Chapter II

Tracing Dalit Autobiography in India

Autobiography is one of the most sought after literary genres in the world; it is the most popular and powerful medium of expression of experience of all sorts of individuals: from a king to a John Doe. People are rushing to write, they are feeling impelled to express and print, they are self-driven to express and exhibit their own lives. Writing an autobiography can also be a way to share experiences with others and unburden one’s own heart; a sort of psychological relief. The drive or urge to write and express one’s experience is found in every corner of the world in different ways. This urge, what R. C. P. Sinha calls ‘craziness’ has infected the whole world. Though this craziness is not new to India, its present form, which is discussed in the first chapter, is, certainly, an endowment from the West. Autobiography has been written sporadically yet it is being written with gusto and vigour, with the same spirit that is shown by the West. Indians have accepted this genre as their own. It came to India, may be limping, lately and intermittently, but in modern Indian context, autobiographical writing has gained a greater height. Since three centuries, Indians have produced some of the finest autobiographies in this universe. Various people from politics, religion, social activism, sports, media, and different arts background, have written beautiful autobiographies till date. Those who have been voiceless like women, Dalits, X genders, working class people, downtrodden in the name of religion, caste, colour and creed, have successfully raised their voices through autobiographies. Due to its flexible and lucid nature, autobiography has crept into different forms of literature, and it has made its presence felt. It has helped to find proper expression in both literature and
non-literature where its critical boundaries are widespread. Within literature, autobiographical forms can be traced in poetry, fiction, drama, travelogue, etc.

Autobiography has made its space among readers as it stresses on various serious issues of our surrounding. In fact, there is no sphere of human activity where its importance is not felt. It is a valuable historical source, a ‘subject’ to psychologist, a text of personality development, a text for critical approach, a political record, an individual’s confession, a war memory, a text of literary aesthetics and of linguistic analysis, and so on. A good autobiography expresses an individual’s all above aspects without fear or biases which is a quality of a good and healthy society. It mirrors one’s political freedom and liberty to choose one’s life. It also symbolizes the civic sense of a countrymen and the kind of civilization of the society.

In Indian context, a country of multicultural society, an autobiography, has been established as an important phenomenon. Autobiography, in contrast to the West, in India it is always different in its nature. Its purpose and aims are quite different because of cultural issues. A country with old and stringent tradition has always ignored individual’s essence, merging the essence with the broader philosophy of universe. So, it is essential to see what an individual feels in a given context and what views and perspectives are about or her own world. While writing an autobiography ‘self’ becomes the focused subject. In India an individual identifies himself with the society, and he himself sees the world. ‘Vasudaiva kutumbakam’ is what prevails in India. The world becomes one family of human beings, and the individual part of the family. Whereas the ‘self’ or ‘aham’ also coexists instead of as a separate entity; ‘aham brahmasmi’ propagates the idea of individual at the universal level. When an individual becomes one with the whole universe, he or she will not have or face any issue with individual’s
existence or crisis. This ‘divine absolute’ still haunts our minds. We are absorbed in worldly issues at the expense of the demands of the mundane. A German philosopher Albert Schweitzer calls this governing idea “world and life negation” (Schweitzer 1).

In Western culture, writing autobiography dates back to Saint Augustine’s Confessions of the fourth century AD. But to us the genre is not traditional. In contrast to West, India got this genre quite late. Though there has been a debate on the beginning of the writing of autobiographies in India, recent studies have shown that “the first Indian autobiography is written in 1641 in Hindi, Ardhakathanaka, by Banarasidas” (Kumar 43). Since then numerous autobiographies have been written by persons coming from different and divergent fields of activities. But again it would be considered in a limited sense if we omit the Muslim authors who have contributed to the genre. Hence, the debate goes on if we consider Banarasidas’ work as the pioneering work in India. It sounds justifiable when we look at the genre from a broader perspective and go back to few early years and trace its roots.

As mentioned earlier, it is an individual’s urge to express personal experience in the form of autobiography, this urge to write or express will have a motive, and it is difficult to clearly classify. But in India these motives are explicitly dominated by our social structure. It is evident that life histories in India have been historically perseverant and socially pervasive form of cultural expression. Different social groups, diverse religious traditions and cultures have produced a variegated repertoire of life stories, the characters and incidents are repeatedly drawn upon by individuals to commemorate the others’ lives in order to find meaning in their own lives. From Sanskrit to Pali and from Persian to Urdu, from Buddha to Basava, life narratives have represented visually in the didactic iconography of various sects of our society.
Early Pali and Sanskrit narratives told the life stories (carita) of Shakyamuni Budha, his life stories from Bodhisatva to enlightenment (more inputs). Arnold Schweitzer says, “Genealogies, both orally transmitted and written and horoscopes (again both oral and written forms) might be considered part of this wider genre, but the great majority of pre-modern life stories were hagiographical- oral and written accounts of the lives of deities, kings, cultural heroes, saints, poets, poet-gods and poet-kings” (Schweitzer 7). The critique points out further that these life accounts were not always of male or high caste, but there were works best known by a kind of radical egalitarianism. The hagiographies exist in different forms of literature to applaud the subject or to place the narrative within a mythic framework. Supernatural powers, magical events, dreams elements, vows, divine intercession, and miracles were used or explained to indicate the events in the lives of poets, saints and kings. The subject of an autobiography is an individual, but at the end of these narratives go beyond one’s control. Arnold says, “The subject faces dilemmas and makes decisions, but there is little ‘character development’, because the end, the course of the events, goes beyond his or her control” (Schweitzer 7). Earlier life stories contain facts and historical events, but without causation. The cause of the events was incalculable, perhaps, due to our belief in fate. The stories ascribe to abstract things like divine intervention, magic and other things which can be assumed as beyond human reasons. R.C. P. Sinha attributes this aspect of life stories to the doctrine of ‘Karma’, and he calls the attempts a failure. Referring to S. Radhakrishnan’s Indian Philosophy, R. C. P. Sinha says:

… the failure of the Indian to write their history as well as their life-stories is often ascribed their doctrine of Karma and to their view that everything is brought about by Fate, working in manner wholly inexplicable and beyond all foresight. According to the doctrine on Karma ‘whatever happens to us in
this life we have to submit in meek resignation, for it is the result of our past
doing’. Man’s actions, therefore, are wholly incalculable, as nobody is in a
position to know what deed in the past is responsible for the present
happenings. To the concept of Fate was added yet another life-enervating
view of ‘the miraculous in the shape of divine intervention, magic and
witchcraft. (Sinha 10)

These reasons supposed to have struck the very root of the individual’s self-
consciousness and the recording of individual’s life circumstances, and therefore
autobiography has been a rare deed in India.

To write an autobiography, the birth and rise of individualism is necessary.
An intense individualism in the West and the ‘world and life negations’ in India,
seems to be the major difference in this context. Indians, nevertheless, managed to
find a kind of mean to their autobiographies since the Vedic times. Sinha gives an
account of Sanskrit scholars who gave their life accounts in the prologues to theirs
dramas. Though authorship of these accounts is questionable, they play a vital role
in historical sense. Sinha refers to Sudraka and says, “Only a few among the
Sanskrit writers have chosen to furnish any information about lives. Mostly it is in
the prologue the dramatist happens to write about themselves. Sudraka has several
facts of his life enumerated by the Sutradhara, in the prologue to his play The
Mrichchakatika or Tay-cart. Mention is made of his being a great scholar and
valiant king, who, after giving the reins of his kingdom to his son entered into the
fire when he was exactly one hundred years and ten days old”(Sinha 170). From
historical and literary point of view the next noted and important text is Bana
Bhatta’s Harsha-Carita of the seventh century AD. It is a historical romance based
the life of Kanauj king Harshavardhana who patronized Bana Bhatta. He celebrates
his patron’s rise to poet in a lengthy narrative in highly ornate and complex prose.
Though it is a more historical novel, it commences with a somewhat details of autobiography, leading up to an introduction to the king. Suresh Chandra Benerji says, “from the autobiographical account, contained in the introductory portions of the Harsha-carita, we have some information about his personal history. Banabhatta was son of Citrabhanu and Rajyadevi” (Benerji 9). Banabhatta entirely devotes first two and half chapters to describe his personal and family account of life. He sets an example to autobiography writers by giving a detailed picture of his clan in an objective manner. “An autobiographical account has been given by Bana himself, slightly his Kadambari and quite extensively at the beginning of his Harsha-Carita. With a legendary touch Bana traces his ancestry to the family of Vatsa, the cousin of Saravata, the son of Goddess Sarasvati and Dadhicha. Vatsa lived in Prikuta, a place on the river Shona or Hiranyabahu. A Descendant of this family, one Kubera, became very famous on account of the honours he received from Gupta kings” (Datta 359). He created a new genre of prose romances by writing historical tale, the biography of his patron king.

In the eleventh century AD we have another Sanskrit writer Bilhana, the author of Vikraamankadeva-carita. It is a biography of his patron king Vikramaditya VI of Kalyana. Like Bana, he also narrates his life account along with his patron king. The poet gives his autobiographical account in the last canto of his poem. He was inhabitant of Kshmir, belonging to Kaushika gotra. He writes that he was born at Khonamusha in Kashmir, surrounded by the saffron fields of pink on one side and green vie-yards on the other. Here he does not end his details abruptly; he narrates his sojourn of Indian landscapes from Banaras to Kanauj and sums up his career. This heroic poem is still studied for its historical kernel, “which is presented on the poetic canvas with conventionalism like whitewashing the hero, in Vaiarbhi style, which is studied but not overdone” (Sinha 521).
There is another noted writer called Kalhana, in Sanskrit, the author of *Rajatharangini*. *The Dictionary of Oriental* explains that in the twelfth century he wrote *Rajatharangini* which was a chronicle of the kings of Kashmir. Perhaps it is the lonely surviving Sanskrit literature that depicts true history based on facts. In this chronicle, he attempts to connect narrative of the various dynasties which ruled Kashmir from the earliest period down to his own time. He uses legends, popular traditions and old written records to arrange the historical data. But, here the notable aspect is that at the end of each Taranga (Book) he says that he is the son of the great Kashmir minister, the illustrious *Lord Champaka*. The final part was, however, an account of the events which the author knew either through personal experience or from accounts of contemporary witnesses. One unique quality developed by the author is the usage of date. An autobiography is known to its authenticity over dates and facts. To his credit as a historian, he mentions the date of his writing in the introduction part. He wrote the chronicle “in the year 4224 of the Laukika era” (Sinha 24). These three authors have contributed to autobiography genre in bits and pieces. Bana, Bilhana and Kalhana have consciously or unconsciously identified their ‘self’ along with the world in drama, poetry and chronicles respectively. In a given space and time they could excel to register their personal life events in a reliable manner in their own style.

It is from the twelfth century onwards that Indian literature witnessed the triumph of individual spirit. Through bhakthi movement throughout India, various individuals expressed the essence of life. Many common people and saints celebrated individuality and sang the saga. But the celebration was not away from the traditional roots. Individual identified himself with divinity. Man cut off himself from the old norms in order to associate with God. It can said to be the first phase of development of autobiography in its present days form. For instance many
Vacana writers recorded their individual life stories in the form of Vacanas to worship as well as to rebel. Allama Prabhu, Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, Ambigara Chaudayya, Dohara Kakkayya, Madigara Chennayya and many more sang the sage of their lives in their Vacanas. They asserted, for the first time in Indian history, their individual identity and considered their profession as means of worship and a way to salvation or ‘mukthi’. It is first in its kind where individual talks about his own life and celebrates it. But this kind of celebration has revisited in Dalit movement of 1970’s where autobiographical accounts question the contemporary social order.

Meanwhile, there was another stream of literature that carried autobiographical trend into India from middle-East. Persians entered Indian territory for two reasons; travel, loot and conquest. In these three actions literature accompanied them. Having influence of Greek and Latin autobiographical trends, Persian writers wrote autobiographies extensively with historical and religious perspectives. After settling in Indian Territory these Persians, presumably Muslims, gained local authority and became part of Indian history, hence we would consider the autobiographies of Muslim scholars and kings. Though Amir Khusru (1254) authored about his life in two works: *Gharratul Kamal* and *Tuhfatus Sighar*, Sultan Firoz Shah is the first Indian Muslim to write autobiography. After ascension of Delhi throne in 1351 he wrote a little work of 23 pages autobiography in Persian language which contained a short account of his political adventures. Here the motif to write this work could be twofold; one Firoz Shah wanted to express his gratitude to Almighty for the blessings bestowed upon him, second he wanted to tell that men with desire to do good deeds and be prosperous can treat it as guide and read his book and be inspired. The autobiography gives an account of his military, administrative and religious actions
of Firoz Shah. He stopped frivolous and unlawful punishments, suppressed the rise of Shias whom he thought were going against established law and ruthlessly destroyed temples. He writes of the measurements he took for the furtherance of Islam. Though the book seems to be a record of his deeds, as an individual he prevails through every page of it. It exhibits human spirit of a serious ruler who is being ridiculed very often in history.

At the stage of the evolving Indo-Persian tradition, Mughal emperors penned their autobiographies from time to time. About one and half centuries of Firoz Shah there came Babar’s (1483-1530) autobiography. Babar, “prince of autobiographies” (Sinha 29), wrote Babar-nama or Tuzuk-i-Baburi which is divided into three parts. The first part elaborates Babar’s accession to the throne of Farghana to his banishment from his own land; second is about his life in Afghanistan or Kabul; and in the last part he talks about his life on Indian soil. One notable thing in this work is the diary-entries; beginning with 3rd January, 1519 up to September 7, 1529. But these diary-entries abruptly end, and Babar-nama which is available today is incomplete, it has many gaps of chronological events in between. Yet it is a charming autobiography due to the author’s transparency in acknowledging facts, and its appeal to the readers. Appreciating this inmost ‘confidence’ of the readers, E. M. Forster says, “It is not, as in most cases, an enervating chamber; it is a mountain stream, arched by the skies of early manhood” (Forster 321-322). Strength lays in the truthfulness of Babar’s life which is the beauty of autobiography. And perhaps, Babar does it consciously as he says, “In this history I have held firmly to it that the truth should be reached in every matter, and that every act should be recorded precisely as it occurred”, Continuing he says, “Towards the last he rather preferred intoxicating confects and, under their sway, used to lose his head. His disposition was amorous, and he
bore many a lover’s mark” (Sinha 30). Here Babar is unpretentious; he does not hesitate to accept the truth in any case, and reveals his strength and weaknesses. Owing to truthfulness, the text speaks in the idiom of the common people, stands to be a landmark in the history of Indian autobiographies, particularly written by Muslim rulers in India.

This practice of writing autobiographies, initiated by Babar, became a culture in Mughal dynasty in the following years. After Babar, Gul-Badan Begum, his daughter, and Jahangir, Babar’s great-grandson, were important to write autobiographies with historical and literary importance. Historical records have found many more memoirs and diaries written by Mughal clan that played a major role determining their political and cultural history. Gul-Badan Begum wrote *Humayun-nama* (1523-1603) in Persian language and records the reminiscences of her father and brother Humayun (father of Akbar). Perhaps she is the first Indian woman to write reminiscences. Though her work is about her father brother, Sinha believes, “… she also provides a glimpse into aspects of her own personality. From the pages of her *Humayun-nama* she emerges as a gentle and cultured member of the royal family” (Sinha 36). In the following century we have a notable autobiography by Jahangir with the title *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*. One common aspect in the both *Humayun-nama* and *Babar-nama*, is that both the authors did not assign the work to others using royal powers which shows authors’ intention to tell truth. Jahangir, in an exceptional case, handed over the writing process, after 23 years, to his wife Mumtaj Begum due to ailment in his old age. Therefore, the narrative of the autobiography faces set back technically.

Meanwhile, non-Muslim writers were busy in setting the new tradition of autobiography silently in India. In its own way Indian literature has contributed to the autobiographical tradition since centuries. However, the first Indian
autobiography was written, in one of the Indian vernacular languages, by Banarasi Das in 1641. He was Jain poet who wrote *Arddhakatha or Half-Story* in Hindi. It covers the poet’s fifty years of life-span which is exactly half of a man’s ideal age in Indian belief (Shathayushi). Being born in a jeweler’s family he found it uncongenial due to his sensitive nature. Banarasi Das was expected to devote himself to traditional trade of his family, but having great interest in poetry he placed himself in trouble. As Sinha observes, “it is a story of a man who has had enough of the bitterness of life, of poet who finds his poetic sensibility at loggerheads with his social milieu. Yet the story is told in a relaxed manner with no trace of bitterness” (Sinha 41). Despite the wayward disposition and brewing crisis, Das did not give up; he worshiped lord Shiva which led him to search inward for the solution after which he was. *Arddhakatha* narrates the author’s painful inner struggle and sudden spiritual realization, and the values that brought the changes in him. It is a candid narration of an individual, his ebbs and downs of life in order to seek higher truth. He chose the popular medium that is Hindi not Sanskrit or Persian to reach people. He set the tone of tracing individual mind instead of traditional way of writing life-stories. Here, India can boast of achieving a potent and growing tradition of autobiography well before the British.

At this point of time when Jahangir was on throne, British entered India with business purpose, but along with them came their language and culture too. The English language was in disguise of Christianity where language was learnt through religious texts. By the time of Plassey war of 1757, where British East-India Company gained its power over India, in West autobiography had developed to its full terms. Accounts of the life of Christ, Christian saints and heroes, as disseminated by missionaries and their converts, added a further element to the already existing diverse nature and content of Indian literature. Gradual spread of
English language and Western thoughts brought forth a bunch of Indians who drank deep with the official policy of the British. The British company had realized the necessity of English education in administration, justice and politics. As a result many schools were started, Culcutta Madarasa (1781) and Sanskrit College at Benaras were established. Though it was initiated at the clerical or translation lever, later Evangelical movement assumed the vital importance of the spreading of Christianity through English education. The Christian missionaries believed that imparting English education would disturb the ancient roots of Indian culture. Charles Grant aptly observes these developments and says, “They also thought that the spread of English education among the natives would lead to the assimilation of Western culture by the Indian and that this would make for the stability of the empire” (Naik 10). Indian intellectual minds undoubtedly understood which way the wind was blowing; they embraced the English education and desired to encourage their children in a liberal manner.

For the rise and growth of autobiographical tradition, there is need of a turning point, and that point seems to be certain degree of individuality in Indian context. Renaissance, liberty, romanticism of the West were completely based on strong individualism which caused many revolutions. The elements of staunch individualism of the West and inhibitory traditions of India had severe conflicts, and this development certainly shaped Indian minds. Indians read English literature diligently and with great interest and attention which included a fair sprinkling of autobiographical writing. With this assimilation of cultures, the earlier hagiographical tradition was beginning to be supplemented or supplanted by a new development in autobiographical form. By the end of the eighteenth century, the renaissance?, as a result of India’s contact with England, influenced and stimulated the autobiographical impulse in native Indians. On one hand western Christian
missionaries were busy in ‘taming’ Indian minds through English education on the other hand they were busy in re-visiting our classical scripts; there were fully fledged attempts to understand Indian thoughts through every mean. Indian mysticism and deep thought attracted the whole West that it could not create a counter culture immediately. Dr. Albert opines in his preface to Indian Thought and Its Development:

To gain an insight into Indian thought, and to analyse it and discuss our differences must necessarily make European thought clearer and richer… I am fully conscious of the difficulty of describing definite lines of development in a philosophy which possesses in so remarkable a degree the will and the ability not to perceive contrasts as such, and allows ideas of heterogeneous character to subsist side by side and even brings them into connections with each other. But I believe that we, the people of the West, shall only rightly comprehend what Indian thought really is and what is its significance for the thought of all mankind, if we succeed in gaining an insight into its process (Schweitzer, ‘Preface’).

The British rule also brought with it modernity, individualism and rationalism, new thoughts, educational and social reforms, and improved communication, legal system. Likewise, literature too received new touch like novel, autobiography, short stories etc., through various domains. Though there were instances of resistance from the radicals, one could sense huge social mobility through English education. Raj says, “Education made social mobility possible and the need to define one’s identity outside caste and family parameters began to rise. This led many to think of themselves as isolated individuals who then wrote their narratives as the record of their development of individuality” (Kumar 57). This would have led to the emergence of Indians’ sense of science with the spirit of
enquiry and politics with sense of freedom. The rise of reawakened national spirit found a new impulse of self-expression towards building a new nation. The rising tides of English Education were strengthened by shrewd Macaulay who had the combination of Evangelism, Messianic imperialism and Whig liberalism. The coup de grace of the English education was achieved with the assailments of Macaulay’s famous Minutes on Education in 1835. Wakefulness and hindsight of the some charismatic minds of India apprehended the forthcoming dangers of colonial domination and clash of two cultures. Therefore, few Indians used the same magic stick English education to tackle the issues as well as to tell the tales of their own experiences in order to inspire the coming generations for the national cause. Yet English education made its way into India due to favorable political conditions, and it pervaded every corner of the subcontinent.

The project, imparted by Macaulay, to import English language through literature was successful in its propaganda. Indians accepted the change or modern trends whole heartedly and made it their own without much struggle. “Perhaps the most adaptable of people, they had whole-heartedly taken to Persia some centuries earlier, with the Muslim conquest, and had mastered that language. It was obvious to them that a similar strategy with regard to English was now called for” (Naik 10). Forward-looking people were being convinced that English education is not the Devil’s wine but a Godsend. They treated it as an opportunity. To put it in Nehru’s words, “Western Knowledge opened the doors and windows of the mind to new ideas and dynamic thoughts” (Naik 46). As earlier mentioned the new ideas, strong individualism, concept of equality and primacy of reason entered Indian minds through planned educational curriculum- the curriculum must have included some of the finest autobiographical writings.
The spirit of Renaissance in India would have attracted young English educated Indians to write their own life stories to record their budding revolutionary thoughts and actions for national cause. Indian intellectuals, perhaps the most adaptable beings under the Sun, had whole-heartedly accepted the Persian language few centuries ago, with the Muslim conquest, and had mastered the language. Apparently, similar strategy was being adapted with regard to English language and literature. The pioneering autobiographers in India reveal the fact that English was not a devil but it was a blessing, encounter with Western culture was not a curse but an opportunity to rediscover our own historical glory in every sense.

Hazari, the architect of Child marriage Restraint Act Sarda, a rebellious princes Brinda, Nayantara Sehgal, statesman Mirza Ismail, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sudhitranath Datta, journalist and novelist Khushwant singh’s *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, a female-dacoit and revolutionary Phoolan Devi’s *The Bandit Queen*, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam’s *Wings of Fire*, a filmmaker Satyajit Ray’s *Jakhan Choto Chilam*, a feminist poet Kamala Das’ *Ente Katha*, and recent one by a sportsman Yuvraj Singh’s *The Test of My Life*, etc. the list goes on till date. Various people from different domains have written autobiographies with varying intentions. But the journey from the first Indian autobiography to today’s yet to be published autobiography; there is a visible change that marks uniqueness of Indian autobiographies. They have stepped with the changing norms of the genre along with the changing time. Though numerous works are being written, for the research purpose few well-know or much anthologized autobiographies are being discussed.

The above mentioned autobiographies can be divided into two categories; firstly pre-independence and post-independence. The categorization has been done in terms of chronology and for the convenience of the study. And of course it suggests a thematic development in the genre from beginning to the present day.

The first champion to acknowledge these developments in the form of autobiographical letters during the Company rule was Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). He was an educationalist, social reformer and master of nationalistic spirit. During the time of Roy English was used by a number of Indians for both creative and practical purposes, and English found this ablest Indian champion. Rammohun Roy wrote autobiography in the form of letters; the letters are small sketches of his life incidents. At the request of Mr. Gordon of Calcutta, Roy wrote his first autobiographical letter to Mr. Gordon himself just before he left to France in 1833.
In this letter he writes about his ancestry, education, his opposition to perverse and pernicious practices in Hindu society and stiff opposition by conservative quarters. He seems to be a morning star to the subjugated classes of India who got a place in English language through an Indian. Though it was too brief and written in a matter-of-fact manner, it was innovative in its nature. Regarding the style of his writings, Naik says:

Rammohun Roy’s style is reminiscent of Burke’s eloquence, though it does not possess the English master’s colour and splendor. Nevertheless, clear thinking, soundness of judgment, comprehensiveness of vies, forceful and logical argumentation and moderation and dignity in refuting the criticism of his adversaries are the outstanding features of Rammohun Roy’s prose style, which indubitable makes him the first of a long line of Indian masters of English prose. (Naik 18)

Naik’s remarks certainly advocate that Roy’s style of writing autobiography is a benchmark to well-known autobiographies of the twentieth century such as autobiographies of Nehru and Nirad C. Chaudhuri.

Immediately after Roy, there was another autobiographical letter written by Kasiprasad Ghose. He wrote a letter to Rev. James Long in 1834 which contained a brief of account of his life. The letter has two parts; in the first part he talked about his caste, in the second part he mentions about his education in Hindu College where he practiced poetry. He is believed to be the first one to write poetry in English with Indian origin. In the third and the last part he describes his domestic life. As an autobiography it is important because of author’s notion of the genre. Quoating Ghose from M. Garcin De Tassy’s *Histoire De La Litterature Hindoue Et Hindustanie*, Sinha says, “the most faithful representation of a person
when made by himself is apt to betray him” (Sinha 48). The kind of self-
exploration that we tend to associate with the modern trend of autobiography was incidental by product.

Still and all, the first full autobiography was written by Latfullah in 1854. In his *Autobiography of Latfullah: A Mohamedan Gentleman and His Transactions with His Fellow Creatures: Interspersed with remarks on the habits, customs and character of the people with whom he had to deal* (1857) he extensively describes his life story from the early memory of his childhood days. Being born in orthodox Muslim of Central India, he went through various tough stages of life. He escapes from family trauma, goes to Afghanistan, joins East India Company as a clerk, learns English which was a smattering, teaches the British army Persian and Hindi. He writes in simple English language fascinatingly and gives vivid picture of life. Latfullah “speaks against evil practices prevailing both among Hindus and Muslims. He comes down heavily upon the practice of circumcision among Muslims the pain of which he himself had suffered. At the same time he ridicules and bitterly opposes the system of ‘Sati’ among Hindus and writes how he had been a witness to a heart-rending scene of a young Hindu widow going to burn herself alive with dead body of husband” (Sinha 51). Though his motif to write this autobiography is not clear, the autobiography serves a greater purpose as he was critical about hypocrisy of religions.

The next full-length autobiography was written, with the two decades gap after Latfullah, by Lal Bihari Day. *Day’s Recollection of My School Days* is important because it reflects on the English education policy and its consequences in India. Education had brought about great changes in Indian minds. It is this education which made Lal Bihari to embrace Christianity. As an autobiographical genre, it is important as its focus is firm and clear. Raj Kumar says:
The advent of the twentieth century saw the dawn of an era, which presented a fertile ground for autobiographical writings. The political awakening and upheaval in India brought forth new political leaders on the horizon. As a result the old religious and social institutions received a jolt in the process. With a new age came an awakening and several kinds of experiments in the fields of art, architecture, music, dance and literature. The century, thus witnessed an unprecedented spurt in autobiographical writings”. (Kumar 58)

The first independence war of 1857 had changed our perspectives which are reflected through such literature.

However, next we find very often-referred autobiographies that are written in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The kind of self-exploration that we tend to associate with the modern trend of autobiography was incidental by product, but now here we see as a primary intention. These autobiographers of this duration break away from the spirit of the nineteenth century and propagate the individual’s inner search meaningfully; a kind of introspection rather than just chronological reference of life-events. Some autobiographies open up a trend of the genre where our inexhaustible curiosity in politics is awakened for various reasons. The political happenings of the first quarter of the twentieth century across the world have caused men write about themselves voluminously to give different shades of opinion of their own contemporary world. For a host of reasons some of the autobiographies of Indian statesmen and politicians are entitled to the attention of the critics. Politicians well-known, less-known, legendary freedom-struggle heroes and those who have deeply touched our hearts through deeds have written their fascinating life stories. Such life-narrations of individuals bring to light some amazing unknown facts of our freedom struggle. It is always overwhelming to get into the private life of men of eminence and see the various colours of our past.
The new spurt of previous century continued and resulted in the first decade of the twentieth century in the form of Lala Lajpath Rai’s autobiographies. His name is generally associated with the trio; Lal, Bal, Pal. Being a revolutionary freedom fighter he had extended his influence overseas and had led incessant fight against the British in the Punjab region. His autobiographical account is chiefly political activity based. His first autobiography, *The Story of my Deportation* (1908), talks about his exile to Mandalay from the 9\(^{th}\) May 1907 to the 18\(^{th}\) of November 1907 in which the poignantly human side of a great national leader is revealed. It gives an account of how the trinity was being formed; the trinity of militant anti-partition agitation. The second autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, written in Urdu, describes his participation in Arya Samaj. It is important because it is a religious and social record by an individual of importance. The third autobiography by Lalaji was *Indian Revolutionaries in the United States and Japan*, written in 1919. It is of his sojourn in the US from 1914 to 1919, and in Japan for five months. From historical perspective it is valuable as it gives an account of Indians’ assimilation with the Harlem Renaissance which strengthened Indians’ fight against the British. It elaborates how Indian soldiers volunteered to participate in the World War I, and praises Indians’ noteworthy contribution to the growth of the Europe, Africa and the US. Perhaps, Lalaji glorified the sacrifices of Indian soldiers in order to gain sympathy or support of the US to strengthen the fight against the British in the coming days. In fact, the autobiography looks like propaganda of his future course of freedom struggle. All the three autobiographies are *res gestae* of Lalaji’s political and freedom struggle activities; from exile to overseas and from Hindu Mahasabha to imprisonment.

While Indian freedom movement was at its heights in the hands of the both extremists and moderates, people with literary importance too wrote
autobiographies. Rabindranath Tagore, who had made his name even in the West, wrote two autobiographies in Bengali which were being translated into English later. At the age fifty (1911) Tagore wrote his first autobiography *Jibansmriti*, which was in English called *Reminiscences*. It is story of an artist based completely on memory which is unlike other typical life-histories. It is purely subjective in its narrative; therefore it can be called a life’s memories.

The autobiography begins with his childhood days, incidents around his family servants, humorous anecdotes, and many other small things which can be remembered by a kid. Though his family was rich, he was leading a simple life, not being coddled and fused over. His poetic mind was nurtured by all such minute details around him. He says, “Looking back on childhood’s days, the thing that recurs most often is the mystery which used to fill both life ad world” (Sinha 155). He observed and inculcated everything in him, never blamed or cursed for being alone away from the family. Like Wordsworth, the sensitive mind found its solace in calmness. Tagore further says, “When in childhood I was confined to the house, I offered my ear in my wistful gaze to outside nature in all its variety through the openings in the parapet of our inner roof-terrace” (Sinha 155). Critic R. C. P. Sinha points out three journeys of the text that brought in crucial changes in the life of Tagore; Firstly, his journey to school where he had hardship of learning English; secondly, his journey to Himalayas with his father which brought some inner changes in him; thirdly, his journey to England which is described in detail. Hence, overall text gives a theme of the autobiography where Tagore’s poetic genius is grows.

At the age of eighty Tagore wrote another autobiography called *Chhelebela or My Boyhood Days*. It is uniquely wonderful that Tagore could write vividly about his teen age when he was standing on the verge of life. There seems to be a
shift in style, emphasis on particular and mellower tone compared to the previous autobiography. Drawing a comparison between the two autobiographies Sinha says, “In Reminiscences he is a lonely child, but in My Boyhood Days his world is peopled with all sorts of figures—servants, story-tellers, bangle-sellers, snake-charmers, juggler, women doing their household chores, etc., and even ghost and goblins springing up from nowhere” (Sinha 160). Written in sonorous style, the narrative in My Boyhood Days runs uninterruptedly meandering through the memories.

One notable aspect of the autobiographies of the early twentieth century is that the autobiographies are being written by public personalities of various domains. These persons might have written their life accounts either to offer a narrative of their role in shaping the events which were taking place or to record their life-account. We have such an autobiography, of public personality after one and half decades of Lala’s book, by a leading politician and one of the founding masters of the Indian National congress Mr. Surendranath Banerjea. Being one of the most powerful orators in India, Banerjea was dismissed from Civil Service for breaching administrative norms. Later he realized the plight of Indians under the British rule and dedicated himself to uplift the Indian pride. His aim, which is expressed in his autobiography, was to attain self-government within the empire through constitutional and lawful methods. Prof. Naik remarks on Banerjea’s autobiography:

In his autobiography, A Nation in Making: Being the reminiscences of fifty years of public life (1925), he claims to have had a high patriotic purpose, viz. to trace the growth of the national movement and to do justice to the early builders of the nation. More of a public than a private document, A Nation in Making is an apologia for Moderate politics. Though often long-
winded and magniloquent (his Presidential speeches at the Congress Sessions at Poona (1895) and Ahmedabad (1902) run to 91 and 106 pages respectively), at his best Surendranath Banerjea was a master of the impassioned utterance. (Naik 78-79)

This autobiography was begun by the author when he was twenty-five years old, but it looks more of a political document than a personal history. Dalit critic Raj Kumar finds an adequate reason behind this and says, “His real motive in writing the autobiography was to impress upon the reader the idea that the leaders of his generations, particularly the moderates and himself included, were sincere in their efforts to serve the country and in no case was the honesty of their patriotic feelings to be questioned. Keeping such an agenda at the backdrop, Banerjea wrote more about the political history of modern Indian that about his personal history” (Kumar 58). Perhaps for this reason it looks more like a sub-genre of history than a serious work of art for evaluation. Many autobiographies written in this period stand in the same line.

With this political background to autobiography in India during freedom struggle, the discussion will have additional three more autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi’s *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, and S. C. Bose’ *An Indian Pilgrim*. These three autobiographies with three different outlooks towards the nation present varying perspectives. From literary perspective too they offer new elements which are necessarily vital while evaluating the autobiographical texts. Their narrative is vivid, motives are different, socio-political backgrounds are not the same, expressions come nowhere closer to each other, and each one’s way of ‘search of self’ is quite unique. These autobiographies are class apart as they grow beyond recording public events to introspect personal dilemma and reflect on crisis. They
are explicitly vocal about venture of writing these masterpieces. Here is a glimpse of each these autobiographies.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi wrote his autobiography *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* between 1925 and 1929 originally in Gujarati in his fifties. It was published in the form of chapters in *Navajivan*, a Gujarati weekly. It is a humongous life story of Gandhi from his grandfather Ota Gandhi to 1920’s where he begins non-cooperation movement on Indian soil, but condensed into five or 168 chapters. The introduction was written on 26th November, 1925 in which he precisely explains the motive behind this literary venture which has caught the attention of the whole world. Later in 1940, Mahadev Desai translates the text from Gujarati to English.

Having said the facts about the autobiography, it is perceptible with the first look at the introduction to the autobiography that the text is complex, and is not easy to interpret. It is complex because of its motif; Gandhi starts to write this autobiography at the ‘instance of nearest co-worker’ with many questions in his mind. His dilemma deepened when his friend asked him, “What has set you on this adventure? Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or like that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written may be misled? Don’t you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet? Continuing as retrospection to these questions, Gandhi says, “This argument had some effect on me. But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of noting but those experiments, it true that the story will take the
shape of an autobiography” (Gandhi xii). In this introductory part he candidly says that the writing adventure may appear to be an autobiography but it would be a story of his experiments with truth; it is not merely a document of personal life events; It is a spiritual journey in order to record his soul; It is an innate search of self in a spiritual context. This autobiography is not written in self-praise as he had already planned his ‘experiments’, it was just a means to the already existing blueprint. In introduction itself he says, “… I have finished the history of Satyagraha in South Africa, I am tempted to undertake the autobiography… Something has to be written for Navajiwan every week. Why should it not be the autobiography?” (Gandhi xi). Apparently, the autobiography becomes a tool to pen his experience of South Africa in order to present a narrative of ‘search for self’. The life in London clearly indicates that the autobiography has the primary concern of moral and spiritual life not political one. Therefore, the autobiography allows us to peep into his private soul to see sincerity in the documentation.

His ‘experiments’ shaped his thoughts and mind to dedicate him to serve the downtrodden. The concept of ‘Ramarajya’ was the result of continuous self-exploration in which he found programmes like Khadi, Sarvodaya, Satyagraha, etc. For the first time in a utopian world, dalits were given place; a step ahead, they were called ‘the children of Lord Hari’. Thus, perhaps no other public figure or politician has revealed so much of his private life like Gandhi in his autobiography. He gives no place to vanity, which makes him and his work disguisable form others. It is observable that “His transparent sincerity is captivating and his frankness infectious. His direct, precise and critical way of writing is in consonance with his personality. He dissects his life mercilessly and each of his faults and lapses he holds up, to teach, warn and improve” (Sinha 139). Unflinchingly truthful in self-portraiture, agonizingly frank, and absorbing human
document, it is an outstanding document of a spiritual self. His intense fidelity to truth, the standard of candour and veracity achieved still remains unexcelled.

Nehru is one of the key political figures in Indian history. Being a political heir of Gandhi, he has left impression strongly in the third world, in particular India. Having a sound social and economical background he would never have thought of his future course of life under the stronghold of his father. But after returning from England, he found his way with the association of Gandhi and Congress. His participation in Indian freedom struggle, English education, and his knowledge about the West helped him give a shape to his ideas as a politician. Later his role as the Prime Minister of India for one and half decades decided the fate of India at global level. Therefore, his autobiography is a landmark in Indian history not just because it is a private document of an individual but it is an authentic statement of Nehru’s political creed and vivid portrayal of political situation of his times.

Nehru wrote his entire autobiography in prison from June 1934 to February 1935, when he was 45 years old. It runs into more than 600 pages. Out of 600 hundred pages he narrates the story of his ancestors and his childhood days from 1857 to 1905 in just about 16 pages. His school days, college days of Harrow and Cambridge, and his return to Allahabad are told in around 24 pages. After joining Allahabad High Court, he got married to Kamala. Nehru devoted 320 pages to Gandhi’s leadership in Congress for national freedom movement from 1919 to 1932. Remaining 200 pages tell the stories of political activities with Nehru as its epicenter, in which the personal elements are disproportionally small. Therefore, structurally, the book seems to be lopsided. It looks more like a chronological record of the freedom struggle against the British Raj than an autobiography, yet readers can be enthused with some episodes where the personal elements certainly
make it a meaningful autobiography. The autobiography is partial like many other great autobiographies such as Gandhi’s and Franklin’s, after writing this autobiography also he lived for more years which are unknown to us.

When it comes to writing of the autobiography, Nehru was at his best when he was in jail. It set a proper tone to write; the loneliness provided him a situation of contemplative and self-analytical. He never found boredom in prison as he was always busy in reading, writing and other mental exercises. The prison walls did not stop his imaginative and curious mind from being busy. His longing for tiny and small things and thoughts kept him occupied. When he was in Lucknow jail he wrote that he did not hear a barking dog for many days, while he was in Dehradun jail the Himalayan mountains and scudding clouds across the sky attracted him. He excels in vivid recreation of scenes and in intimate and penetrating analysis.

While discussing the techniques, methodology and motives, critics tend to compare Gandhi and Nehru. They were different in every sense; Gandhi had an intense and introspective self-analytical mind where as Nehru completely depended upon socio-political events. It is always interesting to see the difference and the common ground between the two. Sinha emphatically says, “The distinction between Gandhi and Nehru is worth noting. Nehru is psychologically honest, but it is pride that would not permit him to be dubbed a coward. In Gandhi, it is the note of spiritual surrender that would make him face any severe trial of the flesh” (Sinha 145). They both go beyond self-understanding. They both belong to upper caste where they never faced the harshness of social discrepancy during their childhood. Yet they had secular outlook, they were empathetic towards bent of mind, they had sympathy for the downtrodden. In an overall account, An Autobiography gives a comprehensive picture of Indian political life than an individual’s personal life details.
Nirad C. Chaudhuri caught the attention of the whole world readers through his autobiography *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* for its scathing and forthright speculations. Though he declared himself ‘unknown’ loudly, he is no longer unknown. It is not just an autobiography but a historical record that is to tell, “The story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, in which the destiny of British rule in India became necessarily involved” (Chaudhuri 39). Unlike Gandhi and Nehru he strikes a balance between social history and personal narrative; his personal concerns meet the public activities.

The autobiography was written during his fifties (1951) in which he faced hostile situations. The motive that was emanated from his personal source compelled to write this text. His fifty years of life forced him to begin a new life by writing his failures through this autobiography. The sense of failure, what Sinha calls ‘an experiment in revenge’, affects the both texture and tone. The vanishing landmarks, life in Calcutta, his gradual mental and intellectual growth, the exit of British form India etc., are recorded in this autobiography.

Structurally the autobiography is divided into four books; three are purely on personal life but the last one contains essays on history, politics and society. The last book seems somewhat incoherent. The whole book portrays the making of a scholar’s mind and his education.

The first book is entitled, ‘Early Environment’. In this he talks about four places which played vital role in his life, particularly childhood days. The first three were his birth place Kishorganj, his ancestral village, Banagram, his mother’s place Kalikacchna, and England which he never visited. He had imagined beautiful picture of England which had greater influence on him. It was the same ‘fairyland’ outlook many Indians carried even after the British left India.
The second book talks of author’s parents and the first twelve years of his life. His father inculcated in him “a sense that by educating ourselves we should be acquiring, not simply the means to do something else, not simply a key to other kinds of success, but some all-round and absolute goodness which was not mere skill but something desirable in itself” (Chaudhuri 144). His father’s meticulous nature and liberal views on education had great influence on Nirad and his brothers.

The third book is about the author’s school and college days in Calcutta. His stay in Calcutta from 1910 to 1942 played a decisive role in moulding his scholarly temperament. He confessed that he was detached from environment and learned from libraries, museums and shabby buildings of Calcutta, being unaffected by the surge of daily life. Though he was unhappy with school and college days, he found solace in English and Bengali literature. His acquaintance with Encyclopedia Britannica had increased his curiosity, and the First World War had deepened this interest.

Though the narrative does not begin chronologically by mentioning author’s birth date, it starts with Chaudhuri’s childhood days, places and connects the whole events. It is not merely a document of historical events or achievements of political or public personality. The central theme of the autobiography is the story of the education of a sensitive man.

After Nirad Chaudhuri, many men and women from literary and political background wrote autobiographies in independent India; some of them enjoyed the critic’s attention and some remained in dark. The descent of voice, articulated by Chaudhuri, got a new turn when a new generation of Dalits started to assert their identity through literature. Being influenced by Ambedkar’s thoughts and
philosophy, and inspired by Black Panthers, a new trend in Indian literature emerged. And the new emergence again explicitly portrayed through Dalit autobiographies.

The origin of Dalit writing can be traced to a deep rooted and age long longing for equality and fuelled by anguish and anger at the denial of personal and socio-political dignity of Dalits. Particularly, because mainstream Indian literature has omitted the word-view and aspirations of Dalits, this body of writing carry the force of a people long denied freedom of speech and movement.

‘Dalit’ is a word for a community and an identity that are in the making. To call oneself Dalit, meaning “Ground down”, “broken to pieces”, “crushed”, is to convert a negative description into a confrontational identity and to become particular sort political subject. Dalit literature reacts against the ‘Varna system’, the Hindu caste hierarchy that paves way to many forms of discrimination. In India the Dalit literary movement is inspired by the thoughts and ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader, politician and activist. Dalit literature appeared in the syllabi of many literature classes in the USA before it was included in the Indian syllabi, and with translations into French, German, Japanese and others. It has acquired global acclaim.

Dalits and Black (African Americans) share one dominating aspect in literatures; subaltern experience due to colour, class and caste. Therefore, Study of Dalit literature is incomplete without referring to Afro-American or Black literature. Dalit literature has sought undying spirit form Black literature since one century due to striking similarity between Dalits’ and Negro’s underdog experience. There are similarities in experience and literature; their nature of
protesting is also similar. Dalit is the protagonist of India’s caste ridden society, Black is the African American protagonist. As Dalit critic Gnaniah views:

There are ample grounds to compare and contrast the brief history of the Blacks in USA and the age long ancient history of misery of Dalits in India. There are numerous similarities of both these black peoples especially in their sufferings and miseries, legal and illegal violence, segregations and ghettoes, whippings and punishments, destitution and hunger, brainwashing and punishments, livelihood, employment, education and culture, denial of entry into Churches and Temples, untouchability and apartheid, housing and civic facilities, suppression and oppression, above all total exclusion from the social order. (Gnaniah 3)

Both Dalit and African American societies are engaged in similar kinds of liberation movements. Given that the two societies are different in terms of place and time, there should be certain limitations and differences in their literatures and there are similarities too. While the Dalit movement may have helped Dalits of India, and the negritude movement a similar movement among the Blacks helped them face the tide of racism and colonialism. Dalits in India have several times been compared to the condition of colonized African slaves. However, the Dalits have led life under a far more sinister culture, mostly oppressed by upper castes of India. Africans were captured and being brought to America and sold as slaves since the early seventeenth century. With this the slavery of African Americans began their struggle. Dalit society, on the other hand, has experienced slavery since ancient times. Unlike the Blacks, whose motherland is Africa, from where they were captured to be sold in America, India is the motherland of the Dalits. They are not outsiders, but they are the true inhabitants of this land.
In India, the problem was more intense as Dalits were not the outsiders, they were one of the society. But in India Communists gave importance to class issue while Ambedkar to caste issue. Indian peoples’ class consciousness is overwhelmed by caste consciousness. Class consciousness in Indian Dalit has always been weak and alien. Caste consciousness is indigenous and basic social phenomena but also with a class feeling. On the other hand Du Bois in America did not face such a complex maze and despite intermittent differences with communists, he focused on the problems of the Blacks and in his later part of life, he became a full-fledged international spokesman for anti-imperialism and Pan Africans. Both Dalits and Afro-Americans have protested against religions which perpetuated their enslavement.

A doctrine of inferiority to nationalize to oppression was developed by the white Americans to maintain the underdog nature among the Blacks. Once the concept of slavery and subordination developed, a symbolic and mutually reinforcing relationship evolved. Similarly, division of human beings deepened in Indian context due to caste system which is propagated by the religious doctrines. Untouchables are the most exploited and unwanted ones. Not only economically, they are also culturally and politically suppressed and oppressed ones.

A theory is based on The Rigveda‘, the sacred text of Hindus, humanity is divided into four ‘varnas’, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. In the social hierarchy, first come the control people from the rest three ‘varnas’. Then come Kshatriyas who are rulers and warriors. Vaisyas form the third segments who are land owners and merchants. In the last lap of hierarchy is the servants and others, especially artisans. These were the most oppressed and exploited people.

Economic situation of the lower castes in India often resembles that of blacks in the US. It is important to understand that caste and race are distinct and
not mirror images of each other in nature. Some specific professions were identified like butchers, leather workers, launderers and latrine cleaners, who were labeled untouchables. Both the systems have provided an integral base for the local histories. Major events based on racial differences have punctuated USA’s social, political and economic history. Similarly the caste system has served as the foundation of India’s socioeconomic history for several centuries. The pseudo-scientific section of the society supported the differences between the races while the caste difference got the Brahminical Hinduism ‘support in India.

The Dalit, occupying the lowest position in Indian society, is in an absolute position quite below the average African American. Here are two different societies-America’s first developed identity with its urbanization, affluence, industrialization, and India’s Third World or developing world identity, with its poverty, overpopulation and a wide gap between rural and urban lives. Although both the Dalits and the African Americans are distinctive groups they occupy a similar position in their respective societies at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. The Afro-American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously banished from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Racism is like life threatening, non-nurturing force which exists even today.

According to Walter Rodney, Africans were enslaved for economic reasons so that their labour power could be exploited. As he observes, the enslavement of the Africans had everything to do with the cheapness labour not the colour of the labourer’s skin. A critic says, “Racial difference made it easier to justify and rationalize Negro slavery…Finally this was the decisive factor, the Negro slave was cheaper. The Money which procured the White man’s service for ten years could buy a Negro for life” (Rodney 65). Black literature, also called African American literature, is literary work created by Americans of African descent or literary work written about the African experiences.
Through the Black literature the history of America and its development are reflected. The term Black Literature covers a wide range of works, from slave narratives of the nineteenth century to contemporary black literature. Black literature is generally traced to the late eighteenth century. Two hundred years later, the field of Black literature has evolved to the point where there is no questioning of its role in American history and culture. In America, Blacks were bereaved of all the opportunities and fundamental rights of life that would have been theirs as human beings. The gifts of the new world are the beastial treatment and deprival of human dignity. They were not only denied their African culture to pass it to next generation but they were also not given a chance to absorb the emerging American culture. To make it realize, they were denied access to education, laws and social institution of their new land. They were not allowed to participate in politics and were thrown to live in social and cultural limbo that offered them neither present nor future, erasing their past.

There are many caste stereotypes in Indian society. The caste system provides a systematic ordering of groups in society for all time. There is no provision for initiating change. For conscious striving men entering new functional fields or to achieving advanced social position is taboo. The idea of progress is almost entirely absent in the philosophy of caste system. It is inimical to the caste system and its rational.

The Indian scenario was not that different. Dalits were branded untouchables and remained outcast. The Hindu ‘varna’ system imposed slavery on them. They were tortured for a very long time. Such was the condition of these troubled communities that they had neither a village, nor a home. On the Indian front, crime or begging was their only means of livelihood. As Shivaji observes it:

In India, Dalits were not legally enslaved like the African Americans in America, but their plight was worse than that of the Black slaves. Until
recently, they were denied the right to education; they were forced to live outside the villages; and the public places. And temples were closed for them. The monster of segregation was all powerful, discrimination among the people on the basis of their castes. The lower class, Shudra, comprising lower castes, was treated as if it did not belong to the human race. The evil custom of untouchability was practiced and it was believed that the mere touch or even the shadow of a Shudra spoils the sanctity of the Savarna. (Sargar 2)

The racial discrimination in the US goes back to ill-treatment of the Native Americans and the African slaves by the European settlers. Blacks were given no rights under slavery, and were treated violently and as inferior race. In 1866 the Civil Rights Act was the beginning of the movement towards equality and it made citizenship rights available to everyone, and made it illegal to remove anyone of these rights based on discrimination.

However, the political act did not solve the problems of racial discrimination as Blacks were still suffering through segregation and separation from the Whites. Although racial discrimination in the United States and caste in India create similar outcomes, there are also differences between the two. Racism, in this case in the United States, is based on individual prejudice against a race due to the association between actions and appearance.

In India caste in India is not based on appearance or skin colour, but rather it is determined by occupation, birth and endogamous. The caste system in India is also affiliated with religion, which suggests the caste discrimination is rooted in religious grounds and beliefs, with the higher castes even being considered superior. Despite the differences in the race and caste systems, the issues have been addressed through similar actions and policies which are very affirmative in nature.
Whites and Savarna Hindus forcibly extracted labour from them by imposing slavery on Blacks and Dalits. In America, African Americans were being assigned separate educational institutions, separate eating places, separate spaces in trains and buses, and separate residential areas by Whites. In India, untouchables were kept outside the village. Arrangements were made for them to have separate settlements, separate river banks and separate cremation grounds.

For Dalits, the question of separate educational institutions did not arise as low caste people were denied any right to education by the Hindu caste system. Later, during the British rule, when they were allowed to get education, they had to sit in a separate corner or outside the threshold of the class room. It is interesting to know that there was a direct influence of Blacks on Dalits and Dalits on Blacks. A group of young Dalit poets and activists were motivated by the militant Black Panthers and their claims of Black Power to compose outrageous art in order to shatter the complacency of Brahminical ideologies. They proudly called themselves Dalit Panthers. In the late 1960s through 1970s the Black Power and Black Panther movements not only gave rise to a militant resistance to white oppression but it also witnessed the emergence of anti-white establishment art.

A group of young Marathi Dalit artists in India called themselves the Dalit Panthers and embraced violent politics and aesthetics to resist caste supremacy. They were the first to use the word Dalit which became an accepted term for the untouchables. But there is a contextual difference between the treatments they received from their respective society. Sharankumar Limbale marks certain differences in the treatment rendered towards both:

The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in number of ways. While the African Americans were slaves, they could buy their freedom with money. Though Dalits were technically not slaves, they could not even pay to rent a house. The White masters were responsible for
looking after the Black slave. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savarnas had no concern for them. Untouchables are societal slaves. The cause of the African slavery was economic. The cause of the Dalit’s untouchability is social. African American can do any type of labour but their labour was not considered undignified, while Dalits can perform the lowest type of the job but his labour is always termed undignified. While African American cannot hide the colour of his skin, Dalit cannot hide his caste. (Limbale, Towards 86)

A social and political agitation was initiated and led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1920 to lead the movement against untouchability. He himself was a son of Mahar (an Untouchable community) who received his high-school education in Bombay. He believed in the power of education and considered it as a major tool to abolish the untouchability from India. His first hand experiences at Manhattan where he has seen Harlem’s vast African –American communities also helped in his increased sensitivity towards this marginalization.

Despite the differences of place, time, historical background, cultural contexts, language, society, class, colour, etc., the sole aim of the African American and Dalit movement was the same; though they have proceeded along different paths and taken different shapes, the core of both the movements was the same. Both are struggles for human rights and in-human wrongs; the similarities in the life experience of the two communities derives from the fact that both were targets of excess, injustice and slavery- their experience of pain is of a world-scale.

On one hand we see the similarities in the subaltern experiences of Dalits and Afro-Americans, on other hand, even the oppressors, White and Savarna Hindu, share common ground by propagating the feeling of ownership, entitlement and superiority. According to an order of the US government issued in 1863, all
African Americans became free as of 1865. Similarly, in India, Dalits launched a movement in June 1927, to gain entry into the Kala Ram temple in Nasik. V.D. Savarkar then put forward a proposal to build a separate temple for Dalits. But Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar opposed this idea of separate but equal. In 1954, racial segregation was declared unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. After this event, African American ridiculed the word Negro and called themselves Blacks, so did the Dalits in India by replacing the word Harijan or other similar names.

Names of Dalits and African American were changed in order to give up the names received from their masters as those symbolized their slavery. Dalits have abandoned the names thrust upon them, which had uncivilized and inauspicious meaning, by the Hindu religion. African Americans underwent religious conversion with a view to end slavery. Dalits, too, converted due to their exasperation with untouchability. Their subaltern identity in India and America are fractured because of the way caste works in India and how race operates in America.

When Dr. Ambedkar says, “The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu. The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable. The Hindus wanted a Constitution, and they sent for me” (Ambedkar 81), he grasps the hidden agenda of upper caste who always used the Dalits at every stage, be it intellectual or physical. Their social identities and acceptance did not change with their political identities. Similarly, while equality for all “as an American ideology was articulated in the Declaration of Independence, slavery and subordination of African Americans (then known as negroes) and native Americans was a common practice” (Nalavade 87).

America is also a plural society. There are several cross-currents operating within the nation. People from different nations of Europe and other continents had come to settle down in America in the sixteenth century or prior to that. Though
the settlers practiced their own religious faith and had similar racial features and appearances, they had brought with them the national identities and ethos which in each case is unique. Heterogeneity was added with the black race with the Negroid features in the following days.

There are several movements in both the societies which have achieved some goals of rights and equality. But the success of any form of resistance in unequal social hierarchies is always balanced by the fact of ongoing suppression. As observed by M.D.Nalavade:

Hindu literature, one has to admit, is not all-inclusive and deals with life and aspirations of Brahmins. It does not talk about the life and aspirations of the Shudras, especially of the down-trodden people, even if they form nearly one-fourth of the Hindu population. Since the dawn of Hindu civilization, the art of writing has monopolized by the Brahmins and because Brahmins stand on the highest top of Hindu society, they never cared for others in Hindu society. (Nalavade 41)

When it comes to Black American literature, it is as old as American civilization. The slaves brought their culture along with them from Africa to work on the plantations of the white men. They sang folk songs to themselves; the songs of their miseries and spiritual yearnings. They passed on the tradition of oral songs from generation to generation amid desperate situations. This tradition of songs of miseries and spiritual yearning is known as ‘blues’. These blues were the source of inspiration to many poets of the Harlem Renaissance of this century like Langston Hughes, Claude Mackay, Countee Cullen etc. Further these blues inspired many composers of Jazz music in America during 1920s. The first book to be published by a slave in America was An Evening Thought Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries‘ by Jupitar Hammon in 1760. He was followed by a girl named Philis Wheatly who produced a fair amount of poetry and won the attention of
George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. This tradition of singing or writing has sometimes direct impact on Dalits in India. Many Indians, who had settled or had communication with the West, brought those Black’s thoughts to India in order to set right several social issues.

Dalit literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post-independent India. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of the untouchables to a self-chosen identity as a Dalit is described in the collective writings over centuries. Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jotirao Phule were the pioneers to appropriate the word Dalit as a noun and an adjective. The term Dalit Literature was first used in 1958, at the first Dalit conference held in Bombay. But the term Dalit came into recognition in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The name suggests their feelings for kinship and solidarity with Black Panthers who started a radical fundamental struggle for African-American rights in the U.S.A. The literary fronts of Dalit and African American also have many similarities.

A cumulative impact befalls on the overall Indian sensitivity towards Dalit writings due to mutual communication. India is a nation with many linguistic regional groups and in each of such groups the untouchables have the language of that region and sometimes their own. It is therefore difficult to study all the languages and find out names of Dalit writers of different regions in India in pre-Ambedkar times. Despite the difficulty, an attempt is already in the first and the second chapter to see the roots of the Dalit writings in Indian context prior to the twentieth century.

It is noticed here that all the other marginalized and oppressed groups of people are under its sway and sweep. It has struck a note of the consciousness for their lost identity. Other marginalized groups like Tribal and Nomadic communities. We have many prominent writers today like Laxman Mane, Laxman
Gaikwad, Sharankumar Limbale, Siddalingaiah, Aravind Malagatti, B. M. Puttaiah, Devanooru Mahadeva, etc., who have made a big impact for their communities through their writings. They have asked similar questions like any other oppressed class across the world, like Blacks in America; Who are we? What is our place in Indian society and history? Why is our situation so marginal? From where do we find our roots? Another very important phenomenon to be observed in the rise of this literature is its originality. The writes are celebrating their heritage in their own idioms. They have their own aesthetics. Their dance, music and folklores, all are included and celebrated in their voices. The American Blacks have their own black aesthetic theory.

The Indian Dalits have tried to develop their own aesthetics which can mirror their perception of life and the world around. A black bourgeois class gradually emerged from the black masses. Similarly, a Dalit bourgeois class has started emerging from the Dalit. They all are awakening from their slumber. They are trying to re-write their history with new analysis of their past and their present. Historically, America has a very brief history of race-class syndrome slavery. But India has a long ancient civilization history of caste-class syndrome slavery although its founding base too was a race syndrome- Aryans versus Dravidians and non- Aryan natives.

The image of Dalit is similarly geared at keeping him in eternal bondage and slavery. Dalit Literature and Black American writings are propagandist in nature because they are written to bring about social change and the experience is articulated in a collective from. Both are full of anger because of the torments of marginalized life cannot be expressed in sweet poetic stanzas. These marginalized people who suffer from many disabilities such as Blacks suffering from slavery, apartheid, racism, colonialism; Dalit suffering from untouchability, humiliation, oppression, casteism; proletariat suffering from joblessness, poverty and hunger;
aborigine and indigenous people suffering from loss of nationality, the tribal suffering from dispossesion, dislocation and loss of identity- all these subaltern groups are included in the wider context of marginalized writings.

It can be seen that there are strong similarities between the outcome of the racial discrimination in the Unites states, and the caste discrimination in India. Both systems resulted in suffering by the minority groups and unfair treatment that has led to current social economic problems.
References


