Panthers, like the Black writers in America, wanted to universalize the Dalit identity. The Dalit Panthers were also influenced by the Communist ideology. Therefore, what they projected as Dalit experience was often the proletarian experience. Several factors were responsible for the emergence of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. After Ambedkar’s death, his followers sought to serve their own interests rather than the interests of the Dalit communities. Dalit writers soon got disillusioned with the party founded by Ambedkar and they thought of a new political alternative: Dalit Panthers.

The poetry of Panthers critiqued the caste forces and the parliamentary democracy that supports it. Their poetry was powerful and was characterized by devastating humour as in Keshar Meshram:

One day I cursed that motherfucker God
He just laughed shamelessly
My neighbour, a born-to-the pen Brahmin, was shocked
He looked at me with his castor-oil-face
I cursed another good hot curse

The university buildings shuddered and sank waste-deep.

All at once, scholars began doing research,

Into what makes people angry. . . .

(Anand and Zelliot, 62)

The widespread reach of education and benefits of reservations had produced a good number of educated, middle-class Dalits. Namdeo Dhasal, a founder poet of the Dalit Panthers, paints in true colours the harrowing existence of the immigrant Dalits in the cities through his poem “So that my mother may be concerned”:

In the eighteen century, the completely human race was

Turned upside down

Nevertheless, even today you have not heard of it...

Mother, your son is not a child.

He is the symbol of this age’s rebellion,

He can see clearly the injustice, himself as victim,

Governmental machinery, means of living, power of toil

Mines of coal and steel, warehouses, factories

There: protection, guarantee of food and money,

My face, lying in the dust, separated from all of this.

(Anand and Zelliot, 60)
The Panthers did not last long, within two years it split as "Buddhists" and "Marxists." While Raja Phule was the leader of the former faction, Namdeo Dhasal headed the Marxist faction. The Dalit Panthers, though it lasted only for a short while, produced poetry that effectively spoke of caste problems. It gave Dalit Literature a new vigour and direction and as a result, Dalit Literature re-emerged and flourished in most of the Indian languages. Though the Dalit Panthers was started as a political movement with the goal of countering the violence against Dalits, it acquired a cultural dimension as well since it brought to light the emerging Dalit Sahitya. This is the greatest contribution of Dalit Panthers to Indian literature and to the Dalit Literature in particular.

Though the Dalit Panthers Movement split, its leaders such as Ramdas Athvale, Gangadhar Gade, Jogendre Kavade, Arun Kamble, Bhai Sangar, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Phale and others were active in their respective fields in promoting the cause of Dalit Literature in various parts of Maharashtra. The impact of Dalit Panthers Movement was felt not only in Maharashtra, but also in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, where there were groups called Dalit Panthers. From 1972 onwards, there has been a flourishing of Dalit Autobiographies in Marathi and other regional literatures. A number of these autobiographies received Sahitya awards of the Central and State governments. Many of them were translated into English and some other foreign languages. Autobiographies of Daya Pawar, Laxman Mane, Omprakash Valmiki,
Laxman Gaikward, Narendra Jadev and so on, have got wide spread recognition. Female writers like Santabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Savitha Ambedkar, Bama and others have also produced autobiographies.

Thus, an attempt has been made in this chapter is to delineate the historical circumstances that produced Dalit Literature in India. This socio-political history of the Dalit Writings in India makes it obvious that Dalit Literature has a tradition of its own and that it has emerged as an offshoot of the Dalit Political Movement led by Ambedkar. Though Dalit Literature emerged in the 1930s in Marathi, it had only a short span of active existence and it faded into oblivion after the death of Ambedkar. Dalit Panthers who gave it a great momentum revived Dalit Literature in the 1970s.

Today Dalit writers are active in most of the Indian languages like Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Oriya, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam. Sisir Kumar Das has made a survey of Dalit Writings in these languages in his multi volume series on Indian Literature (Das, 301-348). Dalit Writings all over India are informed by a distinctive ideology. Dalit Literatures carry forward the struggle against caste oppression at the ideological level.

Dalit critics, too, are engaged in evolving a distinctive Dalit approach to literature. Reacting against the upper-caste ideology and aesthetics of literature, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* explores the hitherto neglected aspects of Dalit view of life and literature. Limbale says that Dalit Literature is experience based, while the mainstream
writers largely rely on imagination for their creative and aesthetic pursuits. Dalit writer explores the hitherto unexplored, painful and prosaic realms of Dalit existence. For Dalit writers, life is not illusory and history is not mythical as the Hindu metaphysical approach to life suggests. Dalit Literature is characterized by authenticity in representation. The Dalit writers also make use of language that is realistic and also that which reflects the nuances of the language of the outcastes and the underprivileged.

From tracing the long history of Dalit movement and the subsequent evolution of Dalit Literature from it, we understand that Dalit Writings in various parts in India are characterized by certain similarities in ideology and style of expression as they have all emerged from similar socio-political background. Though Dalit Literature evolved from Dalit Movement in Maharashtra, the birthplace of Ambedkar, in the 20th century it was not confined to Maharashtra alone. There were similar movements in the rest of the country and some linkages are identifiable among these various movements. For example, unlike the caste reform movements of the Nineteenth century, these non-Brahmin movements were anti-caste. There was an assertion of a distinctive “Dalit identity” emphasizing the common cultural background of Dalits and the fact of their shared oppression. Hence, the theory of Aryan conquest was often emphasized. Dalit Literature, which is the by-product of the Dalit movement, also partakes in these similarities.
Nevertheless, to brand Dalit Literature as monolithic is to deny its infinite variety and creative differences. Although the common ideological plank on which Dalit Literature is produced remains same — to resist Brahminical hegemony in culture and to prepare Dalits for assertion and mobilization — Dalit Writings from various regions are also invested with their specific ideological agendas. Therefore, while exploring the similarities in transforming the tears and anger, the cruelties and humiliations suffered by the Dalits into literary expressions, it is also imperative to acknowledge the differences.