CHAPTER-I

Introduction

We eat by touching, we wash
By touching, from a touch
The world was born
So who’s untouched? Asks Kabir
Only he
Who has no taint of Maya.
(The Bijak of Kabir, qtd. in Narayan et al. 2004, 7)

I

Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze in their recent book, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (2013) underline the fact that inequality of various kinds is a universal phenomenon in all countries of the world. But the inequality based on hierarchical casteism in India has “a unique cocktail of lethal divisions and disparities” (Sen & Drèze 213). Despite a great amount of legislative measures taken up for removing untouchability and casteism, they continue to exist as a major social disease in India. Caste stratification has, in fact, reinforced class inequality which, argue Sen and Drèze, is harder to overcome (213). For Ambedkar, caste inequality was part of his firsthand experience and he closely studied the institutions of caste in his academic writings. His paper, “Caste in India, their Origin, Mechanism and Development”, written for the anthropological seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweisser at Colombia University in 1916, recognized the principal characteristic of caste as
endogamy superimposed on exogamy in a culturally homogenous ambience (Rodrigues 239). As observed by him, this caste problem was a vast one, both theoretically and practically. He insisted that despite heterogeneous social structure in terms of different ethnic groups in Indian society, the unity of culture had been the basis of homogeneity. This homogeneity of culture intensified the caste problem which was so difficult to explain (Ibid 242-243).

The practice of casteism has been continuing without any legal recognition as a social system till today. Though certain measure of social reformation was initiated, they were mostly concentrated on religious reformation than social one. Ambedker pointed out five different categories of Hindu views on Hindu social system. Firstly, the orthodox Hindu views to the follower of which the talk of reforming Hindu social system was a kind of blasphemy. Secondly, Vedic centred Hindu view practised by the Arya Samajists who differed from orthodox Hindus, and discarded everything which was not in the Vedas. The third one was the indifferent view to the Hindu social system but they admitted its wrongfulness. Their view, as observed by Ambedkar was:

Hindu social system is all wrong, but who holds that there is no necessity to attack it. Their argument is that since law does not recognize, it is dying, if not a dead system. (Who Were The Shudras 12)

The fourth was the political minded view of social system and to them Swaraj was more important than social reform. The fifth category of views was rational in its kind and the people of this view regarded social reform bore primary importance which was more important than Swaraj. While talking about the indifferent Hindu social view of the third category, Ambedkar shows that law is not
the only sanction which legitimizes social institutions. There are other sanctions of which religious and social sanctions are important to play vital role in legitimizing certain system in society. He writes:

The Varna system has fullest social sanction from Hindu society. With no legal prohibition, this sanction has been more than enough to keep the Varna system in full bloom. The best evidence to show that the Varna system is alive notwithstanding there is no law to enforce it, is to be found in the fact that the status of the Shudras and the untouchables in the Hindu society has remained just what it has been. (Ibid 13)

However, he was happy with the section of the Hindu people who expressed their concern for the necessity of reformation in Hindu social system which was the mainstay of Ambedkar’s argument. These categories of liberal Hindu intellectuals were writing for social equality and were speaking for the lower strata of the Hindu society.

Quest for Dalit identity has been a core issue of Dalit literature which was lost in non-Dalit literature for centuries. Transformation of unconsciousness to the state of consciousness of the Dalits is one of the key factors to construct their identity which urged them to go back to their past socio-cultural historiography. This formed what Benedict Anderson defined as "amnesias" that consistently formed all thoughtful changes in human consciousness. Such forgetfulness, Anderson argues, sprouts narratives. In other words, identity is constructed, though paradoxically, out of and through the remarkable dynamics of forgetting and remembering. The Dalit narratives of historiography as embodied in the writings of Ambedkar carry such evidence of "amnesia", caused by the Brahminic cultural
hegemony that has necessitated the Dalit's search for identity and a sense historical continuity. The writings of Ambedkar constitute the core of these narratives (see Ganguly 336).

Amartya Sen in his *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006) says, “A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence” (Sen 1). He professes that identity can make an important contribution to build up a bond of warm relation with the neighbours, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or among the followers of the same religion. This bond, enriched by identity, can help the people of a community to do many things for each other and take them beyond their self-centred lives. Referring to recent literature on ‘social capital’ by Robert Putnam, he says that identity with others in the same social community can make the lives of all better in that community, and a sense of belonging created by identity is thus seen as a resource – like capital (*Ibid* 2). Janardan Waghmare, a researcher on American Black literature and a famous Dalit critic also emphasises on the importance of identity in his book, *The Quest for Black Identity* (2002):

It is true that the identity of a people is a major and perennial source of their social, cultural and psychological empowerment. Quest for identity is a kind of search for the roots, for reconstructing the history, for seeking the status and for sharing, with equal measure, the national prestige and pride. Rediscovering and reconstructing history is the most essential pre-requisite for identity. (Waghmare xvii)

Despite negative criticism by the postmodern critics, identity remains an important area of research for the subaltern studies in postcolonial socio-political context. The movements of American Blacks such as the Harlem Renaissance, the
Garvey Movement, the Black Muslim Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement etc. were, no doubt, meaningful attempts at redefining and reconstructing their identities. Similarly, in Indian context, the Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha, the Nasik Satyagraha, Manusmriti Burning, the historical Yeola Conference etc. were endeavours in asserting the identity of the untouchables in India.

Like the American Blacks, Dalit literary history has been an unrelenting endeavour of reconstructing their identity. Dalit literature is known after, neither a particular language nor a geographical area but after a community belonging to the lower strata of Indian society who have suffered from the thraldom of untouchability for centuries. Like Black literature, which is known by the name of the race, Dalit literature too has drawn attention of the reader to its specific socio-historic legacies.

In Indian context the downtrodden group of the stratified society hardly had any place in the mainstream canonical literature which the Dalit writers call as ‘Hindu literature’ and challenge its hegemony through their own writings (in Ahmed et al, 132). It has been felt by the Dalit writers that for centuries, Indian society has been the most hierarchal among the known civilizations of the world. The literature of this country has never focused on the plights and sufferings of the untouchables, the lower strata of the casteist society. In the words of Ambedkar, the injustice done to the untouchables were kept as a secret in the Brahminical literature of the country. The plight of the untouchables under the reign of the Hindu kings and the Mughals was neither addressed nor considered as a social problem. The Muslim rulers of India kept the socio-cultural problem of the Hindu society at its status-quo to remain where it was. Even during the 300 years of the British colonial rule the question
regarding the plight of the untouchables, the lower strata of society was identified only in the first half of the 20th century. The privilege of writing and the legitimacy it ascribed were confined in the hands of those who wielded power. Those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible even unmentionable in the so-called great literary texts of India (Ibid 129).

Dalit literature is an outburst of anger of prolonged suppression tolerated silently for ages by the so called untouchables. This literature has emerged as a voice of resistance against the ferocious suppression based on the notorious social parameters of casteism in Indian societies predominantly governed by Brahminic values. Thus through their writings the Dalit writer-activists engaged themselves in search of an identity against the Brahminic supremacy. Dalit repression became a historic-political awareness through the insights and learned means of B.R. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar was in America at Columbia University as a graduate student from 1913 to 1916 where he had witnessed the discrimination between the Blacks and Whites from close quarters. His observation of the growing consciousness among the Blacks and their struggle to claim their identity and humanity against the white supremacist oppression influenced him much to think for the Dalit liberation in India. In America he experienced a sense of liberation and empowerment as he was no longer seen as an untouchable in the new country just as Baldwin, the Black author found himself in Paris. As noted by S.D. Kapoor:

Baldwin discovered in Paris that his colour did not matter to people there. He could move about without crutches. In Columbia University, America, Ambedkar was not treated as an Untouchable but an equal member of the academic community. Their uniqueness was confined to a particular situation. Apart from that, if they continued
to harp on the uniqueness of experience they would be playing into the hands of Muslims in America and orthodox caste Hindus in India. (Kapoor 2004, 21)

This experience of Dr. Ambedkar led him to think about the permanent segregation of the Dalits which is unique because nowhere except in India there existed such hereditary slavery who lived their wretched existence. He believed that untouchability was a unique phenomenon unknown to humanity except the Hindus. His academic writings as well as political activities have not only exposed the wretched state of the untouchables of India but also have succeeded in planting Dalit consciousness in the mind and heart of the Dalits to revolt against the oppression perpetrated by the casteist hegemony of the Indian upper castes.

II

Historically the Dalit consciousness as an awareness of their oppressive social status of being untouchables evolved under the leadership of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). It has eventually evolved into a discourse of social empowerment and political assertion for rights and identity claims. The awareness of their wretched social condition became part of their collective social realization during 1920s when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led a series of Satyagrahas such as Mahar Satyagraha, Nasik Satyagraha, the burning of the Manusmriti and organising of the Yeola Conference to assert not only the rights of the untouchables but also to make them conscious of their position in the prevailing social system (Mathew 20). In a way these Satyagrahas played very crucial roles in initiating the beginning of the Dalit consciousness movement towards mobilising politically aware self-assertion.
The symbolic rituals, initiated by Ambedkar, of breaking the casteist stigma through the violation of the restrictions imposed on them not to touch and pollute the water of Chowdar tank made a huge impact among the Dalits. Chowdar tank was situated in a Mahar town which was maintained by the Mahar Municipality Board under Bombay Presidency. Ambedkar initiated a Mahasatyagraha to assert the legal rights of the untouchables to take water from that tank and also to make the untouchables conscious of their rights. A conference was held from 18th to 20th March, 1927 at Mahar in the presence of around 2500 untouchables from various parts of Maharashtra to sensitise the untouchables about the social oppressions they were subjected to. The procession under the leadership of Ambedkar reached the tank and for the first time the untouchables drank water from that tank. The upper caste Hindus went into frenzy and physically attacked the untouchables (Ibid 21). To Thomas Mathew, the Mahar Satyagraha was an act of direct action aimed at the demolition of the social order and destabilizes its very foundation. One such act was the burning of the Manusmriti, and mass refusal by the untouchables to lift and carry dead animals belonging to the caste Hindus and to skin the carcasses.

The temple entry movement began with the Vaikkom Satyagraha in 1924 in Travancore State. Ambedkar took bold initiatives to organize the Nasik Satyagraha for temple entry at the Kalaram Temple of Nasik on March 2, 1930. About 1500 volunteers headed by Dada Sahib B.K. Gaekwad marched in a procession towards the gates of the temple with a band in front, followed by 500 women Satyagrahis. The volunteers were not allowed to enter into the temple by the heavy police force guarding the temple. The procession gathered at a venue at Godavari Ghat to mobilize the volunteers. For more than a month the non-violent Satyagraha was carried out with a small group of volunteers trespassing the temple premises and
courting arrest every day. Some fanatic caste Hindus attacked the volunteers with stones and *lathis* injuring a number of them including Dr. Ambedkar when the protestors tried to touch the chariot carrying the image of Rama.

Similar kind of mass Satyagraha was launched at *Guruvayoor* temple in Malabar in November 1931 to force entry of the untouchables into the temple. The movement continued for a number of years. K. Kelappan went for fast unto death from 21st September, 1932, until the doors of the temple were thrown open to the untouchables. However, he had suspended the fast after three months on the assurance of Gandhi that if the doors of the temple entry were not opened for the untouchables, he would go for fast himself with Kelappan from January 1, 1933.

After the continuous temple entry movement for five years, led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a conference was held at Yeola on 13 October, 1935, wherein it was concluded that untouchability and caste tyranny could not be abolished within the framework of the *Sashtras* which formed the bedrock of Hindu religion (Ahir 1997, 19-20). Addressing the conference Ambedkar declared that there was no way to get self respect from the caste Hindus from within the Hindu fold of belief. He made the famous statement, “Ultimately I was born Hindu, it was beyond my power to prevent that, but I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu” (qtd. in Ahir 20).

In a conference held at Bombay on 30 – 31 May, 1936, Dr. Ambedkar presented a clear-cut view on the question of conversion. He explained that there were two aspects of conversion, social as well as religious; material as well as spiritual. To him, untouchability was a result of a struggle between two classes - the caste Hindus and the untouchables. He pointed out:
Untouchability is not a short or temporary feature, it is a permanent one. It is eternal because the religion which has placed untouchables at the lowest rank of the society is itself eternal according to the beliefs of the Hindus who do not accept change in the social order. (qtd. in Ahir 21)

He further argued that there was no place for an individual in Hindu society and it was based on caste concept. According to him, there were three factors essential for the emancipation of an individual as a human being - sympathy, equality and liberty but none of these existed in Hindu religion. All the Satyagrahas led by Dr. Ambedkar created immense awareness among the Dalits about their ignoble state across the country. This awareness eventually turned out to be a key factor leading to the emergence of Dalit literature.

III

The word ‘Dalit’ is found in several Indian languages. However, it is said that the word ‘Dalit’ was derived from the Sanskrit root word ‘Dal’. As a verb it means to split, crack open, crash, and grind and so on. Dalit is a noun, also an adjective form of the word ‘Dal’. The word ‘Dalit’ is found in Molesworth’s Marathi-English Dictionary of 1975, a reprint of the 1813 edition that gave the meaning of ‘Dalit’ as ‘ground, broken or reduced to pieces generally’. It has also been said that Sanskrit has borrowed the root word ‘Dal’ from Hebrew. In Hebrew it may be used in two senses. It may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly insignificant position in society (Ahmed et al, 131). When the root word ‘Dal’ is applied with another Hebrew word ‘anti’, it explains an economic relationship. As evidently suggested by Harvey L. Perkins:
‘Dal’ is derived from a verbal root which recognizes that poverty is the process of being emptied, becoming unequal, being impoverished, dried up, made thin ... so there is social frailty (and those suffering from it) are easily crushed and have not the means to recover. (qtd. in Ahmed et al, 131)

However, the term ‘Dalit’ refers to the people who are broken, crushed and torn apart, so much so that they cannot retrieve themselves from the state of their perpetual wretchedness. The term has now turned into a metaphor pertaining to the ex-untouchables. In Hindu scripts the untouchables were known as the Mletchas and Chandalas (terms used by Manu) Dasas, Dasyus, Raksasas, Asuras, Avarnas, Nisadas, Panchamas, S vapacas, Achutas etc. The socio-political and cultural movement of this community during the colonial period under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar forced the colonial administrators and the Indian intellectuals to recognize them through several names such as Ati-sudra, out castes, pariah, Harijan (a glorified term used by Narasimha Mehta, a Gujarati poet later adopted and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi), Exterior Castes (a term used by J.H. Hutton), Depressed Classes (the phrase used by British officials), Scheduled Castes and so on (Massey 7, Michael 16). They felt that the words coined by the upper caste Hindus, officials and social reformers, were abusive and derogatory, domineering and condescending. So the people belonging to this category preferred to describe themselves as Dalits which emphatically underlined their oppressed status. However, Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, the two towering figures in the Pantheon of Dalit history, were the first ones to appropriate the word ‘Dalit’ as a noun and as an adjective in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe the extreme oppression of the untouchables (Ibid 6). During that period a newspaper, the Dalit Bandhu, was also being published from Pune in the 1930s as the mouthpiece
of the depressed classes (Mahida 92). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used eloquently the word ‘Dalit’ in his Marathi speeches which he had supposed to have borrowed from Swami Vivekananda’s quote, “Deena-Dalita-Dukhi Devo Bhaba!” (“Service to the weak, the downtrodden, and suffering masses itself is the worship of God”. qtd. in Mahida 15).

The term ‘Dalit’ gained further circulation in the literary parlance with the first ever conference of ‘Dalit Literature’ held in Bombay in 1958. However, the word got prominence as an identity marker when a group of young intellectuals and Dalit writer activists founded an organization called ‘Dalit Panthers’ in 1972 and made concerted efforts to promote Dalit literature. The name reflected their solidarity and kinship with the Black Panthers who were engaged in the struggle for the African-American’s rights in the United States of America in the 1960s. The Times Weekly supplement of 25 November, 1973, took note of the gradual militant orientation of the Dalit movement as well as their literary creations that emerged as part of the Dalit consciousness movement. Eleanor Zelliot, a noted critic and commentator of the Dalit movements in India, notes that in the 1970s two important movements gained prominence in Maharashtra in the form of Dalit Panthers and the Dalit literature which even could find a room in the English language press of the state. By substituting the word ‘Black’ for ‘Dalit’ the reader can immediately understand that a kind of new literary-cultural phenomenon akin to the Black consciousness movement emerged in the social and literary affairs in western India. By choosing the word ‘Dalit’, as identity marker, like the Afro-American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit literary movements instilled a new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity in a politicized Dalit mind. The word ‘Dalit’ does not have the same connotation as the other common words such as
Eleanor Zelliot writes:

The Marathi word *Dalit* like the word Black was chosen by the group itself. ...*Dalit* implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy. (Zelliot 267)

The term has gained new connotations in the academic discourse with the proliferation of Dalit literary output which eventually entered the postcolonial critical domain. At the same time Dalit literature as a genre generated considerable amount of suspicions and cynicism among critics. Nevertheless, the Dalit Buddhist youths were the first ones to have led a Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s. Quite predictably the Dalit writers and critics were the major stakeholders to have got engaged with the debate on the semantic dimension of the term Dalit in literary and cultural context. Some defined the word *Dalit* as a secular term and argued that it did not refer to a particular caste. In this context Eleanor Zelliot refers to a letter from Gangadhar Pantawane, a Professor of Marathi at Milind College and then at Marathawada University in Aurangabad as well as the founder editor of *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of Dalit Literature where Pantawane expressed his observation about the term ‘*Dalit*’ according to which it did not refer to a caste, but signified as a symbol of change and revolution. Thus, he defined the term ‘*Dalit*’ in the following terms:

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, Faith and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He
does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. (qtd. in Zelliot 268)

The key here is a radical rejection of casteism, religious legitimization of poverty and untouchability by the Mahars, an untouchable community, who had rejected Hinduism and embraced Buddhism along with Dr. Ambedkar in 1956. They seemed to have abandoned their belief in faith and Heaven quite in line with Marxist philosophy with the objective to initiate movements towards change. Pantawane construed the Dalits rather as “low caste Marxists” (Ibid 269). However, their way of Marxist revolution towards change of society was not only aimed at class emancipation including women, tribal, workers and agricultural labourers but also it was against the socio-cultural hegemony of casteist social order that had reduced them into slaves. Arjun Dangle felt that the word ‘Dalit’ traditionally connoted destitution, poverty and humiliation. Dangle defined the word ‘Dalit’ quite like Gangadhar Pantawane. He wrote:

Dalit means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion and other factors. Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country.” (Dangle 1 iii)

However, the definitions provided by the Dalit writers and critics show that the concept of Dalit is an ultimate by-product of castiest socio-cultural tradition sanctioned by religion. They reject casteism that led them to their present state of suffering with all kinds of disparities against inhuman social atrocities. In the words of Raj Kumar, whatever may be the definition, the term ‘Dalit’ refers to the condition of a group of people who are subjected to all forms of age old social,
political, economic, cultural and religious oppressions and atrocities (in Ahmed et al. 132).

IV

The Dalit writers and critics have attempted to define Dalit literature from the perspective of Ambedkarite thoughts. Dr. Ambedkar’s socio-political movements for the emancipation of untouchables, the lower caste or Panchama’s of Indian Varna system, inspired the untouchables or the Dalits to imbibe a sense of Dalit consciousness like that of the Black consciousness movement of the African-Americans. The Dalit consciousness emerged as a collective sense of community self among the newly educated Dalits of free India who had pioneered a Dalit literary movement which is, however, often interrogated in respect to its literariness, its ontological and epistemological orientations. For Saran Kumar Limbale ‘Sant literature’ is one of the popular traditions in Marathi literature which were produced by the Sants from ancient to contemporary times. Significantly, most of the saint poets were from the lower caste, such as - Namdev the tailor, Gora the potter, Samvata the gardener, Chokha the untouchable, Sena the barber and Janabai the maid. The epithet in respect to the ‘Sant Literature’ was never questioned but with respect to the Dalit writing, it is constantly asked whether this literature can be attributed to as Dalit Literature alone. Answering this question Limbale writes, ‘literature is not Dalit, but it can be of the Dalits’ (Limbale 96).

As a response to the debate on the definition of the term ‘Dalit’, Arjun Dangle, the editor of Poisoned Bread, an anthology of Dalit writings, emphatically writes, “Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about a change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and
new people” (Dangle 1iii). Similarly, Baburao Bagul, a well known Dalit short story writer says:

> Dalit Literature is not a literature of vengeance; Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spread hatred. Dalit Sahitya – first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity. (qtd. in Prasad 3)

Like African American literature, Dalit literature has been an intellectual, social, and political movement of a peripheral social entity. It rejects the established norms of aesthetic interpretation of the mainstream Indian literary tradition what they called Brahminical Literature. Instead, they tried to evolve a separate set of aesthetic and literary parameters based on their own social experiences. They have tried to develop their own interpretation of ‘Dalitness’, a distinct personality evolved in the backdrop of their specific intellectual, emotional and cultural life experiences. Dalit literature, according to them, should not be judged from the perspective of mainstream Indian canonical codes, for Dalit literature carries its own values and aesthetic qualities unique to itself as reflected in the arguments of Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004).

The Dalit writers and critics have claimed a distinct space for itself. It has been characterized by a set of certain features that have assigned a distinctive identity to Dalit Literature. This literature is rebellious in nature; the narrative is essentially representative of the collective rather than the individual experiences. The Dalit writers are casual in terms of using language as there has been a marked emphasis on the use of the colloquial than the refined expressions. Dalit literature betrays a strong sense of commitment towards human emancipation and social
freedom especially in relations to the Dalits as it is, in terms of the values and commitment, reflective of Ambedkar’s notions of Dalit emancipation (Limbale 37).

Being influenced by Ambedkarism, Dalit literature gives priority to human freedom as it holds ‘the human being to be its focal point’ (Ibid 51). For the Ambedkarite Dalit writers, ideology means the philosophical and socio-political thoughts that profess the termination of caste system of Hindu society that has fostered the values and customs based on inequality especially with respect to its traditional beliefs on heredity, endogamous marriage system, paternally inherited profession, dietary rules and caste hierarchy. Ambedkarism speaks about instilling a sense of self respect among the Dalits. It believes in the social philosophy of liberty, equality and fraternity based on social justice. In a speech broadcast by All India Radio on 3 October 1954, in the series, ‘My Personal Philosophy’ Ambedkar said:

Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, equality and fraternity let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science.’” (qtd. in Keer 1987, 459)

Dhananjay Keer in his biography, Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission (1987) writes that Babasaheb Ambedkar did not believe that law could be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality Babasaheb Ambedkar gave the highest priority to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality. To Keer, the appeal of Ambedkar for liberty, equality and fraternity was another name for brotherhood or humanity which was another name for religion.

In terms of literary insights, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had, as mentioned by Limbale, a “definite life-affirming and realistic position on literature” (Limbale 48).
He never accepted the Vedic literature and the *Manusmriti* which endorsed and justified inequality in society. To him, a literature that supports inequality is not only unacceptable there must be a mass revolt against such literature. He opined that literature must espouse equality and destroy inequality. For him Sant literature (the religious literature) failed this test as it was of no use in the destruction of Hindu *Varna* system. Continuing his argument on the failure of Sant literature he insisted that a revolutionary like Voltaire should have been born in India from the ranks of Brahmin as he caused a revolution against the doctrines of the Catholic Church in which he was brought up. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar exhorted that writers should take inspiration from the greatness of common people. He wrote:

> Through your literary creation cleanse the staled values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective transform the light of your pen 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 this pain and sorrow and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there. (Ambedkar 1976, 8)

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar valued literature that was realistic and life affirming so he expected writer’s commitment to common humanity as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s own literary vision was essentially founded on humanism. In the same way, Limbale, the Ambedkarite critic of Dalit literature, has also emphasised:

> Dalit Literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief. (Limbale 2007, 3)
Dalit Literature is characterized by a sense of rejection and revolt. But this is neither the rejection of essential human values nor is it a revolt against a particular human community. Dalit literature is the rejection of caste based social hierarchy, anti human social, cultural and religious rules and customs that subjugate people and force them to be in the lowest strata of social order for eternity. It is a revolt against the social system and the religious norms that deprive the subjugated entities of education, politics, economic opportunities and the fundamental human rights. Dalit literature rejects the established norms of the Indian literary tradition essentially governed by upper caste hegemony; instead it follows its own set of traditions and values established by Buddha, Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar.

According to Marx an ideology is a belief system and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning such as capitalism, patriotism, religion, ethical systems, humanism, environmentalism, astrology, etc. But Indian communists did not give any importance to the caste problem during the social reform movement of Dr. Ambedkar. For, they assumed that the explanations of social problems could be given in terms of class analysis alone (Thorat et al. 8). Caste is a product of Brahminic hegemony which involves economic exploitation and political domination taken as naturally justified way of social behaviour. However, the preachers of casteism say that caste has nothing to do with class system.

Religion is an ideology which Marx called “the opiate of the masses” (qtd. in Tyson 59). Religion is, in fact, an ideology that helps keep the faithful poor remain content with their lot in life or at least tolerant of it just as a tranquilizer might do. The question of God’s existence is not the fundamental issue for Marxist analysis,
rather what human beings do in the name of God and organizes religion is the focus. To justify man’s views on religion he says that many Christian religious groups work to feed, clothe, house and even educate the world’s poor. The religious tenets that are disseminated with food and clothing include the conviction that if the poor remain non-violent, will find their reward in heavens. Obviously, to Marx ten percent or less of the world’s population who own ninety percent of the world’s wealth have a vested interest in promoting this aspect of Christian belief among the poor and the historically exploited and have Christianity for the purpose of controlling their wealth. For the Bible has been used successfully to justify and promote the enslavement of the Africans in America and subordination of women and non-straight people. In Indian context the subjugation and enslavement of the untouchables have been justified through the theory of *Karma*, the precepts of Hindu religion which has been accepted by the subjugated untouchables for centuries as the natural processes of divine retribution.

Marxism advocates that literature does not exist in some timeless aesthetic realm as an object to be passively contemplated. Rather, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the given socio-economic conditions. Hence, the ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written are reflected in literature irrespective of author’s intention and objectives. For the Marxists, as observed by Tyson, literature grows out of historic-material conditions that create at least two possibilities of interest: either the literary work might lead to reinforce in the reader the ideologies it incorporates, or it might tempt the reader to critique the ideologies it represents. A number of literary texts perform both. And it is not the mere content of a literary text, the ‘action’ or the ‘theme’ that extends ideology, but the ‘form’ is also fundamentally an artefact of the ideologies in force (Tyson 66).
Similarities are there between Marxist and Dalit criticism of literature as both are based on historico-material conditions. But ideologically there are differences between Marxism and Ambedkarism. The socio-economic exploitation of the Dalits by the upper caste hegemony is primarily based on religious ideology rather than economic conditions.

Ambedkar studied Marxism very closely but he had taken quite a critical position in respect to Marxism in Indian context. He critiqued Indian Marxism as an incomplete discourse because it did not provide any discursive argument against caste hierarchy vis-à-vis untouchability. To Ambedkar, the destruction of untouchability and annihilation of caste was one of the foremost priorities for a classless society in India. Limbale quotes Dr. Ambedkar’s critical comments on the Indian Marxists and the nationalistic leaders for their purported failure to address the evil of casteism with adequate vigour:

“If Lenin had been born in Hindustan, he would have first destroyed caste discrimination and untouchability completely and he would not even have imagined a revolution without this” (Ambedkar 1929 b). Or, ‘If Tilak had been born in a boycotted caste, instead of rearing, “Swaraj is my birthright”, he would have said with confidence, “Annihilation of untouchability is my supreme duty.”’ (Ambedkar in 1927, qtd. in Limbale 2007, 63)

Ambedkar considered the elimination of caste to be of greater importance than revolution or swaraj as Dalit would get nothing from it without the provision of social equality. He critically observed that both ‘revolution’ and swaraj were political movements without due commitment to change the social disparities relevant in Indian context. He believed that social revolution was more important
than political movement especially in a stratified society like India. This caste system is based not on division of labour and society as a whole but on the existence of a hierarchal notion of superiority. If these castes were destroyed some would lose more power and status than others. As a result, class consciousness could never emerge as a radical awareness in Hindu society. Ambedkar writes, “Caste system is not merely a division of labour, it is also a division of labourers” (Ibid 63).

There have been a number of anthropological and sociological studies on Indian casteism since the ’70s. The French scholar Louis Dumont’s study of the issue provoked considerable critical responses pertaining to the question of caste in India. Dumont postulates that caste is the most fundamental and the most specific institution of Hindu society. The approach of his study of caste is ‘structuralist’ as it is based on two oppositional structures of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ that is the governing structure of the system. To him, caste represents the institutionalization of hierarchical values. Dumont argued, ‘caste teaches the fundamental social principle, hierarchy’ (in Jodhka 16). In Dumont’s framework, hierarchy is defined as superiority of the pure over the impure which is the basis of caste system. He writes:

This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessity and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites. (qtd. in Jodhka 18)

Dumont’s position on caste has been severely criticised by several anthropologists like Gerald Berreman (1971), Kathleen (1973), and Joan Mencher (1974) pointing out to his use of Brahminical sources rather than empirical ones in
understanding the disparities of Hindu society. In fact, he had turned to the Brahminical view of society to formulate his arguments for caste hierarchy. However, the studies of Arjun Appadurai (1986), Richard Burghart (1983), and R.S. Khare have emphasised that there are differences between the socio-religious ideology of the upper castes and the lower castes groups. These scholars view that Dumont’s study lacks empirical study of Hindu society which should have been carried out from below (Michael 26).

Dr. Ambedkar criticised the Indian Marxists for they never considered Brahminic hegemony over the Dalits as one of the central strategies to perpetuate logic of oppression. When the caste is intermingled with the concept of power and social status, the social status of the exploiters, the savarnas-the upper castes, and the exploited asarvana-the Dalits, is not identical. The social divide between a Brahmin worker and a Dalit worker within the same working groups cannot be ignored. This division is socially, culturally and historically conditioned. Significantly, Dr Ambedkar strongly realized that the Indian communists never raised their voice against Bramhinism. He writes, “I have heard labour leaders giving eloquent speeches against capitalism. But I have not heard a single leader (speaking) against Bramhinism among workers” (Limbale 2007, 63-64). As noted by him, Brahminism was no less a conspiracy of exploitation than capitalism. He criticized the labour leaders for not speaking against the ‘cycle of repression perpetrated’ by Bramhinism. Commenting on the reason in the Bahiskrit Bharat (Dec., 1929) as to why Indian communist leaders did not condemn Bramhinism, he argued, “If communists’ views about God and religion were to be stated openly, they will not find a single follower among workers in today’s situation” (qtd. in Limbale 2007, 64).
While comparing Buddhism and Marxism, Ambedkar preferred Buddha’s thoughts to Marx because Marxism had promoted violence and dictatorship while Buddha’s preaching was essentially predicated upon non-violence. In his view, if Buddha’s concept of sorrow was considered to be identical with Marx’s theory of exploitation, there was no such difference between the two. Buddha ardently preached non-violence but he permitted its use only where it was necessary to achieve justice. To Dr. Ambedkar, the Buddhist Sangha was a model institution of communism without dictatorship and typical adherence to non-violence. However, he believed that humanism needed not only economic values, but spiritual values as well therefore he had denounced the communist method of destroying values to achieve the goals. He had put one of the most disturbing questions against the communists, “How many people did (you) kill to gain (your) objective?” (qtd. in Limbale 2007, 64).

The Dalit writers, critics and socio-political activists have been resolutely opposed to Marx, as Marxism does not take social disparity based on caste parameters into consideration. There was conflict between the socio-political activists of Republican Party of India which was formed on Dr. Ambedkar’s vision after his death. When Dadasaheb Gaikwad, one of the Dalit activists, proposed that the Republican Party of India was the party of the dispossessed, B.C. Kamble accused Gaikwad of being a Marxist. The conflict subsequently led to the split of the party.

Similar conflict took place between the two groups of activists of Dalit Panthers which emerged from the political failure of the Republican Party of India. The militant organization, Dalit Panther, was organized on 9 July, 1972, in protest
against the oppression of the Dalits by the upper-caste people in Maharashtra. However, the Dalit Panthers’ manifesto issued by Namdeo Dhasal was criticized as being Marxist by Raja Dhale who, along with Sunil Dihe, a naxalite activist, was instrumental in preparing the manifesto called, Dalit Panthercha Jairnana. In his definition of the Dalits Namdeo Dhasal included dispossession, exploitation and relentless suffering as the key aspects of Dalit reality. Raja Dhale rejected this argument and abandoned the Dalit Panthers to form a separate organization called the Mass Movement leading to the split of Dalit Panthers.

Dhale made his stand clear in respect to Marxist ideology arguing that the root of poverty of the Dalits lies in untouchability. In Dhale’s analysis, the impetus of untouchability lay in Indian history and the Hindu religious tradition, and not in the present day capitalism. Dhale contested the view that Dalits were poor therefore they were untouchables; rather he had reversed the argument positing that the Dalits were poor because they were untouchables. As the controversy went on among the Dalit socio-political activists regarding the acceptance of Marxism, the same issue became crucial for the Dalit writers and critics as well. The separate Buddhist, Dalit and Asmitadarsh literary conferences in various regions are the clear examples of group formations among the Dalit writers on the issue of following or rejecting Marxist ideology in Dalit literary circles. However, the Dalit writer critic, Sharan Kumar Limbale, gives a persuasive opinion on the necessity of convergence of Marxism and Ambedkarism. He views that the Dalit writers need to understand that neither Marx’s nor Ambedkar’s thought is so one dimensional that it must be labelled only as economic or only as social formulation of interpretation. He writes:

It will just not do to say that Dalit’s questions are only social, that they have nothing to do with economic issues. Dalits are subject to social as well as economic
inequality. They will have to struggle at best levels. As Dalit literature is the literature of Dalit’s struggle, it has to be asserted that Dalit literary movement will have to accept Marxism along with Ambedkarism. (Limbale 2007, 66)

It is obvious that untouchability is now coming to an end due to constitutional laws, religious conversions, progressive ideas, science and technology etc. Limbale notes that the transformation in social life brought about by inter-caste marriages has also contributed in diminishing untouchability. However, it should be noted that this inter-caste marriages are limited to a small portion of urban and sub-urban areas of the country. Thus it has not been a widespread influence in removing untouchability from society. When untouchability is being diminished gradually due to socio-economic changes in Indian society in general and among Dalits in particular, the scourge of casteism is still remain rooted in Hindu social order.

Raja Dhale has pointed out that it is untouchability that has made the Dalit people poor. If it is accepted as an absolute truth then it may be said that when untouchability is no more in the Indian society, the Dalits are meant to be economically empowered. However, it cannot be said that untouchability is the sole reason of poverty for the Dalits in India. It is the imposition of caste with regard to profession adhered to birth is a historically and socially conditioned reason which has made the lower castes poor for ages. The removal of untouchability alone cannot empower the Dalits economically. Limbale writes:

While the cause of Dalit’s economic slavery is hidden in the Indian social order, the ultimate path to liberation will be found only through the convergence of Marxism and Ambedkarism. (Ibid 67)
It is noticed that in the contemporary Dalit writings both Marxist criticism and Dalit criticism go together despite controversy as respect to the interpretation of Dalit literature. Limbale writes:

If Marxist criticism developed from Marx’s and Engel’s perspectives on literature, Dalit criticism grew out of Ambedkar’s thought. Marx and Engel did not write extensively about either the form or theory of art. Their position on literature has to be inferred on their writings, which is also true to Baba Shaheb Ambedkar. Many similarities are evident between Marxist literary criticism and Dalit literary criticism. (Ibid 70)

The similarities between Marxist criticism and Dalit criticism are, however, evident in Dalit writings of Maharashtra of 1970s and 1980s. Firstly, both Marxist and Dalit criticism were developed by a particular intellectual section. Secondly, since Marxist and Dalit writers take the side of the exploited, the apparent objective of both literatures is to make the people conscious of their slavery. Thirdly, Marxist and Dalit literatures and literary criticism are committed to the affirmation of life even though their paths are independent and distinct. Fourthly, though Marxist and Dalit literature rejects aestheticism they do not underestimate the value of art. However, Dalit literature demands separate aesthetic interpretation of their literature like that of Black aesthetics for Black literature. Fifthly, considering the philosophical thoughts of Ambedkar and Marx, Dalit writers and critics prefer to analyze the Dalit literary works in the context of Ambedkarite thought which in many ways is analogous to Marxist approach to literature. Limbale says:

Humanity is the religion of Dalit literature therefore in its world, no imaginary or worldly object is greater than the human being. It rebels against any culture, society or literature that degrades the human being. Dalit literature will have to be analyzed
in the context of the Ambedkarite thought system, of which rebellion is an
indivisible part.” (Ibid 69)

Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule, one of the most significant Dalit visionaries, has
been the staunchest critic of Brahminism and identified Brahminical caste as the
central cause of casteism and social segregation. The preface of his powerful book,
Gulamgiri (1873) begins with the following lines:

Since the advent of the rule of Brahmins for centuries (in India), the Sudras and
Atisudras are suffering hardship and are leading miserable lives. To draw people’s
attention to this and that they should thing over their misfortunes and that they
should eventually set themselves free from this tyranny of the Bhattas (Brahmins)
perpetrated on them is the main aim of (writing) his book. (Phule Vol-I, ix)

Phule criticized the Brahmins for having manipulated the religious tracts to
overpower the Sudras and keep them in thralldom for ages. These religious rules are
claimed to have been received from God as revelations. The religious rules
introduced by Manu and others in the form of legends and fantasies were critiqued
by Phule as the clever ploys to unleash Brahminical colonization where the Sudras,
the untouchables are brutally subjugated. Phule points out at the nature of slavery
fostered by Bramhinism:

The system of slavery to which the Brahmins reduced the lower classes is in no
respects inferior to that which obtained a few years ago in America. In the days of
rigid Brahmin dominancy, so lately as that of the time of the Peshwa, my Sudra
Brethren had even greater hardships and oppressions practiced upon them than what
even the slaves in America had to suffer. (Ibid xxxiv)
Dr. Ambedkar was a devout follower of Phule. He considered Phule to be the greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower caste Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher castes. Ambedkar points out how Phule preached the gospel that “social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule” (qtd. in Chandra et al. 264) for India. The Phule-Ambedkarian discourse draws attention to the fact that just as India went through a phase of British colonialism, it had previously passed at various stages of its history through Brahminal colonialism (Michael 91).

Phule used the term ‘Dalit’ to mean the sufferings of the untouchable section of society sanctioned by the caste system of Hinduism. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on the other hand, applied the word ‘Dalit’ to mean the outcastes, the untouchables who are the victims of the age old casteism of Hindu religion. His struggle for the freedom of Dalit from the bondage of untouchability and for their rights to live with respect and equality in society is an inseparable part of interpretation of the term ‘Dalit’. So the meaning of the word ‘Dalit’ is more significant in contextual interpretation than its literary meaning. When contextual explanation of Dalit arises, it has to inevitably go through historical and cultural evolution of Indian Hindu civilization.

Since Ambedkar was a descendent of Mahar community, he had to suffer the stigma of low caste and untouchability throughout his life from childhood in school to manhood as a leader of the untouchables. So, the use of the term ‘Dalit’ is more related to the downtrodden, low caste people in the caste hierarchy. His movement for the socio-economic freedom of the untouchable community was also supplemented by his movement against casteism which he thought to be the root cause of social discrimination in Indian society. He thought for a casteless society
for which he had advocated for greater intermingling of castes through inter-dining, inter-caste marriages, etc. However, he understood that casteism had religious sanction of Hinduism and it deeply entrenched into the cultural realm of society. He had realised that a social movement was necessary to uproot casteism but he was also aware that reformative initiatives in the form of Vaishnavite movement had already failed. So, he thought that casteism could not be uprooted through religious preaching alone. He had famously said, in the style of an anecdote, “Preaching did not make caste-system nor will it unmake it” (qtd. in Dangle xx).

In Yeola Conference Dr. B.R. Ambedkar famously announced that he was born as Hindu but he would not die as Hindu. After having gone through various principles and philosophy of different religions he chose Buddhism as the only religion which could give the Dalits, the untouchables, a casteless life. Dr. Ambedkar did not believe in caste and rebirth, fate and heaven. He believed in humanism based on socio-economic equality. However, all the untouchables were not converted to Buddhism. Many were converted to Christianity and also to Islam. Majority of the untouchables who did not come in contact with Ambedkar’s revolution remained stagnant in Hinduism. So, the people who are still the victims of casteism in Hindu society, the Neo-Buddhists and the converted Christians from among the untouchables come under the definition of ‘Dalit’.

The Dalit movements since Ambedkar’s time have gradually brought in a change of Dalit vision. S.M. Michael in his introduction to his book, *Dalits in Modern India: Visions and Values*, (2007) writes:

Throughout history, socio-cultural and political situations have been changed by the power of certain ideals and visions such tremendous change is in progress in
traditional India and the old values related to caste relationship under great strain. It will not be exaggeration to say that one of the profound changes in contemporary Indian society has been the Dalit transformation of our times. (Michael 13).

As noted by S.M. Michael, there are different views regarding the term ‘Dalit’ especially from the point of view of the postmodernist and poststructuralist critics who challenge the very term. Significantly, the term ‘Dalit’ faces strong rejection from some quarters both from the Dalits and the non-Dalits who argue that the term ‘Dalit’ lacks the ontological ability and the hermeneutic capacity of its own to help the ex-untouchables in their struggle for total emancipation. Romila Thapar speaks of the ‘out of date history’ and according to which certain categories lose their significance in course of time, such as the categories like Arya-Anarya. By the same logic one can argue that categories like Shudra, Ad-Dhamma, etc. have also become ‘out of date history’. However, from the perspective of social reality, Romila Thapar maintains that despite two sets of arguments responding to the theoretical construction of the category called Dalit, it should be treated as a specific category having a political necessity to hold on to it. Satyanarayana, another scholar, is also of the view that it is important to look at the category Dalit as a construct through which it has achieved the hidden culture and textual history of the Dalits. As S.M. Michael would argue, without understanding the cultural and historical rootedness of Dalit category it is not possible to understand the complex social reality of India. (Ibid 14-15).

VI

Dalit Literature has emerged as a distinct genre of Indian literature with the literary movement started by the activists of Dalit Panthers during the 1970s. It
gained mainstream attention in India with the appearance of the English translations of the Marathi Dalit writings (Satchidanadan 2013, 76). In the last part of 20th century several anthologies of Dalit writings were published, translated from various regional languages of India into English such as An Anthology of Dalit Literature (1992) edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot, Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature (2009) edited by Arjun Dangle, The Oxford Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writings (2012) edited by M. Dasan, V. Pratibha, Pradeepan Pampirikunna and C.S. Chandrika, Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing (2012) edited by Ravi Kumar and R. Azhagasan, and No Alphabet in Sight edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, published by Penguin Books in 2011. However, Dangle’s Poisoned Bread republished in 2009 by Orient Black Swan was perhaps able to draw the attention and interest of the readers and critics of Dalit literature in a very significant way. Poisoned Bread is arguably the first book to have popularized the genre throughout contemporary India.

Nevertheless, this cannot be said that there were no creative Dalit writings before the Dalit literary movement that was started by the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s. In fact, the origins of Dalit Writing can be traced back to the Buddhist literature and the Dalit Bhakti poets like, Chokhamela, Gora, Raidas, Karmamela, the Tamil Siddhas or Chittars (6th to 13th Centuries, C.E.). These Bhakti poets experienced untouchability and social inequality so the attempted to reform Hindu religion by removing the evil of untouchability through the egalitarian ideologies of Bhakti movement. These Bhakti poets articulated their resentment through their poetry against the ill practice of caste based social discrimination of Hindu society prevalent across the country in medieval period.
From time immemorial there had been the tyranny of caste system and a large number of low caste Hindus embraced Islam to escape the atrocities of the high caste Hindus. In order to save Hinduism from the crisis of conversion to Islam and modify it with the changed circumstances, the Hindu saints and philosophers took upon themselves the task of reforming Hinduism mainly through the Bhakti movement. However, to many historians it is wrong to assume that the Bhakti movement was a direct outcome of the arrival of Islam in India. In the words of V.D. Mahajan:

In fact, the history of the movement can be traced back to the time of Sankaracharaya who provided a solid background to Hinduism. He established a logical monistic system and laid emphasis on attaining salvation through knowledge. However, as his system was too philosophical, the common people could not follow it. The saints of the medieval times made Hinduism a living force by attracting the popular mind towards it. The movement received great encouragement because the people found solace in devotion to God.” (Mahajan 385-386).

Prof. A.C. Banerjee on the same line argues, “The cult of Bhakti movement was not a medieval contribution to the religious thought. It had a long and a continuous history from the earliest stage of spiritual adventure” (qtd. in Mahajan 387). However, it had two important limitations in its scriptural form. Firstly, it was meant primarily for the spiritual emancipation of the individual and not for his liberation from the social bondage. There was no question of abolishing the caste system. Secondly, there was no elimination of traditional ritual such as worship of idols, recitation of mantras and pilgrimages. This is why it could not become popular.
As noted by Prof. A.C. Banerjee, the Alvars of the Tamil country who flourished between the fifth or sixth and twelfth centuries brought to the Bhakti cult deeper passion and wider social implications. The earliest exponent of the Bhakti movement was Ramanuja of Tirupati followed by Nimbarkara, Madhavacharya and Vallabhacharaya in the south. Ramananda from Banaras was the bridge between the Bhakti movement of the South and the North who was followed by Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Raidas, and Malukdas. When Sankardev and Madhavdeb introduced Bhakti cult in Assam, the far East of the country through Eka-Sharana-Dharma, Chaitanya did it in Bengal followed by Chandidas and Vidyapati. Jnanesvara is the fountainhead of Maharastrian Bhakti cult followed by Namdev, Chokhamela, Eknath, Sena, Janabai, Tukaram, Ramdas, and Bahinabai in the western part of the country. Mirabai, Dadu Dayal, Birbhan from Rajasthan and Guru Nanak from Punjab initiated the Bhakti Movement. This is how the Bhakti cult was popularized among the people across the country during the medieval period.

The important development of the medieval Bhakti movement was that it was one of the early voices of modern deconstructive religious thoughts from the 8th century Tamil Nadu to the 16th century Punjab. It was also characterized by the emergence of the low caste Bhakti saints throughout the country, such as Namdev the tailor, Chokhamela the untouchable Mahar, Gora Kumhar the potter, Sena the barber, Janabai the maid, Kabir the weaver, Raidas the tanner, Tukaram the rural grain trader etc. who expressed their deep concern against casteism. These low caste saint poets had contributed a lot to reform society by denouncing the old social disparity and promoting humanitarian philosophy through their Bhakti lyrics.
These low caste saint poets made significant contributions to Indian literature during the medieval period. Their writings may collectively be described as proto-Dalit. They recited their lyrics criticising the Brahminical orthodoxy. As noted by Amandeep in his article, ‘Dalit Aesthetics: A Study of Bhakti Period’, the beginning of Dalit Literature is rooted in Medieval Bhakti literature for two important reasons. Firstly, most of the Bhakti saint poets were low-caste local preachers and secondly, they launched a blistering attack on canonical Hindu practices (Amandeep 1).

Chokhamela was a thirteenth century saint of Bhakti tradition and was a Mahar, the only important Bhakti figure in Maharashtra from an untouchable caste. Chokhamela and his family seem to have followed the traditional village duties of a Mahar. The legend of his birth involves his parents’ carrying mangoes to Pandharpur on the orders of the village headman, a duty expected of the village servant who was at the beck and call of the Patils. The legend of Chokhamela’s death also involves traditional Mahar work and gods’ grace. He and other Mahars were called to repair the wall at Mangalvedhe another traditional Mahar duty. As they worked on it, it collapsed and buried them. Namdev, the Bhakti saint from Shimpi or tailor community who was Chokhamela’s most devoted friend, went to the village to claim Chokhamela’s body. He found the bones that murmured “Vitthal, Vitthal” and took them to Pandharpur where they were buried near the steps of the temple. Both the legends suggest that Chokhamela and his family without any protest obeyed the village traditional duty of the Mahar caste. His Abhangas, the Bhakti songs suggest some protests against the concept of untouchability. Eleanor Zelliot translated and published a collection of 211 songs which reflect Chokhamela’s deep devotion to Vitthal, the lord Bishnu, and his protest against casteism and untouchability.
As a Bhakti Saint, Chokhamela was also a monotheist and was against the practice of rituals which has been reflected in one of his *Abhangas*:

Why do you need a mirror

...You don’t need to think about ritual;

Chant the Name of Vitthal.

...The chant is free;

Do it first.

Chokhha says: there is bliss in the company

Of the saints;

Chant the Name every night, everyday. (qtd. In Zelliot 5; Abhanga:4)

There are *abhanges*, the Bhakti songs, which refer to his untouchability and also reveal his disturbed state of mind following his despicable place in society. At times his lyrics would resign to his social position and sometimes the lyrics would become rebellious. For example, the *abhanga* quoted below resents his birth in lower-caste:

If you had to give me this birth,

Why give me at all?

You cast me away to be born; you were cruel.

Where were You at the time of my birth?

Who did You help then?

Chokha says: O Lord, O Keshava, don’t let me go. (qtd. Zelliot 5, *Abhanga* 6)
There are some songs which express Chokhamela’s awareness about his social identity as a low-caste Mahar. The Abhanga quoted below represents his personal experience as a low-caste:

O God, my caste is low; how can I serve you?

Everyone tells me to go away; how can I see you?

When I touch anyone, they take offence.

Chokhamela wants Your mercy.

(qtd. in Zelliot 5, Abhanga:76)

In the following Abhanga Chokhamela is critical of the so called concept of purity and impurity in religious interpretations. He deconstructs and philosophises the concept of pollution through rhetoric questions, and the answer of which is known to him:

The only impurity is in the five elements.

There is only one substance in the world.

Then who is pure and who is impure?

... Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure?

(qtd. in Zelliot, 5-6, Abhanga:11)

As expressed by Zelliot, despite protest and questions through his abhangas, it would seem that Chokhameia lived a traditional role life of a Mahar with its usual limitations. The spirit of most of the abhangas is searching for delight with selfless devotion and surrender unto Lord Vitthal which is the only way to get rid of life’s suffering (Zelliot 8). In the abhanga quoted below, for instance, he is less critical of
the excesses of Hindu orthodoxy and is more apologetic about his own karma and birth:

Pure Chokhamela, always chanting the name.
I am a Mahar without a caste. Nila in a previous birth.
He showed disrespect to Krishna; so my birth as a Mahar.
Chokh says: this impurity is the fruit of our past.
(qtd.in Zelliot 7, Abhanga 4).

Chokhamela’s voice is perhaps considered as the first Dalit voice in terms of interrogating the caste structure. However, his protest is mainly contained in bhakti. Similarly, another low-caste bhakti poet of north India, Ravidas, who is supposed to be more radical than Chokha, also succumbs to the pressures of the sacred during the moments of his vehement protest:

Whether one’s heart is Brahmin or Vaisya,
Shudra or Kshatriya,
Dom, chandal, or malech,
Through the worship of the lord, one becomes pure, and
Liberates the self and both family lines…
Just as the water plants leaf remains nectar the water
[But untouched by it],
In this way, says Ravidas,
Is the life [of the blessed] in this world?
(qtd. in Zelliott 197)

Kabir, a bhakti poet from northern India, is famous for his iconoclastic outpours in his Bijaks (lyrics). He is best-known for his renditions exhorting equality of caste and religions in highly poetic, picturesque and fiercely vivid
images. He questions the concept of purity so-obsessively advocated by the twice-born Brahmins. He asks in one of his Bijaks:

Tell me, O pandit,
what place is pure
where I can sit
and eat my meal?

(qtd. in Dharwadkar 124).

Subsequently, he goes on to enlist practically every site of life which are dismissed by the Brahmins as impure:

Cowdung’s impure,
The bathing-square’s impure –
Its very curbs are nothing but impure.
Kabir says.
Only they are pure
who’ve completely cleansed
their thinking. (qtd. in Dharwadkar 125)

The Maharastrian bhakti movement, similar to the bhakti movement throughout India, was founded on the experience of God rather than on traditional piety or rituals. It was characterized by anti-orthodox protest against inequality with regard to both women and shudras. The radical stance and inclusiveness of this movement, however, were largely confined to religious plans. The action on the issue of social equality was trivial (Paswan et al. 16). The Bhakti lyrics profess the poetics of surrender which ultimately ushers the poetics of concerted resistance
against Brahminical oppression. Though in the context of modern Dalit-radical perspective the resistance against the Brahminic rituals seem compromising and moderate in terms of protest, the initiation of protest by the bhakti poets against ritualistic inequality is quite revolutionary. It destablished the orthodoxy of Brahminism and left a dent in its hegemony.

Just as the poetics of resistance against the inequal Brahminic rituals, and preaching of democratic values by bhakti cults of medieval time, the Dalit personal narratives have also been an important form of expressing the poetics of resistance. Dalit literature, irrespective of forms, culture and society is autobiographical (in content) as they write out of the authenticity of experience rather than out of mere imaginative impulses. When the mainstream autobiographies are written to celebrate their achievements in the later part of their life, the Dalit autobiographies, on the contrary, are written in their early part of life to express their pain both physical and mental. The questions arise – what are the factors that prompt the Dalit writers to write autobiographies? Why have the Dalit autobiographies been written in their early part of life? How do the Dalit autobiographers perceive their selves? If the Dalit autobiographies are written to assert identity in Indian literature how do they do it? What kind of aesthetics and techniques do they follow as part of their narrative strategy? These and more are the questions that problematize the whole discourse of Dalit autobiography which the present study seeks to address.

VII

Five prominent autobiographical works have been selected for this study to analyze the emerging Dalit identity in Indian literature. All the selected autobiographical works have been written in regional languages of India and they
are Ompraksh Valmiki’s, *Joothan* (1997) in Hindi; Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste – Akkarmashi* (1984) in Marathi; Lakshman Maruti Gaikward’s *Uchalya* (1987) in Marathi; Vasant Moon’s *Vasti* (1995) in Marathi and Faustina Bama’s *Kurukku* (1992) in Tamil. Subsequently, these autobiographical works have been translated into English. Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003) was translated by Arun Prabha Mukharjee; Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste – Akkaramashi* (2007) was translated by Santosh Bhoomkar; Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* translated into English with the title, *The Branded* (1998), by P.A. Kolharkar; Vasant Moon’s *Vasti* was translated by Gail Omvedt with the title, *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (2001), and Faustina Bama’s *Kurukku* (2001) was translated by Lakshmi Holmstorm. These autobiographies have been discussed in the subsequent chapters in the light of marginality and aesthetic theory which leads to the subsequent assertion of their Dalit identity.

There are hundreds of Dalit autobiographies written in different regional languages in India since 1950s. There are about more than fifty autobiographies written in Marathi alone during 1975 and 1990. They can be divided into three broad categories- autobiographies by male writers, female writers and the autobiographies of tribal experience which raise voice against all sorts of exploitations- social, economic, political, and religious. These books were not written to delineate the life-long experience of an individual writer but to expose an ugly facet of social reality which had remained unnoticed and unknown to the so called civilized lot of the world.

The major autobiographies have mostly been written in the 1970s. Five autobiographies have been selected by five renowned Dalit writers for the proposed research study represent different castes of Dalit community of three different
provinces of India. All of them have made significant contributions to their regional literature and the authors of the works have been awarded for their eminent literary works. In terms of Dalit literature, these five autobiographies have attained almost canonical status. These works have powerfully questioned the values and ethics of the institutional narratives promoted by the existing Bramhanical literatures.

The autobiographies have been selected for this study represent different ethnic community of Indian Dalits to examine the diversity and unity of Dalit culture. The authors of these autobiographies come from different types of profession that give them space for diversified experiences from their cultural, socio-political and literary activities. They are also activists who worked in different places and experienced the socio-cultural condition of Dalit people. There has been apparent silence of the Dalit woman's voice that raises new questions about the experiences of being both a Dalit and a woman. It cannot be denied that, within the Dalit autobiographers' imagination of Dalit identity, there remains certain boundaries which challenge the autobiographer's ability to be wholly representative and thereby to define the total identity of the Dalits.

_Joothan: A Dalit’s Life_ by Omprakash Valmiki was written in Hindi in 1997 and translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee. When Valmiki’s _Joothan_ was published by Samaya in 2004 in English translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, a teacher of English at York University, Toronto, the book won the New India Foundation Best Book Award. Sumit Guha, one of the subaltern historians, on the blurb of the 2007 edition of the book, described it as ‘a searing memoir of the life of the sensitive and intelligent Dalit Youth in independent India’. It tells how he overcame contempt, humiliation and violence to gain education and join the slowly growing ranks of Dalit intellectuals and the Dalit literary movement in India. Omprakash Valmiki is a
poet and a literary critic, and now is an established name in Hindi literature. He narrates the excruciatingly painful life of his growing up in a village near Muzzafarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, in an untouchable community, Chuhra, well before the defiant term ‘Dalit’ was coined. As observed by Valmiki, “only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting” (Joothan vii).

An acknowledged masterpiece, *The Outcaste-Akkaramashi* by Sharankumar Limbale, is the emotionally violent autobiography of a half-caste growing up in the Mahar community. The book manifests the anguish he suffers from for having not belonging fully to a community. First published in 1984, this book captures the anguish and irreverence of the cultural movement that opened up Marathi literature to Dalit writings. It was translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, a teacher of English at Shri Saraswati Bhuwan Arts and Commerce College of Aurangabad. In *The Outcaste* Sharan, the protagonist is obsessed by his fractured identity whether he is an upper caste or an untouchable. It has provided typical insights into the question of Dalit identity. The work is considered as a milestone in Indian literature in translation that helped expose the Dalit cause. A first person narrative, it is a touching account of a community in the hands of a thoughtless privileged class.

Laxman Maruti Gaikwad was born in 1956 at Dhanegaon, in Latur district of Maharashtra. His *Uchalya* was written in Marathi and was published in 1987. Later on, it was translated by P.A. Kolharkar into English and published in 1998. The book gained international recognition with the new title, *The Branded: Uchalya*. The autobiography is considered as a masterpiece that brings forth the trials and tribulations of the narrator’s tribe, Uchalya, literally means the pilferers, a term coined by the British who classified the community as a criminal tribe. His treatment of the Dalit theme, in which his own delicate subjectivity is entrenched, is widely
acclaimed for its masterful sensitivity and supreme craftsmanship. He depicts in all their subtlety and poignancy the inner feelings, sufferings and emotional complexities of his tribe historically viewed as criminals. This autobiographical work tells the story of a member of the Uchalya tribe who overcomes the disabilities arising out of the circumstances of his birth and his eventual emergence as a leader of the dispossessed people. As he faces all sorts of the challenges of oppression based on casteism and untouchability, he gets wise to the ways of the rich and the powerful and recognises the inadequacies of the Dalit leadership. When this work first appeared in 1987, it created much excitement in Marathi literary circles. In 1988 the autobiography was selected for the prestigious Sahitya Academi Award.

Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, a Tamil Dalit woman from a Roman Catholic family. She is one of the prominent Dalit writers and has written three full length works of prose literature, such as, her autobiography Karukku (1992), two novels Sangati (1994) and Vanmam (2002) along with three collections of short stories in Tamil. Karukku is the first autobiography of its kind in Tamil as Dalit writing in this language has not produced many autobiographies which have appeared in Marathi Dalit literature. Karukku was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstorm and was published in 2001. The book won the prestigious Crossword Award establishing Bama as one of the distinct voices in Indian Literature. Karukku focuses on Bama’s ‘sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, and a Dalit.’ Her landless ancestors and parents worked as labourers for the landlords (in Karukku xv-xvi).

The autobiography Karukku (1992) was conceived at a moment of personal crisis in Bama’s life when she as a Christian Dalit woman with a burning desire to work for the upliftment of the oppressed group that she herself belongs to. She
became a nun with a sense of mission, to work for the poor and the deprived only to find the institution so rife with many contradictions. *Karukku* was written at a point of time when she had just abandoned the job of a nun and was caught in the painful dilemma of deciding the course of her future life. Bama has confessed that she wrote *Karukku* to ‘stop herself from dying’.

Vasant Moon, a renowned Ambedkarite, was born in 1932 at Nagpur. He was invited and appointed by the Maharastra Government to edit *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* in sixteen volumes. His autobiography *Vasti* in Marathi was first published by Granthali in 1995. Gail Omvedt, translated it into English with the title, *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* and was published in 2001.

Vasant Moon’s autobiography exposes the powerful memoirs of a youth in the slums of central India struggling with the condition of material deprivation, caste conflict and neighborhood politics which boosted the rise of Dalit militancy and spirituality. The autobiography depicts the caste system that existed in the mixed colonies of the Brahmins, Marwaries, Bengalis and the Madrasis in his neighbourhood. However, he has given a penetrating description of how there were many sub-castes within the same Mahar community and what the feeling of untouchability among them was. The narrative also gives a historical account of various Dalit movements which provide insights into the future of the liberation of the Dalits. The narrative about his conscious association with various struggles of the community movements renders its readers a pragmatic approach to the Dalit issues.

The subsequent chapters discuss the select set of Dalit autobiographies considering various themes and issues of Dalit life and Dalit literature. The
autobiographies have been studied to understand the marginalized voice of the Dalit individuality as well as the communal Dalit identity that has been asserted by the autobiographical narrators through various events, thoughts and insights. There has also been an attempt to identify the position of the Dalit writers in the formation of aesthetics of Dalit literature.
Dalit Autobiographies: An Analysis

The only impurity is in the fire elements.

There is only one system in the world.

Then who is pure and who is impure?

The cause of pollution is the creation of the body.

In the beginning, at the end, there is nothing but pollution.

No one knows anyone who was born pure.

Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure?

(Abhanga-11, by Chokhamela; qtd. in Zelliot 2005, 5)

I

Autobiography has remained a significant segment of Dalit literature since 1960s and 70s. The Dalit writers termed the autobiographical narratives as ‘self stories’ (Atmakatha) or ‘self-reportings’ (Atma vritta) (Kumar 2011, 150). Dalit literature, as a genre, has emerged through the Dalit movement in Maharashtra in the 1960s, and later on in the other parts of the country. Similarly, Dalit autobiography also became popular in Maharashtra and subsequently in the other provinces as one of the significant sub-genres of Dalit writings. When Dalit Marathi poetry aims at decanonizing literature, Dalit autobiographies attempt to unveil the wretchedness and miseries of the Dalit life and experiences through first-hand accounts. Till recently, there have been more than eighty major Dalit autobiographies written in various Indian languages as well as in English.
A large part of the Dalit literature is autobiographical in form. It may be noted that their poetry, novels, critical prose writings, theatrical dialogues etc. are in confessional mode. The ‘confessions’ are mostly made to invoke the painful experiences that the authors have gone through in a caste ridden society. Dalit writers mostly prefer to write out of authenticity of experience instead of soaring high with the wings of imagination (Bhogle 158). Many of the poems and novels elaborate the personal life and individual experiences of writers themselves with a realization that other members of their community also suffer in the same way.

The emergence of Dalit autobiography opens up a new dimension to the study of autobiography in Indian literature. Dalits are marginalized entities and were denied education for quite long time by the society infested with casteism and social hierarchy. After being educated, some of them took writing as a weapon for self assertion and as an act of protest. Rajkumar emphasizes that “writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression” (Kumar 2011, 5).

The genre, autobiography has flourished as a post-capitalist literary emergence which is generally believed to have the aim to record an individual’s achievements and attainments. But this act of recording one’s self achievement is not applicable in case of the Dalit autobiographies. Instead of celebrating the self, the Dalits narrate a life of pain and suffering of their collective lot.

Autobiographies emerged as a major literary exercise of the Dalits in the 1950s, much before the Dalit literature evolved into a distinctive genre in the context of Indian literature. The reason could be that the Dalits who gained the opportunity
of education and were exposed to the Ambedkarite ideology became aware of the necessity to evolve a sense of Dalit consciousness among themselves and realized the need for the portrayal of their battered souls through writings. In the process they try to attain power from below by reconstructing their identity and social history. The autobiographies turned out to be emphatic outbursts of their smouldering anger taking on the hegemonic paradigms of the Brahminical values glorified in the mainstream literatures. The Dalit autobiographies also play a significant role in reconstructing the Dalit cultural historiography in the postcolonial context of Indian literature.

The Dalit autobiographies are characterized by some specific features that differentiate them from the other Indian autobiographies. Firstly, most of the Dalit autobiographies are written in the early part of the respective author’s life. Secondly, the identity assertion is one of the key features of Dalit autobiography with an emphasis on caste, class, gender, ethnicity, language, region etc. Thirdly, the Dalit autobiographies are largely recollections of their wretched experiences as social pariahs and veritable outsiders. Fourthly, by defying the existing norms imposed by the mainstream codes, the Dalit autobiographers mobilize resistance. By writing autobiographies the Dalit writers raise voice against all forms of oppression. Fifthly, through the writing of autobiographies the Dalit writers try to rediscover and reconstruct their socio-cultural history of dehumanizing oppression and exploitations in every sphere of their life.

According to Raj Kumar, “writing autobiography is a political act because there is always an assertion of the narrative self” (Ibid 3). Autobiography is a narrative that involves remembrance, but this act of remembrance is not a random act but a process of selective recollection. The process involves, what Maurice
Halbwachs has described as communicative memory which is socially communicated and relates to a group. As Halbwachs pointed out, the recreation of memory by itself does not preserve the past, it is preserved by society’s contemporary frame of reference in respective era leading to the, what he called, ‘concretion of identity’. The autobiography has evolved into a major discourse that has provided the crucial trajectory for the concretion of Dalit identity and its social location (see details in Aasmaan).

The location of self is an important subject for analyzing an autobiographical text. The identity of a person is determined on the basis of the location to which he or she belongs because the person will undergo the experiences in life accordingly. In order to understand the life-experiences of a person, several identity criteria in terms of location, such as - caste, class, ethnicity, language, religion, region, gender etc. can be put to test. Each of these criteria has to be thoroughly examined while studying an autobiography so that we are able to understand the person’s affiliation to a particular universe of meaning and experience, and its world view. On different locations the experience of lives may be different. Therefore, all aspects of life, such as, social, political, economic, religious, psychological, philosophical, etc. need to be considered in order to understand how the narrator has coped with his or her life, time and society. So without going through the locations of individuals the act of generalization of life experiences may lead to wrong interpretation of the autobiographies and the authors (Kumar 2013, 3).

II

Paula Moya points out in the introduction to Reclaiming Identity (2001) that the concept of identity has been a major topic and widely discussed by the feminists,
anti-colonialists, scholars of ethnic and race studies; by the theorists of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, queer theory and cultural materialist thinking for decades. However, to her, the discourses on identity have often been not free from debate and inconsistency. She writes:

…much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimate, and in some cases eliminate, the concept itself by revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations. (Moya et al. 1-2)

Moya explores how the debates around identity and multiculturalism have been developed in particular contexts of history, as various notions of group and cultural identities were formed amidst contentious fields of social changes.

Essentialism, a controversial theoretical position in terms of identity theory, refers to a set of characteristics or properties which are common to a given entity. These sets of characteristics are the essences that characterize a substance or a form. The Essentialists consider these characteristics as the fixed traits of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or other markers. They do not allow variations of these traits among individuals or even over time in multi-cultural social spaces. The problem is that if essence implies permanence and inalterability, essentialist thinking tends to agree with political conservatism and militate against social change. But in many ways essentialist claims also have contributed useful rallying-points for radical politics, including feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial struggles. In a culture imbued with essentialist modes of thinking, an ironic or strategic essentialism can sometimes be politically advantageous (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essentialism). In the context of the Dalit discourse, it
has largely been the assertion to resist the essentialisation of their individual and social identities.

Paula Moya underlines various limitations of the problematic of essentialist tendencies. Firstly, the essentialist has a tendency to posit with one aspect of identity as the sole cause or a determinant for the construction of social meanings of an individual’s or community’s experience. However, the major contention is that the identities are constituted differently in different historical contexts. As for example, a slave woman in antebellum America might experience her “womanness” differently from a middle class housewife living in Victorian England. So contrary to essentialist’s view, identity category is neither stable nor internally homogenous. Secondly, the instability and heterogeneity of identity categories lead to a range of additional problems turning it impossible to determine the processes of identity formation with unified or monolithic concepts.

The French poststructuralists’ view on the concept of identity is exemplified by the way deconstruction has been applied in social and cultural theories. The theory of deconstruction asserts that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by the language we speak. Since our language is unstable and ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies, we ourselves are unstable and ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies. To the deconstructionists, the self-image of stable identity that many of us have is really just a comforting self-delusion which we produce in collusion with our culture, as culture also wants to see itself as stable and coherent when in reality it is highly unstable and fragmented. In reality, we don’t have identity as the word implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact, we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties,, and intentions. The deconstructionist thesis about
the arbitrariness and indeterminacy of linguistic reference led many U.S. literary theorists and cultural critics to understand the concepts of experience and identity as similarly indeterminate and therefore epistemologically unreliable. The questions on the very concept of identity raised by the postmodernist critics can be briefed in a related set of ideas: such as (i) objectivity is impossible, (ii) we cannot know the external world, (iii) identities are untenable, (iv) experience cannot yield genuine knowledge, and (v) universal moral ideas are baseless (Tyson 259).

The postpositivist critics of identity find that identities are evalutatable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences. Our conceptions about which we are as social beings influence us and in turn are influenced by our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences in the society are likely to be. However, the point to be considered here is that our different views about how our society is structured and where we and others fit into that totality (society) are not all equally accurate. Moya says, “Identities are thus not simply products of structures of power; they are often assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated” (Moya 9).

The postpositivist realists claim that neither the essentialist nor the postmodernist parameters are adequate frame of references to explain the social, political and epistemological significance of identities. According to them, identities can be both real and constructed. When the identities can be politically and epistemologically significant, on the other, they are also variable, nonessential, and radically historical. To the realists, subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but is an important component of it (Ibid 12-17).
III

Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct literary genre and as such an important testing ground for critical controversies ranging from the ideas of authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. Autobiographical writings are traced back from Plato’s time and have expressed itself in the form of a genre since Rousseau’s *Confession* was written. Now it is a popular form in the West as well as in the East. The postcolonial study includes the autobiographies of both the third and the fourth world writers, such as the Afro-American, the Indian Dalits and all the other subaltern autobiographical narratives.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to analyze select Dalit autobiographies to examine how the Dalit writers narrate their social location and assert their identities through their writings. In this regard five prominent Dalit autobiographies have been chosen covering three linguistic communities, the autobiographies are - Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste-Akkarmashi* (2007), Faustina Bama’s *Karukku* (2001) Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya-The Branded* (1998) and Vasant Moon’s *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (2007).

The potentiality of autobiography as a literary genre has been widely accepted. The Oxford dictionary defines ‘genre’ as “a kind or style especially of art or literature, e.g., novel, drama, satire” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English 1990, 491). Todorov in his article ‘The Origine of Genres’ (1976) elaborately discusses how genre existed in the good old days of the classics – ballads, odes, sonnets, tragedies and comedies. He, however, observes that the modern writers ‘no longer respect the separation of the genres’ (Todorov et al. 159).
Todorov claims autobiography as another genre which he described in terms of two identities: firstly, the author with the narrator and secondly the narrator with the main character. The first identity, i.e., ‘author with the narrator’ separates autobiography from the novel as a genre. In brief this, identity separates the entire ‘referential’ or ‘historical’ genre from the genre of ‘fiction’ (ibid 168). To him autobiography as a genre involves a speech act that codifies both semiotic properties of narrator-character identity and pragmatic properties of author-narrator identify that one claims to tell the truth and not the fiction. In this way this speech act is extremely widespread outside literature. To become a literary genre, the speech act which is the base of the identity of the genre has to undergo numerous transformations.

Raj Kumar, a major critic of Dalit personal narratives, claims that defining autobiography is not an easy task because today’s definition might get changed tomorrow following ‘shifting priorities in literature and society’ (Kumar 2011, 10). In Greek, however, ‘autos’ denotes ‘self’; ‘bios’ ‘life, and ‘graphe’ ‘writing’ (Smith 1). When all these words are taken together in order, it would mean ‘self-life-writing’. The term offers a brief definition of autobiography, nevertheless.

Philippe Lejeune speaks of four essential elements of autobiography, such as prose as the medium, real life as the subject matter, author as the narrator, and retrospective as the point of view. This is a normative definition of autobiography which suggests some boundary lines to be followed while writing an autobiography. But by going through a number of autobiographies it is seen that all texts do not necessarily follow the guidelines as proposed by Lejuene. They are diverse in themes and structures and demand a complex strategy of reading. Estelle Jelinek
prescribes that a good autobiography should have certain qualities. Firstly, it must centre exclusively or mostly on the author and not on others. Secondly, it should be representative of its times. Thirdly, the autobiographer should be aware of her/his self and seeker of self knowledge. Fourthly, he or she must aim to explore and not to exhort. Fifthly, his or her autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some personal mythos, etc. (in Kumar 2011, 11).

Estelle Jelinek’s attempt to define a good and bad autobiography is not necessarily an attempt to homogenise the entire discussion of autobiography into two groups. Because in the context of heterogeneous socio-cultural experiences of individuals, the autobiographies will definitely be different from one another. Thus over the years different aspects of autobiographies have generated different responses among the critics.

Literariness of autobiography is a debatable issue. Since Dalit writers are writing autobiography as an important genre, it is pertinent to examine how far these autobiographies can be accepted as a genre of literature. Paul De Man in his critical essay, “Autobiography as Defacement”, defies autobiography as a literary genre. He states that the study of autobiography is based on a set of problematic and restrictive assumptions. To his view, it is a mistake to imagine autobiography as a literary genre since the very idea of genre presupposes historical and aesthetic classifications like novel, the epic, the lyric etc. He also focuses his attention on the difficulty of supposed distinction between autobiography and fiction as autobiography demands verifiability of events which is not the case for fiction. He says that autobiography is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs in some degree in all texts. Autobiography takes place when a text involves two
persons constructing their own identities through the reading of each other (McQuillan 74-76). Generally, confessions, journals, memoirs, meditations, and self portraits are often recognized as different forms of autobiography. The elements of autobiography are present in fiction, poetry, and even drama and they have been read as forms of autobiography albeit in dramatized forms. K. Satchidanandan in his article, “Thinking of Autobiography” (2001) says that the border between fiction and autobiography is particularly thin as they often employ similar techniques. The difference between the two genres depends on the unstated pact between the reader and the writer. It is autobiography when the reader suspends disbelief and promises to accept the author’s work as truth and the moment the trust is broken, the border becomes blurred and autobiography becomes fiction. (Satchitanandan 201-202)

Roy Pascal in his ‘Design and Truth in Autobiography’ argues convincingly that autobiography is a unique literary form offering its readers a complex set of interpretative problems. But Pascal’s sensitive analysis of the genre is spoiled by his rather insistent value judgments. To him the ‘true’ autobiography tells us not only the remembered deeds and thoughts but also brings forth both for the author and reader ‘a spiritual experiment, a voyage of discovery’ (Howarth 363). William L. Howarth in his essay, “Some Principles of Autobiography” (1974), proposes a simple analogy between an ‘autobiography’ and a ‘self portrait’. Each of those single quoted words suggests a double entity, expressed as a series of reciprocal transactions. According to him, the ‘self’ thinks and acts and it knows that it exists alone and with others. A self portrait as an entity is space and time, illusion and reality, painter and also the model, and each of these elements places a demand, yields a concession. On the other hand, a ‘self-portrait’ is even more uniquely transactional.
In Aristotelian sense autobiography is a literary art as it is a conscious verbal construct written for specific purpose – a purpose which helps to shape the work, and without which there would be no work. A particular autobiography can be better or worse as literary art in relation to how well or poorly the autobiographer shapes his or her materials to achieve the inherent purpose or organizing principle.

Autobiographies need to be studied as a whole work of art, as noted by Barret John Mandel. Literary critics still tend to concentrate on isolated beauties in an autobiography rather than on the work as a whole because, as Charles Neider believes, “One of the ironies of art is that it is possible to win a war and lose the battles, and… it is more tragic to lose the battles than the war” (qtd. in Mandel 217). To his argument a war is won because its battles are won.

There are certain limitations for an autobiography to become literature. Firstly, the materials used in autobiography must be the content of his or her own life. Secondly, the autobiographer must limit himself or herself casting retrospective glances back over history while a writer of fiction is free to create a world that might even never have existed in the way it is depicted. Thirdly, the autobiographer must write with fidelity to the spirit of the truth. It is certain that every autobiographer explicitly or implicitly professes that he or she will speak the truth at least what has been selected to make public. These three limitations differentiate an autobiography from a fiction. Despite these limitations autobiographer has much freedom in its choice of organizing principle, form and devices of representation which can have much literary elements to consider autobiography as literature (Mandel 219-220).

Autobiography has been a well established literary genre for a long time in the west which can be traced back to Plato’s time in the fourth century B.C. An
important period of Plato’s life is described in his *Seventh Epistle* (fourth century BC). As noted by Raj Kumar there are also sources which tell us that some of the early Roman rulers like Lutatius, Catulus, Sarus, Rutilius, Rufus, Sulla, Caesar had left behind some accounts of their military achievements (Kumar 2011, 8-9).

The confessional mode of writing underwent great changes in Europe when Christianity became an established religion and the continent lost its earlier novelty. This happened during the Middle Ages and especially during the Renaissance when non-confessional and secularly oriented autobiographical accounts of life began to appear. In the course of time autobiographical writing has developed into a unique and autonomous genre describing its author’s life.

In the context of the Indian literary tradition autobiography as a genre developed from the nineteenth century onwards. In comparison to the Western autobiographical tradition, writing about one’s personal life-story is a relatively recent literary exercise in India. As noted by Raj Kumar, there existed several self-narratives from the ancient times. Benarsidas’ *Ardhakathanaka*, published in 1641, is considered to be the first full-fledged Indian autobiography. But we begin to find regular autobiography as a literary genre from the late nineteenth century. Some of the interesting autobiographies published during this period were written by women. One of the remarkable works is *Shaheed-e-Rana* published in 1897 which is an autobiography of a prostitute written in Urdu. Another remarkable work came from Ramabai Sarasvati who wrote *Ramabai: The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1890). Vidyasagar’s incomplete autobiography published in 1891 is a delightful work of unfulfilled possibilities. Narayan Hemchandra’s Gujrati autobiography *Hum Pote* (1900), Ambika Datta Vyas’, *Nij Vrtaant* (Hindi 1901), Lala Lajpat Rai’s, *The Story
of My Deportation (1908), Nehru’s Autobiography (1936), Subhash Chandra Basu’s The Indian-Pilgrim (1948, tr. from Bengali), M.N. Roy’s Fragments of Prisoner’s Diary (1941), M.K. Gandhi’s The Story of My Experiences with Truth (1927), Nirad Choudhury’s An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1951) and Mulk Raj Anand’s An Apology for Heroism (1946) are some of the noted Indian autobiographies (Ibid 43).

The critical studies of the autobiographies/personal narratives have been slow to emerge in India. The reasons are obvious. The literary critics in India have not felt drawn to this, otherwise, important genre. The few Indian autobiographies which have widely drawn attention of the researchers are Gandhi’s, Nehru’s and Nirad C. Chaudhury’s. They individually represented different world views, but socio-culturally they belonged to a common category, i.e., they were from the upper caste and were quite privileged to have an audience worldwide. Since their autobiographies were available in English from the very beginning, the critics working on autobiographies naturally picked them up to evaluate their lives and writings. In recent times there have been a considerable number of critical studies on Indian upper caste women’s autobiographies. On the other hand, the Dalits, who have been raising their voices for quite some time through their respective personal narratives were rarely heard of and thus systematically neglected in the academic circle and subsequently have been deprived of critical attention.

IV

Raj Kumar in his Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity (2011) emphatically states that the anti-colonial movement in India led people of the upper caste to write autobiographies. These autobiographies are mostly
written to celebrate their ‘self’. But in the beginning of post-independent period, the Dalits started writing autobiography as an act of self-assertion and resistance against caste oppression and social neglect. He says, “The writing of autobiography was used by the members of this oppressed group to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against caste and class oppression” (Kumar 157).

The Dalit autobiographers have documented their experiences of pain and sufferings, both physical and epistemological, through various social processes of deprivation, caste segregation, untouchability, denial of education, abject poverty, forced child labour, exploitation of Dalit women, physical and mental persecution, dehumanisation of their body and so on. These experiences alert the Dalit autobiographers and their community to struggle for self respect and social emancipation through education and assertive articulations. Slowly but steadily the Dalit consciousness emerged to address their experience of social exploitation as well as physical and epistemic violence. The Dalit autobiographers have made it a point to record these experiences of oppression and deprivation through their attempt to reconstruct their individual as well as social history. The assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme of their autobiographies as a strategy to resist the normative codes of the mainstream values and make a critique of the hypocritical stance of the high caste people, the hierarchies prevalent in the social structure, and the Brahminical and of the castiest ethics that essentially govern every aspect of social order. Thus the Dalit autobiographies are formidable examples of subaltern narrative of the self.

Omprakash Valmiki, in his preface to the Hindi edition of Joothan⁶ (Translated as Joothan: A Dalit’s Life, by Arun Prabha Mukharjee, 2003) says that
his autobiography expresses those ‘experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations’ (vii). He notes that in the process of writing this autobiography, a lot has remained unsaid as he could not manage to record them all. It is quite clear that he has taken recourse to selective remembrance as a strategy in recording his experiences which is not only mere act of writing but a project for self-representation. His autobiography narrates his childhood experiences in the village that was situated at the outskirt, at the periphery of the village boundary; his painful school life and his growing up as one of the Chudras, an untouchable caste. The autobiography also records how Valmiki came in contact with several people while he was a trainee in various ordinance factories. Through those new acquaintances he got the opportunity to display his creative faculty in theatre that inspired his own interest in dramatic performances and creative writing. During his stay in Jabalpur he was actively involved with writing and Dalit activism. Significantly, his autobiography also addresses the issue of identity crisis of the Dalits both as an individual and part of a community.

Realization of physical segregation of the Dalits from the mainstream high caste society has been one of the central themes of Dalit autobiographical narratives. Valmiki’s *Joothan* begins with a narration on the physical demarcation of the living spaces of the villagers which was primarily drawn on the basis of caste affiliation. The caste based segregation of spaces is a real and tangible experience for the Dalits that would get ingrained in their psyche to eventually condition their self-perception. Valmiki’s house was adjacent to Chandrabhan Taga’s gher or cowshed and there was a pond that demarcated the boundaries between the villagers of the *Tagas*, the high caste people and the *Chuhras*, the untouchables. The open space behind the dwellings of *Chuhras* was used as public shitting place without worrying about
decency (*Joothan* 1). Through this physical separation of living spaces Valmiki shows how social existence was essentially determined through the casteist segregation that forced social division of society in terms of caste identity. Such compartmentalization of the societies is an important characteristic of colonialism as noted by Frantz Fanon in the essay, “Concerning Violence”, included in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. (1963, 39) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar too noted how the untouchables were the ‘broken men’, and forced to live outside the village (*The Untouchables*, 45). By exposing the segregated settlement of the Dalits and the non-Dalits in the autobiographical narratives, the Dalit autobiographers have underlined how the social living for them has been a perennial experience of segregated existence in a society predominantly governed by the scourge of brahmanical caste hegemony in the line of western racism and colonial imperialism.

Bama’s *Karukku* (2001) begins with the narration of compartmentalized settlement of the lower castes which were demarcated from the upper caste settlements through a series of roads. The roads were the indicators to identify the caste based colonies. The Dalit colonies had further divisions based on their sub-castes, such as, *Nadars, Koravars, Chakkiliyar, Kusavar, Palla, and Paraya* (*Karukku* 7). Bama describes that at the entrance of her village there was a small bus terminus from where the buses did not go further as if the ‘entire world ended there’ (*Ibid* 6). Beyond the bus stand, there was a stream that ran in full spate during rainy season that turned into a stinking shit-field when the stream was dry. The stream marked the boundary line of the narrator’s colony. The physical description of the habitation reveals the marginalized and segregated status of the lower caste groups of Bama’s community.
However, the upper caste settlements were beyond the streets of the Thevar, the Chettiyaar, the Aassari and the Nadar. The author-narrator found it to be a paradox that in a country that is supposedly socialist and democratic that upheld the values like liberty and equality, but ironically people actually lived in settlements with caste based segregation in the same country. She writes:

I do not know how it came about that the upper caste communities and the lower caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had works to do there. But they never, ever came to our parts. (Karukku 7)

As noted by Fanon, the Western colonial settlers set up educational institutions, denying educations to their ‘Others’- the colonized. So is the case in the Indian segregated settlements too. The upper castes established educational institutions in their own areas of settlement denying the same to the untouchables. Post Offices, the Panchayat boards, milk depots, big shops, the Church, the schools and all the other social institutions were set up only in the settlements of the upper caste people. This physical segregation of the Dalits from the non-Dalits suggests the separation of the other. The works the Dalits do; the life they live; the food they eat; the garments they wear are different from the upper caste Hindus. They draw water from a separate well, and the even the space for cremation is also separate. As rightly noted by Alok Mukherjee, “Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s Other” (in Valmiki 2003, 2).

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his autobiography, The Outcaste: Akkarmashi (2007), narrates the settlement of the untouchables at Maharwada, a place dwelled
by the Mahars, which was segregated from the upper caste of the locality. There was a peculiar turn of events in the life of Limbale. His grandmother, Santamai, quarrelled with Limbale’s mother, Masamai, and left the house along with young Limbale to live by the Maharwada bus stand braving cold and rain.

Similarly, we come across the description of separate settlements of the untouchables in Laxman Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* (1998) as well as in Basant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2001). *Uchalya* are a pilferer tribe. Since the British government branded them as born criminals they were not given any job in any farm or taken for any household work. They never had any permanent settlement; they mostly used to dwell near the stations or market places. The author suffers identity crisis when it comes to location of ‘self’ in comparison to his counterparts in established mainstream society. He opens up his autobiography with the discourse of segregated identity that his memory goes back to the experience of his childhood as, “No native place. No birth date. No house or farm. No caste, either. That is how I was born. In *Uchalya* community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur” (*The Branded* 1). He further writes:

> It is there that I grew through childhood and youth. I still remember our hut. It was nothing more than a low, hay thatched roof. All of us had to crawl on our hands and knees to get in or out.” (*The Branded* 1)

Basant Moon in *Growing up* describes the slum dwellings constructed by the Municipality board at Nagpur where his family, along with other untouchable Mahars, used to live cutting away from the mainstream upper caste inhabitations. As he describes, “At the east end of the settlement stood a very long apartment building,
beyond that lived a mixed colony of Brahmins, Marwaris, Bengalis, and Madrasis” (Growing Up Untouchable 2).

Most of these autobiographies begin with the description of the segregation of the Dalit dwellings from the upper caste colonies, which itself distinguishes these writings from the other mainstream Indian autobiographies. This segregation is questioned by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his The Untouchable (1948) where he speaks of the ‘Broken Men’ who are the conquered tribes and are not allowed to live in newly established settlement by the conquerors. They were allowed to live outside or at the border of the settlement to “watch and ward for the settled tribes and the settled tribes agreed to give them food and shelters” (Ambedkar 2008, 45). The settled tribes forced the ‘Broken Men’ to live outside with the strategy that they should live on the border of the village to meet the raids of the hostile tribes. The practice of segregating the ‘other’ has been an act of consolidating power and to subjectivise them. As Foucault argues, ‘where there is power, there is resistance’. For its existence power depends on the ‘multiplicity of points of resistance’ (in Barry Smart 70). The Dalit autobiographies reveal how the upper castes exercise the power through the plurality of ‘subjectification’ of the untouchables by denying them education, employment, and shelter. The ultimate form of power politics of upper castes is to segregate the societies in order to protect its own constituencies of power. The experience of subjectivisation is not only physical but also social and epistemic for the Dalits in India whose subjectivisation has been justified on the grounds of their perceived impurity.
Untouchability has been one of the most fundamental issues that made writing about it a collective imperative for the Dalits, and the Dalit autobiographies have invariably focused upon this social blight. For the Dalits, the very act of writing itself has turned into an act of resistance against the mainstream social norms. Gandhi’s initiatives for the apparent emancipation of the Dalits from untouchability by renaming them as ‘Harijan’, apart from giving some symbolic solace, could not assure the Dalits any freedom in real terms from the socially sanctioned stigma of lowliness. Gandhi’s idea of Dalit emancipation was more political than social. In fact, Gandhi supported caste system till 1922 which was later aggressively opposed by Ambedkar. Ambedkar quotes Gandhi on this issue:

I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand because it is founded on the caste system. Caste has a readymade means for spreading primary education, caste has a political basis. Caste can perform judicial function. I believe that interdining or intermarriages are not necessary for promoting national unity. (qtd. in Thorat 5)

However, in 1925 Gandhi became critical of caste system and says:

I gave support to caste because it stands for restraint. But at present caste does not mean restraint, it means limitations. Restraint is glorious and helps to achieve freedom. But limitation is like a chain. It binds. There is nothing commendable in castes as they exist today. They are contrary to the tenets of the Shastras. ...This is not a condition of elevation. It is a state of fall.” (Ibid 5)

Ambedkar was instrumental in instilling the sense of Dalit consciousness in Om Prakash Valmiki who later, through his writings, tries to resurrect the Dalit historiography and their representation. He has been thoroughly critical of Gandhi’s
role and methods for the so called Dalit emancipation though it was largely accepted by society. Valmiki argues in *Joothan*:

> From text book to the media of communication, they were all beating the drums about Gandhi. ... After reading Ambedkar I had realized that by naming the untouchables ‘Harijans’ Gandhi had not helped them to join the national mainstream, but has saved the Hindus from becoming minority. (*Joothan* 72)

Valmiki’s *Joothan* depicts the ‘untouchable self’ of the author which has been a perennial existential experience for him since childhood, and even after his becoming an established author. Paradoxically, it was the school where he encountered the reality of untouchability as he came in contact with other high caste children there. As one from the Chuhra community, untouchability became part of his day to day experience. He recounts that before he got admitted in the government school, untouchability was officially declared an offence, a legal crime in 1955 in independent India, but in terms of real experience, it remained the same with hardly any difference whatsoever. He writes:

> Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others from the class, that too on the floor, the mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. (*Ibid* 22)

For Valmiki being mocked at as ‘Chuhreka’ by the fellow students as well as by his teachers of the school was part of his daily encounter. He was invariably taunted by his schoolmates no matter whether he was in neat and cleanly dressed or shabbily clad. So, the author himself and his friends from the Chuhra community
were inevitably in ‘no-win-situation’ (Ibid 3). Despite Valmiki’s achievements in school he would be a victim of social ostracization but his fate would hardly change in the given circumstances. Valmiki writes:

During the examination we could not drink water from the glass when thirsty. To drink water, we had to cup our hands. The peon would pour water from away high up lest our hands touch the glass. (Ibid 16)

Valmiki experiences untouchability outside his school too. He narrates such an experience as he happened to accompany Bhikhuram, who used to run errands for the teachers of Barla Inter College. They made a trip together to their teacher Brajpal Singh Tyagi’s village to bring a sack of wheat. On their arrival at Brajpal’s house an elderly man offered him to sit on the cot where he was lying on. After a while both Valmiki and Bhikhuram were served food by them. However, after their lunch when the elderly person came to know about their caste he became so angry that he took out a stick from underneath the cot and began to beat Bhikhuram while hurling abuses on them. The author experienced how merely by coming to know about their caste people would instantly change their attitude towards them. Valmiki writes:

The hollowness of this hospitality had been exposed. It is the guest’s caste that entitles him to respect. How did we have any entitlement to hospitality? My apprehensions had turned out to be correct. Somehow we managed to escape their wrath. (Ibid 52)

The experience of caste indignation and untouchability together formed one of the most wretched aspects of the Dalit identity that was tangibly experienced by
the Dalit autobiographers as well as by their community. Faustina Bama writes in *Karukku*:

> When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is. (*Karukku* 13)

For Bama the experience of untouchability was part of her childhood reality. She had experienced it right from early childhood when she accompanied her grandmother to Naicker’s house where her grandmother worked as a maid-servant and drudged from morning till evening by doing the chores like sweeping the cowshed, picking up the dung and dirt and return to bring home the left-over rice and curry of previous evening. Bama also noticed that the Naicker lady doling out the left-over in her grandmother’s vessel from a safe distance so that her vessel did not touch the vessel of the pariah’s lest it got polluted (*Ibid* 16). In school, the high caste children and teachers spoke to the students belonging to Bama’s caste with contempt; they were always looked down upon as the wretched pariahs of society and were often instigated to commit misdeeds. She notes, “If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, ‘It must be the Cheri children who did it’” (*Ibid* 18). For her, the stigma of untouchability was so pervasive and insidious that she faced it everywhere - inside schools, in the buses and even in the convent which she joined and which she eventually renounced.

Sharan Kumar Limbale’s autobiography, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2007), narrates harrowing experience of untouchability that degenerated into a social evil that hugely affected education in schools, social transactions and relationships. The autobiography begins with the description of how untouchability remained a strong
and constant preoccupation among teachers and students of high castes even during
the events like school picnic. He refers to the sitting arrangement of the students in
the picnic where the high caste students were allowed to sit along with the teachers
under a banyan tree while the Mahar students were asked to sit under another tree.
He writes:

Boys and girls from the higher caste like Wani, Brahmin, Marwari, Muslim,
Maratha, Teli, Fishermen, Goldsmith and all the teachers, about hundred or so sat in
a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar boys and girls, were asked to sit under
another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn’t make any
sense to us. (The Outcaste 2)

The book, The Outcaste narrates numerous instances where the narrator was
ill-behaved in the school by his classmates and teachers and was treated with
insolence as untouchable. During rainy seasons the school would move to Shivapa
Tali’s mansion and sometimes in the Marwari mansion, but the Mahar students were
allowed only to sit at the entrance and not inside the room. The narrator could
understand the reason for that. He writes:

There were so many caste factions in our school. The umbilical cord between our
locality and the village had snapped, as if the village, torn asunder, had thrown us
out of it. We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This scene of alienation
increased over the years and to this day my awful childhood haunts me. (Ibid 5)

Outside school, in the day to day social life also he had faced untouchability.
He saw the Brahmins used the upstream of the river bank for water and washing
clothes; the downstream by the Kumbies and Shephers; and the lowest stream was
for the Mahars. There were many other instances of untouchability like barber’s
denial to cut the narrator’s hair, pouring water into author’s hand by the old mother of Kaka, the stepfather of the narrator, from a safe distance and the restrictions imposed on them to take water from Narayan Patil’s well etc. which illustrate the deeply rooted practice of untouchability that was so indignantly prevalent in society.

Laxman Gaikwad in the beginning of his autobiography, *The Branded: Uchalya* claims that he was born casteless in an Uchalya Community, a tribe which was notified by the British as perennial criminals under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 and subsequently amended from time to time. He states:

> The community in which I was born has ever been rejected-ostracized by the caste ridden hierarchy among which it has been fated to live. For hundreds-nay-thousands of years this man-forsaken community, denied its innate humanness by all and sundry, has been forced to live a life no better than that of a godforsaken animal. (The Branded vii)

The sinister ostracization of the author and his tribe by the high caste was justified by the existing hierarchical caste order. Gaikwad writes that he was admitted to school and coincidentally in his lane some children fell ill, suffering from loose motion and vomiting. Tulsiram, one of his neighbours, and others charged Martand, the author’s father, for that epidemic as they alleged that the epidemic broke out because his son, Lakshya, the nick name of Laxman Gaikwad, was admitted to school. Even the community Panchayat too resolved that Martand must stop his son from going to school otherwise he would be excommunicated from society. Subsequently his teacher, Kulkarni, came to their lane and asked Tulsiram as to why the other people of the village were not afflicted with cholera despite the children from those villages kept going to school. In his reply Tulsiram
said, “Their caste have a right (sanctioned by religion and tradition) to learn, to read, to write but we are not so permitted.” (Ibid 18) They believed they did not have the religious sanction to go to school which the upper castes had. There are numerous other descriptions of casteist discrimination and untouchability experienced by the narrator since his childhood days.

Kunbi women’s act of removing flour from the grindstones before an untouchable worker touched it and the villager Patil’s refusal to eat flour and salt from author’s community as it was a taboo for the high caste people etc. unfold incidents of untouchability that the Pathrut community of the author subjected to. His father Martand worked as a servant in a high caste Chamle household. He saw that his community people were not allowed to take water from the common village wells. They were given water from a distance by the high caste villagers so that there was no physical contact with a Pathrut. The author recounts his life of untouchability lived in Dhanegaon. He was mocked at by Maratha children who would insult him by taunting, “lichiman Tata crab-curry khata?” (Ibid 115) Gaikwad recollects:

If I happened to touch anybody’s vessel he purged it in fire or touched a cow to wash way the taint of my touch. I had to speak with respect and humility with even a one year old child. This village had forced me to a slave’s life. (Ibid 115)

However, a little difference is there in case of Vasant Moon’s experience of Dalit life. He doesn’t have bitter experiences of untouchability in his day to day life and school life like that of Valmiki, Limbale, Gaikwad, and Bama. But his Growing Up Untouchable In India: A Dalit Autobiography (2001) narrates the plight of untouchability and low esteem of his community that he experiences through the
sufferings of his mother. He recounts how his mother, Purna, while searching for job to survive with her son and daughter, was refused by every Brahmin household in the neighbourhood because they would not keep her as a maid servant in the Brahmin colony as she happened to be from Mahar community. Most importantly, Vasant Moon’s Dalit identity is asserted through his community’s experiences rather than his own as an individual. He shows a complex relationship of his individual pain with the sufferings of his community. He learns from uncle Kundalik how Mahars were not allowed to work in the weaving department as they were not supposed to touch the thread.

Valmiki recollects the dire situations that he along with his wife, Chanda, experienced on account of his surname which was embedded with untouchability. To some, his surname which was written deliberately after his caste name was attractive; for few it was significant; to some others it was a courageous act; and for his relatives and well wishers it was a foolish antic. However, to the author writing caste name as his surname is an act of self-assertion. He mocked at the educated Dalits who began to use their family gotra as their surname with a little change for fine-tuning. This is how the Dalits tried to overcome the crisis of untouchable identity. He writes:

…They find that the easy way out. Behind all such acts is the anguish of identity crisis, which has come about as a reaction to the blatant inhumanity of casteism. Dalits want to join the mainstream of society after getting an education but Savarna prevents them from doing so. Discriminates against Dalits. Thinks of them as inferior beings. Doubts are cast on their intelligence, their ability, their performance.

(Joothan 126-127)
Valmiki realizes how the Dalit intellectuals are frightened of their caste name and because of that they are hiding their caste identity. He understands that concealing identity is not the solution of the Dalit issues. He professes that the “writers, intellectuals and activists in the Dalit movement have to struggle constantly with their inner conflicts” (Ibid 128). There has always been deep seated fear in the hearts of the Dalits for they are prevented from leading a normal life because of their caste identity. He argues that caste has been the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority and this battle against casteism cannot be won in a short span of time. To win this battle, the Dalits need a continuous conscious struggle.

VI

Violence is inherent in hierarchical caste system which is sanctified by the religious belief of Hinduism. Dilip Menon in his book, Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India, (2011) has noted that Gandhi’s non-violence was never actually the central theme of any major Hindu religious text. Gandhi had constructed and invented it in order to engage with the presence of day to day violence. Gandhi was critical of C.F. Andrews for insisting that nonviolence as the core of the major texts of Hindu scripts. Gandhi argued, “I see no sign of it in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, not even in my favourite Tulsidas” (qtd. in Menon vii). To Gandhi, violence was constitutive of Indian society, particularly in the maintenance of a hierarchical Hindu order. Menon makes a significant observation that in the present social context, that caste violence is looked as negligible and the communal violence continues to be a matter of serious concern. The interwoven violence against the Dalits and the adivasis becomes the object of ‘reportage’, and ‘communal violence’ the object of ‘theorizing.’ (Ibid viii)
Menon raises a pertinent question as to whether the Dalits have the right to life in modern India. It is undeniable that there is internal violence within Hindu society. The deployment of violence against the ‘internal Other’, the Dalits, is historically prior to the ‘external Other’, the Muslims. In academic discourses, it is often discussed that the Dalits have been given opportunities by affirmative action and they have improved a lot, whereas there are many poor non-Dalits who need to be provided the same opportunities through constitutional provisions. In making such hypocritical arguments the inherent plight of the Dalits as a constitutive element of Hindu social system is unacknowledged. This is what Menon would call ‘blindness of insight’. He writes:

That Hinduism – as religion, social system or way of life – is a hierarchical, inegalitarian structure is largely accepted, but what goes largely unacknowledged in academic discourse is both the casual brutality and the organized violence that it practices towards its subordinate sections. (Menon ix-x)

Subsequently, the so-called affirmative action, taken up by some of the states in favour of the Dalits, often proved futile in their states in ensuring an effective social change and emancipation. The violence exercised by the Brahmins on the Dalits in maintaining the caste hierarchy in society is very much present but it remains invisible as it has been ingrained and internalized within the rubrics of social system. Menon writes:

The issue of the use of violence in the maintenance of caste hierarchy does not appear as an issue in the text. Yet again, this remains the central occluded fact of Indian society: so present, yet so invisible. (Ibid xvi)
Dalit autobiographies have created a discourse for narrating the experience of violence like that of the other socially oppressed groups such as the African-Americans and women. Through caste system and untouchability the lower strata of Indian hierarchical society has always remained perpetually oppressed in every sphere of social, economic, political and individual life resulting in poverty, child labour, exploitation of the Dalit women, and physical and mental persecution of the Dalits in general.

The practice of untouchability supported by the caste politics of Manu in Manusmriti led the Dalits to undertake lowly and servile works, and most of the time it also forced them to go workless. Valmiki, in Joothan, recollects the poor condition of his family where everyone did something or the other odd works yet, they could not manage two decent meals a day. They did all sorts of works for the Tagas, the high caste people, including cleaning, working in their farms and doing general labour. They often had to work without any wages. Nobody had the courage to protest against such oppression of unpaid labour, they only received contempt and humiliation from the Tagas. Their only identity to the Tagas was that they were Chuhras. Chuhras were not seen as human beings rather a thing to use. They were dehumanised and reduced to mere commodities to serve the high castes. The utility of Chuhra community lasted till they had use value and exchange values for the bourgeois. In Valmiki’s words, “their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away” (Joothan 2).

When the young men of Valmiki’s basti refused to work for the Tagas without wages, they were brutally tortured by the help of the police. The police captured the men from the basti and thrashed them publicly. The people watched the
event mutely without any protest. The women and children of the basti howled loudly as their men were captured by the police for no reason. Valmiki writes, “No one had the courage to ask the head constable why he was being beaten. What crime had been committed?” (Ibid 39). All these physical torture was perpetrated to create fear-psychosis among the low caste Bhangis as a consequence of their denial to work for free for the Tagas, in effect for defying the orders of the rich high caste villagers.

The representation of the author himself as a forced child labourer in the field of Tagas and his mother’s engagement as a worker in cleaning the cowsheds along with the other from among the community in exchange of ‘Joothan’, the leftover food, brings forth the terrible dimension of inhuman social oppression that was actually experienced by the Dalits of Valmiki’s community. All the protagonists of the selected autobiographies directly or indirectly had to work as a child labour to support their family. In Outcaste (2007) Limbale narrates how he had to collect cow-dung with his grandmother and had to help his mother to bring the raw materials to brew liquor at home and serve it to the customers as a child labour. Similarly, in Uchalya (1998) Laxman Gaikwad had to go to the field with his grandfather for collecting grains from the rat holes; while the author of The Growing Up had to collect the abandoned iron metallic pieces and sell them to fill his stomach; in Karukku Bama had to work in the field, especially of the Naikar’s family with her grandmother and other children. The protagonists of the Dalit autobiographies invariably had to spend a major part of their younger life as child labourers.
Apart from the description of economic exploitation, the narratives of sexual exploitation of the Dalit women by the high caste landlords are evident in the autobiographies. Limbale, in *The Outcaste*, narrates how the high caste village heads exploited the Dalits to deprive them of their livelihood. They treated the Dalit farm labourers as their commodities, as mere objects usable for their materialistic gains. They even did not hesitate to destroy the family life of the Dalits working in their farm by using their wives as whores. Limbale writes:

People who enjoy high caste- privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. (*The Outcaste* 38)

And it is because of this kind of lust of the Patils, the protagonist of the autobiography had to suffer a life of outcaste with a perpetual crisis of identity. He became an outcaste in his own community for being an illegitimate son of his mother. He reveals the extreme immorality of Hanamanta Patil who had destroyed the happy married life of Ithal Kamble and his wife Masamai, the mother of the author narrator. Hanamanta helped Ithal Kamble during hard times with a hidden intention to establish an illicit relationship with his wife. As a consequence of this the caste council of the *Mahars* forced Masamai to divorce Kamble. Then after she was kept as a keep of Hanamanta Patil, and the narrator of *The Outcaste* was born of this illicit relationship. Soon after she became pregnant and gave birth to a child, she was thrown out of the house. Later on, she became a keep for another Patil, Yeswantrao Sidramappa Patil. This is how she became an object of sheer lust gratification for the Patils and her beautiful married life with Ithal Kamble was completely ruined.
There are several stories of sexual exploitation of Dalit women in *The Outcaste*. One of the stories was told to the narrator by Dammunna who had exposed the hypocrisy and tyranny of the high-caste people against the Dalits:

Once, a Dalit youth dared to look lasciviously at a high-caste woman from the village. This was considered a serious crime. Suppose she went back and told the people in her house? The whole village turned against the young man and attacked the Maharwada. Later the whole village went to court against young Dalit men who were sentenced to imprisonment for a year. When they returned after serving their term, everyman’s wife had had a baby. The Dalit women had been raped when their husbands were in prison. (*Ibid* 71)

Police atrocities were day to day events for the Dalits. In *The Branded: Uchalya* (1998) Gaikwad’s community being branded as a ‘criminal tribe’ under the provision of Criminal Tribe’s Act of 1871, had to suffer social ostracization as well as police atrocities. They tried incessantly to come out of their community profession of pilfering but they were denied any work by the high-caste people. Gaikwad writes:

Nobody would offer work to my Father, Martand, as we are known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhonabai, even as a farmhand. (*The Branded* 2)

Thus his community was isolated socially and physically from the mainstream Hindu society. They had no other option for their livelihood except theft. In this context Dr. Ambedkar’s statement on isolated social castes is apt here:

Classes or social groups are common to all societies but as long as the classes or social groups do not practise isolation and exclusiveness, they are only non-social in
their relations towards one another. Isolation and exclusiveness makes them anti-social and inimical to one another. (qtd. in Thorat 60)

Laxman Gaikwad describes how his family and his community were subjected to extreme police atrocities. His grandfather, Lingappa, was a skilled thief of his community and the Nizam recorded him as the most notorious and dangerous thief for which no one dared to cross his path. But once in a drunken state he attempted to cut the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger’s waist. In cutting the knot with a blade, he cut a nick on the stranger’s body from buttock to waist. The man screamed loudly as it was bleeding profusely from the wound. The police caught Lingappa and dragged him to his hut beating him severely all the way to search for the stolen goods. The narrator’s mother Dhonabai had already hid herself in the woods as she heard the approaching thud of the police. The police snubbed his grandmother as a whore and grabbed her by hair and thrashed her all over. He writes, “The police were beating whosoever their eyes fell upon – women, children. They squeezed grandmother’s breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods.” (The Branded 2)

If anyone from the author’s household or tribe wished to leave the place, he or she had to obtain a permit from the police – often bribing the police for that purpose. To pay the bribe for the permit they had to sell their cattle in the market. They had to show the permit to the police and tell them where they were going, and even then they could not stay at that place for more than three days. As the author was a child, except him everybody had a pass. If they travelled without a pass they were invariably arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten up and brutalised. The police set free only after extracting exorbitant amount from them. The police atrocities were common and frequent incidents for the author’s family and his
community. Even author’s mother was not spared from molestation by the police. She had to sell the whole flock of sheep to bribe the police to free her sons from the cruel police beatings and torture. The narrator would wet his shorts at the horrendous site of police violence. He was, therefore, unwilling to accompany his brother on stealing trips. Gaikwad writes:

The police would beat us making false allegations of thefts, even when in fact, no thefts had been committed. The police themselves were responsible for creating conditions in which we were left with no option but to steal. (Ibid 62)

Being isolated from the mainstream society and because of the police atrocities, his family and community were forced to suffer from extreme poverty. He writes:

We never saw comfortable days in our household. It was always poverty and a wretched, grovelling life. Only on major festival days did we prepare chapatis out of hardly a quarter kilo wheat. That too under the haunting fear of the evil black magic of a sorceress. (Ibid 84)

The Marathas in the town of Kawatha exploited the people of Uchalya community following the ignorance of his community. They charged hefty interest rate of ten percent per day. So, whatever they earned from thieving trips had to be paid to the money lenders against the interest but the principal amount remained ever untouched. The police inspectors-in-charge of the areas also took large amount as bribe from the community. The money brought from outside went into the pockets of the people like the money lenders, the police officers, the proprietors of gambling dens, and the liquor vendors of the places like Kawatha, Salgara, Bhadgaon etc. where the Uchalya community resided.
In *Karukku* Bama narrates how the police inhumanly tortured the people of Paraya community, on the dispute over a cemetery. Police brutality was so barbarous that a young man died in police custody and his father could not weep at the immature death of his young son. Bama notes the plight of a Paraya father in her lines:

At the dead of night, between ten and twelve, the father came disguised in a *saree*, saw his son, and stood silent, stunned, and unable even to cry out loud. On his way home, they had been stopped by the Police. (*Ibid* 43)

**VII**

The autobiographical narratives not only recount the events of plight of the narrators as individual and community simply by using memory since their autobiography is part of a political act, in their writings, they register their protest against all kinds of oppressions. The protagonists of the autobiographical narratives describe the selective events of the past and construct an alibi in their present in search of identity. It has already been noted that, for Dalits, writing itself is an act of assertion of identity. However, in all the select five Dalit autobiographies, several devices, such as challenging the mainstream narratives of justifying casteism, questioning the value system, criticising political hegemony, mocking hypocrisy of the high caste social norms, protesting against violence etc. have been employed and manoeuvred to assert Dalit identity in the mainstream literary representation.

Valmiki’s father courageously confronted the school headmaster to protest against the teacher who forced the young Valmiki to sweep the school compound while he was in class four. This resolute and courageous protest of his father against injustice turned into a decisive event in his life. He would recall how his father
alluded to the neglected hero of Indian epic, Ekalavya, “Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?” (Joothan 6). Declination of accepting ‘joothan’, the scraps, by Valmiki’s mother and protesting humiliation meted out to her by Sukhdev Singh symbolically represent the core issues of politicised Dalit consciousness in his autobiography, Joothan. When a teacher was delivering his lecture on poverty of Dronacharya as he had to feed his son flour dissolved in water, the whole class responded to the subjective deliberation of the teacher with great emotion. Valmiki’s question in the class was why the author of the Mahabharata did not write a single word about the miserable life of the Chuhras who had to drink starch to survive, the teacher ordered him to stand in rooster pose as a punishment for criticising the epic. The author says, “I too have felt inside me the flames of Ashwatthama’s revenge” (Ibid 23). The protest against the established tradition of Brahminic hegemony creates a desperate strive for identity. Valmiki writes:

The more active I became in the Dalit movement, the more suspicious people around me got, as though I was working to destroy their hegemony. Most of these suspicious people were Savarnas. I began to notice the effects of this surveillance among my fellow employees too. (Ibid 112)

Gaikwad represents the Pathrut community which is treated as a low caste and an untouchable community. Gaikwad was a follower of Marxist ideology and struggled for the labour class. As a leader of the factory workers he saw the plight of the labourers caused by the exploitation of factory owners. He fought for justice for the workers for which he was forced to leave his job. His growing consciousness about abject poverty of his family and community’s wretchedness disturbed him
inwardly and made him develop protest against the inactiveness of democratic government and inhuman attitude of the high-caste people. He writes:

Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves’ community. If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get land, decent houses? If we are all brothers, why are my brothers forced to resort to thieveing in order to feed our people at home? (The Branded 62)

In Kurukku Bama perceives that her Paraya community, along with other low-caste people, were exploited by the high-caste people. Naicker is a land-owning caste in Bama’s village. The Parayas worked in the field of the Naickers from morning till evening and each Paraya family worked for the Naickers almost as bonded labourers. Only the Pallas and the Parayas had to work this way as they had to strive for foods. She writes:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her around, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. (Kurukku 16)

Bama’s other grandmother served as a household servant for the Naickers and for that she had to get up at the dawn and leave for Naicker family to work the whole day. But in return she brought home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. Bama brought to the notice of her reader how the socio-economic exploitation rooted in casteism has transgressed from domestic domain to the academic and charitable institutions. The students of Dalit community were tormented and humiliated by the high-caste teachers in schools. She experienced
such atrocities in educational institutions from her childhood till her college life. She points out that almost three quarters of the children in the school were Pallars and Parayas, but still the school and the Priest’s house were all at Nadar’s street. She recollects how the Paraya children were used for menial works of the teachers’ houses. She writes:

   Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn’t hesitate to use for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher’s house; we watered plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school. (Karukku 18)

When Bama admitted in class nine, she had to go to the high school at a neighbouring town where she stayed in hostel and experienced contemptuous scolding by the warden-sister for no reason whatsoever. Bama, to her chagrin, noticed how the Sisters used to publicly ridicule the lower caste children, “These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grew fat” (Ibid 20).

However, Bama never concealed her caste as advised by her mother. She had to undergo mental persecution by the retorts of teachers in the name of her caste as she would never hesitate to reveal her low caste identity. Bama realises the reality of caste discrimination in society. She writes:

   In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Whatever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy ... this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (Ibid 26)
Bama experienced caste tyranny even within the convent. On the completion of her B.Ed. curriculum she joined a school as a teacher. She wanted to serve the students of her community and poor children by entering a convent as a nun. But soon she realized that there was rampant caste discrimination within the convent which was a great shock to her. She remembers how the nuns had to take vow that they would live in poverty and work for the betterment of the poor. She was disillusioned as she could see the real difference between the convents’ proclaimed principles and the actual practices of the authorities in the institution. The convent she entered did not even care to glance at the poor children and it only wished to serve the children of the wealthy (Ibid 77). She writes:

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a shame. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. When the bell rang, there was always food of all kinds. By turns, at each meal there was meat, fish or eggs. There was always an abundance of fruits and variety of vegetables. There was comfortable room to live in. Each room had a bedstead, a fan, table and chairs and drinking water. (Ibid 77)

Bama experienced the hatred against the Dalits nurtured by the nuns and sisters in catholic institutions. They were so much biased in their thought of Dalit reality constructed by the Brahminic narratives. So the Dalits to them were subjects of contempt. Speaking ill of the Dalits was a normal practice of the nuns and the sisters. Bama quotes a conversation of the sisters that she heard in the convent, “How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves knew their place (115). Even if they had to speak something ugly or unpleasant, they categorized them as Harijan. Through such social attitudes, Bama shows the
polarised position of the non-Dalits and the Dalits as “us” and “them.” The hierarchical Brahminic world view of the church people disillusioned Bama’s perception of the supposed farsighted world view of the egalitarian Christian institution. Finally, she could not tolerate the mental torture in the convent and walked out of the order after three years of bitter experience.

To the Dalit writers, autobiography, in realistic sense is not ‘about’ the mere facts and events related to the achievements and failures of their personal life. It is about a political act by their choice to interpret them from Dalit point of view, and make sense of these events to assert Dalit identity. In doing so, they have not only described various themes of oppression as analysed above, like, segregation, untouchability, exploitation, patriarchy etc that they experience in the culturally hierarchical society as subversive narratives, they also have used subversive structure of language. To quote Bama’s opinion in an interview with Manoj Nair justifying her style of language is apt here:

Some critics cried out that a woman should not have used such coarse words. But I wrote the way people speak. I didn't force a literary language on myself ... My ambition is to communicate the dreams and aspiration of my people who have remained on the fringes for centuries in Indian history. (qtd. in Kumari 74)

The language used by the Dalit autobiographers is mostly colloquial in nature with the phrases used in their day to day life which may be called as ‘Dalit style of language’. This subversiveness of Avarna (Dalit) narratives overturns the decorum of the Savarna (mainstream) aesthetics creating a platform for Dalit identity.
The Voice of the Marginalized: Individual and Community

“Proud casteman of my unfortunate country!
Throw aside your pride of caste,
Lest on your unwilling head,
Should be heaped the burning insults
That you now shower on other.
You have deprived the outcastes,
Of the common rights of man
With your very eyes
You have beheld their misery
And yet you refused to take them to your heart.
But remember, please do remember
Someday you shall have to be
The equal of them all in ignominy…”

(Rabindra Nath Tagore, in ‘The Great Equality’ published on 5th August, 1993 in ‘Harijan’)

Dalit literature is an inseparable part of marginality discourse in India which evolved into an emphatic literary genre of resistance and assertions against the caste based hierarchical social system prevalent in India. The Dalits have created a space of their own through the assertion of their socio-political identity since the 1930s in the colonial era. This movement inspired the literary movement of the Dalits that crystallized with its idiosyncratic forms in the 1970s raising their voice from below. Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak are some of the formidable theorists of the so called third world origin, who have theorized the
voices of the margins and their influence extending to the field of modern literature, history, politics, language and contemporary feminism. In the wake of Ranajit Guha’s Subaltern Studies Group in South Asia formed in 1982 for writing subaltern historiography of Indian peasantry, Gayatri Spivak’s famous writing “Can the Subaltern Speak?” evoked considerable critical attention with respect to the problematic of the marginality discourse. When Spivak’s question of subalternity emerges with reference to the ‘colonizer-colonized’ dialectic for theorizing postcoloniality and subalternity; Dalit subalternity, on the other hand discarded this binary, and exposes the inner contradictions that it conceals. Alok Mukherjee, a translator in his introduction to Limbale’s Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2007), writes:

Limbale establishes the Dalit subalternity not in a colonial structure, but in the caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. Here, the village becomes the metropolis, and Dalits exist literally on the periphery. Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements; they are actually outside the boundary of the village. This physical segregation signifies other separations. (in Limbale 2007, 2)

Marginality in respect to subalternity is a relative concept. Being colonized by both the British imperialists and the parallel domination of Brahminism, the Dalits in India have been reduced to subaltern categories, being perpetually relegated into the periphery as the eternally marginalized. Mahesh Gavaskar in his essay, “Colonialism within Colonialism: Phule’s Critique of Brahmin Power” (2007) points out that the Phule-Ambedkar discourse has underlined “the fact that just as India went through a phase of British colonialism, it had passed previously through different facets of Indian history leaving Dalits as colonized” (Gavaskar 91).
Mahesh Gavaskar also points out that Phule’s critique of British colonialism has been rather ambivalent. In his book *Slavery*, Vol-1 (1991), published in Marathi as *Gulamgiri* in 1873, Phule wrote:

The depressed and the down-trodden masses in India were freed from the physical (bodily) slavery of the Bhats as a result of the advent of British raj here. But we are sorry to sate that the benevolent British Government have not addressed themselves to the important task of providing education to the said masses. That is why the Shudras continue to be ignorant, and hence, their ‘mental slavery’ regarding the spurious religious tracts of the Bhats continues unabated. (Phule 1991, Vol-1, i-ii)

Significantly, Mahesh Gavaskar observes in analysing Phule’s critique of Brahminism that the British colonialism had inadvertently made certain normative and cognitive tools which actually helped the Dalits to fight against the ‘Brahminical Colonialism’ (2007, 91).

In general sense marginality implies a condition not only of physical relagation but also a disadvantaged position in terms of social, political, economic and cultural participation. In other words, marginalized people are socially, economically, politically, and legally deprived and abandoned, excluded or neglected and are therefore vulnerable and constantly lacerated with a sense of provisionality in every sphere of their life-experience. Ghana S. Gurung and Michael Kollmair have analyzed marginality in their article, “Marginality: Concepts and their Limitations”, (2005) by taking two major conceptual frameworks, i.e. societal and spatial (spatial marginality is also referred to as geographical or physical marginality in literature). The societal framework focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (e.g.
caste/hierarchy/class/ethnicity/gender), economics and politics in relation to the access to resources by individuals and groups. In this regard, the emphasis is placed on the understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and locational segregation of people (Ghana 2005, 10). The spatial marginality is related to geographical remoteness of an area from major economic centres and refers to areas that are difficult to access in the absence of appropriate infrastructure. As a result the people are isolated from the mainstream vis-a-vis the processes of development.

The societal marginality describes the social condition represented by poor livelihood options, where the subject has ‘reduced subjectivity’ or restricted opportunities of participation in public decision-making, less use of public space, lower sense of community status and low self-esteem. Usually, the marginalized people are discriminated against, stigmatized, ignored and often suppressed by the mainstream on the basis of race, gender, age, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy (see Larsen, 2002), which is also known as ‘systematic marginality’ (see Mehretu et.al. 91-92) that is, a socially constructed system of inequitable relations with hegemonic establishment that allows one set of people to exercise undue power over another set on the basis of class, ethnicity, age, gender and other similar considerations. The autobiographical narratives of the Dalits show the position of the Dalits in India as a systematically marginalized entity both in terms of social and spatial marginality.

In the postmodern theoretical context, the concept of marginality has been changed. Now marginality is no longer a concept of excluded, forgotten or overlooked entity. In a sense postmodern notion of ‘marginality’ is no longer
peripheral but central to all thoughts. The poststructuralist thought of marginality has claimed it, on the other hand, as a liberating force. George Youdice writes in his essay “Marginality and the Ethics of Survival” (1983):

Today it is declared the marginal is no longer peripheral but central to all thought. Contemporary post-structuralist thought has apotheistically reclaimed marginality as a liberating force. By demonstrating that the “marginal” constitutes the condition of possibility of all social, scientific and cultural entities, a new “ethics of marginality” has emerged that is necessarily centred for a new, Neo-Neitzschean ‘freedom’ from moral injunctions. (Youdice 1989, 214)

Derrida has significantly contributed to the notion of marginality who has propounded that centre is always one and marginality is multiple. The postmodernist deconstructionist, Gayatri Spivak termed margin as ‘the silent, silenced center’ (qtd. in Imran, 2). In her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she takes the position that subaltern cannot speak. She emphatically analyzes and critiques the attempts by most of the marginal, the oppressed categories to speak. In doing so, she first directs her critique against the French thinkers like Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze who believed that if the oppressed is given the chance, and through alliance with politics that builds solidarity, subalterns can speak and know their conditions. On the line of Marxist analysis, Spivak argues that exploitation against the oppressed lies in structural domination which emerged from the international division of labour. Thus the attempts to speak for the subaltern often end up in alienating the Subject further. As such, attempts to speak for other, is often caught in the cycle of (re)production of a dominating discourse and representation of the Other (Ibid 2-3).
Marginality, in the context of Dalits, presupposes the hegemonic powers possessed by the high caste people and their victims. Casteism as a hegemonic ideology has sustained through a cleverly designed socio-religious structure what Antonio Gramsci would describe as ‘permanently organized force’ (in Souda 2012, 1-2). Gopal Guru in his essay, “Dalits from Margin to Margin”, says that the Dalits in India seem to be facing different kind of marginalization and the most important among them is political marginalization. In literary, cultural, educational, spatial and technological spheres too the Dalits have remained marginalized (Guru 2000, 111-116). Dalit literature as cultural representation of marginal section of society has assigned voice to one of the most underprivileged and marginalized people of Indian society that had been silent, and unrepresented for centuries in the mainstream literary narratives of India. It was the Vidharbha Literary Conference of 1954 where Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was happy to see the representatives of Brahmin and Mahar Associations who were sitting close to each other among the audience. In his address, Dr. Ambedkar spoke about the necessity of introspection of life values and cultural values in literary works. He appealed to the Brahman Pandits and writers to understand the struggles and suffering of the Dalits through their literature. He said:

We are neglecting our lives, our duties and our culture. If we do a little bit of introspection, we will discover a horrible picture of how our life-values and culture are getting burnt up. Whatever the reasons may be, we will find that we are going on a downward path of degradation. That is why, writers should immediately take notice and should make an effort to conserve the life-values and culture, give them lustre, and make them grow…. Make your pen spread its glow to dispel the deep darkness from the villages ... Try to understand their suffering, their problem and strive to bring about improvement in their lives through your literature. There lies the real humanity. (qtd. in Guy Poiterin, 5)
The non-Dalit progressive and revolutionary writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, T.S. Pillai, V.S. Khandkar, and very recently Arundhati Roy and several others have addressed the pains and sufferings of the Dalits through their literary writings. However, they are often criticized for being superficial in dealing with the feelings and experiences of the Dalits. On this issue D.N. Nagraj argues:

Usually anger, pity, and melancholy are the dominant feelings in the literature on Dalits written by non-Dalits. Many a time even the value system of the Dalit world is interpreted wrongly. In creative writings such baby-sitting for other groups and classes is very awkward. (Nagraj 1993, 61)

The Dalit writers feel that only Dalits with their experience and sensitivity can be the genuine Dalit writers representing their life and culture through their writings. The Dalit writers through their narratives represent the subjugated and the peripheral Dalit voice not only of the individual but also of the community. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (2007) writes:

Dalit writers assert that their literature conveys the life that they have lived, experienced and seen. Since the experience contained in Dalit literature is articulated out of a desire for freedom, its character is collective rather than individual. (Limbale 2007, 32)

II

The Dalit autobiographical narratives, unlike the western and Indian mainstream upper caste autobiographies, have recorded the marginalized voice of individual self and the community as well. Most of the Indian Dalit personal narratives are about their decentred selves. One of the most significant aspects of Dalit autobiographies like *Joothan, The Outcaste, The Branded-Uchalya, Karukku,*
and *Growing Up Untouchables in India*, selected for the current study, is that the protagonists manifest the decentred selves of their community while relating themselves with the social and cultural affairs of their selves with his or her neighbours. The autobiographers, Valmiki, Limbare, Bama, Gaikwad and Vasant Moon have created a space for the Dalits, the other to the Mainstream high-caste people to represent themselves like that of Morgan, an African Autobiographer, who in her *My Place* transformed the narrative from being an individual to collective or community auto/biography. The ‘self’ of the author in African American and Dalit autobiography, reflects both his/her individual self and the social self. In this connection, Toni Morrison rightly observes:

> Autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, ‘my single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative.
> (Morrison 1990, 327)

Unlike mainstream autobiographies, the protagonists of both Dalit and African American autobiographies narrate certain experiences relating to social, political and cultural issues which are common in the lives of the community members while presenting a portrayal of their own ‘selves’. Here lies the distinctiveness of Dalit autobiographies that the ‘self’ is depicted not only as an individual with a private career but also as a member of community with the sense of deep bond and responsibilities to the other members of his community. Thus the ‘self’ is not detached from its social group because as a member of it he, too, has received similar inhuman and humiliating treatment by the established social structure.
The personal experiences of the narrator and the experiences of any other member of his community are usually the same. The individual achievements of the protagonists often turn into community achievements as it is found in Joothan. When Valmiki passes high school examinations, his success in his village was celebrated as a community achievement. Similarly, the failure of the community activities hurts the narrator too. Valmiki expresses his deep concern when the protest of his community against the unwaged labourers fails and the people are brutally tortured. This is how the Dalit autobiographies present the unity of the individual voice and the voice of the community. Thus it is quite natural that the multi-layered experience of pain and suffering led the protagonists to find the communal self in their individual ‘selves’.

Stephen Butterfield in analysing the ‘self’ in African American autobiography observes:

The appeal of black autobiography is in… their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people and people find a voice in the self. (Butterfield 1974, 3)

Similar sense of shared life of collective experience has been reflected in all the five selected Dalit autobiographies through the articulation of the protagonists. When assertion of identity remains an important agenda of Dalit literature, in Dalit autobiographies, the protagonists’ perception of their own identity is closely bound to that of their caste and community. The author-narrators face personal discrimination due to their stigmatized caste identity. They are also deeply sensitive to the sufferings of the other oppressed Dalits with whom they identify to such a great extent that they seem to experience their pain to be their own. There are numerous narrative accounts of the 'communal' experiences of the pain of untouchability in the Dalit autobiographical narratives. In Joothan Valmiki recalls
an instance when the young men in the Dalit basti refused to do beggary (unpaid labour) and the police were called in at the instruction of the upper castes. He writes:

Those who had been captured from the basti were being made to stand like a rooster; a very painful crouched up position. Moreover, they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. This festival of valour was being celebrated openly. People watched quietly, without a word. There was no protest from any side. (*Joothan*, 38)

Further connection between the individual and the community is revealed as Valmiki’s personal success in education is also interpreted as an achievement for the entire Dalit community. He says:

The high school results were announced in the paper. In those days, they used to publish the names as well as roll numbers. I was very happy to see my name. *Pitaji* had invited the whole basti to a feast to celebrate my results. The basti wore a festive look that day. It was the first time someone from our basti had passed high school. (*Ibid* 59-60)

Valmiki’s father repeats that it is his son’s personal responsibility to ‘improve his caste through his individual achievements. Furthermore, Valmiki’s own progress as an individual and the options open to him along with that came his way was largely affected by the progress of the Dalit movement as a whole. Valmiki writes:

Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government school had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. (*Ibid* 2)
Thus Valmiki's entrance into the school system was both an effect of the early success of the Dalit movements, and at the same time his personal success was restricted following the movement's own limitations. Although the individual subject of the Dalit autobiography is portrayed as inseparable from the Dalit community, his individuality is not wholly stifled. Valmiki, for instance, is still able to assert his own personal agency in opposition to the traditions of his community during his marriage by rejecting the community-chosen bride and instead marrying the girl of his own choice, and that too without conforming to the community's traditions during the wedding ceremony at the expense of offending many members of his family.

In Joothan the protagonist's individuality is additionally valued as a counterpart of the upper castes who saw him only as a faceless member of his community. In social context they often have faceless identity. Valmiki’s observations are pertinent here when he writes:

They did not call us by our names. If a person was older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person was younger or of the same age, 'Abey Chuhre' was used.

(Ibid 2)

Limbale’s autobiographical narrative, The Outcaste (2011), represents the voice of both individual and collective ‘self’ of the protagonist who recollects the events from his childhood experiences to his grown up age. The various experiences, such as contestation of untouchability, poor condition of living, unskilled labourers assigned to filthy works, rigid customs with superstitious beliefs, lack of education, child labour, suppressed feminine scenario, the bonds with the neighbouring people of the same community, love-hate relationship within the community and family,
exploitation of the upper caste people, Dalit protest against oppression, growing interest for education, increasing awareness towards Dalit consciousness, quest for identity and self-respect, involvement in Dalit movement and philosophising the whole issues of Dalit voice reveal the author’s individuality which is closely tied up with the affinity to his community.

By the use of first person plural ‘we’ representing the Dalit children of his school in the opening sentence of the narrative, Limbale looks back at his ‘individual self’ along with his school mates when he experiences untouchability in school, while using the river water and in visiting the temple. He was teased, and thrown stone at by the fellow high caste school mates for being one of low caste Mahar boys. The Mahar children were not allowed to enter the temple but he happened to be in the middle of the temple, one day, unconsciously while sweeping. He recollects Parshya’s reckless act of pissing on the sacred icon of Bhutalsidh temple. However, he felt the guilt for that and sought forgiveness of his entrance into the temple. Simultaneously, he registers a silent protest against prohibition of the temple entry as they were also Hindu by faith. He writes:

Though branded as untouchables we too are Hindus by faith. We too are Human beings. High-caste children from the village may visit the temple, yet we are forbidden. There is a saying, ‘Children are the flowers of God’s abode,’ but not us.

We are the garbage the village throws out. (The Outcaste 4-5)

In some cases, there had been taboo of untouchability within the family and in the community of lower-caste itself because of superstitious beliefs. Limbale describes how his grandmother, Santamai who looked after him, did not like touching things in the house as she believed that a ghost could follow the footsteps of the family members returning home. She asked the author narrator to spit before
entering the house. She not only used to sprinkle cow urine on the members of the author’s family but also forced to gurgle and drink it for good health. However, the narrator was disturbed by the incident when one of his friends, Arjya, a Mang boy from an untouchable community, was not allowed water by his grandmother; even he was forbidden to play with that Mang boy. Young Limbale and Arjya together went to the river for having water and there too they had to face the dilemma as to where from they would drink water as certain parts of the river bank were reserved for certain high caste communities on the basis of hierarchy. There were two different places reserved for two different castes ‘Mang’ and ‘Mahar’ of the same homogeneous group of untouchable community. Limbale writes:

Different parts of the river bank were reserved for Mahars and Mangs. Where were to drink water from? Even water was its own enemy here. No, our minds were not only divided they were also contaminated. (The Outcaste, 20)

Limbale raised voice against the practice of untouchability on the basis of pure and impure, which was being followed by the mainstream society for ages, and also sharply criticised prevalence of similar practices adopted by various untouchable castes within the same untouchable community. Limbale gradually becomes aware of how the caste hegemony makes the Dalits to ultimately accept the normative structure of hierarchical status in the name of castes within the Dalit community itself. The similar kind of caste antagonism among the Dalits has been echoed by Valmiki in his Joothan too. He points out how the feelings of caste differences were operative even among the activists that created differences between Mahars, Mangs, Chamars and Mehtars (Joothan 109). Vasant Moon has also the problem of untouchability on the basis of subcastes that existed in Dalit community.
He says that before his birth the subcastes like Ladvanes, Bavans, Zhade-Ghavanes, and Barkes did not take food in each other’s house. He writes:

At public gathering they sat in separate rows. The Ladvans, Zhades-Ghavanes, and Barkes would not sit on the mats of the Bavabes. If by mistake anyone sat down in the wrong place, the subcaste panchayat would do a purification ceremony. *(Growing Up Untouchable in India 6)*

The issue, in respect to the experience of antagonistic practice of untouchability between the two sub-castes of Dalit community is both individual and communal. It may be noted that the Dalit autobiographical narratives have addressed the issue of internal casteism within the community itself. When through the process of Sanskritization the lower castes were allowed to have a higher social status by changing their profession, Karma theory, on the other hand, appeased the Dalits to be satisfied with their present tragic condition as a divine curse for the misdeeds committed by them in their previous life. The attempts of reformation by Arya Samaj and the religious preaching of Bhakti movement failed to substantiate a democratic set up for an egalitarian social system. It can actually be said that the practice of untouchability among the Dalits itself is a kind of scourge infected by the grand narrative of caste system based on the religious principles of Hinduism.

The protagonists of Dalit autobiographical narratives speaks of spatial marginality which makes them physically segregated from the mainstream society. Limbale in his *The Outcaste* recounts that there was a system of separate cup and saucer for the Dalits and high caste people in the tea shops in his village. The people in the village took tea from Shivram’s tea shop without any protest against such separate arrangements. The narrator also makes his point on the marginalization of
their houses. He finds that their “houses were in places that other villagers used as latrine” (*The Outcaste* 76).

The Dalit autobiographer despite being a narrator apparently speaking of the experiences of the self, in essence, is a representative, a collective self, giving a voice to the community experiences. The individual ‘I’ in Faustina Bama’s *Karukku* is closely bounded with collective ‘we’. Raj Kumar writes:

> Instead of her individual self coming to occupy the centre stage, she evokes the collective self of the entire Dalit community suggesting that the autobiographical ‘I’ does not have an autonomous life outside the collective ‘we’. Almost all Dalit autobiographers adopt this strategy. (Kumar 232)

Several other distinctive narrative strategies have been used by Bama in *Karukku*. She perhaps deliberately leaves out the names of the persons, places, institutions in order to bring anonymity in her narration. As for example, she has not mentioned the name of her village, her parents, grandmothers, the school teachers, sisters of catholic churches, and the high caste people who exploited her caste people. Instead, she has mentioned the names of a few ordinary people who can, significantly, be found in any Dalit community (*Ibid* 232-233). In this respect M.S.S. Pandian argues:

> To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. (Pandian 132)

Thus invoking larger solidarities, Bama tries to draw attention of the readers to the issues of caste oppression with reference to her Paraya community for
centuries. The beginning part of her autobiographical narrative describes the day-to-day socio-cultural and economic activities of Paraya community which shows the nature of poverty and their incessant toiling following rabid caste discrimination. She, along with other members of her family, experienced the same plight like her other community members. Bama narrates:

More than three-quarters of the land in these parts are in the hands of Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family attached to a Naicker family, as panniyaal, bonded labourers. As far as I have seen, it is only Palla and Parya communities who work in this way. Other communities don’t have to work so hard. (*Karukku* 48)

Despite the struggle for livelihood and humiliation received because of caste stigma Bama, along with her brother, has succeeded in completing education. She joined a school as a teacher run by nuns. But as time went by she could realize how the Dalit children were the victims of atrocities in the school. Following her commitment as an educated Dalit she wanted to teach the Dalit children what they ought to be taught and reflected upon as to how they should be treated by the nuns. But they were deprived of that. She made her mind to become a nun and finally she did. However, she had bitter experience of caste discrimination in the convent too. She found that there was no love for the poor and the humble in the convent. She says that the nuns and the priests claimed God’s love as limitless, without any condition. “Yet”, she writes, “inside the convent there were innumerable conditions about how you should be and who you are in order to deserve their love” (*Karukku* 106). They openly discussed that the standard of the school would fall if they took Dalit children. Whereas according to Bama’s observation, “In the churches, Dalits are the most in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least” (*Karukku* 80).
She realized the difference between Jesus in the Bible and Jesus in the daily pieties. They taught the Dalits that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives the sinners, patient, tender, humble and obedient, but they never insisted that God is just, righteous, and is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood and never encourages inequality. She writes:

> Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation; we find there is no place for us. (Karukku 80)

Bama finally left the order and consoled herself that there were many people who suffered worse plight than her. After leaving the order she became penniless and realized how her position in the society. This is how she resembles her position with other Dalit women in the society who despite toiling hard could not accumulate a little cash in hand which is very essential to gain some authority, status and prestige. She felt an uncertainty in her life after having left her job and she turned her tragic condition of life into a vantage to look back at the poor people of her community. She writes:

> Today I am like a mongrel, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food, and a safe place live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. (Karukku 78)
Autobiographical writing has remained a dominant tradition of narratives which has helped to construct a history of selfhood. This is a paradigmatic narrative through which the subject has learnt to know who s/he is in social, cultural, political, economical, and religious sphere of life. In the second phase of the autobiographical writings, Gusdorf described the autobiographer as the ‘historian of himself’, who locates his account of ‘private motives’ in relation to ‘the objective course of events’. At the cusp of its third period, Karl Weintraub once more insisted that autobiography is ‘an historical genre’. Conversely, however, Marcus suggests that since its inception auto/biographical studies have also extended considerable effort on the project of “rescuing” autobiography from incorporation into history and history-writing’. Throughout its existence, critics have insisted that history focuses on collective experience, often in time-frames which exceed individual life-spans, while autobiography is regarded as the record of more private domains of self-reflexive analysis and feeling (Moore-Gilbert 77). Dalit autobiographies as subaltern testimonies reconstruct their subaltern historiography from below as the narrators find themselves absent in the mainstream chronicle of history.

Prathama Banerjee in her essay, “Caste and the Writing of History” (2010) points out that the history which “we practice today, emerged in India in the second half of the nineteenth century as a colonial-modern form of knowledge that sought to reinvent time, both as concept and as experience” (Banerjee 216). The texts of history written by the early beneficiaries of colonial education, namely the upper-castes and the middle class male professionals, took great pains to make caste into a benign category. Their histories did not acknowledge the caste as a differentiating element. They argued that the caste structure served to keep the Indians together,
despite systematic propagation of economic inequalities. Gandhi himself till the 1940s was one such thinker who believed in Varna system as one of the fundamental historical institutions of Indian civilization (Ibid 217).

Other school of Indian historical writings came from the Marxist school. The past was viewed as a successive development in terms of production. The greatest drawback was that the Indian society was viewed from class perspectives where castes are merged with class configuration. By the time Ambedkar wrote on history, he studied textual source materials of Sanskrit literature as a major source for uncovering the nature of Indian past, its social and religious history. Y.S. Alone, an eminent scholar of School of Arts and Aesthetics from JNU, in his essay, “Historicism: Confrontations and Inquiries” (2007) writes:

Undoubtedly, the cultural practices of any society can be read through literature. Therefore, for reconstruction of social and religious history, the study of textual sources assumes importance because each text in itself conceptualized its own world, constructing its own narrative having numerous connotations, which needs to be understood in its own social context and in a historical situation. (Alone 264)

The Dalit writers inspired by Ambedkarite interpretation of Indian historiography have written their autobiography to reconstruct Dalit history with a zeal for identity assertion. As said by Hegel, every history has a final aim that is to be shown philosophically. A history without such aim and point of view would only be a feeble minded past time of the imagination. (in Miller, 455) Miller in his essay, ‘Narrative and History’ (1974), says that every story of a narrative must have an aim and therefore also a history of a people and the history of the world (ibid: 455).
Vasant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchables in India* has been translated into English by Gail Omvedt from Marathi *Vasti* which was published in 1995 and the first English edition was published in 2001 by Rowman and the second edition was published by Vistaar Publications in 2002. Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchables in India* (2002) has been written in twenty nine chapters with titles in episodic manner. Each of the chapters is intertwined with different stories of his self, society, culture, economy, politics, untouchability, exploitation, patriarchy and so on. But the most striking part of Moon’s autobiography is growing consciousness of Dalithood in his community in 1940s and 1950s, and the Dalit movements that came up in Maharastra in general and in Nagpur in particular being imbued by the Ambedkarite ideology. He recounts the caste atrocities inflicted upon his community in those days and articulates how the Mahars and other untouchable communities organised to put up strong resistance against such social atrocities. He powerfully narrates from his own empirical experiences as to how the high-caste people, with the help of Govt. machineries, skilfully infused fear, sense of inferiority, complexity, trepidation, servility and despair in the psyche of the Dalits. He represents himself as one of the activists of that Dalit movement led by Ambedkar himself in 1940s. With the help of childhood memory Moon historicises the contribution of various Dalit agencies formed during the 1940s and 1950s, also narrates about the valour of the Dalit leaders of his contemporary time. The works of the agencies like Samata Sainik Dal (SSD), All India Schedule Caste Federation, the community activists of his neighborhood, the role of the community wrestlers have been recorded by Moon from Dalit historical perspectives. He provides a clear cut view of the Dalits on Gandhi’s position against the untouchable’s demand for separate electorate proposed by Ambedkar. Gandhi’s stand on the issues of Dalit representation was vehemently
opposed by the Ambedkarites. The protest by Mahars against Gandhi’s policy for the untouchables came to light in 1941 incident of his visit to Chokhamela hostel in Nagpur on the invitation of some Harijan students. Most of the Ambedkarite students and activists of the Samata Sainik Dal opposed the move to invite Gandhi. He recounts how the plans were made by Sandanad Dongre, one of the Ambedkarites, to protest at Gandhi’s arrival in the hostel. The Mahar youths from north and central Nagpur came together. The protesters were spread all around the hostel, on the railway tracks and roads. So the agitating people were led to believe that Gandhi would not be welcome by the organizers. When the followers of Gandhi started shouting slogans, “Long Live Gandhi”, Ambedkarite demonstrators shouted slogans sounding “Mahatma Gandhi Go Back!” which reverberated in the surroundings. The situation forced Gandhi’s car to come to the hostel from behind. To narrate the event Moon writes:

Until Gandhi went on to the stage, everything was quiet inside. But once he rose to speak, some of the Ambedkarite students in the audience stood up and began to shout, “Gandhiji, we have many questions for you”. Gandhiji was standing quietly. He said, “Yes, ask them”. But the turmoil only increased. No one could hear the questions in that confusion. The hundreds of people standing outside on the railway lines began a massive stone-throwing into the hostel. No one would give Gandhi a chance to make his speech. In this confusion, the organizers brought Gandhiji out of the pavilion to protect him. Just as he had came in by the door, so he left. (Moon 2002, 63)

The Ambedkarites’ protest against Gandhi’s arrival in Nagpur was an ideological movement resisting Gandhi’s claim for representing the Dalits of India. The 1942 Quit India Movement of Gandhi evoked huge response when the Textile
Mills were closed down, morning processions were carried out and the young volunteers organized marches singing the song, “This is my India, an unbroken continent!” (Ibid 89). But the Ambedkarites did not take part in this historic movement because for them the movement did not really address their cause. To quote Dr. S.K. Paul:

The upper castes being the early beneficiaries of education first entered into the British revenue administration and later became entrenched in politics. They were nominated to the legislative council representing the landed aristocracy. In such a situation ‘freedom’ for the country had hardly any meaning for the Dalits. (Paul 2008, 24)

Therefore the follower of Ambedkarite ideology rather wanted to initiate a movement by their own. In this context Moon writes, “In those days no caste tension existed. The feeling was that each community should have its own movement” (Ibid 90). He has also pointed out the reaction that came from the high-caste people at the refusal of Mahars to do their traditional menial works as a kind of resistance under the leadership of Dasharat Patil, an Ambedkarite at the historic call of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Moon observes how the Hindu-Mahar riot took place against that Dalit resistance movement and the Mahars unitedly fought against the caste Hindus, blind to their thought of Dalits’ traditional works as their duty. However, Moon describes the valour of the Dalit Mahars who fought against the riot sacrificing lives.

Ambedkar has survived as a figure of inspiration throughout Moon’s life. Representing himself as a Dalit activist, and joined Samata Sainik Dal at Nagpur as an active member. As a radical activist, he worked hard with his fellow members for accomplishing the unfinished tasks of Ambedkar. Besides being a student and a Dalit activist, he was also interested in sports like hututu, kho-kho, football, hockey
and cricket. Though he has narrated about his experiences from his childhood life of
the basti, Maharpura, to his becoming of a Deputy County Commissioner, his
autobiography is not a mere celebration of his self and life as it is found in the
narratives of conventional autobiographies. As regards to the material deprivation of
his community in their slum life and many social conflicts that his community was
subjected to, according to Moon, could have been averted through equal social
opportunities. Moon takes note of fraternity that prevailed among the Dalits in his
contemporary period, and perceived the quality of love and compassion of his
community people. He narrates how the members of SSD provided him food in their
houses during his childhood scarcity. Because of their love, he never had the sense
of despair what is found in Limbale’s ‘The Outcaste’, Laxman Gaikwad’s ‘The
Branded’ and in Bama’s ‘Karukku’. He praised his neighbours as they stood by his
side whenever any problem occurred. He gives heroic description of many of the
activists who sacrificed their lives like heroes.

Cultural representation is a significant and an inseparable component of Dalit
autobiographies. Moon’s autobiography Growing Up Untouchables in India
describes the cultural life of the Dalits which was rather vibrant and active. The
basic points that he draws on about Dalit culture such as, Dalit fraternity as
experienced by him in his community; hard working and courageous nature of the
Mahars; interest in games and physical performances like wrestling; He gives
descriptions of the songs and customs of his community. He was instrumental in
establishing the Das Bhajan Mandal, a cultural organization that used to organize
events like the Quawali programmes etc. that became quite popular in Nagpur.
These programmes would go on from midnight till seven or eight in the morning
wherein the two groups, Das party and Sherkhan party, would engage in musical
combat. The songs and poetry of the Dalits would also narrate the events associated with the Ambedkarite movement. One such song was sung by Ganvir from Indora when the Satyagraha against the Pune Pact took place in 1946 and thousands of people were imprisoned in the Nagpur jail:

The battle of Satyagrahis, O young fighters of India!

When the jail doors opened for your coming

There lentils and bread you got were mixed with grass

When blood flowed in your urine and the heart was crying out,

Thavare Saheb fall sick and he was a strong man,

When the jail doors opened for your coming.

(Ibid 113)

The philosophy of Ambedkarite movement created a sense of bonding among the community members of the basti, the locality where Moon lived. So, when he had to leave the basti as a Deputy County Commissioner he made it a point to visit his basti at Maharpura of Sitabardi region of Nagpur in every one or two months. He writes:

You will find such a group in any community. Our community was a reflection of the public life of Nagpur. The Ambedkarite movement existed in every neighborhood. Mill workers, bidi rollers, labourers, barbers, wrestlers and trainers, singers and balladeers, hymn-singing Varkaris and chanting Kabirpanthi Mendicants, library managers and magazine makers, feast – organizers and play producers. All these various types were found in the Nagpuri life of those days. All were merged in the Ambedkarite movement just as well all rivers merge into the sea. (Ibid 175)
In *Joothan*, Valmiki attempts to recover the history of suppression which never found a place in the narrative of mainstream national history. The brutal repression of the silent protest of the Bhangis against unwaged labor by the high caste Tagas made the poems like Sumitranandan Pant’s ‘Ah, how wonderful is this village life’ (*Joothan* 39) rather inconsequential and ironic as he finds such narratives artificial and a lie. The brutal incident of Ganwai Brothers of Poona who were blinded by some upper caste people created much tension in the Bombay-Poona area. He had experienced the anxiety and tension himself even in the Bombay Ordnance Factory where he was a trainee there. He wrote an essay on the problems in the *Navbharat Times* which aroused a lot of controversy and the government employees who were supporters of Shiv Sena complained against his article to the Principal of the Institute, Shri Desai. As Valmiki was sympathetic towards the Dalits, they began to investigate about his actual caste identity. His sympathy to the Dalits was a crime in their eyes. As an activist he travelled many Dalit villages of Maharashtra and saw that the Mahars became quite an educated lot. In comparison to them the Mangs, the Mehtars and others were still illiterate and in a state of real destitute. He also saw that there was unequal treatment even within the Dalits. Although the activists talked outwardly of forgetting the differences among Mahars, Mangs and Mehtars, yet sub-caste inequality was very much there. They even hesitated to enter into the Mehtar bastis. This was quite disturbing for him. Ambedkar’s message did not reach the Mehtar bastis at all. They had respect for Ambedkar but his followers could not win their minds and hearts. The Mehtars were at the bottom of the social ladder and were even suspicious of the Dalit leaders.

Valmiki has consciously pointed out the anti-reservation protests that had taken place in Gujarat in the 60s. The protesters carried out horrendous violence in
the rural areas. They stood under Gandhi’s statues in places like Baroda and Gandhinagar and fulminated hatred against the Dalits. The hate campaign also spread in some parts of Maharashtra where the Dalits were incessantly harassed in their work places. Valmiki wrote how the Dalits were harassed in the government and semi government work places. He has also written that many fake organizations like *Shoshit Workers Union* were created by the Savarnas and the caste Hindus to orchestrate conspiracies against the Dalits (see *Joothan*, 108).

He notes that how the posters and brochures of *Shoshit Workers Union* instilled inferiority complex among the Dalits. These materials were also distributed in the Ordnance Factory of Chandrapur where Valmiki worked. However, the Dalit activists resisted the conspiracy as an anti-Dalit agenda of the Savarnas. They organized a huge rally near the gate of the factory and an unanimous motion was passed at the rally to counteract against the conspiracy of the upper castes. Valmiki writes:

> When Dalits stand up to protect their selfhood, they are declared casteists. It is the dyed-in-the-wool casteists who make these declarations against Dalits. It is a move by the traditionalists and status quoists who are always suspicious of Dalits. (*Ibid* 109)

Valmiki was dejected at the failure of the Dalit Panthers party following the differences among the leaders on the issue of synthesizing the ideologies of Marxism and Ambedkarism. Apart from being a sympathizer of the Dalit politics, Valmiki was also a culturally inclined man. Wherever he went, he made a cultural circle for theatrical performances. On the occasion of Ambedkar’s birth anniversary all the Savarna members of his cultural organization disappeared from the scene. This betrayal by the Savarna members was disappointing for him who realized the
kind of feelings the Savarnas nurtured against the Dalits even in an event like celebrating India’s independence and its democracy.

He found the reason as to why the untouchables residing in the town and cities concealed their Dalit Identity through his encounter with Mohandras Naimishray, a poet, critic and journalist who had introduced Valmiki to a publisher. Naimishray, in fact, instructed Valmiki not to reveal his real surname to the prospective publisher in order to get a favourable response from him. Further, Naimishray also revealed that he could establish a good rapport with the publisher only because he did not reveal his actual identity to him. For Valmiki, it was rather disturbing. He expresses his concern for this fear of revealing caste identity in a society as follows:

The writers, intellectuals and activists in the Dalit Movement have to struggle constantly with their inner conflicts. There is so much fear lurking in the dark recesses of the heart that prevents us from leading normal lives. (*Joothan* 128)

The crisis of identity among the Dalits and even in his own family, among his relatives has been a matter of constant agony for him which still remains a crucial aspect till the present day Dalit Movement. He realizes, “Caste’ is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, ‘caste’ determines his or her destiny” (*Ibid* 133). Valmiki argues that despite having a history of great mythologies and chivalry, India has essentially been a fragmented nation. This is why, Valmiki argues, India was repeatedly defeated by the invaders. It is the blind arrogance of the savarnas (high caste) that ensured the doom of the nation. He writes:
All sorts of mythologies were constructed of Chivalry, of ideals. What was the outcome? A defeated social order in the clutches of hopelessness, poverty, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, religious inertia and priestocracy, a social order embroiled in ritualism, which fragmented was repeatedly defeated by the Greeks, by the Shakas, by the Huns, by the Afghans, by the Moghuls, by the French and by the English. Yet, in the name of their valour and their greatness, Savarna kept hitting the weak and the helpless. Kept burning homes. Kept insulting women and raping them to drown in self-praise and turn away from truth to not learn from history, what sort of nation-building is being dreamt of? (Joothan 134)

Limbale experiences identity crisis in every aspect of his life as both an individual and communal self. His own community people reminded him of his lowliness. In one occasion he was asked to fetch bidi for Shrimantana, a man from his village. The narrator did not comply with the order. Shrimantantan threatened him to drive him away from the village as he did not belong to that village. Limbale recounts:

I am an alien. My father is not Mahar by caste. In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me akkarmashi. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as offspring of one. (The Outcaste 62)

Limbale portrays a picture of faceless identity of the Dalits in their family and society that has been engendered by the caste violence which is constitutive of Hindu caste system. Limbale’s experience of separation from the family members is no less than the predicament of separation that was found in Afro-American. He writes:
I am twenty five years old now and cannot recognize my own brothers- nor my father. They are all alive. We may not recognize each other even if we happened to travel in same bus. That’s what this journey of life is like. (*The Outcaste*, 91)

He was perpetually disconnected by the fear of his caste identity. He recalls, “If I happened to be going with a high-caste friend and someone greeted me with a ‘Jai bhim’ I felt like an outsider. I was worried that my caste would be revealed” (*Ibid* 104).

Even after independence of the country and abolition of untouchability by constitutional law, the Dalits have remained victims of untouchability embedded with casteism supported by the Hindu religious scripts. This is evident in Limbale’s narration of his difficulty in searching for a rented house. For this, he had to conceal his low-caste identity and lied to be a Lingayat, a member of high caste community for a little space for his stay. The high caste people could not recognize his caste because of his surname. He writes:

We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin. They couldn’t guess my caste on the basis of my surname, so when they became suspicious they kept asking for surname of my in-laws. (*Ibid* 105)

He was critical of the leaders of Dalit movement who nurtured among them the concept of purity and pollution ascribed by the high caste narratives. He suffered from identity crisis even among the Dalits. He was very much annoyed at the expression of purity and impurity of blood by a Dalit activist and to escape from embarrassing situation he did not reveal his parental identity to them. He says, “What would happen if the volunteers of this vast Dalit movement came to know that I was impure? Would they to avoid and ostracize me?” (*Ibid* 106)
All the select autobiographical narratives reveal the crisis of identity that has been faced by the autobiographers in every stage of their life on the basis of caste indignation, is universal in the culture of Indian social system. This is a reality that in India caste plays a unilateral role in determining one’s social position even in the present context of multicultural and pluralistic concept of identity. Valmiki’s friend Kureishi, a police inspector of Chandrapur police station, urged Valmiki to meet the new Commandant of army who was transferred to Chandrapur as both of them were from Mujaffarnagar district, they would be happy to meet each other. However, the manner in which the army Commandant behaved was typical of the Indian cultural attitude deeply rooted in casteism. Valmiki writes:

He was delighted when he heard that I was from Barla. Before we had even sat down, he asked, ‘Barla is Tyagi village. Which caste are you from? I looked at Kureishi whose face had changed colour. The question had been asked conversationally. The moment I said that my caste was Chuhra, he became uneasy. Suddenly all conversation stopped, as though there was nothing left to talk about. (Joothan 115)

Limbale’s The Ouscaste exclusively talks about economic, socio-cultural, and political history. Dalits were oppressed socially in the name of caste and religion; they were exploited economically through lesser wages than they deserve. Similarly, the Dalits had no space in political representation as most of the time they had to depend on the decision of the village heads. Limbale narrates the story how Mahar women were being sexually exploited by the high caste Marathas. It was a social practice in Maharashtra and also in other parts of the country that Dalit girls just after attaining puberty were kept by the upper caste as their keep for their gratification. It was almost a customary service for all Dalit families throughout
Maharashtra to offer their daughters to the upper-caste landlords as their concubines. In return these young women were given food and shelter. The children born out of such relations were considered bastasrards because the landlords never acknowledged them as their own children. In many cases these Dalit women had to satisfy the lust of several landlords in their lifetime and therefore they could not name the real father of their children. Their children were often denied school education. They did not have economic security either. They were often ostracized by their own community and were looked down upon as whores of the Patils. For them life turned out to be an incessant suffering, turmoil and perennial abuse.

IV

Bama in her *Karukku* reconstructs the history of the converted Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu who are caught in the web of untouchability and humiliation as Hindus and even after their conversion into Christianity their condition, ironically, remained the same. The religious conversion in India has hardly brought any effective change and remarkable improvement to the Dalit Christians. Bama realized that the high spiritual and moral ideals and the so called principles of humanity fostered by the Catholic institutions got derailed where the inmates like the nuns, sisters, Mother Superiors, Mothers Generals too fostered the Brahminical attitude towards the Dalits. These institutions were, in fact, reflected deep seated hypocrisy in terms of the values that they preached. Bama also narrates the perennial plight of the Dalit children as well as all other members of the community who loiter as a matter of routine in their daily life only to manage the bare minimum to survive. Their children used to live in perpetual malnutrition, who would invariably become labourers with their parents when they are as young as six or even just years old. Like most other Dalit autobiographies, Bama’s *Karukku* also
deals with the social life of the Dalits as well as the brutal police atrocities that a Dalit used to suffer as part of his regular life experience.

Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* (2009) gives an account of life and livelihood, culture and language of the Uchalya community which was branded as a pilferer community, a community of criminals, and the identity was even officially endorsed by the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 by the Britishers. On the basis of the report of Kennedy, the Deputy I.G.P of Railways and Criminal Investigations, Bombay Presidency, in 1901, the Uchalyas were branded as a criminal Tribe. Gaikwad has very poignantly narrated the story of sufferings of the Uchalya community. His community was identified by several names in different regions. His narration exposes how the people had to be trained to endure beating and kicking so that they could tolerate the torture of the police and the people as well. Gaikwad also recounts how his sister-in-law was sold to a person from a distant place following their despicable poverty. They had to lose their life due to lack of proper medical treatment. The people of this community were subjected to extreme physical torture even for small guilt in the mills and in other places. He also describes various superstitious beliefs rampant in his community. Going to school was a sin for them. Gaikwad was the first school going child from his community of the village, Dhanegaon. The community Panchayat out of superstition took decision to punish the guilt that often turned fatal for the victims. Even his grandfather, Lingappa, was killed following a Panchayat’s decision. At times the Panchayat decisions could be even wildly farfetched like punishing the mother of a bride for the alleged sexual aberration of the grandmother of the bride. Gaikwad felt the dire necessity of education and social awareness for his community. He went to the
villages of his community to carry out awareness programmes while he was still working in a Mill at Latur.

He has described the story of exploitation of the Dalit workers in various mills by the mill owners from the Marxist point of view. He realized how the Mill owners exploited the workers by depriving them from their due wages and he raised his voice against such repressions for which the mill owners through manipulative means suspended him from job. However, he did not surrender easily before the board of management. He filed a suit with the help of a communist advocate and though he was not reinstated in his job but the management was compelled to reinstate some of his fellow workers. Finally, he tried to get elected in the Assembly election from Latur constituency as a candidate of Bahujan Samajbadi Party though he could not succeed in his bid. From his experience of contemporary socio-political scenario, the narrator tries to recover the social history of plights of the Dalits. He writes:

I had learnt my lesson. In this country it is not enough to possess good workers and volunteers to win elections; you must also possess wealth, social prestige and the quality of having been born in one of the higher castes. In addition, you must be well versed in the art of hooliganism, mobocracy and making false promises and assurances. Only with these accomplishments you are fit to enter the arena of politics. (Uchalya 2009, 230)

About the perpetual penury of the mill workers, who were always bogged down by debts, Gaikwad writes:

On pay-days creditors, shopkeepers, liquors-vendors would stand at the gate of the mill, ready to pounce on their preys. If a worker refused to pay, they would snatch away the money from him. Not a single pay-day was over free of violence, one or
the other worker was sure to be beaten in the quarrel over debts and credits. (Ibid 154)

Dalit discourse strongly represents the predicament of the Dalit women in a caste ridden society. It has already been noted that Dalit literature is also a cultural movement of the Dalits. Women act as important agents in cultural transmission. Women are predominantly present in the selected autobiographies of this study. Eva-Maria Hardtmann in her essay, “Dalit Feminism in a Neo Liberal World”, notes that there has been ambivalence in respect to the feminist discourse in India. She writes:

The main reason perhaps is that the concept feminism has been associated with the dominant West and Colonial rule. Thus, when talking about feminism in India one has to put it in the framework of an unequal global world. (Hardtmann 208)

In India the feminist discourse gained specific eminence in the 90s. Indian feminism has been characterized by a sense of class and caste neutrality for the feminists in India look at women, as pointed by Hardtmann as “belonging to one and the same general category and have been put into this kind at Hindu framework. Feminism has accordingly often been used synonymously with ‘general feminism’ within the framework of a ‘Hindu culture’” (Ibid 208). However, Dalit feminists do not see themselves as part at the ‘Hindu culture’. They do not identify themselves with general feminism which they call ‘Brahmani feminism’. The notion of Dalit feminism emerges with the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995 when in the same year they took part in the Fourth International Women’s Conference in Beijing for building transnational alliances. Ruth Manorama, one of the members of the NFDW from Bangalore, went to express her
fascination with the achievements of Toni Morison and referred to Dalit women as ‘the thrice discriminated’ on the basis of class, caste and gender (Ibid 217).

Culturally, the discourses on the issues of women are perceived from the point of view of sex and gender. Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses gender as a subject of analysis when reading natural practices and a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive, on the contrary women as emotional or irrational, weak, nurturing, and submissive. This patriarchal view of women is by definition sexist which promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. The belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form which is called ‘biological essentialism’ as it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as man and woman. Feminism distinguishes between the word ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. When ‘sex’ refers to our biological constitution as female or male, ‘gender’ refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. Feminist theory argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational and sentimental is rooted in the actual social condition where a woman does not have power; is treated as an object of sex, or a procreating device; has fewer political and financial rights and within these texts because these ideologies are instrumental in continuing women’s oppression (see Lois Tyson, 83-88).

Dalit women writers have made a potential contribution to Dalit literature. From the very beginning Dalit women’s writings reflected their experience of societal indignation. The writings of Dalit male also always speak for women empowerment as observed from Jyotiba Phule’s time to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Muktabai, an untouchable girl who read an essay on the problems of caste
indignation and sufferings of untouchables in the school established separately for girls by the great reformer, Jyotiba Phule in 1851 with the help of his Brahmin friends, Gevande and Valvekar, was one of the first major Dalit woman voices against gender oppression. Jyotiba’s wife, Sabitribai, was also one of the first Dalit woman activists and a teacher in her husband’s school who actively took part in the movement for women education. He supported widow re-marriage and gave protection and shelter to pregnant widows and the orphans in his orphanage, the first ever such an institution formed by a Hindu (Slavery, Vol.1 pp. xvii).

From the beginning of the second half at the 20th century Dalit women writers became aware of their status and from that time on there was a proliferation of Dalit women writings that manifested their emotional self. Kumud Pawade, Jyoti Lanjewar, Urimla Pawar, Hira Bansode, Sugandha Shende, Shurekad Bhagat, Asha Thorat, aruna Lokhand, Sushela Mool and Meena Gajbhiye are some prominent names of Dalit women writers from Maharashtra. While speaking of Dalit feminism, Anita Ghosh in her essay, “Dalit Feminism: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Indian English Literature” (2007) writes:

Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits. She has suffered much and she is still suffering. She must walk through the burning desert of casteism in search of some oasis. (Ghosh 48)

Hira Bansode, a Dalit woman poet, makes an emphatic statement that it is because of casteism that Dalit women are being dishonored and molested. In one of her poems, “Petition”, translated into English from Marathi by Christian Novetzke et al, she lodges a complaint in the people’s court hoping for justice, but she eventually attacks the inhuman game of the oppressors (Novetzke, 293).
M. Swami Margaret confessed in a journal that all these identities that she carries about have significant roles in perceiving herself and the worlds she live in. As a Dalit woman she primarily writes for the Dalit women to address their own concerns. This statement urges for the necessity to define the self of women by themselves, otherwise women will be defined by others for their use and to their detriment. She narrates her first day in CIEFL, Hyderabad. While filling up the *challans* and forms with the help of some familiar looking young men who came up to her and introduced themselves as members of the Ambedkar Students’ Union which she later joined as one of the members. Very soon she realized that the young men did not consider her an equal intellectual comrade. They rather considered her only as a Dalit woman whose presence was necessary just to present bouquets to the invited guests and speakers in the public events and propose the vote of thanks.

Anita Ghosh writes in her essay:

They do not consider her in important decisions and in writings papers. Later she learned that excluding women from their communities was a deliberate policy they followed as they believed women’s presence would cause ‘problems’ and come in the way of serious politics. Women inevitably mean “problems” their sexuality being an uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the unassuming Dalit men in the movement. It is assumed that they divert the attention from the larger concerns of the movement. (Ghosh 55)

M. Swami Margaret while recounting her CIEFL experience reveals that she was given a nice room in the Ladies Hostel of the institute which was abandoned for the last couple of years. She was told that the room was abandoned but she did not ask why. Later she came to know that one Dalit woman, named Suneetha, hung in the room after being exploited through continuous sexual abuse and was finally
rejected by a Reddy man when the question of marriage came up. Swami Margaret on being asked whether she was scared or not after knowing about the fact, she replied:

   The ghost that stared at me was not the thought of a hanging female body but it was my own body which is Dalit and woman and is as vulnerable as Suneetha’s. (Ibid 55)

   Anita Ghosh also heard from Margaret’s mother the stories of exploitation of Dalit women who were used and thrown away by high-caste men. She is critical of the Dalit ideologies of Katti Padma Rao, Gopal Guru and Gaddhar who seem to be less sensitive particularly to the Dalit communities. She reviews the stand of Gopal Guru critically as he maintains that all women are Dalits since the upper caste women are treated as impure during their menstrual period. Hence, to the argument of Guru, in such situation the upper caste women are also untouchables. As claimed by Guru, untouchability is the ideal framework to fight against caste oppression but Anita Ghosh contests this idea of Gopal Guru, and writes:

   What Gopal Guru, overlooks is that untouchability is a phenomenon that evokes various notions and images of bodies- bodies that are marked by their caste, gender, class, age, sexual orientation and other identities. (Ibid 57)

She says that all Dalit bodies do not possess identities. She argues,

   Not all bodies possess even identities. Not all Dalit bodies are one, not all female bodies are one. They interact with other being caught in a complex web of intersecting identities. Dalit man, even those identified with the movement, does not want to see us as intellectuals. (Ibid 57)
Anita Ghosh emphasizes that there is brutal patriarchy within the Dalit communities which repeatedly appears in Dalit feminist discourses. However, the Dalit male intellectuals argue that there is some kind of interrelationship between caste and gender. Kancha Iliah compares the state of the Dalit women and the high caste women and proclaims that in terms of women status Dalits are more democratic than the caste Hindus. He observes that there are oppressive practices like wife-battering prevalent in Dalit families, however, he finds that the beaten up wife has a right to reprimand her husband by screaming and crying foul in public if possible, the women even go to the extent of beating their husbands in return (Ibid 58).

Laxman Gaikwad’s autobiography, *Uchallya*, portrays the women characters like his mother Dhondabai, grandmother Narasabai alongside his wife Chhabu, sisters-in-law and other women characters like Chandrabhagabai who have influenced him in his construction of ‘self’ and his insights. The narrative begins with Gaikwad’s introduction to his community. His grandmother Narasabai stands as a metaphor of his community who ran the household as his grandfather became thoroughly useless owing to his old age and also for being in the police records. His father was also physically weak. Dhondabai, his mother, did not go for her community profession of stealing. She was not offered any job so she tried to earn her livelihood by selling milk. Gaikward notes how the police went beyond norms while searching for stolen goods and torturing women. Both his grandmother and mother were molested by the police besides physical torture. His father, Martand, beats up his mother on suspicion. In the same way Gaikwad’s wife was beaten up by him on suspicion and at the instigation of his sister-in-law. She was beaten up brutally with raw stick for the first time and felt sorry later on. Next day she went to
her mother’s home with her brother assuring Laxman Gaikwad, “I promise to come back in a week. Please send me now. I remember my mother. I very much want to meet her” (The Branded 141).

There has been patriarchal domination over the women of Gaikwad’s community both by the high caste and by the community males as well. The author’s inability to protest against the Panchayat’s decision to punish the bride’s mother by shaving her head clean showed the author’s helplessness before the authority of power. He writes:

My head went numb with all that I had witnessed. How backward and superstitious could our community be! What a horrible scene was I witness to! On one side was the advanced urban society and on the other, our community Panchayat. I found the functioning of the Panchayat obnoxious and distinguishing. I mutely watched whatever was happening before me. (Ibid 120)

Whatever the decision came from the Panchayat, the mother of the bride had to obey otherwise her daughter would remain a spinster. The mother’s fear is expressed by the author:

Haunted with fear the bride’s mother came and sat in front of the Panchas. She bowed humbly before all the people present. Her husband sat as if he was a cold corpse. (Ibid 120)

Limbale’s The Outcaste has exploded the patriarchal domination as well as certain values and morality imposed on them. Limbale tries to examine the position of his self in relation to his community, culture and tradition. G.N. Devy in his introduction to the autobiography The Outcaste writes:
The most memorable element of Limbale’s life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters in it, and not one of them without a serious complication in her life. There are widows, childless women, deserted women and as the ultimate of all this divine and social justice, Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most blatantly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. (in Limbale 2007, xxv)

As an illegitimate child of a mother, he was ostracized both by the high caste society and also by the Mahar community itself. So he had stayed with his grandmother, Santamai, who was like a godmother for him from his school going life till his getting a job in his youth. In his acknowledgement he says, “My history is my mother’s life, at the most my grandmother’s. My ancestry does not go any further” (Ibid ix).

The author was brought up by his grandmother. He could understand his grandmother’s dream of watching him as an established man in society free from humiliation and starvation. He speaks of her dream on the occasion of morning processions on Independence Days and Republic Days that went around the village. He happened to be in those processions along with other mature boys of his locality. About it he writes:

My granny looked proudly on when she saw me shouting the slogans. She must have felt her dream come true. My granny’s name is Santamai and it was she who brought me up. (Ibid 6)

He narrates about many incidents of atrocities perpetrated on the Dalit female bodies which he learnt from his grandmother, his own experiences in his community life and from other acquainted women of their locality from his young
age. He depicts Santamai’s divorce from her husband for not begetting a male child; his mother Masamai’s plight at the exploitation of Hanamant Patil, Yeshwant Patil and of her husband Ithal Kamble; Dhandamai’s death at the hand of her son Dattya; the story of physical torture on Kondamai by her husband and Masamai’s sympathy to her; the affair of Ambumai and Kacharuajja and the story of abortion of Dhanavva by Devki, a spinster. Limbale realizes how a woman body is a mere consumable commodity for the patriarchs. The author’s mother, Masamai, had to struggle by carrying head loads of woods and finally became a keep of Hanmanta Patil. He recounts Ithal Kamble, his mother’s first husband’s remarriage:

A man can eat *paan* and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored. (*Ibid* 36)

Laxmi Holmstorm in ‘Translator’s Note’ to the second edition of *Karukku* writes about the universal characteristics of the question of women oppression:

It is precisely because it tells the story of Bama’s personal struggle to find her identity that *Kurukku* also argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression. (*Karukku* xiv)

There are several stories of patriarchal domination on women. Bama’s protest against patriarchy is found in her description of the police atrocities. She writes:

They used obscene language to *Paraya* women and swore at them. They threatened the women to be ready at night to entertain them as their husbands were hiding themselves to avoid police torture. They winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies. (*Ibid* 40)
Men and women of Bama’s community worked hard in the field of the Naickers. Women worked equally as men did. Despite equal amount of labour, women were paid lesser wages than their male counterparts. Bama’s sense of protest against patriarchy was reflected through her question, “Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why?” (Ibid 55).

Paraya community decided not to allow their womenfolk to go for films since they got harassed by upper-caste men. Bama’s father got angry when she took admission in college for higher studies. His resentment was conveyed to Bama through a letter. According to him it would be difficult for him to get her married in his community. Bama faced patriarchal domination and at the same time she had to face oppression as a Dalit woman by the high-caste nuns and teachers in her convent and school. She encountered indignation when her hostel warden contemptuously remarked that she became chubby by having the good food of the hostel; she was humiliated by the constant attack by the nuns at the convent for being a Dalit woman. She also narrates the incident of her being self-confined in the bathroom until the college party was over in order to avoid insult by her fellow students. Both Valmiki’s Joothan and Moon’s The Growing up Untouchables in India perceive Dalit women as subjects of oppression. Valmiki notes that his sister was not sent to school simply because she was a woman. He writes, “My family sent only myself to Sewak Ram Munshi. My brothers were all working. There was no question of sending our sister to school” (Joothan 2). He happened to go to master Brajpal’s house near Devband with Bhikhuram, on his way back to Barla he had to stay at Muzaffanagar as he had missed the last bus. He stayed at Master Vedpal Tyagi’s house at the night. A man and a woman came to Vedpal’s house on the same night.
The author was asked to sleep in the varanda on the bare floor and he saw that the two men sexually exploiting that woman. He writes about the incident:

When I think of that woman, I begin to feel nauseated. What helplessness had brought her to them? Did she come willingly? A woman surrendering to two men, even today my mind refuses to accept it. (Ibid 55)

Similarly, he recounts his experience of travelling by a police jeep with Kureshi and noticed how the police would collect bribes from the prostitutes in the fair of Vani.

Vasant Moon’s The Growing up Untouchable also depicts the patriarchal ideology that was prevalent both in high-caste society as well as in his own community. There are numerous incidents of atrocities on women in the autobiographies which include the account of torture on his mother by Moon’s drunken father; Moon’s step brother, Laxman’s possession of a house after his grandfather Sadaship’s death and forcing Moon’s mother to leave the house for good; the story of the light skinned wife of a Dalit who was chained up by her husband in order to prevent her from running away with somebody else; the narration of police atrocities on the two Ambedkarite girls who escaped after killing two police men etc. make a critique of woman position in Dalit societies. The autobiographers of have shown with equal sensitivity the plight of acute suffering and plight of the Dalit women whose afflictions were double edged, as a Dalit and as a woman.

The Dalit personal narratives juxtapose marginalized position of the individual self and community as well. They are marginalised with physical segregation in terms of their habitation both in villages and towns as well that is found in all the select set of autobiographies. Dalits are marginalized in all spheres
of social, cultural, educational, professional, political and intellectual activities which is systematised through upper-caste cultural hegemony. Gopal writes:

On moral grounds, the relationship between the margin and the core is always of a hierarchical nature. It is dichotomous, in which the core exists only at the cost of the margin. In other words, the existence of a margin becomes the logical requirement of the core. (Guru 200, 115)

The untouchability and torture of the protagonists along with the Dalit students by the uppercaste teachers and students in schools; denial of good jobs and political representation as per their capacity described in The Branded; and non-recognition of the Dalit intellectuals as portrayed by Valmiki along with his friends expose a realistic picture of Dalit marginality that exists today. The autobiographies also show how Bama and Limbale’s grandmothers accept their wretchedness as a kind of tradition that has descended for years they have experienced. Gopal Guru in this regard states:

Dalits accept their marginalisation, particularly in two situations. In the first situation they find themselves helpless, frustrated, having lost faith in their ability to comprehend and then confront the marginalisation. In fact, they are forced to defend the marginalised position itself. (Ibid 115-116)

The autobiographies describe their trauma of caste violence, and challenge the in-built paradigm of Dalit marginalization which has been theorised through the mainstream scriptural narratives. The narratives of untouchability expose that the Dalit marginality more or less remain camouflaged in the upper-caste psyche which is inherent in the caste system. The Dalit autobiographers through their act of
writing autobiography reconstruct their history. The narratives also present insights into the future of the liberation of the subjugated. Having consciously associated with individual life with that of the community, the autobiographers provide the readers an opportunity to consider their roles in the formation Dalit struggle for their emancipation.
Aesthetics and Narrative Techniques in Dalit Autobiographies

Cane is crooked, but its juice isn’t crooked

Why be fooled by outward appearance?

The bow is crooked, but the arrow isn’t crooked,

Why be fooled by outward appearance?

The river is twisting, but the water isn’t crooked.

Why be fooled by outward appearance?

Chokha is ugly, but his feelings aren’t ugly.

Why be fooled by outward appearance?

(Abhanga 52 by Chokhamela, qtd. in Zelliot, 2005, 8)

I

The necessity of theorizing Dalit literary criticism has been felt by the dalit-writer critics since 1976 Dalit literary conference of Nagpur. R.G. Jadhav, a literary critic, in the conference, presented an actual understanding of the development of literature formulating a theme of social awareness and an aesthetic outlook. Social content and aesthetic form are inseparable in any literary work. The autonomy of a literary work as a work of literature should be granted, however, when a theme of social awareness is presented in a proper literary form, it assumes significance. Dalit literature remarkably comprises a considerable amount of the themes of social awareness. Though, in literary criticism, it seems that the content-oriented and form-
oriented positions are separate, in actual criticism they go hand in hand. Social and formal aspects are blended in a literary work and such blending is organic otherwise both the purposes are susceptible to defeat. Jadhav suggested the idea of Dalit aesthetics as:

I think that from the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness. It means that the Dalit writers have to realize their total sensibility towards life from the level of art. (*Poisoned Bread* 306)

He further argues that Dalit world is deeply immersed in the struggle of life, and the actual Dalit world is filled with dreadful, terrible and humiliating events. As he writes:

Dalit writers cannot escape being tied physically and mentally to this world. Dalit writers are doing the difficult work of portraying this life, through personal experience and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility to live this life is painful enough; it can be equally painful to recreate it on the mental level. (*Ibid* 310)

The contestation that Dalit writers, such as Daya Pawar and others, make before the mainstream Indian writers is that the high caste writers did not bother to look at Dalit life – even with blinkers. Daya Pawar, in his poem “Oh! Great Poet”, interrogates the great poet, Valmiki, who sings in praise of Ramarajya, “Oh Valmiki… how then should we call you a great poet?”(in Anand 132). Pawar contests the claim of epic quality of Valmiki’s work as he had not written even one stanza about the injustice and repression of the Dalits. So the penetrating expression of agony and oppressed social reality of the Dalits is an inherent constituent of Dalit literature.
Janardan Waghmare, in his essay “Black Literature and Dalit Literature”, makes a comparative study of the two literatures from historical and ideological points of view. He describes that only after the World War I, American Black literature made a real progress. During the period between 1920 and 1930 various facets of the Blacks’ artistic achievement were manifested. It was the time when young writers in the form of ‘new Black’ came to the forefront. Langston Hughes, a poet and novelist, representing the young Black writers delivered the manifesto of Black literature:

We the younger Negro artists, who create, now intend to express our dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. Now we are beautiful. (qtd. in Waghmare 2009, 318)

Thus the Black writers began to portray their life in their own characteristic language. From that time they abandoned the idea of white washing their black skins and minds. In the 1940s and 1950s some remarkable literary works were produced in America such as Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son* (1940) that depicted the ghetto life in Chicago and in 1952 Ralph Ellison’s famous novel, *Invisible Man* was published that depicts three and half centuries of Black life. The Black writers have taken about forty to fifty years to evolve such a revolutionary stance while the Dalit literature emerged primarily under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambekar in the 1930s, and it brandished in the 1970s and 1980s.

M. N. Wankhade in his presidential address, later published as a critical essay, “Friends, The Day of Irresponsible Writers is Over”, in the conference of Dalit Writers expresses his view on the aesthetics of Dalit literature as man being at the centre of Dalit literature. He criticised the romantic nature of Indian mainstream
writers, who were the proponents of ‘art for art’s sake’, developing a great gulf between people and writing. To quote him:

Beauty became the only aim; form and style became of paramount importance, and content was thrown to the winds. The notion developed that the writer writes for himself. As a result there developed in the literary world small, mutual admiration circles of writers and poets who wrote for themselves. The writing that came out of these groups was characterized by escapism, theme of sex and depravity and a sense of meaninglessness of life. (Dangle 329)

According to him, beauty is a relative concept and not constant or eternal. Beauty as a concept is related to the thoughts prevailing in respective ages. There was a time kings were the subject of literature and not the common people but today, the life of the slums and untouchable quarters have become the subject matter of literature. There is an intimate relationship between literature and myths and the Dalit writers are trying to writing about their own myths and stories of their own heroes or Viranganas to evolve a narrative tradition specifically associated with the Dalit identity (Ibid 329).

II

Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, deals with the nature of art, beauty and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Scientifically, it is defined as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values and also called judgements of sentiments and taste. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1992) defines aesthetics as “a set of principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty” (19).
Leo Tolstoy in his book *What is Art* (1898) defined art from the point of value judgement. He observes:

Art is a human activity consisting in this that one consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings, he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them (qtd.in Goswami 222).

His concept of the value of art is based on the value of empathy that shared for good feelings

Noel Carroll in his book *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (2001) notes that the art object is something which is designed to provoke a certain form of response and a certain type of relation. The canonical relations with art (object) involves the aesthetic however that is to be characterized. So to him, the “artwork is an object designed with the function of engendering aesthetic experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and so forth” (Carroll 5). He observes that much has been said by Kant and Hutcheson about theory of art, but in real they are not the theory of art rather they are the theories of beauty. He writes:

Though Kant and Hutcheson say a great deal about art, their theories are not theories of art. They are theories of beauty - and, in Kant's case of the sublime as well. But they do not propose anything remotely like definitions of art. (*Ibid* 31)

Giles Deleuze, on the other hand, argues that art does not produce concepts, though it does address problems and provocations, rather, it produces sensations, affects, intensities, as its mode of addressing problems (see Grosz).

During the period of late 17th to the early 20th century Western aesthetics underwent a slow revolution into what is often called Modernism. German and
British thinkers accentuated on beauty as the key component of art and of the aesthetic experience, and perceived art as necessarily aiming at absolute beauty.

For Kant beauty is a disinterested manifestation, a truth by itself and it is so on account of our judgement. Moreover beauty is ‘universal’ and ‘necessary’ implying the objective and detachment of beauty valid across all spatio-temporal contingencies. Beauty, in the scheme of Kant, is only seemingly or affectively purposive but is actually without a purpose (‘purposiveness without purpose’ or ‘final without end’). To Kant, the ‘judgements of beauty will be tainted if guided by our practical interests in the object-interest we can plausibly sustain if we take the object to exist’ (Carroll 30).

Peter Lamarque, in the essay “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?” (2007), has pointed out how Frank Sibley’s view on aesthetic concept is differentiated from Kant. To Sibley, aesthetics is not exclusively confined to beauty as claimed by Kant rather it is wider than that. He also recognises descriptive and evaluative elements that can interact in the aesthetic concepts. He maintains that aesthetic properties are emergent that require something more than merely sensory perception for their appreciation, as in the case of literature, language is not the sufficient criteria to appreciate a work aesthetically. There are some other skills involved beyond linguistic competence and in this regard literary appreciation is not a natural but a trained mode of discernment. He also views that there is no logical or inductive relations between an object’s aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. Thus the idea of condition governed aesthetic concept is challenged. He explains about the applicability of ‘aesthetic particularism’ in appreciation of literary works instead of ‘generalisable’ concept of aesthetics on the ground that same poetic or literary
devices in different works never ensure the sameness of aesthetic effect (Lamarque 30-31).

In *Aesthetic Theory* (2002), Theodor Adorno is concerned not only with such standard aesthetic preoccupations as the function of beauty and sublimity in art, but with the relations between art and society. He feels that modern art's freedom from such restrictions as cult and imperial functions that had plagued previous eras of art has led to art's expanded critical capacity and increased formal autonomy. With this expanded autonomy comes art's increased responsibility for societal commentary. However, Adorno does not feel that overtly politicized content is art's greatest critical strength; rather he champions a more abstracted type of "truth-content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). Unlike Kantian or idealist aesthetics, Adorno's aesthetics locates truth-content within the art object, rather than in the perception of the subject. Such content is, however, affected by art's self-consciousness at the hands of its necessary distance from society, which is perceptible in such instances as the dissonances inherent in modern art. Truth-content is ultimately found in the relation between multiple dialectical interactions that emerge from the artwork's position(s) relative to subject and greater societal tradition, as well as internal dialectics within the work itself. Throughout, Adorno praises dramatist Samuel Beckett, to whom the book was dedicated.

Going through Adorno’s aesthetic theory, Zuidervaart introduces the reader to the historical context, the conceptual framework, and the social and political claims of Adorno's aesthetics. There is also paradoxical nature of Adorno's conception of art. He says that the desirable social significance of art is possible only when it is semi-autonomous from society (see Michel 202)
Theodor Adorno felt that aesthetics could not proceed without confronting the role of the culture industry in the commodification of art and aesthetic experience.

Unlike the Western concept of aesthetics, Indian aesthetics is based on the spirituality and propagated by the mainstream Brahminic culture. The Indian culture is essentially ingrained in its spirituality which emphasises much on the soul than the body. It is found that from the era of *Upanisads* down to the era of philosophical debate, the consciousness of Indian mind seeking pleasure has been engaged in searching for transcendental happiness. In order to find out a heavenly spiritual happiness, Indian philosophy, from time immemorial, has worked for transformation from material to immaterial, from mundane to spiritual for realization of the Supreme Being. The pleasure derived from the realization of *rasa* springs from ultimate feelings of the Supreme Being unified with eternal entity. Thus rasa theory is more spiritual than ordinary associations of day to day life.

Indian mainstream literary criticism considers *rasa* (sap/juice/taste/supreme joy/mental feeling/aesthetic enjoyment) as the soul of all literature. Sage Bharata has propounded the elaborate theory of *rasa* realization in his treatise entitled *Natyasastra* (c. 200 A.D), and he lists eight types of rasas: the erotic, comic, pathetic, heroic, frightful, furious, and odious and the marvellous. G.N. Devy observes in *Indian Literary Criticism*, the number of rasas was a point of contention from the beginning. Later, critics added a ninth *rasa*, the tranquil. Indian aestheticians frequently link the theory of rasa with spirituality, and finding inspiration in the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of monism, they have tried to “synthesize all *rasas* into a single *rasa*” (Thampi 318).
Ayyappa Panikar, in his essay “Towards an Alternative Aesthetics” (1994), states that one can see the interconnectedness of various strands in the writings of the Blacks or Afro-Americans across the continents and the Dalits in Indian sub-continents. The common features of both these marginal literatures rest on the oral nature of composition and transmission, literature of the downtrodden as experienced in everyday life, nonconformity to the set standards, the sub-culture dominated and controlled by the colonizers or elites, acquiescence and acceptance of the colonizer’s culture or ideology and protest, anger and grief, writings dominated by centrifugal tendencies etc. which promote a culture of protest and resistance against the oppression in search of an alternative aesthetics (see Paniker). The concept of Negritude has emerged out of revolt of the Black man insulted and enslaved by the white supremacists. They accepted the word “negro” which was hurled at them as an epithet and defended themselves in pride as Black in the face of white (Irele 9) and so is the case of Dalits in India. They articulate their voice for separate aesthetics as their counterpart fails to do in their literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes:

We must redefine theory itself from within our own black culture, refusing to grant the racist premise that theory is something that white people do, so we are doomed to imitate our white colleagues, like reverse black minstrel cities done up in whiteface. (qtd in Harlaw 577)

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, critic has opposed rasa theory and propounded separate Dalit aesthetics in his book Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2004). He writes:

How will the taste of the pain, anger, rejection, rebellion, problems, struggles, injustices and ill treatment contained in Dalit literature be known through slow
sipping and relishing? In terms of Dalit literature, the *rasa* theory of aesthetic appreciation seems insufficient. (Limbale 2007, 116)

This is how with the advent of marginal literatures, the entire debate regarding aestheticism in literature has taken a new turn. Today, the social sensibility has been a key element in the concept of aestheticism of marginal literature instead of its literary form, symbols and artistic feature (Kumar 2012).

The Indian elites are habitually engaged in intellection either to create ideological apparatuses or to rehabilitate structures of coercion or to recover themselves from the damage caused by their engagement in modernity. On the contrary, subalterns situate themselves within militancy. The elites are engaged in an attempt to understand whether the creative enterprise of the subaltern are ‘false consciousnesses’ or ‘replication’ of elite structure what Borges termed as the “normal respiration of intelligence” (qtd. in Menon xi), Mimesis, within the anthropological discourse, has been a dominant factor in understanding the South Asian subaltern intellectual creativity. In Indian context, “imitation being the sincerest expressive form of submission” (Menon xi), the culture of the subordinated caste is understood as a mere replication of the thought of dominant caste structure. Casteism exists within the rules of language embodying the dichotomous world view of purity and pollution. Srinivasan’s concept of ‘Sanskritization’ again is a process of diluting the articulation of subaltern voice for social mobilization against casteist anarchy. To quote Menon:

It is a model of deferred ideal of perfect mimesis, wherein subordinated castes, given time, shall become behaviourally more and more like those above them in the hierarchy. Here, too, the creativity of the subordinated castes lies in replication, not in innovation. (*Ibid* xii)
However he adds that a new trajectory of Dalit writings, mainly academic in its form, has denied the mimesis and the construction of arguments that speak of a different world. The Dalit writings possess an independent world view, autonomous culture that rejects the thoughts based on casteist structure. He says, “Subordinated castes are seen as possessing an independent, autonomous culture that rejects any semblance to the structures of Brahmin thought” (Ibid xii). This practice of innovative culture, in Marxist term, is known as antagonistic ‘class’ culture premised on production relations in sudra polemic as a different domain of sensibility. This involves a subtle account of creativity and historical change, which does not resolve into the question of mimesis or its denial. It creates an anxiety about the presumed stability of identity which in the words of Bhabha, “at once resemblance and menace” (qtd. in Menon xii). The idea of repetition and difference within the space dominant discourse is an extension into the concept of hybridity that makes possible an understanding of repetition as difference (Ibid xii).

Darshana Trivedi in her essay “Literature of their Own: Dalit Literary Theory in Indian Context” examines that Dalit literature rejects canonical literature and it also rejects all the established aesthetic standards of evaluating literature. The purpose of traditional literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure i.e. ‘Brahmanand-sahodaranand’. Though traditional aesthetics talks about three basic principles of literature, Satayam (Truth), Shivam (goodness), Sundaram (beauty), it is never realistic. On the contrary, Dalit literature is realistic in true sense. Man is at the centre of Dalit literature, man is superior to God and goddesses or even to nation. Hence when we evaluate a Dalit text we can neither apply Bharata’s concept of ‘Nayaka Dhirdat’, Dhirlalit, Dhir Prasant or Dhiruddat, nor can we apply Jagannath’s definition of poetry Vakyam rasatamkam Kavayam”. Dalit literature
also rejects the Western theories like Freud’s Psycholoanalysis, Barthe’s structuralism or Derrida’s deconstruction. It rejects Indian theories like Rasa and Dhawani as need.

Dr. C.B. Bharti in his Hindi article “The Aesthetics of Dalit literature” writes:

The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life. (qtd. in Prasad 6)

Going through the realistic and revelatory kind of narration of Dalit literature Darshana Trivedi finds it problematic in perceiving beauty of Dalit character in accordance with the mainstream norms. She writes:

We cannot evaluate the beauty of Dalit women by keeping Shakuntal’s concept in mind (Kimiv hi madhuranam hi mandanakrutum). The beauty of Dalit women lies in the web of perspiration on her face while she works in the field. (Trivedi 7)

D. Padmarani in the essay “Distinctive Voices of Distress” asserts that Dalit literature is not devoid of aesthetics. She refers to Enduluri Sudhakar who describes the beauty of a Dalit woman who rushes towards the land with all vigour and vitality with sickle in her hand. Sudhakar criticizes the ancient literary works for not making Dalit woman the heroine. (D. Padmarani,: 2007, p. 83)

In this context the representative of Indian beauty, especially in painting, may be evaluated. Ravi Raja Verma is a famous Indian painter belonging to early modern era. His paintings represent typical Indian aesthetics where there is no place
of subaltern beauty of dark Dalit women with the exception of Tagore’s painting of dark women as the representative beauty.

Sharan Kumar Limbale is one of the prominent founders of Dalit aesthetics. While propagating Dalit aesthetics he has considered the mainstream critiques of aesthetics. He says that Dalit literature is a movement, and a vehicle of pain, sorrow, questions and problems. Since Dalit literature is a life-affirming literature all strands of it are tied to life. Dalit writers claim that they write for humanity.

According to Limbale the concept of beauty which has been propagated by the mainstream critic of Indian aesthetics tends to revolve around the feelings of pleasure and empathy aroused by viewing the object instead of being concerned with the form of an object. The pleasure and empathy produced by beauty concerns the aesthete who is as important as an artist and the artistic creation. The artists have to create the beauty in their works agreeable to the aesthete. Everyone has the sense of beauty but only the artistes have the aptitude and taste for beauty. So the ability to imagine beauty is the gift of high culture. In this regard, he quotes N.G. Chapekar’s opinion, “To experience beauty, a cultured mind, health, and enthusiasm are necessary” (qtd. in Limbale 112).

However, Limbale criticizes the pleasure centric aesthetic judgement of literature. He says, “If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna literature, pain is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (2007, 114). It is a problematic for a reader to be pleased by reading the pain and protest as expressed in Dalit literature. He writes:

How can the aestheticism in discussions of beauty be reconciled with the Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature? This revolutionary consciousness is based on ideas
of equality, liberty, justice, and solidarity, rather than pleasure. This is why it is important for Dalit critics to change the imaginary of beauty. In every age the imaginary of beauty is linked to the prevailing ideas. At one time, for example, kings and emperors used to be the subjects of literature. But today, the life lived in huts and cottages situated outside the boundary of the village has become the subject of literature. It has become necessary to transform the imaginary of beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the framework of traditional aesthetics. (Ibid 115)

Limbale has criticized the proposal of Yadunath Thatte to accept ‘revolt’ as the tenth rasa and ‘cry’ as the eleventh rasa recognized by Acharya Jawdekar. He has denied the demand of Yadunath Thatte in increasing the number of rasas. To him, Dalit literature is not pleasure giving literature and propounded separate aesthetic for Dalit literature which is based on materialist idea of aesthetic, Ambedkarite thought and seeking freedom as aesthetic value. He writes:

The traditional theory of beauty seems abstruse and spiritualistic. According to this theory the beauty of an artistic creation lies in its expression of world consciousness or other worldliness. The traditional theory is universalistic and spiritualistic. The aesthetic, which proposes that the beauty of a work of art is its artistic rendering of reality, is materialist. Dalit literature rejects spiritualism and abstraction, its aesthetics is materialist rather than spiritualist. (Ibid 116)

The Ambedkarite thought and the articulation of life-affirming values in the works of Dalit writers speak for the liberation of the Dalits from their wretchedness. The value of a literary work depends on how much and in what way an artist’s ideas imbedded in the work can influence/affect the reader. Limbale says, “That work of
Dalit literature will be recognized as beautiful, and, therefore ‘good’, which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader” *(Ibid 117)*.

The Dalit writers need to become one with their inspiration. They also require a heightened consciousness of literature in order to give literary expression to their inspiration and (their) experience of it. Limbale writes, “The deeper the relationship of readers with a Dalit writer’s inspiration, the greater will be their liking for the work” *(Ibid 117)*. In this process of literary work, written out of heightened consciousness with experience producing inspiration for the readers, all three components such as the artist, the artistic creation, and the reader are inseparable from each other. The artist’s personality is reflected in the work, and the reader’s personality is unified with this reflection. The artist and the reader become one in the artistic creation. The meeting of the two depends on possessing the common values. So there is apparent difference on the intensity of sharing the experiences of Dalit writers by the Dalit and the non-Dalit readers. On the question of permanence of beauty in Dalit literature, he says:

> It should be kept in mind that while the concept of beauty in Dalit literature cannot be a universal concept, the Ambedkarite inspiration expressed in it can be of universal value. *(Ibid 117)*

The readers of any text have some pre-determined assumptions that precede the reading. The reader examines whether these assumptions are challenged or confirmed by the text. So the same work is liked by one reader while for another may be disliking. So, Dalit literature cannot be appraised fully without the knowledge of the Dalit writer’s experience, their anger, rejection, rebellion, traditional values and social context. The literature that glorifies pleasure gives
central place to the pleasure-seeking aesthete. Dalit literature, on the other hand, promotes equality, freedom and justice, and emphasizes on human being and society. Limbale has briefly summed up Dalit aesthetics as:

The aesthetics of Dalit literature rests on: first, the artists’ social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity. (Ibid 120)

On the basis of Indian aesthetics R.G. Jadhav proposes the autonomy of text of Dalit literature. However, it may be noted that Theodor Adorno’s aesthetics reveals the paradoxical nature of art which has desirable significance only when it is semi-autonomous from society. Adorno’s philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic ideas, is reflected in the society as he states that there is “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (qtd. in Michel 202). Dalit aesthetics has drawn similar line like that of Adorno’s notion of aesthetic which is a kind of negative dialectic of Kantian aesthetics.

According to Limbale, the Dalit concept of beauty is temporal in comparison to the universal concept of beauty propagated by traditional Indian aesthetics. As noted by C.B. Bharti, Dalit women’s beauty cannot be compared with the traditional kind of beauty of Shakuntala as represented by Kalidasa and later by Ravi Raja Verma in painting. Limable’s autobiography The Outcaste narrates an episodic story of author’s love for a Mahar Dalit girl in his neighborhood. He describes the surroundings of his beloved’s house having the typical Dalit habitation with poor condition of living. He writes:
Her house was rather bare and it disturbed me whenever I looked at it. The scorching sun, dogs with their tongues lolling in the heat, utterly charmless children, an old hag smoking, holes in the crumbling walls of the house, drunkards stumbling along. What else was there in our locality to interest one? But when Shewanta and I became interested in each other, even such depressing surroundings seemed attractive. (*Outcaste* 25)

He has narrated the beauty of a Dalit girl, Shewanta with whom he had a fling during his school days. He writes:

Shewanta never smiled wholeheartedly. She had never oiled her hair. At home Shewanta was like an ox harnessed to the oil press that goes round and round in a dark room from morning till evening. It was sheer drudgery. Shewanta’s eyes were as humble as a cow’s. Her mother wore an old sari, all patched up. Her father wore a ragged shirt. Shewanta used to pick out and crush lice from her sister’s heads. I would watch Shewanta, as if I was witnessing an accident. (*Ibid* 26)

The beauty of Shewanta here can never be compared with Shakuntala the ideal figure of Indian traditional aesthetics which is subjective and spiritual in nature. Dalit aesthetics of Limbale shows affinities with Adorno who has defined aesthetics as objective in nature that concerns the voice of suffering and that is a condition of all truth.

In *Joothan* Valmiki narrates the story of rejection of Joothan, the leftover food by his mother. Sukhadev Sing Tyagi’s daughter was getting married. Valmiki’s mother used to clean their place for the last few days before the wedding. His father was also doing works for that marriage ceremony by going to villages to collect *Charpais* (cots) for the guests. When the *Barat*, the accompanying guests of the bridegroom were eating, Valmiki’s mother was sitting outside the door with a basket.
Valmiki, with his younger sister Maya, was sitting close to his mother in the hope that they would get a share of the sweets and delicious dishes that he could smell coming from inside. As the feast was over his mother requested to Sukhadev Sing Tyagi for some food for her children. In reply Sukhadev Sing Tyagi showed her the basket full of dirty pattals and said, “You are taking a basket full of Joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going” (Ibid 11). His mother resisted the humiliation by Sukhadev Sing Tyagi expressing her anger and emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhadev: “Pick it up and put it inside your house feed it to the Baratis tomorrow morning” (Ibid 11). She gathered her children and left the place quickly. Sukhadev had tried to hit her but the author’s mother confronted him like a lioness without fear. This very act of rejection of Joothan and resistant to the humiliation of Sukhadev inspired the author and made him conscious of their wretchedness.

Valmiki’s narration on the teaching of the lesson of Dronacharya in his school made him conscious of the discrimination of narrative representation of the Dalits. He understood how the mythological narratives were not bothered to narrate the poverty of the outcastes. The episode of Dronacharya’s famine describes that he had to provide flour dissolved in water to his famished son Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The whole class gave heed to the story of Dronacharya’s dire poverty with great emotion. This was intensely highlighted by the author of the Mahabharata. In all audacity, young Om Prakash stood up and asks the teacher a question:

So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? (Ibid 23)
The whole class stared him and the teacher screamed at, “Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back” (Ibid 23). Later on Valmiki had to undergo physical punishment by the teacher. Valmiki mentions the irate outbursts of his teacher while beating him up, “Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya … Here take this I will write an epic on your body” (Ibid 23).

This questioning against the hegemonic narrative of Brahminism has been inspired by Ambedkarite philosophy. This philosophical representation of Ambedkar against monopolistic religious description is ‘beautiful’ and ‘good’ for evoking Dalit consciousness.

Valmiki’s struggle for education is a reflection of Ambedkar’s ideology that he stated in his historical speech in Yeola, “Educate, agitate and unite.” Surajbhan Taga’s son Brajesh once stood Valmiki’s way to school and threatened and humiliated him primarily because Valmiki did well in school as a student. He said, “Chuhre ke, you really have sprouted horns. You have become arrogant. Even your stride has changed” (Ibid 28). He further said that Valmiki would remain a Chuhra however much he studied. He pushed Valmiki with a stick and threw his books scattered around on the way. His back has fallen into muddy ditch. It seemed to him that it was impossible for him to go to school any more. But his father’s face came before him saying, “You have to improve the caste by studying” (Ibid 29). The similar kind of description is found in the narration of Bama’s Karukku, where Anna, Bama’s brother, inspired her to study well so that she became respectable person in society. The struggle for education by the protagonists of the autobiographies is a part of their self respect movement which also forms one of their aesthetic strategies.
Valmiki was greatly influenced by Ambedkar. He read several books by Gandhi in the library of Indresh Nagar which was run by the Jatavs. It was Hemlal one of his friends who gave him the book *Dr Ambedkar: A Biography* written by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu. He read several books on Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Parsad, Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, and Tagore and so on. But he was completely ignorant of Dr Ambedkar, even upto his twelve class in Tyagi Inter College, Barla. He was not aware of Ambedkar till then. His exposure to Ambedkar brought a positive change to his life and the way he used to think. He expressed his gratitude to Hemlal for showing him a new path. He writes:

My reading these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became in me. (*Ibid* 72)

After reading his Ambedkar a new word Dalit entered his vocabulary which was not a substitute for Harijan but an expression of protest of the untouchable masses of India:

I was beginning to realize that the education imparted in schools and colleges did not make us secular but turned us into narrow-minded fundamentalist Hindus. The deeper eye was getting into this literature, the more articulate my rage became. I began to debate with my college friends and put my doubts before my teacher. It was this literature that had given me courage. (*Ibid* 72-73)

The author here as an autobiographer plays a role of an artist and as a reader of Ambedkarite philosophy became an Aesthete. Valmiki knows that while he was in Jabalpur his manner of speaking and the way he mixed up with his friends changed in a positive way. He became involved in literary circle of Jabalpur and developed his own views on literature. He was attracted to social realism than to
aestheticist and formalist type of writings. His empathy towards Dalits has been in public when he wrote an article in the *Navbharat Times*, Bombay, on the incidents of ‘Ganwai Brothers’ that took place in Pune. This is how being inspired by the philosophy of Ambedkar, Valmiki started his writings with intense Dalit consciousness. The Dalit aesthetics has been essentially informed by such socio-political exigencies.

Limbale in *The Outcaste* comes away several stories of insult and humiliation of the Dalits by the upper castes. About Santamai’s moving stories of sufferings Limbale writes:

“I thought Santahmai’s tears were like an epic. Her agony contained the potential spark of a great war. What a miserable past we had lived! My agony was not limited to myself alone. Injustice done to me was not just today’s phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into histories for many thousands of years. My agony was also the agony of Lord Buddha. I see the same agony even today but why is not the Buddha in me aroused. (*Outcaste* 73)

It was Ithal Kamble who not only divorced and discarded Masamai but also snatched away her suckling baby. After divorcing her, he married another woman and became father of many children. Unfortunately, he was suffering from a disease which both doctors and prayers could not cure. Some people said that he was suffering because of Masamai’s curse as he had humiliated her. So, he came back to Masamai to lessen his sin that he had done to her. Masamai also forgoes all her past sufferings and was strongly determined to save her husband. She took every care for him whole heartedly and with great devotion. Santhamai also prayed before God for her husband. So despite Ithal Kamble’s injustice to Masamai, she did her duty as a
typical Dalit wife which is nothing but a life affirming value of humanity which Dalit aesthetics speaks of.

It is found that Dalit children, men and women often have a nick name either given by their relatives out of affection or by the neighbors to make him or her as part of joke. Many high caste people would call the Dalit people by a nick name as a faceless identity without having names. Just as we find in Joothan, the Bhangi’s are addressed as Chuhra or Chuhri with pejorative tone. But in many cases the Dalit people themselves adopt nick names. So these names are characterized by either inherent physical features or by their very nature of birth and day to day activities. And in many a cases though some feel humiliated, most of the time they are happy with such of names. The names of the Dalit people often bear the reality of society and there lies the beauty of Dalit people. In Bama’s Karukku such names are projected for portraying the realistic picture of the Dalit society. She writes:

People’s baptismal names, given at church, were one thing; the names we used in the street were quite another. One child’s name was Munkovam, short tempered. A women was called Midday-masala … A certain child who was very dark skinned and plumb was named Murugan-spring pig. It seems that pigs wondered about, well fed and plumb, by the spring of Murugan; that is why. (Karukku 8)

There are so many nick names; Bama has referred in her Karukku. She has projected these characters through which the culture of the people is portrayed in real terms. She has described the talent of a man named Uudan, blower who was renowned in her village whose real name was unknown to Bama and others in her village. He knew how to play the flute really well. Whenever there had been a programmer of singing and dancing with a mike set in the hall, Uudan would play his flute. There were other people of her community having extraordinary quality in arts. Pig-
Pavulu’s son was a great pranksear who once plucked the drums and other instruments of the drummers along with five others and played even better than the professional drummers as they were completely drunk and were stumbling during the Easter programme. Several others have been described with their excellent aptitude for song, dance and rhythm, even though they did not have proper learning.

Bama became self sufficient as she was appointed as a teacher and she realized that education was the only way for her comments to get rid of unspeakable material and social destitution. She writes:

> I realized that if only the children on my street acquired a little education and found jobs, then they too could live reasonably well. But then, how are they to educate themselves? The struggle to fill their bellies is their main struggle, after all. (*Ibid* 77)

This thought led Bama to take a great decision to serve the people of her community and wanted to become a nun and enter the order of a convent. Bama writes:

> There was a desire in my heart to help other children to better themselves, as I, born into the same community, had been able to do, because of my education. I really wanted to teach such children. But I understood, after I entered the order that the convent I entered didn’t even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way. (*Ibid* 77)

Bama’s narration of her desire to enter the convent is a social commitment. The act of her leaving the order shows her bold initiative to resist the hypocrisy of the authorities of the convent along with her life affirming values to work for the
poor. Bama’s narrative becomes an intense social commentary aiming at bringing emancipative values for change.

Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya*, gives a searing picture of casteism, superstitions, poverty, police torture, oppression by the high caste people and mill owners. The narrator experiences mental as well as physical torture in his childhood life for his family’s thieving profession. But very soon he becomes orphan child as she dies due lack of proper treatment. The narrator gives a realistic picture of his mother through his beautiful narration making her a universal Dalit mother. As the autobiography begins, the author describes the police tyranny on their family. When the police went to their house, his mother hid herself in the jungle to save herself from the police though his mother was never into stealing. She ran a milk business and had deep affection for her children. The author recalls:

Mother used to collect milk from our house and village and go to Latur to sell it. She would always bring some edibles for us. Sometimes, the milk curdled; then, mother brought it home and wept bitterly. But I used to be pleased, for Dada used to mix jiggery in it and give me. I liked that sweetened milk. (*The Branded* 24)

The mother had to work hard to feed their children. She expressed her sorrow as for that business she had to leave them home. There had often been leakage in their thatched roofed house during rainy season. She earned some money from milk business and made the house with an iron-sheet-roof. The author narrates how her mother took care of him when he was suffering from boil all over his head. She felt that she was the cause for the suffering of her son as she gave up fasting on Tuesdays. Gaikwad writes about her love for him:
She was awefully frightened and said, ‘This disease seems to be the curse of the Goddess. Harlot that I am, I gave up fasting on Tuesdays and so my poor son is afflicted with this dirty disease.’ She brought ash of the cowdung-cake from the stove and prayed, ‘Oh! Goddess-Mother! Please cure my child of this disease. Aslong as I don’t sacrifice a goat to you, I shall fast both on Fridays and on Tuesdays.’ (Ibid 25)

Mother Dhandabai’s ardent love for the author has been described when he was lost in Siddheshwar fair at Latur. He happened to be there in Latur fair alone without informing anyone of his family. On his return home he could not find anyone to guide him. He began to cry as he roamed around calling for his mother. Mother Dhandabai and Dada at the suggestion of More, the hotel owner, got an announcer to move through all the town and announced loudly that a boy from Dhanegaon had strayed and was not being found. The author heard the announcement and ran up to the announcer. He was taken to Mother and the eldest brother. He writes his mother’s reaction:

Mother and Dada began to weep hugging me to their breasts. After they had had their cry, they beat me admonishing, Will you again come to Latur like this? You scamp, do you want to die under a bus? They kept on chiding me thus. I began to cry loudly. So Mother bought me a chhatak of jeelebi. (Ibid 29)

Mother, Dhandabai was caught fever and she stopped her milk-selling business. The house ran through extreme poverty leaving no money to spend for her treatment. They had to sell a brass pitcher at Latur to take her to Jawali for treatment. Eventually, one day a man came from Jawali and informed them about the death of Mother, Dhondabai, a death which was caused by poverty and lack of
medical treatment as well as their superstitious beliefs. The narration of Dhondabai’s motherly affection is universally appealing.

Aesthetics, from Adorno’s point of view, locates truth-content within the art object, rather than in the perception of the subject. From the point of view of Dalit aesthetics the plight of the mother who died of hard work and out of hapless poverty informs Dalit consciousness of their social and economic reality.

III

Roland Barthes commented, ‘the history of narrative begins with the history of (hu)mankind; there does not exist, and has never existed, a people without narratives’ (1966: 14).

David Herman, while giving the working definition of narrative in his book *Basic Elements of Narrative*, writes:

Narrative ... is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change - a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, "scientific" modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. (Herman 2)

Narrative is characterised by a mode of representation that is situated in a specific discourse context which focuses on a structured time-course of particularised events. In addition, the events, represented, are such that they introduce some sort of disruption into a story world whether that world is actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc (*Ibid* 9). In the context of Dalit literary narratives, the mode of representation of world making or world disruption in a situated Indian literary discourse creates a new discourse of Dalit

Narration is admittedly a kind of play-acting. Granting the artificiality of the process, we still maintain that it is not all a game, not a game every time, and not a game with every person. Some sense of identity emerges from the text from the text of the narrative through the interest in, and desire for, self-revelation or a chance to articulate to a listener their own constructions of the significant. (Franco *et al.* 4)

Dalit narrative is a subversive kind of narrative against established narrative based on caste hierarchy. Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque suggests the primacy of an inherently subversive force that effectively disrupts the official categories which confer and contain meaning. It is pertinent to the Dalit narrative discourse as well. In contemporary hegemonic world, we may reread such inversion as articulation of challenge to the established social order. There are complex inter-relationships of festivity, transgression and counter-hegemonic cultural politics. We can find the transgressive unofficial discourse in the perpetual silence of the marginalised other. Dalits have remained voiceless in the margins for ages that could never have the authority to author themselves. Transgressive discourse has helped them to question the efficacy of institutionalised representations without ambivalence (Bhattarjee 112-113). Dalit discourse subverts the established category of meaning and identities and as we find in carnivals. Dalit literature deconstructs the mainstream Indian literary representations through subversion like subversive force of carnivalesque nature.

Badri Narayan opines that the Dalit narratives are the narratives of identity and self-respect. He writes:
The new narratives of the Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self-respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression. (Narayan 2006, 40)

The Dalit narratives are written in the respective Dalit idiom. The construction of the Dalit narratives is based on a sense of self-respect.

As noted by William L. Howarth, in his essay “Some Principles of autobiography” the decision of writing one’s autobiography is at least a strategic beginning. He mentions about three key elements of autobiography - character, technique and theme that subsequently guide a writer’s progress. It is the autobiographer’s sense of self, place, history and motives which builds the image or self-portrait of the autobiographer. Unlike the writers of epic poem, sonnet, short story, the autobiographers enjoy freedom in employing techniques to reach to his art objective. Barret John Mandel, in his essay “The Autobiographer’s Art”, writes:

The autobiographer has no limitations whatsoever as to the techniques he may employ in bringing his self-view to the printed page; here he has more freedom than writers in most other genres. The writer of an epic poem is more or less restricted to … But in autobiography the form (say, the development of an artistic sensibility) may find its expression in a long (or short) prose narrative, either purely expository or mixed with dialogue and other devices of characterization; it may be embodied in one kind of poetry or another, from the long blank verse poem to the lyric; presumably it can take shape dramatically as well. (Mandel 222)

Dalit writers are motivated for writing their autobiography not for portraying personal and family history of pride to the future generations, but for representing a
dalit life as one of the members of dalit community. The dalit autobiographer is
motivated to historicise the experience of dalitness, and philosophise their struggle
for existence, socio-political values. Dalit autobiographies are, thus, both individual
and community narratives. The discovery of self-knowledge, from the experiences
they had had, helps them to define themselves in their own terms, and makes free
them from imposed social definitions.

Valmki’s *Joothan* is constituted of events in thirty seven sections which have
been arranged in a sequence from his childhood village life to his attaining a
position of an established Hindi poet, critic and a Dalit activist. Vasant Moon’s
*Growing Up Untouchable in India* is composed of twenty eight chapters consisting
of different events. Each of them is like an independent story with a title. Moon
narrates the stories of his individual experience of Dalitness and his participation in
Dalit movement from school life to his establishment as a deputy county
commissioner of Darvha of the Yeotmal district. The wide acclaimed autobiography,
*Karukku* is constituted of nine sections along with a postscript. In *Karukku* Bama
has narrated various events of experiences as a member of Paraya community from
her childhood village life to her renunciation from convent life of nun. This is how
Limbale’s *Outcaste* is composed of forty four segments of stories related to his
experience of various events from his early school life to his life of a telephone
operator up to twenty five years of age. Unlike aforesaid four autobiographies *The
Branded- Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad is written without any section on various
events of experiences that he gathered from his childhood life of pilferer community
till his struggle as a leader of workers in cotton mail and as a Dalit politician-
activist.
It is observed that, except a few, there are similarities in the events narrated in the selected autobiographies. There are various events which underline the themes of Dalit autobiographies, such as, the experience of Dalit habitation since childhood at the margin of the villages, devoid of all norms of health and hygiene, segregated from the villages of high caste people, corporal punishment and humiliation received in schools from the teachers and students respectively, the experience of untouchability both in school and society, the incessant struggle to continue study, the experience of severe poverty, the struggle of the parents and guardians to manage hardly two times meals, humiliation by the high caste people, the issue of gender inequality and patriarchy; engagement of all the people of Dalit household for working in the field and houses of the high caste people, the caste based harassment and violence meted out to the Dalits by high caste, the harassment by the police, everlasting indebtedness of the Dalits caused by the money-lenders, etc.

The theme of quest for identity is an unrelenting aspect of the Dalit autobiographies. The question of identity represents the struggles of the Dalits for social equality and justice. Like other Dalit personal narratives, the select five autobiographies represent the caste history of the Dalits. In the course of writing caste history, the narrators question the mainstream culture, religion, values and the basis of oppression. In such enterprise, the Dalit autobiographical narratives construct an alternative history by substantially depicting their culture, language and myth. Despite a little difference with regard to the events, the themes of caste based violence and injustice done to the Dalits and search for identity through Dalit resistance against injustice remain the central focus in these autobiographies. Because of this, Dalit literature is charged as ‘univocal’, ‘monotonous’ and ‘static’. However, Limbale, a major Dalit critic and aesthetician agrees to this charge and
explains the rationality for univocality of Dalit writings. He says that univocality is the result of the expression of ideological view which is common to all Dalit writers. He argues:

Untouchables’ experiences of untouchability are identical. The name of the village may well be different, but the nature of tyranny against Dalits is the same. Social boycott, separate bastis, wells and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal the caste; denial of admission to public places; injustices done to Dalit women; ... Because of the commonalities in Dalit writers thoughts, experiences and emotions, Dalit literature appears to be univocal. (Limbale 2004, 35)

When there is commonality on the issue of identity in their narratives, strong individual self cannot be ignored in relation to the autobiographers/narrator’s rejection of superstitious cultural tradition of his community. Simultaneously, individual narrators excel in their intellectual capability. In Joothan Valmiki registers his complaint against certain traditions like – doing ‘salaam’ in marriage ceremony; treatment of ailment by bhagats, the charmers; sacrificing and killing piglets in the name of worship etc. He says, “My opinion about all these things being a fraud had been further strengthened. Who knows how many people these bhagats had killed” (Valmiki 43). Valmiki’s individual achievement as a first matriculate from his community; his interest in dramatic performance; the poetic zeal and dedication for Dalit cause as an established Dalit writer are the qualities which make his individual self transformative. The narration of individual self is pertinent in all the select autobiographies.

Though autobiographical narratives do not, necessarily, require sequence of events in absolute term, the minimum maintenance of it helps the readers to grasp
the text easily by which the autobiographer presents the problems or conflicts, will and woe for effective reception by the readers.

Unlike the traditional autobiographies, written by the mainstream writers, politicians, intellectuals, most of the Dalit autobiographies narrate their experiences of individual and communal selves from a Dalit point of view. It is found that each of the autobiographies carries a number of episodic stories which make the narratives complex and in respect to the representation of Dalit experiences.

Valmiki’s *Joothan* begins with first person possessive ‘our’ who is the main character narrating the whole story of various events that he experienced in his life focusing on the issues and themes that he wants to reveal before the reading public. It is found that through the use of first ‘I’ the Dalit autobiographers express not only his/her individual experiences that transforms to a conscious self, but raise question to various issues like internalising protest against the injustice, ethics, morality, value system, socio-political perspectives seeking reformation in them. Many a time by the first person narration, the autobiographer justifies his or her position in philosophising certain social aspects. Valmiki’s question on neglecting the representation of the Dalits’ plight in the epics; his question on misbehaving with the students by the teachers; his negation of significance of Sumitranandan Pant’s aesthetic relevance of describing the village life as beautiful and wonderful within the caste hierarchy and many among other such questions by which the narrator shares his opinions and views with the readers. Many a time Limbale in *The Outcaste*, using the first person narration, asks question to himself in search of his position in different socio-political situations. As a student of third form it was difficult for him to write an essay about the picnic he attended with his schoolmates. But on teacher’s insistence and calling him a son of a bitch, he asked himself, “How
should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for?” (The Outcaste 4). In The Outcaste, lots of questions are made by the narrator both in first person and third person, but technically the answers lay in the conscious self of the narrator. The most important questions raised by the narrator in Outcaste have pointed out the whole discourse of Dalit identity and caste based violence meted out to the Dalits. To quote Limbale:

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her as a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I really? (Limbale 2011, 37)

These questions intensify the thoughts, feelings, views about the significance of the events.

The third person point of view is regarded as effective point of view for formal writing as it is impersonal and does not force an opinion on the reader. It often relies on fact and not opinion which is apparently objective and omniscient. Despite the use of the first person narration of the events in Dalit autobiographies, many of them are described in third person signifying narrator’s knowledge and authorial subjectivity. The author’s knowledge and subjectivity are manifested in the third person narration in Joothan, such as Taga’s misery and exploitation of the Dalits during harvesting time, the portrayal of village money lender, violence in institutions against the Dalit youths by the teachers, the incidents of forced and unpaid labour, and identity crisis among the educated Dalits residing in urban areas
etc. In Limbale’s *The Outcaste* the narrator furnishes the third person narration about the untouchability that was prevalent in educational institution, in day to day activities, in culture and economic activities of Maharwada. Bama’s *Karukku* also opens up with third narration and shows her authorial subjectivity in describing location of her village, her people, their hard working nature, poverty, religion, myth of Nallathangaal, casteism, socio-economic exploitation, untouchability in Catholic order etc.

The Dalit aesthetician Sharan Kumar Limbale proclaims that Dalit literature is a distinct kind of literature for its social realism. To quote him:

The reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of the reality. It is the uncouth – impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. It is said that language changes after every twenty miles, but the arithmetic turns out to be wrong with respect to Dalits. In the same village, differences are evident between the language of the village and the language of the untouchable quarters. (Limbale 2004, 33)

The Dalit autobiographies have been a popular form of writings for the readers not only because of their revelation of caste oppression but also because of its simplified, picturesque, and vivid description of each event of Dalit life right from the beginning to the end of the autobiography. The Dalit autobiographers describe their story in the language used in their daily life. Limbale narrates a tragic picture of his childhood along with the other children of his locality. He writes:

There were about a hundred and twenty-five huts in our Maharwada. Ten to fifteen boys were from my class and there were seven to eight girls who had not yet reached puberty. I was crazy about a girl named Shewanta. Her house was rather
bare and it disturbed me whenever I looked at it. The schorching sun, dogs with their tongues lolling in the heat, utterly charmless children, an old hag smoking, holes in the crumbling walls of the house, drunkards stumbling along … Her three younger sisters cried almost continually. They were all hungry, because her parents, when going out to work, left only two bhakaris in the house. (The Outcaste 25)

In the “Translator’s note to the Second Edition” Lakshmi Holmstorm gives a brief note on her use of language in Karukku. She says that Bama has used colloquial language routinely as her medium for narration and even in her argument. Holmstorm writes:

She uses Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading. (in The Outcaste xix)

The Dalit autobiographies are written in Dalit idioms. While introducing and addressing the characters in their personal narratives, the Dalit writers use such vocabulary different from the one used by the mainstream writers. They use the pronouns “I”, “we” and “our” for representing the Dalits and “you”, “yours”, “they”, and “their’ for addressing the non-Dalits especially the so called upper caste Hindu elites. The third person narration provides a sense of authentic distention and at the same time establishes a credible intimacy with the readers.

The select set of autobiographies have ample use of sensory details such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and textures which create vivid images in the mind of the readers. The Dalit autobiographers, who are mostly in their early stage of life, have written these autobiographies with impulsive act of identity assertion
Valmiki’s description of the village, in the beginning of Joothan, gives a sensory description drawn by the sense of sight. In another description of the events, ‘joothan’, the scraps, remains the focus of identity question where the narrator himself is engaged in drying up the ‘joothan’ and guarding them from the attack of crows, hens and dogs that evokes a sight of an innocent poor Dalit boy and the condition of his family. There are certain descriptions of the narrative where a reader can have a sense of smell. After the daylong works in the house of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi on the occasion of his daughter’s marriage, Valmiki’s mother waited for ‘Joothan’, the scraps. The smell of cooking food was hanging around the air and Valmiki’s narration gives an olfactory description of it. He says:

The barat was eating. My mother was sitting outside the door with her basket. I and my sister Maya sat close to my mother in the hope that we too would get a share of the sweets and the gourmet dishes that we could smell cooking inside. (Joothan 10)

The sense of hearing is evident in the description of the rainy night that destroyed many houses of narrator’s village gives a picture viewed through sense of sight; the sound of heavy rainfall can be heard and the plight of Valmiki’s family and the villagers can be felt physically and mentally as well.

The Dalit autobiographers use the technique of ‘backstory’ to add depth or layers to their personal story intensifying the Dalit experience both of individual and community life. The deployment of backstories makes autobiographical representation a complex reality of author’s individual and social self. These stories are described in third person narration revealing the social relation of the Dalit
communities, their culture, and author’s position in such environment in relation to a particular time and place, which remains fundamental in recovering the socio-political and cultural history of the Dalits. Among the five select Dalit autobiographies Limbale’s *Outcaste* has engaged more ‘backstories’ in delineating the author’s life in terms of authenticity of fact and reality. To exhibit these series of autobiographical events Limbale significantly adjoined several backstories like unsuccessful married life of Santamai, the grandmother; the story of Masamai’s marriage to Ithal Kamble and the subsequent divorce by Kamble etc. which act as backdrops to Limbale’s family history. There are many such back stories in the narrative. The issue of patriarchy and gender inequality is reflected in the backstories of Devki, a spinster; Dhanavva a young girl made pregnant by her father; and the story of Rangoo, a prostitute working in Bombay. The frustration of the young Dalit boys and girls following terrible untouchability and social segregation are reflected in the back stories related to narrator’s childhood friend Harya, Parshya, Shewanta, Parbatajya and Shevanta, a girl married to a person of Sholapur from his village.

Valmiki in his *Joothan* narrates the backstories, like, Hiram Singh’s marriage at Mona; the physical violence of the young Dalits for their refusal of unpaid labour; the hollow hospitality in the house of Brajapal Singh, a teacher; the description of the condition of Dalit villages at Chandrapur district; stories of concealing caste name etc. that provide the social reality of Bhangi society in Hindi speaking Dalit regions. In her autobiography *Karukku* Bama gives a subtle description of the socio-cultural status of Paraya community through various backstories. The narration of the myth of Nallathangal; her grandmother’s working as a maid servant in the Naickers’ families; Anna’s introduction as a member of Paraya community; the
story of violence between two community over the cemetery; and the story of bullock cart, priest and construction of a church are the backstories with the help of which the autobiographical narrator tries to construct the Dalit cultural history.

Assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme in all the Dalit personal narratives. However, the narrators construct that identity through emphatic assertion of resistance and rationality against the established hegemonic norms and manipulative rituals that legitimize all sorts of violence and injustice on them by the society. Valmiki questions on ‘joothan’, the scraps as the payment of day long labour of the Dalits: “What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan” (Joothan 10). These kinds of questions are found in almost all the major events described by the narrators. The use of such questions is instrumental for the narrators of Dalit autobiographies to emphasize rationality of their resistance against all sorts of oppression.

There are numbers of episodic stories which are intertextualized in the Dalit autobiographies maintaining the sequences of the text of casteism, untouchability, poverty, starvation, struggle for education, oppression, patriarchy and so on in Indian caste hierarchical societies. It has already been noted that there is little difference in terms of narrative strategies between fiction and autobiography which is based on unstated pact between the reader and the writer regarding truthfulness of autobiographical events. So the autobiographies often employ the similar techniques as used by fiction.

The autobiographers use various devices such as irony, humour, satire, etc. to keep the readers alert with the narrator’s perspective of looking at the existing narrative. These devices have been used to challenge the established norms
hegemonized by the Brahmanical narratives and the hypocrisy of the high caste people. Bama, in *Karukku*, has criticized the hierarchical orders maintained by the Catholic Churches in Tamil Nadu especially in the appointment of the church officials and luxurious life style of nuns and sisters. Bama’s learning, as follower of the Catholic Church, of God had been that God showed great compassion for the oppressed, and Jesus was associated himself mainly with the poor. But she found something wrong in the teaching about God by the church. She writes:

All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous … There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (*Karukku* 104)

As a nun of Catholic order she has experienced the hypocrisy of the high caste priests and sisters which has been internalized within the system of the church. *Karukku* reveals how the church people spent hours on the thought of eating, drinking and dressing as one their priorities inside the church. She wonders at the hypocrisy of the church, “there is ugly in saying one thing and doing another” (*Ibid* 107). She points out that most of the Indian Christians are Dalits, ironically they are controlled and made them enslaved by few high caste people following hierarchical priestocracy in the apparently egalitarian church.

Dalit autobiographers do engage these devices for effectiveness of their narrative agenda. In *Joothan* Valmiki’s statement “All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at this same spot” (*Joothan* 1) hints lot of historical references and his scornful attitude to the outcome
of 1932 historic Round Table Conference which brought no significant change to the Dalit political life. Many a time the Dalit autobiographers perceive the life style they had to follow in an independent democratic country with protective constitutional rights devoid of self-respect as social security is itself an irony. The condition of the dwelling houses of Valmiki’s village was poorly constructed. As in one night, it rained heavily, many houses were collapsed. People were screaming and shouting and at such moment, the narrator’s father enquired of Mamu, the next to his neighbor in a shrilled voice whether everything was alright. Mamu replied, “Everything is alright…the back shed has fallen” (Valmiki 21). There are also the uses of irony that criticize the mainstream epics and other grand narratives. The narrator’s question before his class teacher in school as to, why the famished state of his own family was not represented in the epics like Drona’s made the whole class restless.

The similar kind of irony is found in Valmikis Joothan. Whenever, Valmiki made a mistake, the teacher would grab his shirt and insulted him. The teacher would ask, “How many pieces of pork did you eat? You must have eaten at least a pao” (Joothan 18). Even the school boys from high caste insulted him saying, “Abey Chuhreke, you eat pork” (Ibid 18). However, such insults made him recollect how the Tyagis came to Bhangi basti to eat pork in the dakness of night. He recalls, “Those who came to eat meat secretly at night, in daylight observed untouchability in front of everybody” (Ibid 18).

Gaikwad in The Branded: Uchayla describes certain situations and events with ironic undertone, such as, learning thieving skill instead of going to school for education; worshiping Bharat Blade instead of worshipping God in the temple, and
the hypocrisy of the Patils, the high caste village heads who used to fill their baskets with only meat not anything else from the Pathrut community (The Branded 26-27).

Limbale has also criticized the people of his own caste for their peculiar nature of habit and life style that could be led in cultured way. Limbale was greatly influenced by his father-in-law who was rational in thinking but a victim of alcohol. At the death of his father-in-law, he says, “A ‘saint-cum-villain’ had disappeared into the soil, a victim of alcoholism” (The Outcaste 106).

Since Dalit writing is largely a subversive narrative in its thematic expression and style, the Dalit writers have used language of their day to day use which is colloquial in nature and unrefined. Their uses of such language often arouse laughter among the readers but that is not the negation of Dalit discourse, rather it undermines the hegemony of official discourse. The Dalit autobiographers have used the device of humour in their personal narratives which is often accompanied by pathos.

It was quite difficult to search for a bridegroom for Limbale’s sisters’ marriages and a bride for himself. His mother used to request the people to find suitable matches for her children. The response of the drunken community members was rather amusing:

‘Don’t you worry. We will fix your marriage. We will also find a job for you. We know so many people we can influence. But first you must get through matriculation.’ I had to tell them that I had already passed it and was studying for MA course. They kept talking nonsense because they were drunk. ‘Boys with BA and MA degrees are useless and unemployed. You just get through your matric and come to us. We will sort out everything for you. (The Outcaste 98)
This kind of simultaneous praise and abuse is a part of ambivalence of grotesque realism.

The autobiographies have also used the device of symbols and images. In Joothan Valmiki narrates many of his tragic events using these devices. At the order of the Headmaster, he had to sweep the rooms and the playground of the school with a broom made of some twigs of a tree. Three day old broom was shedding its dried up leaves, and the narrator compares that broom with himself as his childhood charms were shed by the cruelty of casteism and untouchability. He says, “Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks” (Valmiki 5). In Limbale’s The Outcaste, we come across vivid use of images while describing his father working in the field of the landlord. He says, “He worked … His ribs looked like marks of a whip on the skin of an ox” (The Outcaste 35). His mother’s feeling of loneliness, after her divorce by her husband, compared with Sita’s helplessness while searching for shelter in the Dandakaranya. (Ibid 36). Gaikwad in The Branded gives a description of his hut which was poorly constructed where they spent their life like a cluster of flies. He says: “As it was our hut was a dingy affair. We were crowded thick in it like a cluster of fleas” (Gaikwad 11).

Limbale characterises Dalit literature as ‘purposive’ and describes its purpose variously as revolutionary, transformational, and liberatory. One facet of Dalit literature’s rejection of the Brahmanical literary tradition is that it does not adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, according to which the purpose of art and literature is to evoke different emotions and feeling, such as pity, love, fear and anger. As Limbale makes it clear, Dalit literature does not share either the devotional literature’s otherworldly concerns or the bourgeois literature’s
involvement with the desires, insecurities and alienation of the individual. In this regard, he propagates that Dalit literature is neither pleasure-giving literature of fine sentiments and refined gestures, nor a narcissistic self-pitying of its kind. (Limbale 2007, 14)

Being ‘purposive’, Dalit literature is to use an old phrase, a literature of commitment. Contemporary Marathi Dalit literature emerged from a political movement – the Dalit Panthers. It is a literature of commitment. It is partly pragmatic in so far as its commitment to its social obligation as one of its moral responsibilities.

As noted by Toral Jatin Gajarawala, “Dalit literature is characterized as a literature of protest and historical revisionism, typically with an emphasis on the documentation of the violence, oppression, and the structural inequality engendered by casteism.” (Gajarawala 1-2)

Gajarawala, in his book Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste (2013), while discussing Dalit realism, speaks of three incidents of the burning of books: firstly, the burning of a collection of short stories Soz-e-vatan (Dirge of the Nation) by the Brish Raj in 1908; Secondly, the burning of Hindu sacred text Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu) by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and thirdly, the burning of Premchand’s novel Rangbhumi (The Arena) most recently by the activists of Bharatya Dalit Sahitya Academy in 2004. All these three events revolve around the epistemological crisis of the “real”. Gajarawala refers the Hindi literary critic K.P. Singh who credits Premchand’s writing for creating awareness and recognizing the hollowness of the capitalist promises of Swaraj. On the other hand, Alok Rai, a Hindi Dalit critic of Premchand, says that the concept of poetic justice
propagated by Premchand is “the underlying idea of imagined, aesthetic worlds being, somehow, compensatory and corrective” (qtd. in Gajarawala 2013, 18). Premchand did not actually reflect a deep commitment to emphatically address the issue of Dalit oppression in Indian Hindu society. Citing Kanwal Bharti, Rai says that Premchand’s radical characters are never angry enough as found in the story “The Thakur’s Well” where “If only Gangi had fought some battle of liberation, though she may well have lost her life, but it would have become a story of the Dalit fight for recognition” (qtd. in Gajarawala 2013, 18).

As argued by Limbale, Dalit literature is revolutionary and transformational but it is not based on the fact that all Dalit writers stick to a radical ideology, such as socialism or Marxism. However, it rests on the view that, in as much as transforming the condition of the Dalit and challenging the caste system is a revolutionary cause; a literature that is entirely dedicated to this cause is, by definition, radical. The source of this radicalism is considered to be the thought and actions of Dr. Ambedkar.

Limbale argues that Dalit literature serves its radical function through its authentic representation of the Dallit reality. Through this representation, the untouchable Other finds voice to speak across the caste-line and thereby destroy the vaunted purity of the savvarna. (Limbale 14-15).
CHAPTER-V

Conclusion

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.
A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.
A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

(Aime Cesaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, 1972, 9)

The budding voice of Dalit literature, though, traced in the writings of the Bhakti poets in their accent of protest against social inequality and caste tyranny, grew up in its maturity as a distinct literary genre in the post-independent era, the second half of twentieth century. Since the 1970s onward the Marathi Dalit literature has been able to occupy a position in the mainstream Marathi literature and from the 1980s onward the Marathi Dalit writings were extensively translated into different regional languages of India. Subsequently, from the 1990s the Dalit writings are being translated into English and different other languages of the world which made Dalit literature a significant part of Indian literature with considerable global attention.

Dalit literary representations have challenged the mainstream canonical literature and casteist constructions of Indian identity (Limbale 2004, 1). It also interrogates the neat binaries of postcolonial literature. As noted by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Dalit subalternity is not located within the dialectics of the
colonizer and the colonized, but in a caste based social, economic and cultural structures. Alok Mukherjee (a teacher of York University, the translator-critic of Limbale’s book, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*) in his essay, “Reading Sharan Kumar Limbale’s, “Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion” writes:

The shape and nature of Dalit subalternity, then, are quite unlike those produced by colonial relations. The Dalit’s subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. It is eternal and unalterable. (*Ibid* 3)

Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s ‘Other’, but the ‘Other’ is not ethnocultural, religious and linguistic other. This ‘other’ is a part of the Hindu society. The ‘other’ is not only spatial but also normative (*Ibid* 2).

Since casteist violence is constitutive of Indian society in the maintenance of a hierarchical Hindu order, the Dalit humiliation originates from the fact that Dalit inferiority has been embedded in the psyche of the upper caste. The members of high caste community have developed an extraordinary repertoire of idioms, symbols, and gestures of verbal and physical vilification of the Dalits over centuries in their literature. It is entrenched in the literary and artistic imagination and sensibility of the upper caste. Even the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are stuffed deeply with examples of this disparagement where the *shudras* and the *chandalas* are shown to be treated as less than human (see Asaduddin).

Dalit literary movement is also considered as a movement for self respect. The caste-stigma, in fact, has remained as usual even after legal abolition of untouchability. The failure of various Dalit organizations, leadership crisis among
the Dalits and continuous attacks to the Dalits made the Dalit youths reject the leadership, and adopted a militant method of protest against injustice and inequality. The issue of humiliation was deeply painful to the sensitive educated Dalit youths who passed out colleges and universities. So their writings were against humiliation. The famous statement of Fanon during self-respect movement of the Blacks is pertinent here, “hunger with dignity was preferable to bread eaten in slavery” (Fanon 1963, 208).

Dalit writings reveal various issues relating to their segregation from the mainstream-casteist violence leading to patriarchal, social, political and economic oppression; exploitation of women and children, and epistemic violence at a more subtle level of their psychic state of mind. Dalit segregation is both physical and mental. When it is easier to remove physical segregation, it is tougher to overcome the mental one. That is why the so called interpretation of Dalit question in terms of the inclusivist and secular criterion of economics is insignificant, and many a times malicious in design that tries to dilute the entire energy of Dalit movement in order to maintain and strengthen the hegemony of the grand narrative of caste and its legitimacy.

In modern Indian literary context, Dalit literature is a new literary discourse as is found in Afro-American literature which questions the role of the ‘core’ as against the ‘periphery’ and pushing the ‘core’ out of its privileged position. And thus, it is looking for an alternative way of organizing reality and the world (Kapoor 2004, 117). Commenting on the Dalit literature of the 1970s onward, Zelliot placed Dalit Sahitya as a school, a self-conscious movement by itself (Zelliot 269).
The emergence of the Dalit consciousness through their movements, resistance against violence, assertion of rights, restoration of their belief system, art, morals, customs and habits, and their efforts for political representation together create a Dalit culture which gives them a sense of pride, as well as a sense of belongingness to their community. Dalit consciousness has awakened them to the self realization of their identity as a human being despite their caste and creed.

Dr. Ambedkar may be considered as the founder of what Debjani Ganguly coined as the “Dalit discursivity.” As we find that before the emergence of the Dalit Panthers, a Dalit militant organization in Maharashtra, there had been several Dalit movements since 1920s under the leadership of Ambedkar. However, after the Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute in the 1930s, which led Ambedkar to make the famed declaration “Gandhiji, I have no homeland”, there has been a proliferation of Dalit historical and creative writings. This phase of Ambedkar’s contribution in the mobilisation of the Dalits epitomised his stand on the cause of Dalit representation.

Debjani Ganguly in her article, “History's Implosions: A Benjaminian Reading of Ambedkar” (2002), says that it would not be exaggeration to say that Ambedkar is the founder of “Dalit discursivity.” The term she uses in the Faucaldian sense. She writes:

Faucaldian sense here of a figure who provides a paradigmatic set of terms, images and concepts that organize thinking and experience of the past, present, and future of society, doing so in a way which enigmatically surpasses the specific claim he/she puts forth. (Ganguly, 332)
Dr. Ambedkar was influenced by Jyotiba Phule and interrogated the dominant casteist construction of Indian identity. Through his examinations of Indian history, mythology, Hindu scriptures and Buddhism, he ‘made a powerful case of distinct Dalit identity’ (Mukherjee 2004, 1). His works enabled the future generation of the Dalits to assert their identity through socio-political activism and literary-critical writings. In this regard Ambedkar is considered as the champion of ‘Dalit discursivity’. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor and activist traces the origin of Dalit literature in Ambedkar’s writings, “Ambedkar’s revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness” (Limbale 2004, 1).

There are various factors and agencies responsible for the emergence of Dalit literature. However, the immediate credit goes to the writer-activist members of the Dalit Panther groups influenced by the philosophy of Ambedkar. They were influenced by Buddhism and Marxism as well. Despite various fractions of Dalit Panther groups on the basis of ideological differences, they have been successful in creating a space to represent their culture, will and woe, pains and sufferings through their writings with common literary characteristics for which it has gained recognition as a new form of literary genre in Indian literature.

The young writers were aware of the hegemonic literary traditions of Indian literary history which misrepresented their culture with ascribed and deformed identity. The individual writers from among the untouchable community appeared in the fourteenth century and again in the Mahar movements of the late nineteenth century in Maharashtra. However, in the long history of Marathi literature before the 1960s only one acknowledged school of Bhakti saint poet from the lower caste was
included in the mainstream literary circle. Popular entertainment *lawani* (ballads), *pawada* (panegyric poetry), and *tamasha* (folk-dramas) produced by the low castes were anonymous and were never considered a respectable literature. Thus, except religious writings by the low caste Bhakti saints, the secular Dalit writings did not find any place in the mainstream Indian literary circle till the advent of Dalit Panthers’ literary-cultural movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s.

However, in 1960s, apart from the periodicals introduced by Ambedkar, the literary bodies like Siddharth Sahitya Sangh, Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh; the periodicals such as *Prabudha Bharat, Asmitadarsha*; little magazines such as *Fataka* and the Dalit magazines brought out in occasions of Ambedkar’s birth anniversary have given space to write about life and culture of the Dalits.

Dalit literary movement is considered as a self-respect movement. The Dalit literature, as Arjun Dangle observes “emerged out of the womb of anger, pain and inequality in society.” (qtd. in Patil 2010, 144-145) He points out that Dalit literature claims for right to live an honest and honoured life. It speaks for the oppressed of the caste ridden society.

Since the first ever Dalit writers’ event of 1958 Bombay conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha there has been organised literary writings of various forms by the Dalits in different regional languages of India across the country.

Dalit autobiographies have been an important part of Dalit literature. As cultural and literary representation it has challenged the established norms and structure of literary tradition resulting in a shift in existing literary paradigms. Autobiography helps the Dalit writers to articulate their cultural and caste
discrimination, and focuses on the question of otherness, difference, marginality, and aesthetics. Dalit autobiography creates a subversive historiography to voice the protest of the marginalized. Dalit autobiography, therefore, is considered as the most potent and exercised form of fiction in Dalit literature (Devy 272).

Dalit autobiographies have made a space for the Dalits to struggle against the ascribed 'untouchable' identity which is a fundamental battle for Dalit writers. They attempt to challenge the old definitions with new imaginations, a process which Margo Perkins has called 'rewriting the self'. Therefore, through their life-narratives Dalit writers are able not only to describe the pain of caste discrimination, but also reassert control over the right to conceptualize their own identity beyond the experience of common oppression and suffering (Sarah Beth, 555). Dalit autobiographies portray a realistic picture of Dalit society through individual and communal experience of the protagonists. It is significant to note that the major part of Dalit writings is autobiographical in form.

Postmodernism rejects metanarratives and discursive hierarchies. In the Indian context casteist stratification of society is untenable from a radical postmodernist perspective. From postmodernist and poststructuralist points of view scholars challenge the term ‘Dalit’ as some of the intellectuals and activists are of the view that the term ‘Dalit’ is hostile to the ex-untouchables of today and this term has no ontological ability and hermeneutic capacity of its own to help the ex-untouchables gain total emancipation. Thus the category, Dalit, faces violent rejection both from the Dalits and from the non-Dalits (Michael 15). However, caste based hierarchy is the reality in Indian society. Dilip Menon, in his book, The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India (2011), writes that violence
exercised by the Brahmins to the Dalits in maintaining the caste hierarchy is obviously present in the society, but it remains invisible as it is internalized in social system (Menon xvi). This caste based social stratification is widely reflected in both non-Dalit and Dalit writings.

A noted critic of Assamese literature, Pradip Acharya, in his article “Identity and Invisibility” argues that identity is basically a historical construct and not inevitably a genetic destiny. He writes:

Identity, like DNA, is not destiny- it is history. It is inclusive, or, if you like, corporate history; where luminal abnegation or allegiance enriches ethnicity and makes it invisible. (Acharya 25)

However, the emergence of Dalit identity is caused by "amnesias" that consistently go with all thoughtful changes in human consciousness. It has been motivated by the dynamics of remembering and forgetting their culture which had already been lost under the Brahminic cultural hegemony.

Identity in Dalit perspective is the similarity in terms of culture and living experiences. The experiences of caste discrimination, economic exploitation, denial of knowledge and gender dominance are common among the Dalits. The personal narratives of the Dalits deal with the problems of caste, class and gender. In this context, the language and culture of the Dalits play a key role in depicting their identity.

A Dalit writer through the autobiographical writings connects with a non-Dalit readership, and emphasizes the perception that Dalit writers must write about Dalit issues. However, the new generation young Dalit writers emphasize the importance of individuality and criticize Dalit literature's use of identity politics.
It may be noted that Kavitendra Indu, a Hindi Dalit critic, claims that Dalit identity is itself tyrannical in its negation of both a person's other identities with regard to gender, class, occupation, locality, religious, familial etc., and a person's individuality. He further states, “I would like to end with this hope, that you feel that the meaning of 'I' is not only Dalit ... !” (qtd. in Beth 571). Later, in an interview he re-emphasized, "I am not a Dalit writer, and I don't want to be! (Ibid 571).

Dilip Menon argues that the solipsism of the secular self with regard to caste has been formed within the range of progressive narrative of liberal humanism. (Menon 3) This solipsistic ground has been systematically built up by negating the validity of the plural and thereby rejecting ethnic, linguistic, caste and other markers of identity formation in order to enforce faceless merger of individuals with the abstract accreditation as a secular citizen. These solipsist elites use English as their language, and a ‘semiotic system symbolizing modernity’ to impose their secular categories on the social world with the claim to be free from caste and religious markings (Ibid 3). But the question emerges, “Has the caste been successfully erased even from the spaces purportedly identified as enlightened and secular?”

Dalit autobiographies have played a vital role in generating identity politics of the Dalits in portraying both individual and community self. However, the protagonists have not followed all the cultural tradition carried forwarded by the Dalits for ages. In several autobiographies the protagonists have protested against the superstitious belief system, they also have denied certain the cultural activities which are against the self-respect of the Dalit community. In Joothan during the ‘salaam’ ritual associated with the wedding ceremonies of the community, Valmiki denies accompanying his friend Hiram Singh. He found such rituals degrading. During such programme, the new bridegroom and the bride along with the drum
party behind them are to travel the houses where the mother-in-law of the groom used to work earlier. The bridegroom would offer ‘salaam’ and his mother-in-law would make elaborate verbal presentation and ask for help from her landlady. They would depart after receiving the offers from the landlady. Sometimes, in such programmes, the party going for ‘salaam’ had to face humiliation and insult by the people of such households receiving ‘salaam.’ In Bama’s *Karukku*, Limbale’s *Outcaste*, Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India* and Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya* the protagonists register their protest against imposed identities given by the high caste narratives.

The Dalit individuality is inseparable from communal subjectivity. For a Dalit intellectual, his identity is a physical reality as soon as he comes in contact with a member from a high caste in any social situation. In the last part of *Joothan*, Valmiki recollects the dire situations he faced along with his wife, Chanda following his surname. A well known Dalit poet, Loknath Yashwant, and many of his friend appreciated Valmiki for having deliberately used his caste name as his surname though in the beginning his schoolmates and teachers made a lot of pejorative comments about his surname. To some others it was an act of courageous and for his relatives and well wishers it was a foolhardy. However, for the author writing his caste name as his surname was an act of self-assertion. He mocked at the educated Dalits who started to use their family *gotras* as their surnames with a little modification for fine-tuning. This is how by changing surname and concealing the caste identity the Dalits tried to overcome the crisis of identity. Valmiki writes:

> They find that the easy way out. Behind all such acts is the anguish of identity crisis, which has come about as a reaction to the blatant inhumanity of casteism. Dalits want to join the mainstream of society after getting an education but Savarna
prevents them from doing so. Discriminates against Dalits. Thinks of them as inferior beings. Doubts are cast on their intelligence, their ability, their performance.

(Joothan 126-127)

He realizes how Dalit intellectuals are frightened of their caste name and because of that they hide their caste identity. He understands that concealing identity is not the solution of Dalit issues. He professes that the writers, intellectuals and activists of the Dalit movement must struggle “constantly with their inner conflicts”(Ibid 128). There is so much fear among the Dalits that it was quite a task for them even to lead normal life. He points out that caste has been the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority and this battle against casteism cannot be won in a short span of time. To win the battle, the Dalits need to engage themselves in a continuous and a prolonged struggle.

Writing autobiography is both a personal and a political act. There are certain preconditions which enable one to write autobiography. The first and foremost is the act of situating one’s position as an individual in his or her community which helps the individual to judge his place in the community in comparison to other. In the process of writing one’s autobiography, the individual tries to construct an independent identity. However the process is not very smooth because there is always a clash of individual interest with that of the community. Raj Kumar writes, “The act of writing autobiography is possible only when the ‘individual identity’ of a member of a community or country is valued and respected” (Kumar, 45).

Dalit literature had germinated a powerful voice negotiating with a mixed audience of the Dalit and the non-Dalits to inform the public about the new social
and cultural meaning of Dalit identity. Dalit autobiographies, as the most popular and widely-read genre of Dalit literature, has had a profound influence over both the Dalit community's own self-perceptions as well as the wider public perception of Dalit identity as a separate socio-cultural community.

The Dalit autobiographers express their identity in various ways - through revolt against the canonical literature; expressing their pain and suffering of caste discrimination, and protesting against caste violence, which are the initial basis of Dalit identity. Expression of pain whether experienced as humiliation, as exclusion, or as actual physical violence, the various descriptions of pain serve a similar purpose in the narrative to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability which remains an important criteria for Dalit identity construction. For both Dalit and non-Dalit readers, the autobiographies – Valmiki’s Joothan, Bama’s Karukku, Limbale’s Outcaste, Moon’s Growing Up Untouchable in India and Gaikwad’s The Branded: Uchalya expose the continuation of untouchability and pain that turned into a uniting factor for the community (see Beth ). In the author’s preface to the Hindi edition of Joothan, Valmiki writes, “Dalit readers had seen their own pain in these pages of mine” (Valmiki vii). The genre of autobiography gives the Dalit writers the authority to decide what is true even of their survival in terms of their existence in the state or their experience in terms of the Indian social life (Sarah Beth, 569).

One of the objectives of Dalit literature is to construct a subversive route to build the Dalit historiography. Dalit writers feel a strong need to create cultural paradigms, which will challenge the notion of essentialism prevailing in Indian nationalist historiography. This will bring to the centre stage the issue of marginality in caste ridden Hindu society. Central to these narratives is the recovery of “hidden
histories of hurt and humiliation” (Rao, 2003: 3) and the caste body is the site where the inequalities of the caste system in terms of purity and pollution are reproduced. Each life narrative addresses “the very hegemonic structure of the caste system” which appears natural by “appealing to the moral corruption of the society that legitimizes caste oppression” (Ramakrishnan, 2011, 67).

Dalit autobiography is not simply a literary work, but a powerful political statement. The autobiographer’s words speak to a sentiment common among all marginalized groups in many communities—that is, the deep and urgent desire to 'have a voice'. The act of writing is often considered by the Hindi Dalit writers as a way to project a 'representative voice' of the Dalit community in mainstream public debate, or rather to construct their own stream of arguments to debate with and contest against the authority of certain dominant social narratives (particularly those related to caste). More than this, the process of gaining 'a voice' is perceived as an act of autogenesis, a process of coming into being, from silence to sound and from marginalized invisibility to central view.

Despite these challenges, a specific sense cultural identity pervades the Dalit autobiography, as is seen in case of Hindi Dalit autobiographies which have become quite popular and have been unmistakably influential in the process of disseminating a deep sense of Dalit cultural identity, especially in the Hindi speaking public sphere.

A readership of Dalit texts is built up by echoing the readers’ own lived experiences and an understanding of the injustice inflicted on all members of the respective caste. For the non-Dalit audience, however, the experience of reading a Dalit autobiography invokes a sense of shame. Arun Prabha Mukherjee expresses
her experience of reading Valmiki’s *Joothan* and the overwhelming power of the Dalit writing in her essay “The Emergence of Dalit Writing” (see *Post colonialism: My living*).

Ramakrishnan observes that the male Dalit autobiographies have, in fact, evolved into veritable act of “political resistance” (67). As for Sisir Kumar Das the autobiographies have affected a shift from a hero-centric narrative to a narrative dominated by the anti-heroes. Dalit literary representations reject the “discourse of pity” (Limbale, 2004) and the neat binary of postcolonial dialectic of the colonizer and the colonised. The Dalit subalternity is not located in a caste based social order within the same religious fold. Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s ‘other’, but they are not an ethnocultural, religious or linguistic other, paradoxically they are the ‘other’ because they share the same religion of Hinduism.

Autobiographies are generally written by eminent personalities towards the end of their lives, while Dalit autobiographies are penned at an early age when the author is neither distinguished nor eminent but their texts gain attention for their committed depiction of a poignant past of their communal history. These autobiographies deal not only with the oppressive caste system but also depict how economic deprivation and poverty are handmaids of caste discrimination itself.

The location of narrative self in Dalit autobiography is different from that of the mainstream autobiographical writers. The self in Dalit autobiographies is located with the common criteria like lowly caste status and socio-economic marginality. However, attempts are always there to construct identity with a sense of pride both as an individual and as part of the community. In terms of its narrative point of view, Dalit autobiography is different from the mainstream one. A Dalit autobiography is
not about glorifying the achievements of life, rather it is a protest, a resistance, a means to search for identity, rediscovering the history of their marginalized social status, recovering their cultural history, and to create a cultural capital to carry forward the self-respect movement for establishing a hegemony parallel to the mainstream.

Autobiographies have always been popular forms of writing mostly having didactic values, the Dalit autobiographies, however, have little to instruct; rather they explode popular myths about human values and dignity. They expose the blatant ugliness of society and the acute human suffering. As noted by Bhogle the Dalit autobiographical narratives are the ‘moving sagas of human sufferings and helplessness’ (see Bhogle 160).

Dalit autobiographers’ identity is a kind of achieved identity rather than an ascribed one (see Ronkin). Bama emphatically challenges all such notions ascriptions pertaining to Dalit identity which left the consciousness of the Dalits fatally wounded. Hugely distorted form image is attached to them to bereave the Dalits of their self-confidence and self-respect. In her autobiography, Bama mentions that during her school and college days, she and other lower caste students had to face caste discrimination at the hands of upper caste teachers without any reason.

In terms of their narrative technique and aesthetic strategies, there are a number of episodic stories sequencing and juxtaposing the issues of casteism, untouchability, poverty, starvation, struggle for education, oppression, patriarchy and so on. It has already been noted that there is little difference between fiction and autobiography which is based on unstated pact between the reader and the writer,
hence the autobiographies are seen to have often employed the identical techniques like that of fiction.

Aesthetics in Dalit literature may be perceived as a specific phenomenon which may not ensure universal pleasure because the one who identifies himself with Dalit experience will obviously rejoice it more than the others. Besides, it certainly pleases the readers who have a sound sense of history and sensitivity towards society. The one who has lived Dalit experiences can think of no other meaning of aestheticism than the one portrayed through Dalit autobiographies marked with counter Dalit aesthetics and an undertone of resistance, assertion and protest. If Dalit literature is judged from the Kantian perspective of disinterested universal beauty, or that of Keats’s ‘a thing of beauty is a joy forever’ then this judgement of the aesthete should also be complemented with the notion of ‘beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all, Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’ which gets even sounder expression in ‘satyam shivam sundaram’. Dalit aesthetics is a counter aesthetic paradigm that rejects the aesthetic values based on the so called universal judgment of beauty.

In her introduction, translator Arun Prabha Mukherjee elucidates Valmiki's choices of “rhetorical reframing strategies” that create special textual effects; double exposure, interrogative discourse, irony, and interweaving of characterisations of the fractured self with indictments of an unjust society. With double exposure, Valmiki first represents events from a traumatized child’s perspective and then comments on them from an adult narrator’s point of view, which allows for authoritative assignments of blame (Mukherjee 2007, xxxvi).
Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist and anthropologist known for his theory of ‘practice’ and his contribution in expanding the understanding of ‘capital’ gives his description of different kind of capital deviating little away from Marxist definition of capital as materially accumulated wealth. To understand other relations of dominance, Bourdieu expands his description beyond economic capital, and develops the idea of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘social capital’.

Cultural capital, he says, can be differentiated from economic capital by the fact that it is an embodied capital. One has to acquire it over time and it cannot be handed down at one stroke like, for example, inheritance of wealth. One such capital is education which is earned slowly and gradually through rigorous incorporation of skills, values and wisdom at an individual end.

Social capital, on the other hand, indicates a durable network of more or less institutional relationship of a mutual acquaintance and recognition which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’, which entitles them to credit, in various senses of the word. These two capitals are called as ‘symbolic capital’ by him. However, the recognition and representation of the conflict between the two capitals is phrased as ‘symbolic violence’. This conflict may arise out of abatement or suspension between two symbolic capitals. He gives the example of the conflict of the poor migrants, of ethnic communities, of colour as to how they behave in classroom or in the neighborhood. This happens as their symbolic capital which is either not recognized or not given enough legitimacy in the formal order of things (Singh, p.p. 146-48).
Kancha Ilaiah, a Dalit critic, speaks for the need of Dalit cultural hegemony. Ilaiah in his essay, “The Achievement of Hegemony by Creation of ‘National – Popular’ Consensus”, writes:

I strongly believe that unless the oppressed learn to hegemonize their own self, unless the culture and consciousness of the oppressed is put forward visibly in public debate, unless this culture is prepared to clash with the culture and consciousness of the enemy in public, a society of equals will remain an illusion….At a time when the enemy is attacking us, day in and day out, the gesture of taking precautions or nuancing our statements will only ‘devalue’ our historiographical energy. (Ilaiah 2011, 153)

The strategic attempt is needed for legitimate cultural and social capital through Dalit literary and political representation in various academic and political institutions. The introduction of Dalit literary-cultural studies in academic and social institutions has helped the Dalit literature attain a legitimate position. The Dalit intellectuals, social and cultural activists in contemporary India, thus represent a very interesting scenario in which an urgent need is felt to make sense of Dalit reality at an abstract theoretical level. These intellectual efforts also show that Dalit theory might acquire quite a critical mass in the near future.

Arun Prabha Mukherjee in her article, “A Note by the Translator” as a translator of Joothan (2007), notes that Valmiki’s autobiography was one of the few books that made profound impact on her consciousness. Reflecting on her own childhood, she writes:

There were no untouchables studying with me in my school and, later, at college. My text books did inform me about the ‘evil’ of untouchability and what Mahatma
Gandhi had done to eliminate it but in a detached, abstracted manner, couched in a language that seemed to have no connection with my lived reality. (Valmiki ix)

Dilip Menon is critical of the Indian perspectives of social science studies and postcolonial discourse of national identity. To him, caste is the ‘central faultline’ in India. However, Indian social science has a tendency to shift the study from caste to class or ethnicity despite the fact that the public places of modern India are inflected with violence against the Dalits and the other subordinated castes. He writes:

Postcolonial scholarship has written the history of our modernity in terms of a deeply desirable transition to a notion of the Indian citizen unmarked by affinities other than to a national identity. (Menon 1-2)

The familial spaces of the society in India are also characterized by the insidious dominance of endogamous hegemony enforcing social distance of castes as an unbridgeable reality. Moreover, as sociologist-activist Gail Omvedt observes, Dalits' struggles for equality today are exacerbated by high castes' power to institutionalize the separation of "pure" learning from the performance of "impure" tasks; specifically, India's so called gains in information technology industries are shallow and dependent on educational and technological opportunities that remain the preserve of high-caste monopolies (see Ronkin 288). These instances underline the fact that the sense of caste hierarchy is so ingrained in the Hindu mind that it cannot be erased overnight simply by formulating laws of affirmative action, but that a revolutionary change of mind and heart is required (see Asaduddin).

In both United States of America and India, affirmative action has hit every one hard. Across American culture and certainly across Indian caste groups, there is
a deep feeling that ground has been lost by those segments of the population who are used to garnering the advantages of privileged status within their respective societies. Whites in America and Brahmins in India cannot expect doors to open as easily as in the days prior to affirmative action and the Mandal Commission Report on compensating discrimination. (Figueria 44-45.)

The recent anti-reservation movements against the affirmative policy of the Govt. moved by the students in Delhi, and various anti-reservation forums as introduced in the social network sites like Facebook etc. are not quite new phenomena as we find them in Gujarat in 1980s. However, the most unfortunate and hypocritical part of the leaders of these movements is that they never initiate anti-caste movements. It is a common statement often passed by the so called educated youths that they do not believe in caste. Their statement reverses immediately, contrary to their lip service, when the question of inter-caste social intermingling like marriage comes. The objective reality is that the shameless matrimonial advertisements in the news-dailies and different matrimonial electronic websites demanding the bride and bridegroom of particular caste, sub-caste, gotra etc. do speak of the hypocrisy of such movements of high caste educated youths. In this context Menon’s expression on how the issue of contingent Dalit life and social security is bypassed in the public discussions and ire is pertinent. Menon writes:

Public discussion, and ire, have tended to centre less on the contingent lives of dalts and more on the predominance of caste in public life: the issue of positive discrimination in education and employment. A modern discourse of equal citizenship is popularly seen as being sullied by the shrill persistence of ‘primordial’ identities… Debates over the right to equal opportunity seem to bypass the more fundamental question of the right to equal security itself. (Menon ix)
The current study makes an attempt to look at the issues relating to the Dalit identity, history, politics and aesthetics through a select set of autobiographies. The area would require fresh engagement for further exploration of the Dalit questions by taking into account the ever proliferating literary texts that have made a distinctive mark not only as an emerging literary movement in India but also drawing global critical attention as a significant new literature emerging from the margin.