Chapter-I
Introducing the Theme
I know why the caged bird sings

A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
and floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun's rays and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage
can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

The first and foremost issue to be resolved before we proceed with this study is to settle the confusion about whether America and India are comparable variables. A large section of the academia in India feels that these two countries do not have anything in common and cannot therefore be compared. At a larger philosophical level, one wonders whether if the two variables are exactly the same, the need for a comparative study would arise at all. Also, it must be noted that any comparative task does not just need to highlight the similarities, but also the differences and contrasts. There is, for instance, a consensus among historians that there was no slavery in India, but Jotiba Phule was the first to assert a unity with

---

1 This poem is written by Maya Angelou. I know why the caged bird sings is an autobiographical sketch of a young Afro-American girl's loss of innocence. She felt dejected in a totally segregated society of Arkansas in 1930s. She has confessed of a murder on being raped.
other oppressed people throughout the world, and it is not an accident that in dedicating *Gulamgiri*² to the abolition of slavery in the United States, he was one of the first few men of his time to identify with Black Americans.³

Similarly, Ambedkar, in one of his essays, declared that the practice of untouchability was more horrendous than slavery in America. He articulated how slaves in America enjoyed certain privileges which were unthinkable in the case of untouchables in India. Ambedkar attempted to prove that discrimination was based on physical traits in America whereas the social exclusion of lowest castes represented mental slavery in India. He asserted that:

...The slave was not a legal person in the eye of the law...he remained a person in the sense of a human being in the eye of a society. Slave was touchable and enjoyed dignity from the society also. Although the law does not recognize the personality of a slave; the personality which the law bestowed upon the untouchable is with held by the society. Untouchability is worse than Slavery because it does not guarantee a lifelong social security the way it is entailed in the later. Nobody is answerable for an untouchable’s food, clothing and shelter. From this perspective untouchability for sure was not just worse than slavery but crueler also. Third, important difference between untouchability and slavery is that slavery was never binding but untouchability was...⁴

Despite these differences, the strategies used by the Black struggle and the Dalit struggle in India had many similarities. Martin Luther King, for example, took his inspiration from Gandhi in fighting against the injustice of racial discrimination. He experimented with the method of passive resistance and became the hero of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States which had emerged with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King, in his memoir, *My Trip to Land of Gandhi* (during his visit from 2 February to 10 March 1959) reveals his experiences in India in the following words:

² Jotiba Phule wrote *Gulamgiri* in 1873 and dedicated it 'to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire that his countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom. (Phule: 1991) p.xxiv
And there is even here the problem of segregation. We call it race in America; they call it caste in India. In both places it means that some are considered inferior, treated as though they deserve less. We were surprised and delighted to see that India has made greater progress in the fight against the caste ‘untouchability’ than we have made here in our own country against race ‘segregation’. Both nations have federal laws against discrimination (acknowledging, of course, that the decision of our Supreme Court is the law of our land). But after this has been said, we must recognize that there are great differences between what India has done and what we have done on a problem that is very similar. The leaders of India have placed their moral power behind their law. From the Prime Minister down to the village councilmen everybody declares publicly that untouchability is wrong. But in the United States some of our officials decline to render a moral judgment on segregations and some from the south publicly boast of their determination to maintain segregation. This would be unthinkable in India.6

Gail Omvedt,6 in her study of Non-Brahmin movements, saw a similarity in the discrimination faced by the Blacks in America and by Dalits in India. She studied the Non-Brahmin Movement led by Jotiba Phule and later the Dalit movement under the leadership of Ambedkar. She recognised Ambedkar led movement as a democratic political movement, and identifies strong similarities with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Eleanor Zelliot, another American scholar who studied ‘Ambedkar and Mahar Movement’ wrote in 1978 that:

In the early 1970s, two Maharashtrian movements achieved enough prominence to be noticed by the English language press- the Dalit Panthers and Dalit Literature. By substituting the word ‘Black’ for ‘Dalit’ the American reader can immediately understand that a phenomenon comparable to the Black Panthers and Black Literature has surfaced among the lower castes in social and literary affairs in western India. Like the American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit School of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity.7

A consistent effort is therefore visible in the attempts by American scholars to engage in a comparative discourse in general and compare the social discrimination and social exclusion prevalent in these two countries in particular. Owen M. Lynch, a noted American anthropologist, wrote in the foreword of

---

6 Gail Omvedt is an American-born sociologist. ‘Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society’ is the reproduction her doctoral dissertation submitted to University of California, Berkeley in 1972–73. Since 1983, she is an Indian citizen. She is an academian and activist, settled in Kasegaon, Maharashtra.

Barbara R. Joshi's book on problems of Untouchable Politics in India:

India and the U.S.A. have similar but not identical problems, Untouchability in one and Racism in other. Both countries too, are democracies in search of equality. They believe in the principles of one man one vote and the recognition of individual merit rather than hereditary status. Yet these worthy principles founded on the hard rocks of unequal opportunity and unequal access to strategic resources, as well as on adamantine forms of prejudice and social stratification. 8

Despite this, there has been a lack of academic engagement in the field of comparative America-India Studies, especially from the perspective of the discipline of political science except for a few notable attempts by scholars such as K. S. Bajpai who edited a volume titled Democracy and Diversity: India and the American Experience. Arend Lijphart, an expert in Comparative Politics, was himself a contributor to this volume and noted that the initiative by Bajpai, a diplomat turned-scholar, was indicative of the past failure of efforts by political scientists in attempting an America-India comparison. Lijphart wrote in the introduction to this volume:

I see two enormously important reasons why Indian and American democracies should be studied not only comparatively but specifically in comparison with each other; the crucial effects of population size as an explanatory variable and the fact that India and the US can be regarded as comparable cases in many respects and therefore as outstanding candidates for comparative analysis...India and the US are strikingly similar and strikingly different from most other democracies- not only in their high degrees of inequality of incomes and wealth, but in their remarkable public tolerance for these inequalities. The mixture of similarities and differences offers great opportunities for comparative analysis and also for lessons that the two countries learn from each other. 9

Despite the need for such comparative analysis, it would be important to mention at the outset that there are more differences than similarities in the proposed study. This declaration at the outset may seem like a 'prejudiced presumption' to many, but this is being said keeping in mind the fundamental differences between 'race' and 'caste' as well as between the categories of 'Blacks' and 'Dalits' which are to be used time and again in this study. For the purposes of this study, the term 'Blacks' refers to people with a particular skin colour who were

---

forced to migrate from the African Continent to the United States and were therefore also known as ‘Afro-Americans’, whereas the term ‘Dalits’ refers to people belonging to numerous castes that are at the lowest rungs of the Indian social ladder.

In fact, within academic circles, a consensus has emerged on the fact that caste-system is not demarcated by division of ‘race’—implying people with distinct skin-colours—but is rather a system of social differentiation of people belonging to the same race, though some scholars like Gerald D. Berreman, an American anthropologist, have argued that race is no more a biological or genetic reality than is caste. He stated that both are deliberate attempts to divide people on the basis of ranks and hierarchies based on certain societal values: whereas this was done using the pretext of ritual purity in India, in US, the argument of psychological superiority was employed. Writing along these lines, T. K. Oommen has also challenged the traditional understanding of race and caste, arguing that:

According to latest research race as a biological concept does not have any validity. So much so the American Anthropological Association has recommended to the US government to eliminate the term race in the 2010 census because research in human genome shows that DNA of human beings is 99.9% alike irrespective of race. Therefore what is relevant is not race but racism, that is, the rankings being based on their presumed biological origins and features. Similarly, caste as a social category is constructed on the basis of imagined attributes but castecism, that is preferential treatment to one’s fellow caste men and caste discrimination based on the belief that some castes are inferior and others superior are of great significance.

Scope of Study and Research Methodology:

The present study tries to make a comparative analysis of the nature of discrimination and the modes of resistance used by the Black community in the United States and Dalits in India. Thus Blacks and Dalits are the reference points for this study. There is little doubt that in the long history of India and the relatively short one of the United States, the great conceptual difference between race on the

one hand and caste on the other makes it extremely difficult for a researcher to draw appropriate comparisons. Nonetheless, the nature of discrimination, the modes of struggle employed and the socio-political consequences of such movements provide a strong basis for a comparative analysis of the Black Movements in the US and Dalit movements in India.

This thesis comes under the purview of contemporary history; the Mahad Movement is relatively older, but the reminiscences of Montgomery are still fresh in the memories of several Black and White Americans. Our study of these movements, which were led by Ambedkar and Martin Luther King, have relied mainly on the literature written by these two leaders, comprising a huge volume of secondary literature which includes some of the best biographies written on leaders in modern and contemporary times. In fact, while attempting to study Black Panthers and Dalit Panthers, it was realised that this subject did not find extensive documentation in the government archives and the research therefore had to, of necessity, rely mainly on published pamphlets, private papers and memoirs.

A few members of the Black Panthers Party have produced remarkable memoirs and have also written wonderful biographies of their leaders. Dalit Panthers have relatively less material that has been preserved and chronicled. The secondary sources available on the Black Panthers is abundant and has been written by some of the finest historians of American History, but in the case of Dalit Panthers, there is a dearth of secondary literature too. The published secondary sources have been studied using the technique of content analysis which makes systematic inferences from the texts. This method is especially relevant for a study like this given the fact that events to be studied are distant in terms of both time and space. This method of analysis is particularly useful to maintain the objectivity of research.

Given the dearth of published sources for the Dalit Panther movement the methodology of recording narratives was extremely helpful in drawing the contours
of the movement. Personal interviews were conducted with several Black Panther and Dalit Panther leaders. Though both these parties have ceased to exist, surviving former members including some of the founding members were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with several academicians who have studied the subject. Personal interviews, collecting visual documents, poems etc. were particularly useful in mapping the contours of this thesis.

**Hypotheses:**

1. Though located in entirely different contexts, the issues of both race and caste involve intense social and economic discrimination. In this sense, there is a similarity between the two since both represent structures of repression.
2. When the methods of Civil Rights, Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence fails, oppressed groups in multicultural democracies are faced with a hard choice of indulging in violent actions to redress their grievances.
3. Violent protest and the rhetoric of violence itself, though effective in the short term, usually spirals out of control and degenerates into unorganised, sporadic and aimless acts of violence that do not remain effective as modes of protest.
4. The process of globalisation and the internationalisation of human rights concerns have enabled oppressed people to use international forums to debate issues of domination and oppression.

**Research Questions:**

1. What processes have led to crystallisation of the ideas of race and caste? What social conditions have resulted in unleashing these processes?
2. How have protest movements against these discriminatory ideas and practices developed? What have been the changes in their nature through time?
3. Are violent protest movements bound, by their very nature, to fail and atrophy? What have been the factors behind the failure of such movements?
4. In an age when interconnections between various parts of the globe have strengthened and a localised and insulated existence has become a near-
impossibility, there has been a trend towards a greater discussion of problems related to particular nations and geographical territories at the international level. Has this benefited the oppressed people?

5. Can it be said that many movements related to the issue of identity politics lack a sound ideological basis? Do they rely more on arousing people into protests (often violent) and lack a grand scheme or plan? In other words, are they less ideological, more physical, and therefore less effective?

A Brief Survey of Literature:

A substantial amount of literary sources are available, especially concerning the Black Movements in the United States, but also on Dalit Movements in India during the entire twentieth century. The background of the research will focus on Discrimination against both Blacks and Dalits and subsequent emergence of non-violent mode of protests and Civil Rights as an ideology. Below is a brief survey of the literature on these subjects.

One of the most interesting and useful surveys on this is the one conducted by Mortimer J. Adler, (ed.1969), which contains 186 selections by 134 different authors ranging over almost 400 years of American History. A short contextual head-note appears above every contribution, describing the historical circumstances that gave rise to it, and suggesting its relationship to events of the time.13 Some of the authors are Black and some are White, but their subject is always the role of the Black man in the life of the continent or even globally.

Another author, Sanford Wexler, in a volume edited in 1993 provides hundreds of first-hand accounts of the movement culled from letters, speeches, newspaper editorials and press statements, which illustrate how these historical events appeared to those who lived through them. Included among the eyewitness testimonies are those from Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X,

President Lyndon Johnson, Stokely Carmichael, Rosa Parks and Ralph Abernathy.14

Another useful source for this work has been James Melvin Washington’s collection of most of the important writings of Martin Luther King Jr., which appeared in 1986. This volume includes his writings on non-violence, social integration, democracy and Black Nationalism. His famous sermons and public addresses have also been included and these show Martin Luther’s piercing analysis of the causes of the national discord, placing it squarely on the ingrained white racism within American society. In these speeches, he also talks in length of the living conditions of Blacks and reveals the issues of discrimination and poverty as the central planks in his thoughts on the subject. Of course King, in his extempore addresses, also sometimes goes beyond the question of races and in fact discusses the common cause of all disinherited people, be they White and Black, thus laying the basis for several contemporary struggles now unfolding around economic issues.15

Other authors have also written about King and collected his writings/speeches. John J. Ansbro, for instance, brought out a volume in 1984 where he brings together and examines King’s critiques of programmes for social change that were advocated by leaders such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Stokely Carmichael, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Since King was convinced that oppressed people had a moral obligation to resist nonviolently the evil system that dehumanised them, he thought it necessary to criticise the inadequacy of these programmes either for refusing to resist or for resorting to morally unacceptable means of resistance.16

Moving away from King in particular, though he was of course the central figure in the Black Movement, there have been other writings that have adopted a broader approach. Lewis M. Killian, writing in 1968, relates the larger history of the American Negro's attempts to come to terms with his status. He documents and describes the ebb and the flow of the Civil Rights Movement and the reactions to this of various sections of Americans—Whites and Blacks, northern and southern, conservative and liberal. With poignancy and penetrating insight, the author lays bare the depth of the incipient racism that pervades the American society to this day. He also describes the nascent reaction to it by nascent groups of Negro spokesmen, including those who advocate Black Power.¹⁷

This is, of course, just a preliminary survey of the kind of writings that are available on the subject of the Black movement. In contrast, as mentioned above, literature on the Dalit movement is relatively scarce. The reasons for this can be debated, but for the purposes of this study, we have defined Dalit Literature as the literature of, by and for Dalits. It includes not merely literature about untouchability written by ‘untouchables’ themselves, though many Dalit intellectuals and readers reject as ‘not ours’ early or recent upper-caste writings about the sorrows of casteism or the horrors of atrocities, whatever progressive role these may have played in awakening caste Hindus. Though the Dalit Literature as a ‘movement’ began only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the most important Dalit writers and major forerunners of the movement was Anna Bhau Sathe. Unlike most other major Dalit writers, he was a Matang, an untouchable by caste, and not a Mahar—the caste group that provided the base for B. R. Ambedkar and the Buddhist movement that he established. Sathe, however, was a product not of Dalit Movement as such, but more of the working class movement and the IPTA (Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association).¹⁸

The tradition of social reform movements amongst Dalits can be traced back to Jotiba Phule, though these early movements were perhaps politically not very effective. Dhananjay Keer, writing in 1964, talks at length about these movements and their limitations, but still emphasises that it would be of the greatest importance to study Mahatma Phule, the prophet of common man, whom Mahatma Gandhi called a real Mahatma and whom Veer Savarkar called a social revolutionary. In fact, Keer goes so far as to state that if the makers and rulers of present-day India do not study the life of Mahatma Phule, they will not be able to make the progress they desire; for, unless social equality is enthroned it is well-nigh impossible for them to establish economic equality.

Moving on from Phule, the amount of literature available becomes more voluminous. Valerian Rodrigues, for instance, published an edited volume in 1993 where he gave an insightful analysis of the writings and speeches of Ambedkar. M.S. Gore, writing in 1993, traced the evolution and described various facets of the conceptual framework that Ambedkar developed to support his movement. Theoretically, Gore's interest lies in studying the nature of this ideology of protest, and to locate it within the broader framework of a study of social movements on the one hand and the sociology of 'idea-systems' on the other. It is an effort to understand and delineate the ideology of Ambedkar and relate it to the social context in which it developed. Harold R. Isaacs, (1964) an American himself, has qualified the use of the term 'ex-untouchables' saying Untouchability has been abolished in India by law if not in fact. He also establishes a connection between the experience of untouchables in India and that of Blacks in the United States.

One common theme between the Black Movements in the US and the Indian Dalit Movements has been the question of the mode of struggle. The relative effectiveness of nonviolence and violence were debated for a long time, and though

---

a larger amount of literature exists on nonviolent struggles, there is also a substantial amount of literature on violent struggles in both these countries. Elridge Cleaver, for example, was one of the chief ideologues of the Black Panther Movement and has written a remarkable document titled *Soul on Ice* (1968) on the question of use of violence which has proved to be an invaluable primary source material for the purpose of our study. The author held the portfolio of the minister of Information within the party hierarchy and was purvey to the goings-on inside the party organisation. Apart from this usefulness, the book has come to be considered a classic and has been ranked parallel to such works as Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967).22

Besides the Black Panthers, there were also other movements that arose at the same time which were disillusioned with the civil rights struggle. Malcolm X, for instance, was an activist whose rhetoric was pro-black in nature and design and who did not initially concern himself with the task of trying to change or modify White attitudes toward Blacks. His goal, rather, was to invert Black attitudes towards themselves and their position within a larger White world. To Malcolm, Black freedom would arrive only when Blacks began to think and struggle for themselves. Malcolm X offered claims of this nature for the specific purpose of supplying Blacks with the sense of independence that would never be produced by the ‘status quo’ which Malcolm always considered as an enemy.

This question of the ‘suitable method of struggle’ against White oppression has been greatly debated. Carmichael and Hamilton, in a volume edited in 1967, have taken as their central concern the question of finding a suitable programme for the struggle of the Blacks against White oppression.23 Written from the point of view of exploring the efficacy of all possible modes of struggle, this book must have served an important purpose at the time when it was written. The book critiques the liberal method of making one’s voice heard through the ‘proper

---

protest' and asserts that Blacks, instead of getting co-opted within the system formulated by the oppressors, should try to formulate their own methods of struggle for themselves. Written during a period when Black movements were at their peak, the book gives us a peep into the emotionally-charged atmosphere of those days.

Writing on a different theme but on the same subject, Thomas Wagstaff in 1969 tries to provide some insight into the intellectual background of Black Power. The documents contained in the book illustrate the Blacks' historical attempts to identify themselves with the mainstream of American life; they also show some of the psychological and cultural effects of their inability to do so. This book reflects the radical tradition inherent within the American Black protest thought as it developed in the nineteenth century. It further explores nationalist and revolutionary influences in the early twentieth century and concludes with some scholarly analyses of its meaning and direction.24

Arthur L. Smith and Robb, in a volume edited in 1971, similarly provide a ready source for some of the most notable speeches produced by Black Americans. This collection spans over more than one hundred and forty years and selects some of the best examples of Black oral rhetoric, ranging from eight years after the Missouri Compromise to sixteen years past the Supreme Court's landmark decision in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education.25 It includes speeches by politicians, preachers, legislators, movement leaders and educators dealing with many aspects of the Black man's continuing struggle for justice.

Within the Dalit Movement too, the question of violence and the mode of struggle was equally hotly debated. New writers like Namdev Dhasal, Daya Pawar, J. V. Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Arun Kamble and many others expressed the consciousness of revolt in Dalit literature through poetic outbursts. Interestingly, most of these new writers were direct founders of or linked with the militant Dalit

Panthers. Lata Murugkar, in a book published in 1991, looks at Dalits from the point of view of the Black Panthers, placing them within their social context and analysing the factors responsible for the emergence of the movement, its organisational set-up, its leadership pattern, its ideology and programmes. It also makes an assessment of the contribution of this movement towards the betterment of the Dalits.26

So far as the issue of internationalisation of both the problems is concerned, there are a large number of articles available on the subject. A series of articles have appeared both in national and international journals, written by leading activists and thinkers. Shiv Viswanathan (2001), for example, illustrates the fact that until now at international conferences on apartheid and racism, India saw itself as a fighter of freedom and was the official advocate condemning racism, colonialism, apartheid. Suddenly this great role began to be threatened, and from within.27 Similarly, the Black Movement was also international in its character in the sense that it won global sympathy and was widely watched all over the world. Martin Luther King is today not just a symbol of Black assertions, but is seen as one of the leading thinkers and ideologues all over the world. This is the legacy of movements like this—that though they address concerns of particular groups, they also, in a sense rise above them and acquire a more universal character. The following pages will try to look at this and various other questions highlighted in this chapter.