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 ethno-cultural, 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 *Prabhudha 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