Instead of giving his floor a cow dung wash
We piss on it
Rip open his entrails with the sickle
We have tucked in the waist
We’d skin him and with that on the
Drum play around.

(Karri qtd. in Mishra, Web)\(^1\)

The urge to raise one’s voice, to denounce as loudly as possible the injunctions of a hypocritical social structure forms the very basis of the literature of protest. Literature has always been an effective means of inspiring revolutions and this fact proves to be true in case of a social movement like Dalit Liberation Movement. In spite of the predominance of Brahmanic values that largely determined the course of Indian literature, Dalit literature has now burst onto national consciousness with its revolutionary zeal and initiated the process of interrogating the dominant discourse. In the words of Sisir Kumar Das:

Indian literature discovered a new potentiality in the life of the low and the lowliest, the deprived and the humiliated. The hero-centric world would finally vanish yielding place to the anti-hero. The Dalit literature, however, was yet to emerge but the signs had
already appeared. The poem “Violence Zad” (The Tree of Violence) by N L Dhasal (b 1949), the founder leader of the Dalit Panther movement, is only two decades far from the midnight of Indian independence.

(Das qtd. in Basu 181)²

Although Dalit literature flourished after the independence—precisely speaking—after 1960s, yet the seeds of it were sown much earlier in the pre-independence era. In fact, the literary trajectory of Dalit quest for identity and social justice can be traced back to the time of the Bhakti Movement. As it is already mentioned in the previous chapter, the abhangs of the Bhakti poets had been extremely critical of the inequality and injustice perpetrated upon the low caste people by a Brahmanical society. For instance, the abhangs of Chokha Mela and his son Karma Mela reveal the indignities suffered by low caste communities and they had been instrumental in shaping a Dalit consciousness. The impact created by Chokha can be understood from the words of a Dalit folk poet Deenbandhu who wrote:

A saint among saints
Chokha has no peer
He served the people
And preached true religion

But the Brahmins with their complete control
Closed the temple to Chokha

(Deenbandhu qtd. in Gokhale 302)³

The voice of protest against the discriminatory attitude of an unequal social structure was also heard in the abhangs of other Bhakti poets such as Namdev, Tukaram, Kabir and Raidas. It can be deduced that the Bhakti Movement which offered an alternative discourse based on humanism
played a crucial role in nurturing Dalit sensibility and shaping the contours of Dalit literature in India. However, the revolutionary fervour of Dalit literature had to lay dormant for the next couple of centuries, perhaps, because the repressive socio-religious systems grew intensely reactionary. But it surfaced again in the nineteenth century when apparently liberal ideologies of the then British rulers created an intellectual space for the dominant orthodox ideas to be challenged. The issue of caste based discrimination appeared as the central theme of many literary writings produced by both Dalit and non-Dalit authors. Though the 19th century literary world in India was mostly spearheaded by upper caste writers yet there were some Dalit authors who raised their voices against caste atrocity. Among them was the Telugu poet Joshua Garran who learned Sanskrit- a language that was prohibited to the members of the low caste people. Garran worked as a school teacher and later obtained high position in the legislative council of Andhra Pradesh. Another Dalit poet Mooloor Padmanabha Pannikar (1869-1931) was the first major poet in Malayalam to come from a low-caste community- Ezhava. He was a disciple of Narayana Guru (1856-1929) who inspired the Ezhava community to move towards the path of social regeneration. Guru’s another disciple from Ezhava community was Kumaran Asan who became one of the greatest poets of Malayalam for all times. Asan not only depicted the misery suffered by the untouchables but also made them aware of their right to live with honour. In his poem Simhanadam(The Lion’s Roar, 1919), he urged the Dalit mass to “speed up where the caste demon rears its ugly face.” (Basu183)\(^4\) Asan’s two other poems: Duravastha (1922) and Candāla Bhiksuki (1922) continued to portray the grim picture of torture inflicted by rigid caste rules. Among other early 20th century Dalit writers mention must be made of K.P. Karuppan(1884-1957), V.K.Kalath(dates not certain) and Tokoco Vaduthala (dates not certain). (Basu 183)\(^5\) A pioneering Tamil Dalit writer during 1940s and 1950s was Vindan who started his own journal “Manithan” (Man). It was certainly an achievement since the ‘mainstream’ literary
discourse dictated mostly by Brahmical principles was too parochial to acknowledge the merits of Dalit writers. There is no denying of the fact that these low caste writers of the earlier era immensely contributed to the enrichment of Indian literatures as they brought a new perspective to the understanding of the issue of discrimination and thus added a new dimension to Indian literary sensibility. Interestingly enough, some progressive non-Dalit writers of 19th century such as Rabindranath Tagore, Munsi Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand also criticized the notions of purity and pollution which had been instrumental in consolidating the hold of caste-prejudice in India. Tagore’s vitriolic rhetoric condemned an exploitative Indian society as he wrote:

My wretched country, those whom you have crushed and trampled,
deprived of their rights, made them stand and wait
and never drew them close,
Share you must their indignities and sufferings.

(Tagore qtd. in Das 302)\(^6\)

His contempt for meaningless customs that have been created to preserve caste purity found words in *Chandalika*- a play written by him on the basis of a Buddhist tale narrating an untouchable woman’s entry into the religious order as a *bhikshuni* (Buddhist nun) despite public criticism. The caste-problem taken up by Tagore and some of his contemporaries such as Sarat Chandra Chatterjee certainly facilitated the process of a more engaged discussion by later progressive writers. A very sensitive treatment of the theme of suffering of the untouchables is found in the stories written by eminent Hindi writer Munsi Premchand. Though the literary domain was mostly dominated by those upper-caste writers for whom the issue of caste-based atrocity was certainly not the major issue that Indian literature should be obsessed with yet almost all the stories of Premchand that portrayed the stark reality of the miserable lives of the poor and the outcaste population of India created a great impact upon the psyche of an otherwise
value judging, bourgeois middle class reading public. His novels such as *Sudra* (1925), *Ghaswali* (1929), *Sadgati* (1930)*Thakur Ka Kua* (1932) and *Karmabhumi* (1932) narrated in minute details the horrors of caste system. The ubiquitous nature of caste is understood as one moves from the miserable world of Dukhi- the low-caste protagonist of Premchand’s *Sadgati* (1930) to the wretched surroundings of Bakha- the untouchable boy-hero of Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel *Untouchable* (1935). A clear picture of caste discrimination and oppression emerges as Anand vividly narrates how every day of Bakha’s life gets stigmatized because of his low-caste identity:

> Keep to the side of the road, ohe low caste vermin! he suddenly heard someone shouting at him, why don’t you call, you swine and announce your approach!Do you know you have touched me and defile me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself…….

(Anand qtd. in Das 316) 7

This trend among the non-Dalit writers to write about the untouchables is still found in the works of such contemporary Indian authors as Mahasweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh and Aravind Adiga. A great instance of it is Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small things* which reminds us of the unavoidable presence of the caste- evil that has been hovering over Indian society for centuries. However, the portrayal of exclusion and agony depicted by upper caste writers has opened a new debate questioning the authenticity of these details since the authors despite their progressive outlook and empathy lack the intimate knowledge which can only be gained through lived experiences. The supporters who favour the argument that Dalit literature should be written exclusively by Dalits believe that the imaginative construction of Dalit lives by non-Dalit writers fail to capture the angst of Dalit hearts. According to them, these narratives fraught with
Commiseration and pathos are apt to generate feelings of pity whereas a more ‘genuine’ depiction of Dalit life should portray Dalits not merely as victims but as rebels. Famous Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale provides a definition of Dalit literature as he says:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus.

(Limbale/Mukherjee 19)⁸

An echo of it is heard in the words of S. P. Punalekar who opines:

Dalit writers themselves are either victims or witness to social inequalities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political and cultural organization of Dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and use literature as a vehicle to propagate their views on Dalit identity and the prevailing social consciousness.

(Punalekar qtd. in Rai 41)⁹

However, such a view that upholds caste -identity as the necessary qualification for producing Dalit literature is also continually challenged. Counter-arguments are put forward to suggest that the inclusion of writings produced by non-Dalit authors to promote the Dalit cause would ultimately enrich the corpus of Dalit literature. According to Dr. Namawar Singh—a noted Hindi critic and scholar, a literary piece that manifests “...dalit experiences, values, restlessness, curiosities and questions may be called Dalit literature without considering its author.” (Singh
However, the initiative to widen the scope of Dalit literature was taken long before Singh made this assertion. Dalit Sahitya Sangh took a resolution in its 1958 conference that “(T)he literature written by the dalits and that written by others about the dalits be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit literature.” (Rai 42) Such an integrationist perspective became more meaningful in the context of the 1972 conference when the nuances of the term ‘Dalit’ were deliberated upon to include not only the Scheduled Castes and Tribes but also “neo-Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women and all those who have been exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion..” (Rai 42) Yet, despite such efforts to suggest a conclusive definition of Dalit literature the debate still remains a crucial issue among Dalit critics and scholars and casts a shadow over the authenticity of Dalit experiences narrated by upper caste writers.

2.1. EMERGENCE OF DALIT LITERATURE ACROSS INDIA:

There is no argument over the fact that the chief aim of Dalit literature whether produced by ‘Dalit’ writers or ‘non-Dalit’ writers has always been to protest against an unequal social system. An attempt to trace the trajectory of its growth shows that Dalit literature flourished mostly in Maharashtra- a place that not only produced such revolutionary Dalit leaders as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar, but also influenced the course of Dalit movement in India. Phule in Ghulamgiri vehemently criticized the caste stratification prescribed and perpetuated by the Brahmanical Hindu society. His plays and poetry charged with rhetoric of enlightenment played a vital role in awakening the Dalit mass from their centuries of slavery. Similarly, vivid descriptions of the sub-human existence of Dalits in the stories of Bandhumadhav, S.M. Mate, Annabhau Sathe and Shankar Rao Kharat prepared the ground for later Dalit novelists and short story writers to emerge. However, according to many scholars, Dalit literature is indebted to Dr.
B. R. Ambedkar whose ideology and activities provided necessary impetus for the development of Dalit literature. In the words of Arjun Dangle, “...history shows that it was Dr. Ambedkar who was the pioneer of Dalit literature.” (Dangle xi)\textsuperscript{13} It is an undeniable fact that Babasaheb Ambedkar’s revolutionary activities coupled with his ingrained faith in the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity invigorated the course of Dalit literature. His epoch making essays as well as his publications such as \textit{Mook Nayak}, \textit{Bahiskrut Bharat}, \textit{Janata} and \textit{Samata} not only repudiated the traditional Brahmanical interpretation of caste hierarchy but also spread the message of self respect. He emphasized the need for the spread of education among Dalits since true emancipation comes through knowledge. He established Siddhartha College in Bombay in 1946 and Milind College in Aurangabad in 1947. Both the institutions took leading roles in championing the cause of Dalit movement and eventually they turned out to be the mentors of many famous Dalit intellectuals and literary artists. Babasaheb realized that no social movement can grow stronger unless it generates its own literary tradition. He focused on the transformative power of literature and urged authors to write on themes that foster humanistic values:

Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pain so that the darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there.

(Limbale/Mukherjee 50)\textsuperscript{14}

It is important to note here that the term ‘Dalit literature’ was recognized and accepted in the first conference of Dalit writers which was held in the auditorium of Bengali High School, Dadar on 2 March 1958. It was organized by Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha. The necessity of holding
such conferences was aptly explained by Bandhumadhav, a Dalit intellectual who in an article published in the *Prabuddha Bharat* on 15 February, 1958 wrote:

> Just as the Russian writers helped the revolution by the spreading of Lenin’s revolutionary ideology through their works, our writers should spread Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy to the villages…Politics is just one way of attacking opposition. Unless we attack from all sides we cannot defeat those who have inflicted injustice on us for the last thousands of years.

*(Basu 184)*

Resolution No.5 taken at this conference defined the scope of Dalit literature and highlighting its immense cultural significance urged literary organizations and universities to give Dalit literature its due recognition. However, the conference was not completely successful in leaving a lasting impact. Internal conflicts within the Republican Party of India after Dr. Ambedkar’s death weakened the spirit of Dalit struggle and it also affected the rising tide of Dalit literature. It is worth mentioning here that though Dalit literature is now a pan-Indian phenomenon, yet initially it had its epicenter in Maharashtra and therefore was moulded and shaped by the socio-political and literary trends that overtook Marathi literature in different phases of its history. Evidence of it is found in 1960 when Marathi literary circuit was agitated by the revolutionary ideas of Progressive literature as well as the Little Magazine Movement. Marxist ideology was at the core of the Progressive literature and it proclaimed its powerful presence in the poetry of Narayan Surve who vividly delineated the problems of the workers and the downtrodden. This new perspective inspired Dalit writers whose literary endeavours were also encouraged by the Little Magazine Movement. This movement was subversive in nature as the writers who started this were known for their anti-establishment stance. They rejected the existing polite mode of writing
and questioned the merit of the ‘mainstream’ literature which reinforced the hegemony of upper caste, elite writers. They were engaged in several radical activities such as burning ‘Satyakatha’ (the literary magazine that represented the elite literature) and holding poets’ gathering in running buses or in public urinals. (Dangle 244)\(^6\) The Little Magazine Movement could not achieve success; but it certainly acted as a beacon to Dalit literature. Baburao Bagul- the writer who in Arjun Dangle’s words “gave momentum to Dalit literature” (Dangle qtd. in Basu 185)\(^7\) published many of his poems in the Little Magazine ‘Fakta’. However, his short-story collection- *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (When I had Concealed My Caste)* created a great commotion in the literary world because of its unabashedly frank criticism of the hypocrisy and oppression of high caste Hindus. The desire to strengthen the basis of Dalit literature was also noticed in the contributions made by such institution as Milind College where most of the students and faculty were members of low caste communities. Encouragement offered by Principal M. B. Chitnis and Principal M.N. Wankhede proved to be extremely beneficial as the college eventually set up a literary organization called Milind Sahitya Parishad and also started publishing a new journal “Asmita” (now “Asmitadarsha”) under the editorship of Gangadhar Pantawane. The journal appreciated literary contributions from both Dalit and non-Dalit authors and thus underscored its desire for locating the Dalit issue within a larger context of protest narrative. Marxist critics such as Sharatchandra Muktibodh, Waman Ingale, P.S. Nerukar, Dr. S.B. Karhade and Narayan Surve also helped “Asmitadarsha” to generate awe among the reading public. (Dangle 247)\(^8\) Another event of the time which is equally significant for any discussion on Dalit literature is the conference that was held in Bombay in late 1960s under the patronage of Maharshtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. *Akar* – the first collection of poems by Dalits which included the poems of Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Yadavrao Gangurde, Chokha Kamble was published in this conference. Though not all the poems in this collection are written from a Dalit
perspective, yet it makes a noteworthy contribution to the creation of an “evolving Dalit identity.” (Basu186)\textsuperscript{19} The immense potential of Dalit literature and the impact that it can create upon the existing norms of Indian literature was felt when in 1968, Baburao Bagul’s second collection of short stories—\textit{Maran Swasta Hot Ahe (Death is Getting Cheaper)}—won the state award. Bagul’s writing which was far from the artistic rendition of Dalit lives depicted by middle class non-Dalit writers ignited the debate over the necessity for developing a separate aesthetic framework in order to comprehend and appreciate Dalit literature. Arjun Dangle in \textit{Maharashtra Times} (15 October 1972) wrote: “These stories cannot be set in the framework of traditional values of art. The rationale for separate standards of criticism for Dalit literature can be found here.” (Dangle 248)\textsuperscript{20} Controversy around this new, radical form of writing soon caught the eye of the reading public and elicited mixed responses from both Dalit and non-Dalit readers. Some upper caste scholars such as W.L. Kulkarni, D.K. Bedekar, Sharatchandra Muktibodh appreciated the spirit of defiance conveyed through Dalit writings. But unfortunately, there were some educated people from low caste communities who rejected Dalit literature as they thought that such literary writings would tarnish the image of their society. (Dangle 250)\textsuperscript{21} It is because of such negative outlook of these “Dalit Brahmins” (Dangle 250)\textsuperscript{22} that Bagul’s novel \textit{Paushya} which was then being serialized in \textit{Amhi} (the periodical launched by Bagul) was severely criticized. P.E. Sonkamble’s autobiography \textit{Athvaninche Pakshi} also received similar treatment. For some Dalit scholars, writing Dalit autobiography was like “digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past.” (Rege 11)\textsuperscript{23} However, the fiery arguments of pernicious criticism could not impede the resurging waves of Dalit literature which took the world of Indian literature by storm during 1970s.
This new consciousness among the Dalits of their rights and identity found an apt expression in the words of Namdeo Dhasal whose collection of poems- *Golpitha* (1972) shook the world of Marathi literature and its conservative values. The form and content of *Golpitha* remind that a new set of critical parameters is required to welcome the literature of the deprived and the dispossessed. The most striking literary event of 1970s that compelled the upper-caste dominated, ‘mainstream’ Marathi/ Indian literature to acknowledge the value of Dalit writings was the emergence of Dalit Panthers- a Dalit literary organization that generated enough power to initiate a political upheaval. During this time, a wide-spread discontent against a fractured and exploitative socio-economic system was brewing particularly in Maharashtra. Poor people belonging to untouchable communities were affected by policies devised by the State to consolidate the monopoly of a capitalist economy largely controlled by the wealthy high castes. Moreover, the Republican Party of India which was founded by Dr. Ambedkar was by then divided into several factions and none of these groups was interested in addressing the issue of caste-atrocity still rampant, primarily, in rural areas. But some politically conscious Dalit writers got together and vowed to change this dismal and suffocating social set-up. Authors such as Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Umakant Randhir, Ramdas Sorte and Prahlad Chendwankar along with Baburao Bagul decided to establish Dalit Panthers following the model of the Black Panthers of Oakland- a militant army of youths who were fighting for Black American Liberation in the U.S.A. Dalit Panthers was established on 9 July 1972 in Bombay and its purpose was to “fight for the liberation of the Indian Dalits through ‘a complete revolution’” (Basu 188)\(^24\). Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle, J.V.Pawar, Arun Kamble and others expressed their anger against the customs of this caste-ridden Hindu society through shocking disrespectful language that shattered the ‘decorum’ of the so-called mainstream, elite
literature produced by high-caste writers. Keshav Meshram cursed the “mother-fucker God” of the Brahmins and challenges this God in “One Day I Cursed That…God” in these words:

Would you wipe the sweat from your bony body
With your mother’s ragged sari?
Would you work as a pimp
To keep her in booze?
O, father, oh, god the father!
You could never do such things.
First you’d need a mother---
One no one honorus,
One who toils in the dirt,
One who gives and gives of her love.

(Meshram qtd. in Abedi, Web)\textsuperscript{25}

Apart from launching verbal assaults, these poet-leaders also engaged themselves in organizing public demonstrations. They attacked the images of Hindu deities, burned the \textit{Bhagavad Gita} and boycotted election to bring to notice the desperate predicament of the untouchables. Describing the anti-establishment activities and the radical stance of Dalit Panthers Arjun Dangle in his essay “Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future” wrote:

The Panthers observed Independence Day that year, which incidentally was the silver jubilee of Independence, as Black Day and black-flag demonstrations were held at various places in Bombay.

(Dangle 253)\textsuperscript{26}
But, as already mentioned in the first chapter, this fiery spirit of the Dalit Panthers began to dwindle as ideological differences and personality clashes between Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal- two major Panther leaders began to take an ugly turn. In Dhale’s opinions, the issue of untouchability which has its root in the Hindu ideas of purity and pollution can be eradicated by embracing Buddhism which was “the most enduring legacy that Ambedkar had left behind.” (Gokhale 281) But this view was rejected by Dhasal who interpreted untouchability from a class perspective because of his ideological alignment with Marxist philosophy. As an inevitable consequence, the organization was divided by the end of 1974. Nevertheless, the impact of Dalit Panthers upon Dalit literature was immense. It was not merely confined within Maharashtra as Dalit writers from Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were also eventually inspired by the rebellious spirit breathed into Dalit Movement by the Dalit Panthers.

The emergence of Dalit writings in other parts of the country around the last decade of the last century marked a new chapter in the history of Indian literature. Gujarati Dalit literature, unlike its Marathi counterpart, did not grow out of a larger political movement against the upper caste. It rather grew in response to the violence inflicted by high caste Hindus due to the pro-reservation policies of the Government. Hardly any explanation is required to understand that anti-reservation campaigns created an environment of hostility between the upper caste Gujaratis and the Dalits and this gave the Dalit literary movement, which was till then scattered and disorganized, an opportunity to evolve in a more flourishing manner. According to Tapan Basu, the first publication of Gujarati Dalit literature took place with Ramesh Chandra Parmar’s “Panther” which was started in 1975. Later, many periodicals such as “Akrosh”, “Kalo”, “Sooraj”, “Garud”, “Dalit Bandhu”, “Naya Marg” and “Disha” came up to uphold the cause of
the Dalits. (Basu 188) Initially poetry was the most popular medium for giving vent to the anguish and pain of the Dalit community. However the events in the 80s brought a change in their perspective as they started expressing not just anguish but also anger and protest against the upper castes. The 90s turned out to be a prolific period for Gujarati Dalit writings. A number of short stories, poems, novels as well as journals began to be published. On the other hand, sociological and research studies were increased and all these activities contributed to the formation of a Dalit discourse in Gujarat. Though the stalwarts of the Gujarati ‘mainstream’ literature were opposed to the idea of the formation of a distinct identity for Dalit writings yet Dalit literature was able to institutionalize itself through the establishment of Dalit Sabha and Dalit Sahitya Academy. Like other Dalit writers, Guajarati Dalit writers, too, portray the miserable condition of Dalit community. In fact the dingy surroundings of an impoverished house in a vas (separate quarters for Untouchables) forms the physical backdrop of the stories such as Dashrath Parmar’s Paat, Madhukant Kalpit’s Kulkatha and Harish Mangalam’s Dayan. The issue of sexual exploitation of Dalit women also receives considerable attention. Stories such as Arvind Veghda’s Rakhopa na Saamp, Vasantlal Parmar’s Ek Chhaliyun Daal ni Khatar, Hashmukh Vaghela’s Jhaal show how Dalit women are exploited by the upper caste men. The voice of protest is heard through the pages of Haar Paar’s Somali, Mohan Parmar’s Thali and Dilip Ranpura’s Ratan. In these stories, Dalit women raise their voices and protest against rape and sexual exploitation. The communal riot in Gujarat revealed an interesting equation between the Muslims and the Dalits since they both consider the Hindus as their traditional enemy. However, Gujarati Dalit writings appear to be less vocal about the interactions among different sub-castes that live together in a vas. Few Dalit writers have brought out the issue of internal conflict within their community. Shailesh Parmar in Dhil ni Dandiye talks about the emergence of the ‘Dalit Brahmins’ while the writings of Chandra Shrimali and Jasumati Parmar reveal the
double oppression of Dalit women. Nevertheless Gujarati Dalit literature has successfully used regional dialects of Gujarat and blended the content and forms of folk literature in a brilliant manner. Moreover, a remarkable accomplishment of Gujarati Dalit literature is to create a “subaltern mythology” (Basu 189) which challenges the traditional forms of knowledge. In these new renderings of Indian mythical stories Eklavya and Shambuka emerge as epic heroes and the relics of a Golden Age is traced in the ruins of Mohenjadaro and Harrapa and in the caves of Bhimbetka. (Basu 189)

Dalit writings, today, have become a major part of the Tamil literary discourse. Though traces of it can be found in the annals of the past, yet Dalit literature as a genre came into view nearly two decades after its emergence in the 60s and the 70s. The angst of the Tamil Dalits has found expression through news magazines like “Kodangi”, “Kalam”, “Manusangada”, “Nirapirihai” and “Dalit” as well as through different literary forms such as poems, novels and life-narratives. These writings, however, seldom follow the aesthetic decorum maintained by ‘mainstream’ Tamil literature. Disregarding the neatness of a classical structure, they often use a coarse colloquial language which is reminiscent of the dialects used by rural, low-caste people residing in the Tamil speaking villages of South India. In fact, many modern Tamil poems trace their genealogy from the alternative tradition of Tamil folk culture. The folk poetry is the basis of koothu or folk drama which is inextricably connected with the customs of Dalit communities. Other forms of folk poetry (like work songs sung by agricultural workers) are also closely interwoven with Dalit life-stories since in Tamil villages the class of landless laborers chiefly comprises men and women from Dalit community. One of the most popular Tamil Dalit poets today (widely published in both the ‘mainstream’ Tamil literature and the Dalit literature) is N.D.Rajkumar. His poetry talks about the politics of Dalit identity which is threatened by the
Hindutva agenda of Indian politics. His poems about the ‘spirit gods’ of the Dalits reveal the cruel injustice that is perpetrated upon Dalit women. However in contemporary Tamil Dalit literature, the question of Dalit women’s rights have been taken up by Dalit feminist writers like Bama, Sivakami and Sukritarani. Bama’s *Karukku* as well as *Sangati: Events* vividly describes how Dalit women are forced to live in a state of hunger, depravation and exploitation both within and outside their community. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*, exposes the hypocrisy existing within the Dalit community while at the same time it never fails to criticize the meaninglessness of caste system. The literature produced by Tamil Dalit women is intensely spirited and it inspires readers to think not merely about caste but also about the gender based discrimination.

There is no doubt about the fact that Tamil Dalit writings have brought revolutionary changes in the structure and in the substance of mainstream Tamil literature. A note of earthiness has been infused in Tamil literary practices since the publication of *Pirahu*- a novel by Poonami. This trend of incorporating a new perspective continued through the writings of later Dalit writers like Abhimani and Unjai Rajan who brought their own experiences and knowledge within the literary discourse. The maturity of Tamil Dalit literature is evident in Imayam’s writings as he exposes the layers of exploitation that exist within Dalit community. His novel *Koveru Kathudaihal* narrates how the caste-relationship sometimes gets complicated because of the class-composition of the modern society. (Basu 191-192) Such attempt as this proves the fact that Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu has a come a long way and been successful in establishing its distinct identity.

The flourishing of Dalit literature in Kerala took place at the end of 1980s. But its presence was strongly felt during its early phases when the theme of caste oppression was depicted from a humanistic perspective by Dalit novelists such as T. K. C Vaduthala, Paul Chirakkarodu and D. Rajan as well as by Dalit poets like Kallada Sasi and Kaviyoor Murali. The
political fervor of the poems of early writers such as Karuppan and Poykayil Kumaran created a distinct Dalit sensibility which despite being overshadowed by the Left-leaning Progressive Literary Movement resurfaced in the Eighties of the last century through the writings of S.E. James, C. Ayyappan and Raghavan Atholi. James’s *Samvatsarangal* which featured the great leader Ayyankali as a character won the Mamman Mappila Novel Award in 1980. (Yesudasan 627) The Malayalam Dalit literature of this phase is marked by a subversive language as well as a penchant for experimentation with form and technique. Such an intellectual exercise is also practiced in the field of criticism as Dalit intellectual K.K. Kochu underscores the need for rereading and rewriting history from an indigenous point of view in order to “de-legitimize mainstream history that is encoded in the epistemes and semiotics of hegemony.” (Sherrif, Web)

Dalit literature in Karnataka which evolved around 1970s clearly manifested two conflicting attitudes while grappling with the issue of caste oppression. According to D.R. Nagraj, a noted critic of Kannada literature, this issue generated two kinds of responses- “materialist negotiation of the problem and spiritualist transcendence of the problem.” (Basu 190) The stance of choosing the path of resignation in order to deal with caste atrocity was propagated by such first generation Dalit author as Devanoor Mahadeva and was subsequently popularized in the post eighties by K. Siddaiah and Govindaiah. However, the message of confrontation and resistance was loud and clear in the writings of Siddalingaiah- a first generation Dalit author as well as in the literature produced by the second generation of Dalit writers such as Mogalli Ganesh and A. Mallagatti. But an adverse effect was caused by this duality as it prevented the formation of a collective self which was essential for strengthening the foundation of a Dalit Movement in Karnataka.
The ideological duality that split the corpus of Kannada Dalit literature was not present in the writings of Telugu Dalit authors. Dalit literature in Andhra Pradesh which was influenced by the Dalit Panthers flourished in 1980s-90s. Promising young Dalit writers, chiefly, the novelists raised their voices of protest against the tyrannical behaviors of the rich upper caste groups. The story of *Khaki Bathukulu* (1990) written by Spartacus aka Mohan Rao- a Dalit writer, lays bare the picture of grim reality through the narration of humiliating experiences endured by a low-caste police constable. Other Telugu Dalit novels that have gained attention are Boya Jangaiah’s *Jathara* (1998) and Akkineni Kutumba Rao’s *Sorrajjem* (1992).

Dalit writing in Orissa was started in 1970s. Bichitra Mand Nayak poured out his anger against caste oppression through his poetry as early as in 1973. By 1980s and 1990s the appeal of Dalit literature was so widely spread that it elicited positive responses even from many conservative critics belonging to the conventional literary world. Writers like Kalindi Chandra Behara, Jagannath Mallik, Ramchandra Sethi and Dr. Samir Ranjan came into limelight.

However, in West Bengal the tradition of Dalit writing started nearly 20 years after it started in Maharashtra. Such a delayed beginning has, however, been caused due to the disorganization that the Dalit community had to face during the partition after the independence in 1947. Creative pursuits were an unaffordable luxury for them as incidents like the Marichjhapi Massacre threatened the existence of the Dalit community of Bengal. Another factor that impeded the growth of Dalit literary movement in West Bengal was the overarching presence of Marxist ideology that always focused on class issues rather than on caste relationships in its battle against power structures. However a substantial number of novels, short stories and poems have been written afterwards to form an impressive world of Dalit literature. These literary
outbursts not merely recorded the pain of the Dalit community but also advocated for launching a sustained campaign against forms of exploitation. A very famous novel depicting the struggle and pain of a Dalit community was written by Advaita Mallabarman (1914-1951). This novel entitled *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* is an epic saga of the Malo community of the then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to which the author himself belonged. The novel weaves its plot around the daily struggle of a small fishing community which faces the threat of extinction as the river Titash gradually dries up. This posthumously published novel (published 5 years after the death of the author) gained huge popularity and it still remains a milestone in the field of Bengali literature. Among other noteworthy novels are: *Mati Ek Maya Jane* (The Soil Knows Magic) and *Paye Paye Path* (Footsteps Make A Path) by Mahitosh Biswas, *Aranyer Andhakar* (Darkness of the Forest) by Sudhiranjan Halder, *Murmu* by Mani Mandal, *Rakte Ranga Rupasi Bangla* (Beautiful Bengal Turns Red), *Ujantalir Upakhayan* (The Story of Ujantali) by Kapil Krisna Thakur and so on. Apart from them many short stories such as *Anya Yehudi* (The Other Jews) and *Madhumati Anek Dur* (Madhumat is Very Far) by Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Bratya Janer galpo* (Stories of the Excluded) by Bimalendu Halder, *Biplaber Maa* (The Mother of Biplab) by Dhirendra Nath Mallik – have been written by Dalit writers. Even an anthology titled *Chaturtho Duniyar Galpo Sankalan* (Stories from the Fourth World) has been published and it contains Dalit writings from West Bengal, Bangladesh and Tripura. All these stories are not ‘equipped’ with new intellectual techniques that mark the domain of Bengali ‘mainstream’ short stories. Instead, Bengali Dalit writings prefer to expose the grim reality of Dalit lives in a language which is intelligible to the people of their community. However, the most popular genre among the Bengali Dalit writers seems to be poetry and till now numerous poems have been written revealing the anguish of the marginalized. The voice of protest dominates the lines of Dalit poetry though underlying this rhetoric of resistance remains an undying hope for a world
where “inequality of birth would cease to matter” (Byapari/Mukherjee 4116-20) Contemporary Bengali Dalit literature is not only engaged in exposing the politics of marginalization but it is also busy creating a tradition of their own as numerous essays are being written on the history and culture of the Namahsudra (Bengali Dalit community) community. These new and radical traits are mostly visible in the fictional as well as non-fictional writings of such contemporary authors as Achintya Biswas, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Anil Sarkar, Kalyani Thakur and Jatin Bala. There is no doubt that Dalit literature in Bengal is no longer hidden in the shadows of a Proletariat literature that was generated by a Communist Government. Yet, more concerted efforts at the organizational level are required to make it possess a distinct identity.

Dalit literary expressions, in the Hindi belt after having emerged in the late 1980s have been dramatically increased over the decades. A huge number of Dalit books and journals have begun to be published and in such a milieu of Dalit literary assertion the autobiography took centre stage as many Dalit writers stepped into their literary careers through this genre of writing. Of all the literary genres, the saga of pain and humiliation is best portrayed through the autobiographical mode of writing. Though the roots of this genre are firmly planted within the bourgeois sensibilities preferring the rise of individualism, yet the realistic framework of an autobiography best allows a Dalit writer to give vent to her/his sense of alienation which is shared by the entire Dalit community. Among the autobiographies written by Hindi Dalit authors, mention must be made of Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Jhootan*, Jai Prakash Kardam’s *Jhappar*, Mohandas Namisrai’s *Apne Apne Pinjre* and Surajpal Chauhan’s *Tiraskrit*. Namisrai’s narrative is the first known Dalit autobiography in Hindi. (Basu 193) The hypocrisy of a social system that enslaves low-caste people by imposing scriptural injunctions upon them is reflected in *Joothan*, as Valmiki writes:
Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were written in one’s control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard –bearers of this country’s great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom.

(Valmiki, 133-34)\(^{39}\)

Apart from producing literature, efforts were also made to create a tradition of Dalit thoughts which could be disseminated through monograms such as Suresh Chandra Kushwaha’s *Arakshan Ke Hatyare*, Buddhshran Hans’ *Kash Hum Hindu Na Hote* and Mata Prasad’s *Achut Virangana Nautanki*. The purpose of these monograms was to raise awareness level of the Dalit people of their rights and duties. Interestingly enough, Dalit literature in North India has been an offshoot of the success of the Bahujan Samaj Party and Dalit organizations such as the BAMCEF and DS4 while in South India, Dalit political movement received impetus from Dalit literary and cultural practices. (Basu 193)\(^{40}\)

A strong note of Dalit consciousness started being heard in the realm of Punjabi literature from late 1980s and early 1990s. The first Punjabi Dalit Sahit Sammelan was organized by Dalit Sahit Sabha in 1994 in Phagwara. But the trend of depicting the misery of Dalit lives which has been a major theme of such Punjabi Dalit authors of 1980s as Bhagwant Rasulpuri, Des Raj Kali and Jinder could also be noticed as early as in the late 1960s when Gurdial Singh’s *Marhi Da Diwa* was published and deemed to be the “path breaking” (Basu 194)\(^{41}\) novel in Punjabi literature. The foundation of Dalit writings in Punjab was consolidated not only because of the novelists but also due to the works of Punjabi Dalit poets such as Gurdas Ram Aalam, late
Manjit Qadar, late Sant Ram Udasi, Gurmit Kalmajri. The genre of autobiography was also explored by Punjabi Dalit authors and the first Dalit autobiography *Gair Hazir Aadmi* (1994) written by Prem Gorkhi was modeled upon the autobiographies written by Marathi Dalit writers of earlier decades.

### 2.1. FEATURES OF DALIT LITERATURE:

The age-old convention of relegating Dalit literature to the periphery is still prevalent in the academic and literary circles of India. But despite such hostility Dalit writing has been successful in creating a niche of its own. It is an undeniable fact that contrary to earlier practice of ignoring the talent of Dalit writers, today, many publication houses are willing to promote the literature of the marginalized. Without getting into the complex economic and political calculations which perhaps account for the visibility of contemporary Dalit literature, it can be said that this endeavour taken by the publishing industry along with the academia and literary artists is not a mean feat. But, more is to be done in order to make the Dalit discourse accessible to readers as well as scholars and researchers.

However, owing to its mature understanding of the issue of caste-exploitation and retaliation, Dalit literature has now become more decisive about its characteristics and intentions. A predominant feature of Dalit literary writings which basically aim to uphold the triumph of humanity is to expose the absolute disregard shown by upper caste people for their low-caste sisters and brothers. Dalit writers reveal how the members of the erstwhile untouchable communities, regardless of their religions, still suffer from the humiliation of discrimination. The Dalits, in earlier days, were prohibited from entering into upper-caste surroundings. Even if they were allowed, they had to keep pots hanging from their necks lest they defile the soil through
their spitting. They were asked to carry brooms tied to their bodies so that they could wipe away their footprints while passing through the ‘upper lanes’. The picture of such wretchedness of Dalit lives comes alive in the words of Arjun Dangle as in his poem *Chhami Hili Ha (The Cantonment Has Begun to Shake)* he writes:

We fought with crows
never even giving them the snot from our noses
as we dragged out the upper lane’s dead cattle,
skinned it neatly
and shared the meet among ourselves
they used to love us then.
we warred with jackals-dogs-Vultures-Kites
because we ate their share.

(Dangle qtd. in Mishra, Web)\(^\text{42}\)

Such ‘poetical’ expression as this proves the fact that Dalit literature’s primary responsibility is not to indulge in romantic wistfulness or psychological intricacies of life; but to claim the retrieval of the dignity of their lives which has been snatched away from them. In Limbale’s words: “…this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity’s joys and sorrows. It regards human beings as supreme, and leads them towards total revolution.” (Limbale 31)\(^\text{43}\) Thus Dalit literature ideologically connects with the Human Rights Movement which is currently being fought all over the world. It breaks away from the narrow confines of regional and national boundaries and makes itself a part of the global literature of protest. Another striking feature of Dalit literature is its social character. The genesis of this literature is in the anguish of Dalit hearts and hence poems, stories and life-narratives are replete with the pain and misery endured by numerous Dalits. Unlike the conventional mainstream writing, Dalit literature does not revolve round the vicissitude of an individual’s life. It, rather, tells us the story of collective
suffering of an entire community. However, these literary pieces are not sentimental outpouring of pain. It is also about revolting against a social set-up that shows contemptuous attitude towards the under-privileged section of the society. Voice of defiance is heard in the words of poet L.S Rokade who writes:

I spit on this great civilization
Is this land yours, mother,
because you were born here?
Is it mine
because I was born to you?

(Rokade/Gokhle qtd. in Mishra, Web) \(^44\)

An even more intense outburst of anger can be found in “You Wrote From Los Angeles” by Daya Pawar:

In the stores here, in hotels, about the streets,
Indians and curs are measured with the same Yard-stick.
‘Niggars!’ Blacks! This is the abuse they fling on me.
Reading all this, I felt so damn!
Now you’ve had a taste of what we’ve suffered
In this country from generation to generation.”

(Pawar qtd. in Abedi, Web) \(^45\)

Similarly, a stern, uncompromising and confident tone is echoed in the lines of J. V. Pawar’s poem when he writes:

I’m the sea; I soar, I surge.
I move out to build your tombs.
The winds, storms, sky, earth.
Now all are mine.
In every inch of the rising struggle
I stand erect.

(Pawar qtd. in Abedi, Web) \(^46\)
Critics who chiefly patronize the upper caste-dominated mainstream literature accuse Dalit literary writings of lacking in artistic fineness. They also brand it as a propagandist literature which aims to capture the frenzy of an on-going movement and is always subjective and partial. But a reading of the other side of the story justifies the resentment that Dalit literature presents. It is unnatural and fruitless for a Dalit writer to indulge in objective neutrality and artistic nitty-gritty since their primary concern is to expose the brutality of the caste system. The rationale of Dalit literature can be best explained with the words of Limbale:

… it cannot be said that the entire corpus of Dalit literature is propagandist. Since Dalit writers see their writing as a means of human liberation, expressing emotion is integral to the literature they produce. Intense lived and felt experiences cannot be called propagandist.

(Limbale/Mukherjee 35)

Another charge against Dalit literature is that it breeds univocality, monotony and stasis since all Dalit writers offer a common ideological view. However, ironically enough, this commonality of experiences is one of the basic aspects of Dalit literature. Experiences of excommunication and social stigma are common to most of the people belonging to untouchable communities. Locales may be different; characters may have different names. But the incidents of social boycott, humiliation at the village-well and the inability to find an accommodation remain the same in this great saga of caste relationships in India. Hence the univocality and repetitiveness in Dalit writings may be artistically inappropriate; but is socially relevant. Moreover, this commonality of experience is also responsible for generating a collective voice. A literature which is built
upon the edifice of communal experiences cannot be individual-centric. It has got to be polyphonic.

Often Dalit literature has been accused of using coarse language which is not in sync with the artistically appropriate decorum maintained by the mainstream conventional literature. Words used by Namdeo Dhasal (Marathi), Sukritarani (Tamil), Narsingh Ujamba (Gujarati) and Raghavan Atholi (Malayalam) may shock a reader with traditional literary sensibilities. But as K.M. Sherrif points out:

This subversive idiom is a feature of all protest poetry. One finds it abundantly in American Beat poets like Ginsberg or Black poets like Amiri Baraka. Ginsberg advised the American establishment to “fuck yourself with your atom bomb” (“America”). Even if it is not desirable to adopt a particularly ‘Dalit language’, it is certainly one of the tasks of Dalit writing to subvert the Brahminic discourse as it is manifest in conventional poetic idiom.

(Sherrif, Web)

I support Sherrif’s opinions and strongly feel that the use of a bold, non-conventional language in Dalit writings is not a superfluous stance; but a requirement as the aesthetics of dominant discourse are not adequate to do justice to the experiences endured by most of the low caste and other underprivileged sections of Indian society. Besides, it also suits the realistic framework within which a Dalit literary piece usually operates. Bama- the Tamil Dalit writer, in her life-narrative *Karukku*, broke away from the rules of grammar and spelling and also used the spoken form of Tamil. While this may appear to some critics as an instance of severe literary transgression, it can also be interpreted as a unique attempt to liberate traditional literature from the fetters of servile obedience and mediocrity. These linguistic novelties have the potential to
enrich not just the field of Dalit literature; but also the vast terrains of Indian literature. Moreover, the radical ideology propagated by Dalit literature plays a crucial role in re-shaping the contours of the ‘mainstream’ literature in India. It throws a challenge at the epistemological hegemony of the upper caste writers and thus opens a new space for a dialogue between the ‘centre’ and the ‘margin’. Raising legitimate questions about the nature of knowledge disseminated by the dominant discourse is an index of literary maturity and there should be no qualm in accepting the fact that the domain of traditional Indian literature becomes more enriched owing to the active presence of a subversive, alternative system of knowledge produced by Dalit writers and scholars. It is relevant to mention here what Sheoraj Singh Bechain-convener of the Dalit Writers’ Forum said regarding the need for producing a Dalit tradition of knowledge. Bechain observes:

Knowledge has never been democratic in this country. In intellectual life…the arts or in academics there is no presence of Dalit traditions of learning. This is a loss for the whole country, because we need more traditions of knowledge, not the repetition of the same history.

(Basu 193)\textsuperscript{49}

We must remember that the purpose of an alternative historical and cultural tradition is not only to question what is hitherto deemed as ‘sacrosanct’ but also to generate knowledge that foregrounds the perspectives of the deprived and the dispossessed. Dalit literature brings the ‘fractured’ consciousness of the Dalit community to the fore and thus provides an opportunity for creating a liberal milieu where knowledge can be free and holistic.
However, at the same time, Dalit literature also has to prove its maturity by accepting and negotiating with its own internal limitations. The gender question which has not been successfully dealt with in the ‘mainstream’ Dalit writings has propelled Dalit women writers to demand for a separate space of their own within the Dalit movement.

My next chapter explores how the vicious nexus between caste and gender complicates the lives of Dalit women and how this issue of double-oppression is reflected in the writings of Dalit women authors.
Endnotes:


5 Ibid.


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12 Ibid.


21 Ibid.
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22 Ibid.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


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35 Marichjhapi Massacre: During the partition of 1947, upper-caste refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) set up unauthorized colonies in and around Kolkata. The administrative authority of West Bengal did not take any action against them. But unspeakable atrocities were inflicted upon the Dalit refugees by the State machinery when they attempted to occupy an uninhabited island in the Sundarban area called Marichjhapi.

36 Titash Ekti Nodir Nam: Available in English translation as A River Called Titash by Kalpana Bardhan. A Bengali film was also made on it by the eminent director Rwitik Ghatak.


41 Ibid.


Chapter Two: Dalit Literature: An Overview


