Chapter III

Dalit Identity: Crisis and Assertion

India has witnessed numerous social movements. Dalits Movement is one such movement which has left ever lasting impression as a unified force in Indian history. During the movement, Dalits have paved their identity, although the struggle has never been unified them into one major force. Different movements have highlighted different ideologies related to various Dalit issues, but all of them aim to assert their human identity. For Dalits, the basic questions were- Who is Dalit? What is a Dalit to others? What is the difference between untouchable and Dalit? These questions have been haunting Dalits since centuries, and tilting their meanings according to the time and context. Many with humanitarian concern have tried to answer those questions and recognise their social space. Being natives of this soil, Dalits have been living in darkness of caste hierarchy; their ‘impurity’ has been ground for sanctity of Hindu religion. Now, Dalits cannot be ignored or taken for granted. Dalits have acquired the spotlight of today’s socio-political scenario. There happens to be a time when Dalits got importance or place in vital issues. Their suffering was never seen, cry was not heard and their existence was not given any recognition. But, constant struggle or various individuals and organizations of different times and places, Dalits are now able to assert their identity, “They raise questions on the present socio-economic structure and cultural ethos” (Shah 17). Dalits have proved their vital role in every sphere of society; private or government, local or global; their contribution to constructive human domain is significant.

Though Mahathma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar had ideological differences, both had constructive influence on Dalits in fighting against
untouchability. People were always caught between these two idealists; they worshipped Ambedkar and admired Gandhi as Mahathma. A critic opines, “Mahathma Gandhi’s social thrust was integrative but in the political and economic spheres, he strove to pursue transformative goal” (Kumar, *Essays* 166). For Gandhi, untouchability was a religious concern of Hindus and a moral issue. He wanted to solve this issue within the realm of Hinduism by eradication of untouchability, emancipation and change in the attitudes of upper castes. In order to achieve this and acknowledge the identity of Dalits, he called them ‘Harijan’, whereas Babasaheb Ambedkar referred to Dalits as ‘untouchables’.

Dalit autobiographies are considered to be an emergent mode of Dalit discourse. The present proposal seeks to comprehend, evaluate and interrogate the issues of caste, gender and identity and offer a rich perspective and discourse on the Dalit personal narratives. The analysis will definitely give an insight and enrich our understanding of the pain and anguish of Dalit community.

Asserting the Dalit identity has not been an easy task, it has been a prolonged struggle throughout ages. As mentioned earlier, at different times and places, Dalits’ lives and their interests have been guarded by many individuals. From Valmiki to Ambedkar, many have held the pride of Dalits, but in the name of assimilation of cultures, Hindu scripture, like Manusmriti, gained upper hand and snubbed the Dalits, made them scapegoat. Buddha and Basava attempted to free Dalits form the shackles of caste. But power always played a divisive role in degrading the Dalits. They were ragged up for the sacredness of the society by eradicating Dalits’ existence. Dalits’ suffering has been crumbled to fathomless historical depth mercilessly. Yet, “the struggle for the emancipation of these downtrodden from the thralldom of casteism and untouchability has been present for a long time” (Yagati 1). The struggle has resurrected like phoenix. Today’s
challenges of Dalits are not new or strange, they are there for log time, but it is the whole gamut of Dalit movement from time to time that has kept the nerve to fight the long established social norms. Several social, political reformers and concerned intelligentsia, both Dalit and non-Dalit, have tried to eradicate the untouchability and liberate them from old social fabric.

Be it Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s phase or 1970’s Dalit movement, the Dalit liberation movement has got its impetus with the dawn of democratic institutions in India. With the growing challenges for India and Hindu society, new ideas from the West had sliding political and cultural grounds of both India and the world, forced us to listen to Dalits and their plight. Steadily, Dalits become vocal, assertive and effective in establishing their Dalit identity.

From Valmiki to Ambedkar, Dalits have voiced their longing for social liberation through literature. Ambedkar said that mahatmas come and go, but their efforts to eradicate social evils have prevailed in literature. Vacanas, Dasa literature and many activists have written their views on Dalit consciousness and maneuverings have been static and poignant for a long time. In fact, it is 1970’s Dalit movement that marks a great shift in asserting and establishing Dalit identity in socio-political context through literature. The saga of the outcastes from pariah, whose very shadow was considered polluting, to present day’s defiant Dalit, has been troubled and painful. Those painful experiences and historical antecedents witnessed the uprising of an alternative literature to the canon; Dalit literature, that saw its fullest bloom during and after the Dalit movement.

Since four decades, Dalit literature has perceived the notion of Dalit identity, provided critical insights to it. Dalit writers launch literature as a vehicle to propagate their view on Dalit identity and prevailing consciousness. Dalit literature
evaluates Dalit’s identity in the backdrop of caste system of Indian society out of which, culture and traditions, the embodiments of homogenic influence, emerge. It adopts a new aesthetic approach towards in asserting Dalits’ identity Ghashyam says, “Dalit literature does not constitute a homogeneous or unified entity. There are divergent currents and tendencies. Its call for self-identity and freedom is governed by different theoretical and philosophical streams” (Shah 215). This new tendency of emerging literary force emphasises caste as a prime mover. In a dominant historiography, Dalits find no place, it was necessary to reconstruct and articulate their own history. For the first time attempts have been made to read history from subaltern perspective and rewrite Dalits life story through their first-hand experience.

Literature, which spoke of Dalits’ lives in terms of reasserting history from subaltern perspective, was produced in various forms, but autobiography is the most effective form. There are two reasons to claim autobiography to be claimed the best literary form to assert Dalit identity; firstly, the form is completely based on the author’s life that encapsulates the Dalit identity which emerges out of social discrepancy, secondly, the form provides a strong pitch to assert Dalit identity in a positive sense and this identity gains authenticity publically. The personal story of Dalit autobiography explores every possible way to establish an individual’s and a community’s true life incidents. That is how in a Dalit autobiography, an individual’s identity is formed along with his or her community collaging the individual and community narratives at once. By forging two narratives into one and forming a new identity in a new circumference, Dalit autobiographies aim at dual purpose- deconstructing old identity and constructing a new positive identity. It is a kind of historiography that destroys the past passive and subjugated identity
of Dalits, and creates a new identity and an appropriate place for Dalits in Indian historiography.

**Siddalingaiah’s *Ooru Keri***

Siddalingaiah is a versatile writer of Karnataka. He is known as ‘Dalita Kavi Siddalingaiah’ since he started his literary career as a poet. He is known for revolutionary ideas, sharp wit, and verbal attack through poetry. He is actively involved in social activities along with literary endeavor. His *Hole Madigara Haadu*” has been a preamble to Dalit literature in Karnataka since 1975. *Ooru Keri*, written by Siddalingaiah was published in Kannada in 1995, perhaps it was first renowned prose piece. It was published in *Rujuvathu* a Kannada magazine into pieces of articles. Later the author collected all of them together and made into a book by Akshara Chintana publication in Kannada version with D. R. Nagaraj’s, late renowned critic, afterword. After a year, its translation process was begun by S. R. Ramakrishna. The translation process, due to unexpected circumstances, was halted for few years. Finally, it was published with the help of Sahitya Academy in 2003.

The autobiography is unique in its nature. The memory lane begins but without any particular time reference, that sets a strong background to a Dalit’s life. It contains hundred and five small episodes divided into five major sections. The autobiography opens with the section where the author’s father is fastened to yoke like cattle in “Ainoru Fields”. The first part is set in Megalahatti village which is author’s birth place. All the episodes talk about his early childhood experiences in the village. Later in the second part, he moves to his mother’s maternal village Manchanabele, where he gives instances of his experience with many strange issues. The section shows little improvement of the narration as the
speaker too is growing. The section moves from village to Bangalore settlement in which we see early troublesome experiences of his family. It also introduces few influential characters that moulded his career. The third section is important one as it opens up his teenage days in government hostels. As a student he grows into a responsible and sensitive individual who thrives for new experiments in life. He starts to scribe some poetry, developed reading and oratory skills which fetched him some recognition within small group of students. Though it is a small section, it lays down firm ground for his Dalit identity. The fourth section is giant leap in the narration. The section talks about his experience in factory during school holidays, college days, his association with different people, and involvement in various social and political activities. The author reaches a level of maturity in grasping the severity of any given situation and prepares to face it in his own way. His rationality grows with the wide range of reading, debates, and public speeches.

The fifth section grows into a saturated level. Because, the narrative indicates no improvisation in the development of the character except the critical view of his surrounding society. It explores many issues by referring to various individuals like, Lankesh, D. R. Nagaraj, Periyar, Basavalingappa, Devaraj Aras, etc. The major issue in this section is his association with Dalita Sangarsha Samiti. Here, the author puts an end to his autobiography with his settling in the Kannada Department of Bangalore University, under the blessings of G. S. Shivarudrappa.

The autobiography ends with a note on his research career by adding a hint at the continuation of his life story in future. With his unique style the author raises many questions in the readers’ mind, which will make them ponder over the issues raised by him. Appagere Somashekar writes, “Among Kannada Dalit autobiographies, Ooru Keri is expressed on different ground. It has inculcated its own style without heeding to any influences” (Malagatti, Charitre 762). So, Ooru
Keri narrates the story where his teen age comes to an end, adulthood begins. Thus, Ooru Keri is an unfinished autobiography, or it is a beginning of the end.

Following by this autobiography, Siddalingaiah has already published the sequel of Ooru Keri. But the second part is yet to be translated. Therefore, in this research project, the first part of the autobiography is taken into consideration. The second part of Ooru Keri would be the continuation of his career as a teacher, Dalit activist, literary scholar. There are many questions that go unanswered in the first part of the autobiographical series. Perhaps, the second part may provide suitable replies.

**Aravind Malagatti’s Government Brahmana**

Aravind Malagatti is another important and versatile Dalit literary scholar who is known for his progressive and critical thoughts. He came under the limelight when he wrote poems during his university days. He is well-known for his collection of short stories Mugiyada Kathegalu. He is closely associated with the Dalit literary movement, and without referring to his name one cannot read Kannada literature in modern times. He is one among those Dalit scholars who constantly interact with the society and provide possible remedy to issues; overall, his presence is felt everywhere in Karnataka.

His Government Brahmana is the first Kannada Dalit autobiography published in 1994. It looks as though Malagatti quenched the thirst of people who were waiting for Kannada Dalit autobiographies, because by the time of 1990’s, key Marathi Dalit autobiographies like Akkarmashi, Uchalya, Baloota were published. These autobiographies had set a new trend in Indian literary history. But in Kannada, it looked as though Dalit writers were satisfied with the forms of poetry, short story and novels, to some extent plays. But Malagatti seems to break
the literary silence over writing an autobiography. Its influence on readers is so immense that today many Indian Universities have prescribed *Government Brahmana* in their syllabi. It has successfully attracted number of critical reviews and textual interpretations; it is because of the intension behind writing the text as well as the style of the narration.

Generally, a Dalit autobiography is seen from a biased perspective that it will have fierce language, sharp wit, personal attack, and political in presentation. But *Government Brahmana* stands above all such literary prejudices. The text claims Dalit identity so smoothly that the readers are forced to think over the social concerns the author expresses. No one gets offended by reading it, yet the message is conveyed to the point.

Three translators have contributed in bringing the Kannada version of *Government Brahmana* into English; Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich, and N Subramanya, in 2007. A question rises in this context; *Ooru Keri* was written after the publication of *Government Brahmana*, and it was translated into English in 2003, but *Government Brahmana* was translated in 2007. Why is there delay in translating this autobiography? Though the question looks out of context, it is certainly connected with the political intensions behind selecting a text and leaving other. Well this question will be dealt later.

Structurally speaking, *Government Brahmana* contains twenty two episodes, but there is no linear narration; narration move from past to present or the other way. It is a new experiment by not following a chronology in order to break the tradition and set a new trend. All the twenty two episodes are interwoven to hatch Dalit experience. From “preface”, by Vucinich, to “afterword”, by Tharakeshwar. B., the text maintains coordination. The most important aspect is the direct
interaction with the reader. He tells the reader about his life journey from remote village of Vijayapura district, where Dalits’ lives hardly found any hope of emancipation; their existence was almost forgotten by the established institutions. The incidents like “Coins on the corpse”, “She buffalo”, “Handya’s hose”, and “My colony and my study” tell the plight of Dalits’ existence. They explain the way Dalits are suppressed when they tried to move away from the shackles of caste. In the middle of the text, Malagatti refers to his college life in order to spread light on how caste controls every activity and emotion of a Dalit. From the section sixteen to twenty, he narrates the complex situation of Dalits where their identity is caught between too many ideologies, and the mask of fake ideologies is removed by not hurting anyone’s emotions. Malagatti wants to tell his and his community problems without blaming any individual. He flaunts the ‘gentleman’ nature by adopting an inclusive approach towards his society.

Laxman Gaikwad’s *The Branded*

*The Branded* is the first autobiography in its kind; a life story of a thief who not only confesses his deeds but also explains the reasons behind them. It is a life story of Laxman Gaikwad who belongs to Uchalya community, a tribe that is known for theft since colonial regime. Uchalya was a notified community under the ruthless ‘Criminal Tribes’ Act of 1871. The nomadic tribe is forced into thieving profession by the British, Indian landlords, and upper caste Hindus. As a result, one is born a thief in this community, and he or she is not able to come out that ‘brand’ called thief. *The Branded* is a struggling saga of one such Uchalya who revolts against the institutionalized suppression. He openly embraces his
identity being Dalit, at the same time he braces up to change the conditions of Uchalya community.

_The Branded_, by Laxman Gaikwad, is written in 1987, and is translated from Marathi into English in 1998 by P. A. Kolharkar under the initiative of Sahitya Akademi. The autobiography is not divided into chapters or episodes; it flows gradually along with timeline. Though it does not include chronology strictly as the author declares that he has neither birth date nor caste, but it narrates the author’s life incidents from childhood to adulthood. The work begins with certain clarification over his identity, and moves on to tell the story. It is set in Dhanegaon in Latur of Maharashtra. There is introduction of the family members, their occupation, present economical situation, and the pendulum situation of the whole community.

From the beginning to the end, the autobiography explains the hostility of Uchalya people who are caught between too many chains. First of all, they are thieves out of compulsion; they are punished by the police for the ‘crime’, Patel takes his share in the theft, police loot in the name of raids even though they receive bribe to relieve the arrested Uchalyas. This enforced crime on the tribe goes to such an extent that if a Uchalya has a desire to quit thieving profession, he or she is not given a fair chance, in turn, one is punished brutally.

It is a heart rending story of a child who constantly introspects about the wretched conditions of his and his community life. The author’s childhood experiences are full of sad incidents, they are dominated by constant suppression. His life in school hardly provides him emotional shelter; in contrast, education pushes his identity crisis into deep sorrow. But after school days, he tries to gains his voice against the oppression.
His migration to urban area provides little relief, but again when his identity is revealed, he is ill-treated and misused by politicians. Perhaps, his mobilization with Dalit Panther, reading of Ambedkar literature, and association with workers union gives him strength to fight the social evil forces.

At this point of time, his personal life, economical condition, and emotional support deteriorate gradually. He does not complete his education till today. He is still working for the emancipation of Uchalya community by awakening them with education, jobs, and political participation. At each level in the autobiography, the narrator tries to convince the readers about his conditions which are not fictitious. He pleads the ‘civilized’ society not to push his community people into theft. He demands for equal opportunities to move along with the changing time. He urges everyone to abolish the venomous caste hierarchy from its root, so that humanity can prevail.

Gaikwad’s granny Narasabai, mother Dhondabai, father Marthanda, school teacher, and his life in Latur become the centre of debate as each one opens various interpretations. “While condemning corruption at higher levels, Gaikwad obviously does not justify the actions of his community” (Kumar Narratives 201). The text makes an attempt to explore possible ways to liberate the tribal people by respecting their identity.

**Sharankumar Limbale’s The Outcaste**

Sharankumar Limbale wrote *Akkarmashi* in 1984 which was first and original version. Later it is translated into English as *The Outcaste* by Santosh Bhoomkar in 2003 after many drafts. There are three versions (1984, 1990, 1999) of *Akkarmashi*, but the first edition’s translation is available in English. The information is worth mentioning, because, the publication of the autobiography
had created an impact on the whole country that Limbale he himself had to face the wrath of his own kith and kin.

At the outset only the author declares that his history is his mother’s life, at most his grandmother’s; it does not move beyond that. This declaration says a lot about the experiences of Limbale. His mother is the metaphor of rape, and he is the result of such heinous assault. His grandmother is a confused identity as she is associated with a Muslim old man. Adding to the grief, he is not aware of his father, or though he knows, he is deceived of getting his father’s name in the society. There won’t be any other Dalit autobiography that would present the story of an individual’s identity crisis so brutally.

When *The Outcaste* was published, the whole literary world was shocked. Reacting to the reception of the work Limbale says:

…when savarna readers read this, they write me, ‘Limbaleji’, we feel ashamed that our ancestors have committed such excess on your society. We feel that this is very shameful’. It is very good that such feelings and sentiments are produced in the savarna reader. It generates a guilty conscience in the savarna reader; and not only guilt, but also a conviction that the injustices and excesses that have been committed against Dalits must not continue. So, the same book can generate these different responses”.

(Limbale, *Towards* 125-6)

Birth was treated as though it is a divine gift, but here for someone it is curse. Apart from his illicit birth, the autobiography beautifully portrays the brutality of upper caste Hindus and landlords who make the situation worse by strengthening the caste boundaries through untouchability.
Throughout the autobiography Limbale raises many issues like untouchability, class divisions, education, reservation, political gambling, unsettlement of religious harmony, and Dalit women’s security. Since centuries, Dalit women have been subjected to rape, but such acts are justified in the name of gender and caste authority. Further, religious scripts are used to justify the deed. When Masamai, author’s mother, is divorced by the village Patil forcefully, no one questions. The act is accepted by everyone when Patil keeps her as his sex server. Her child from him is not given father’s name; she is not given shelter or food by anyone. She is deprived of minimum privilege a woman can have. The author questions the reader that would it happen with his mother if she were to be an upper caste woman. Her social and economical insecurity, hunger, and caste identity pushes her to serve men sexually and beget children.

There are two more characters; Santamai and Dada, who in this autobiography become epiphany of social rigidity and piggishness. These two characters break the boundaries of religion as they live together by rejecting marital institution. It is poverty and hunger that unite them. Therefore, the identity of religion blurred and class division is highlighted. Thus, The Outcaste presents a cluster of identity crisis, and emerges out of it through the form of an autobiography. In this way it establishes to be the frontier of Dalit autobiographies, and it has set a watermark to other Dalit writers who wish to share their Dalit experiences through autobiographical genre.

The four autobiographies are unique in their nature. Ooru Keri and Government Brahmana are translated from Kannada, but they are regional differences. Ooru Keri is set in the southern region where cosmopolitan world exists. Government Brahmana is set in the northern part of Karnataka where even cities are nothing but big villages. Both the authors speak different dialects, live
different lives. *The Branded* and *The Outcaste* are in the same region of Maharashtra and same context, yet their experiences differ. It is possible only in autobiography, where similarities and differences are depicted excellently. So, while talking about the identity of these Dalits, their issues differ from each other. The nature of author’s struggle and acceptance of challenges make the basic difference while asserting their Dalit identity.

The articulation and assertion of Dalit identity hasn’t been easy, it is the result of long struggle and revolution which amid to bring in social changes that are based on liberty and equality in every sense. This arduous and long dreamt path of social struggle is well-wrought in four Dalit autobiographies- Siddalingaiah’s *Ooru Keri*, Aravind Malagatti’s *Government Brahmana*, Laxman Gaikwad *The Branded* and Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste*. The first two are from Kannada and the latter two are from Marathi, and they are translated into English. All these autobiographies present the identity crisis faced by the authors as well as their communities. None of them is from one particular place, each writer or text represents the experience of Dalits from different regions that culturally share common things, but for Dalits it is a common thread. Each text has different shades of experience of untouchability or caste stigma. Though all of them are born in different region, culture and circumstances, they all have been subjugated due to their birth into lower strata of our society. Nature of subjugation of each writer may be different, but the subject is one, that is their caste. The identification of them with their caste and community propels them to undergo the wretched experiences of human life.

Having different shades of experiences, each narration reveals potential details for a researcher to explore various aspects like tone of speaker, narrative techniques, points of view, way of caste or class assertion, foregrounded or hidden
ideology, dominant or subaltern history, etc. Versatility of these autobiographies is hidden in their contrasting narrations. Their struggle (crisis) of identity within the social matrix is magnificent in nature and astonishing in subject. All four thematically associate, technically differ. For instance, Aravind Malagatti asserts his Dalit identity using mild tone of expression, whereas Sharankumar Limbale uses raw, unrefined language and disturbing incidents without any hustle. Siddalingaiah asserts his Dalit identity through wit and light humour, whereas Laxman Gaikwad’s humour sounds blunt. The episodes of sustained repartees make Siddalingaiah’s *Ooru Keri* a lively social critique.

By reading their pain, suffering, alongside an urge to overcome hurdles through awakening, the four Dalit autobiographies appeal for equal rights and acknowledge their identity. The message of identity assertion percolates in all the four autobiographies with varying styles. While asserting their identity and commendable attempts to upraise, the authors are caught in between many issues which lead to psychological crisis over their being Dalit and plight of that social state. When these writers try to come out of old stigma and celebrate liberated life, they face many hurdles.

Dalits’ identity crisis is candidly expressed through the four significant autobiographies. The opening chapter of *Ooru Keri* portrays the crisis of Dalits in a village of Magadi taluk. In the episode of “Ainoru Fields”, two instances astonish us by establishing a divided pattern of our society. The childhood narration tells the practice of untouchability when the speaker witnesses his community people fetching water from one particular well which is away from the village. There is a strange confusion when the narrator says, “our people trudged to a flower garden some distance away and fetched the water from the well by its side. I never saw any one but the dalits fetch water from this well” (Siddalingaiah 2). It is difficult
to say whether Siddalingaiah was aware of his and community’s dire condition, but it is certain to say that his mind was able to sense the strangeness that happened around him. He says, “We noticed something strange. A man had fastened a yoke onto the shoulders of two others, and was ploughing Ainoru’s fields. It was… was my father” (Siddalingaiah 2). Here he feels ‘strange’ by realising his father carrying a yoke. The child is gripped by agony to see his father in an animal’s place. He might not be able to define his emotional trauma, but he was able to see some difference that makes his condition miserable. Perhaps, Siddalingaiah is trying to establish or set the tone for his identity which has had undergone trauma even at the time when his childhood innocence also could not escape suppression.

He raises the issues of untouchability and de-humanization through an innocent voice that is apolitical; it is apolitical because it doesn’t get involved in any ideological ground when he mentions that he wouldn’t have thought too much about the discrimination. As a conscious Dalit writer, Siddalingaiah might have intended to select these particular incidents to create an aura of suspicion in the minds of the readers, yet, these details are not fictitious but facts.

*Ooru Keri* is an optimistic in establishing the author’s identity though his experiences pin points his crisis. Dalits have been following Buddha for religious dogmas, Ambedkar for political ideals. At the same time Gandhi has also made place among Dalits. Gandhi is accepted by Dalits as he has inclusive social system in which Dalits are called ‘children of God’. Therefore, Gandhi played a major role in establishing Dalits’ self-esteem without denying their social status.

The narrator of *Ooru Keri* tells how his grandfather embraced Gandhi’s ideals and made them family culture, “Grandfather had once heard a speech by Mahathma Gandhi. He used to say he has seen Gandhi from a distance. When
Gandhi had asked non-drinkers to raise their hands, grandfather had been one of those who had. So, there was no drinking in this house” (Siddalingaiah 14). It seems to be a giant leap towards establishing new Dalit identity by breaking away from old social stigma where untouchability was rooted in food culture. The food culture had drawn thick dividing lines between people, and lower strata were not even part of ‘Varna’ system. Babasaheb Ambedkar had cautioned about this lost identity even among Hindu social hierarchy, where Dalit individual has not place to be recognised. “The Hindu social order does not recognise the individual as a centre of social purpose. For the Hindu social order is based on primarily on class or Varna and not on individuals” (Shah 83).

The narrator of Ooru Keri gradually grows into a matured individual and a careful observer after moving into Bangalore city slum. A Dalit finds different challenges in a metropolitan city unlike the village situations. Economical crisis of working class in Bangalore is an added layer to the existing caste system. Siddalingaiah was flabbergasted to see new life in Bangalore and little liberty from caste boundaries. Perhaps, he enjoyed his life being a Dalit during his hostel days. His mingling with various kinds of children, availability of equal education and association of people like Puttappa (founder of DSS) made him feel happy. Simultaneously, more diminishing acts were happening around him. His father becomes a prima facie of his future struggle in leading a respectful life. Some paid rowdies assaulted his father because he had not repaid a loan in-time in village; Dalits’ morale is put to test in such a new cultural tradition.

A new wave of crisis was awaiting them. Siddalingaiah’s Dalit consciousness gets blossomed in R. Gopalaswamy Iyer Dalit Hostel of Srirampura. He acknowledges:
Hostel life gave me new experiences. Three hundred students from various places stayed in the hostel. They spoke Kannada in different ways. Boys form Bangalore rural district spoke in a particular way. Boys from Kollegala and Mamballi said ‘Baruda, hoguda’ for ‘Ba, hougu’ (come and go), while those from the Malavalli region said ‘Baruja, hoguja’. The moment the four or five of us from Bangalore opened our mouths, nothing but swear words came out. (Siddalingaiah 42-43)

Hence, the narrator hints at his ability to perceive himself to be a Dalit for the first time and proposes a possible link between young Siddalingaiah and the Dalit scholar Siddalingaiah. He is able to distinguish himself from others, and strikes the first chord of self-recognition. To set an example of a changed Dalit’s identity, the narrator carefully puts forth an instance of Manchanabele, grandfather’s village, where there was no theft, and prior to this opinion he mentions Gandhi’s influence on the people of Manchanabele.

For a Dalit, understanding his own plight wasn’t easy. He didn’t feel the perplexed situation he was put in for centuries because it was being protected by ‘karma’. He toiled, starved and died without many expectations from the society. But his ‘self’ was disturbed and he always tried to alter his position in his own society. He realized that not just his esteem is diminished, but also his stomach had been empty at the price of someone’s luxury. From that moment Dalit started to recognise himself and his problems. Similar things happened with Siddalingaiah when he was in hostel and protested for food as “the food served at the hostel wasn’t enough. The boys would rush with their plates for the mudde and saru left over at the end of a meal” (Siddalingaiah 47). This episode indicates at the emergence of a protester against any uneven conditions in the hostel though he was from a village he had occupied a larger space among Dalit students.
This growing Dalit’s ‘self’ received rebelling instincts from various activities around him. Association with various scholars, artists, politicians, he had developed a unique quality which shaped his future identity. Reading of Ambedkar literature and writing poetry helped him in expressing his thoughts. In fact, Ambedkar was occupying his mind and soul by making him think of his social conditions and question them. When he wrote, “Koduvaru namage kola/ Kadime hakuvaru kaala/ Aaguttade raakta bedhi/ Aadaroo kodalollaru ragi godhi. (They give us maize, And very little gram/ Blood goes in our motions/ Yet they refuse us ragi and wheat). My friends who liked it started singing it in unison, as though it were a hymn. Inspired, I wrote more songs on those lines’’ (Siddalingaiah 61), he was outspoken about inequality and human suffering of students in satiric tone. This young poetic mind was at formation level, but showed great potentiality.

His collective consciousness of Dalit identity is visible in an incident when around three hundred hostel students participated in a Dalitmela led by B. Basavalingappa and N. Rachaiah. When warden was upset, Siddalingaiah says, “At evening prayer, he (warden) asked all those who had been to the procession to stand up. If some ten students had stood up, he would have deprived them of their meal. We had anticipated such a situation and so all three hundred of us stood up unitedly” (Siddalingaiah 63). This boosted his confidence. Many such events fueled his enthusiasm to work for social cause. His curiosity in Ambedkar’s life story, public speeches and his own poetic skills fetched him huge recognition beyond his expectations. Perhaps, during this time Siddalingaiah’s strong sense of Dalit identity got strengthened. His public speeches, full of Ambedkar’s life anecdotes, brought him great demand. It was a Dalit who uplifted the energetic soul of another budding Dalit hero. The boy, who had no independent face in a society, got appreciated by people like Veerendra Patil and C. M. Armugam.
An incessant effort of appropriating caste hierarchy is seen through generations. For the first time in Ooru Keri, the speaker refers to such a complex story which is found in every Dalit’s life. It is a strange cliché from which Dalits struggle to come out. In recent days Hindus are attempting to break the wall of caste, simultaneously they are not able to break away old customs. This is baffling the Dalit’s act of liberation. During school days one of Siddalingaiah’s friends would take him to his house, and his family members treated affectionately. But one day his mother gave him delicious food to eat, then, the narrator says, “I noticed that they kept my plate in a separate corner outside. This disconcerted me. My friend got to know about it. His agony showed on his face. But his family was not able to give up its orthodox ways. They felt unhappy if I did not visit their house every few days. Our friendship continued for many years” (Siddalingaiah 67). Despite new generation’s efforts to congregate all social groups; it is being pulled back by orthodoxy, which is as strong as an iron fist. At personal level, these incidents have their own limitations with mutual respect. Siddalingaiah faces humiliation due to his caste stigma, but stands above all those odds. He does not let loose his self-esteem by heeding to untouchability. Being Dalit is a matter of great concern as well as pride, and he deliberately protects it by not surrendering.

His gust for the equality gradually gets intensified. There rises the crisis when he tried to hide himself from insult. While the protagonist works in a wedding ceremony as a cleaner, he is haunted by the risk of being spotted by some acquaintances. So, he confesses, “To avoid that I would smear my face generously with grime before taking the bucket out. This would distort my face and render unrecognizable” (Siddalingaiah 69). By this time he has cultivated his mind as a self-esteem Dalit who does not compromise with his ideas. Unfortunately, sustenance of poverty poses challenges to such rebellious spirit. This defensive
attitude is smitten from time to time Ambedkar’s ideals, and the narrator finds solace by calling himself ‘untouchable of Ambedkar’. Whenever the protagonist is caught between future hopes and the past barbaric, he finds out a way out of Ambedkar’s ideology to get rid of his past stigma.

As Dalit identity crisis denotes the cast-out struggle of Dalit to prove their essence and existence amid social discrepancy, a conscious Dalit always looks forward to articulate his identity loudly. Siddalingaiah’s quest for identity is unbeaten by subjects like Ambedkar, contemporary Dalit upsurge, ill-treatment of his class and caste. Importantly, his meticulous mind is always after answers which are left unanswered. This quest for ‘selfhood’ was strengthened when he met D. R. Nagaraj. Nagaraj might have reflected Siddalingaiah’s own personae and made him realise his role in Dalit movement. The author himself confesses, “Nagaraj’s friendship gave a new turn to my life. He analyses my poems and encouraged me. He was delighted to discover that I was a rationalist. He was already known as a revolutionary” (Siddalingaiah 78). Anyone who reads Kannada literature would know the contribution of Dr. D. R. Nagaraj. He was one of the prominent revolutionary Dalit intellectuals who gave theoretical basis to the fight against the caste oppression and discrimination.

More the author asserted himself as a Dalit, more the problems increased. Yet, not disheartened, he claimed his Dalit identity vehemently. While doing so, he was eclipsed by many ideological clusters; carrying the identity of a Dalit, he had had to come out of the dilemma. During his teenage he had rejected the existence of God and he stuck to it for a long time (may be even today). After reading Devaru Satta (God is Dead) written by Vasudeva Bhoopalam, he confronted the author to discuss the existence of God. Because, the speaker believes that it is essential to get rid of Hindu Gods and worshipping culture. When Bhoopalam
concludes saying that it was not important whether God existed or not, what was important whether there was humanity among humans. Due to uninterrupted conversations and debates Siddalingaiah had been recognised as Dalit and he adhered to it. Therefore, he replies to Bhoopalam, “When you have *God is Dead* for title, doesn’t it mean that you agree that he did exist?” (Siddalingaiah 81-82). As this question was not an amiss, the narrator won the appreciation of the progressive thinker.

Just being under lime light Siddalingaiah could not escape the hardship for which had to protest in order to get justice. Whenever there were challenges in front of him he was not smidgen, but he showed an integrated counter action. He cultivated these un-astaundeded guts under the influence of Periyar. He says, “He (Periyar) took no note of the logic myths. His speech was hypnotic” (Siddalingaiah 91). Siddalingaiah admired Periyar and lived his ideals as Periyar had sown new seeds of Dalit identity in South India based on Dravidian concept.

The narrator’s crisis grows along with his fight against the caste system which has conferred inhuman status on Dalits. He travels breadth and width of Karnataka and unites Dalits for a greater purpose. He started to evaluate historical evolution of Dalit consciousness and growth of collective or shared identity in terms of both ideology and organization. His basic thrust was to critique the Brahmanical ideology and counter the hegemony of the upper castes. Incidentally, the growth of democratization and political involvement of people emphasised the relevance of Dalits’ participation. In this pretext, Siddalingaiah sought to achieve socio-economic and political equality through establishment of organizations.

In an increased involvement with various political circles, Siddalingaiah was naturally inclined to set up organizational strength to strengthen his cause. In this
process, many who were socially concerned and conscious of existing conditions, wished to transform them. His ideals, leadership and specified methods to achieve the set goal played a vital role in mobilizing and co-coordinating the masses.

It is a noticeable development that along with the socio-political forces there existed ideological differences among individuals as well as organizations which led to split in the identity of Dalits. Since the beginning of the Dalit movement, the Dalit identity faced crisis, today it has deepened in the name of ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ ideology. This dividing line is visible in Ooru Keri. In the episode of “Communist Camp”, the author attends the summer holidays a camp of the Communist Party of India at Krishna Bavan in Malleshwaram. The speakers were all worshippers of Russia. The speaker exhibits maturity and selects words, incidents and names; majority of the people who attended the meeting were upper caste Hindus and the meeting was held by CPI. The Background itself sets up a phishy tone. If he cross-questioned the delegates about the Soviet Union, they exploded in anger. Though the narrator praises the speakers at the meeting, he subtly criticizes the hypocrisy of the Leftists’ ideology which had begun to lose its ground. With light humour and subtle sarcasm, Siddalingaiah satires them as they used Dalits for their political gains. CPI was led by Brahmins whose principles were practiced outside, not inside their homes. Brahmanism did not vanish from Communist Party by putting Dalit mask. So, the narrator ridicules by saying that a week’s food and Ramakrishna’s speech were his gains from the camp.

It was not mere ideological question, but it was the question of Dalits’ ‘self’ that was exploited in the name of progressive ideals. Dalits from different regions were amassed by the Communists on class lies, particularly in urban areas where factory workers or labour class was growing in number. But the root cause of Dalit’s assertion of identity was deviated from the track. Dalit movement was
initiated to uphold Dalit identity on social ground and assert it politically. As Yagati observes, “The Dalit intelligentsia perceived the existing structural basis that perpetuated human exploitation and they tried different ways and methods to educate, organize and unite all the Dalit masses” (Kumar *Essays* 178). Therefore, it is evident that Dalit identity had a strong sense of collective consciousness of oppressed classes in India.

It is this identity that aimed at autonomy of Dalits at every level and in every sense. But in course of time, many organizations, sections of the society, schools of thought and intellectuals have misled the Dalit identity. Recent voice for Dalit CM is one of those divided voices that are confusing the Dalit identity. In case of Communists, they hardly accepted any kind of Dalit autonomy and at the level of culture and identity, their failure to provide an alternative to the Brahmanical interpretation of Indian history was retrogressive feature. For a long time, Communist leadership remained in the hands of upper caste Hindus, but the alternative literature paved the way for Dalit expression which asserted Dalit identity strongly.

*Ooru Keri*, thus, is a narration of a Dalit’s life which is carved out of incessant caste humiliation and class oppression. The narration unites all Dalits and makes the text an experience of the community. Because, as Dr. D. R. Nagaraj in the appendix aptly writes, “A Dalit story without poverty and caste humiliation would be false. But that the writer triumphs over them in his imagination is true. By slightly distorting the hunger and humiliation in his life, Poet Siddalingaiah points to ways in which they can be overcome” (Siddalingaiah 110). While asserting Dalit individual as well as community identity, Siddalingaiah, though his intelligent and mischievous narration, crates new self-images. The anger is expressed in humour which makes *Ooru Keri* unique in itself.
A noted Marathi literary critic and Dalit thinker Sharankumar Limbale wrote his autobiography *Akkarmashi* (1984) and caught the attention of Indian readership. The autobiography was later translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar as *The Outcaste* (2003). The personal narrative is of a protagonist called Sharan, who is an illegitimate son born to Hanmanta Limbale, village Patil and a rich landlord of Basalegaon, and a poor Dalit woman, Masamai. Like most of the autobiographies, *The Outcaste* also begins with childhood details, but unlike other autobiographies, it is a record of just 25 years of author’s life. Perhaps there is no other Dalit text that deals with the idea of ‘Dalit identity crisis like *The Outcaste*. Its exerting power is visible from the Preface itself; from ‘Preface’ to the last page of the text, the speaker keeps on posing questions to the readers to introspect. *The Outcaste* is not mere a documentation of author’s life, it is a disturbing and thought-provoking account of one’s life. Though central character is Sharan, the author, the theme shifts from person to person. At each level each character around the narrator becomes vital and occupies central place of the text. At one point the stigma of untouchability and illegitimacy themselves dominate over the characters. The penetration of thoughts over author’s birth, caste, family and society make him more perplexed. The more he tries to think about the question of his identity more it becomes complex and painful for him.

The author Sharankumar Limbale highlights the hypocrisy of Indian Caste system which grants permission and status to a high caste Patil to develop extra-marital relationship. He is not branded as immoral whereas the woman with whom he keeps extra-marital relations is branded as a whore. Sharankumar Limbale acknowledges in the beginning:

I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privilege by virtue of his birth granted to him by the caste system.
His relationship with my mother was respected by society, whereas my mother is untouchable and poor. Had she been born into high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his appropriation of her? It is through Dalit movement and Dalit Literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. (Limbale, Outcaste ix)

While discussing Ooru Keri the focus is laid much on the author himself and the crisis he undergoes at various levels. Siddalingaiah’s crisis as an individual Dalit and a leading writer or poet represents an individual’s struggle along with shedding views on other co-existing characters and their plight. Here, The Outcaste reflects various dimensions of Dalit identity and their struggle to gain the acknowledgement. Thus, the text itself stands to be the embodiment of Dalits’ struggle for social equal identity. On one hand, Sharan’s life account elaborates his constant inner and outer struggle to claim his identity since childhood which he does clam ultimately through his rebellious discourse in The Outcaste. On other hand, some characters around Sharan keep struggling till the end and succeed and some never accomplish intended goal and keep haunting the readers through the questions raised by the narrator.

As earlier mentioned, Sharankumar sets the discourse of interaction from the first page itself when he asks, “Had she been born into high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his appropriation of her? (Limbale, Outcaste ix)” , and to the last page, where he asks the readers or the society to answer, “Who will undertake Dada’s funeral after his death? Will Muslims attend his cremation? How can they perform ritual after his death? Where would they bury his body? What will happen to his corpse? What will its fate be?” continuing the narrator connects the religious identity of his grandmother and mother, “Would people come for the rituals on Santamai’s and Masami’s deaths? Why this labyrinth of customs?” Then
he extends the issue of discrimination of Dalits, “Who has created such values of right and wrong, and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow?” (Limbale, Outcaste 113). This series of questions sets upon all issues of a Dalit, who is being rejected of every possible right identity, illegitimate birth, condition of Dalit women, confusion over his own further religious identity in the society, poverty, etc.

Caste system, untouchability in particular, has been institutionalized in social hierarchy. Alok Mukherjee says, “The Dalit’s subaltern status is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority. It is eternal and unalterable” (Limbale, Towards 03). Along with untouchability, if illegitimacy is added, then living becomes an impossible task to any self-conscious man. According to Manu, the ancient Indian lawgiver, untouchability is the punishment for the miscegenation between a member of a high caste and that of a low caste or an outcaste. The offspring of such an unequal pair would become untouchable and the deeper the social gap between the two parents, the lower the status of their children. In such conditions, if mother is a low-caste woman the consequences are also more severe. The notion of legitimacy and illegitimacy is based on the rules of endogamy and exogamy. The higher caste man can sexually exploit the lower caste woman with no stigma of immorality on him but the latter is branded as a whore. The mother and children are socially ostracized and the mark of illegitimacy is imposed on the innocent child since his very birth. The narrator Sharan in The Outcaste suffers such an identity crisis from the same notion of illegitimacy as his mother keeps an extra-marital relationship with a village Patil of Basalegaon.

It is not just of Sharan, the autobiography implies the helpless Dalit woman’s multiple subjugations. The narrator’s mother Masamai’s pangs grow due to two main reasons; one she is a Dalit woman, two she is beautiful. And To be
born beautiful among Dalits is a curse. Masamai was beautiful and she suffered for it. She was divorced by her husband, after which Hanmanta enjoyed her and then deserted her. Ithal Kamble marries Masamai; both live a contended life with two kids, Dharma and Suryakant, even in poverty. The couple is divorced forcefully by the lusty Hanamanta’s cunning plans. On the pretext of immorality and the pressure of rich landlord the caste council forced Masamai to divorce Kamble. The divorce from Ithal Kamble to Masamai seems to be a banishment of Sita by her husband lord Rama. Hanmanta Limbale then keeps physical relations with Masamai. Her grief grows when two kids are snatched away from Masamai, who were only hope of her further life. She refuses to live under anyone’s courtesy and lives a life of revenge by heeding to Patil’s and continues to live an illegal affair with him in Akkalkot and she felt like Sita lost in the Dandakaranya searching for shelter.

Being born out of this illegitimate relationship, Sharan feels as though he was growing like Karna of Mahabharata. In this episode Sharan unveils plight of Dalit women who have been serving the village Patils sexually, and turned their houses brothels under sheer hopeless conditions to survive. If Masamai were to be an upper-caste woman, she would have claimed her rights, both social and economical. By default an upper-caste woman gets every right to seek justice, whereas a Dalit woman does not get that opportunity. Unfortunately, the rapist happens to be a Patil and the victim is a Dalit woman. The Hindu scriptures justify the rape committed by upper-caste Hindus over lower-caste women. The punishment varies according to one’s social class and the punishment is amendable in the hands of upper-caste Hindus. Dalit critic Raj Kumar cites:

The punishments for rape were very heavy and it varied to the caste of the culprit. Brhaspati states that if a man commits rape on a woman of the same
caste, he was to forfeit all his property, to have his penis and testicles cut out and was to be paraded on the back of an ass, that if the woman raped was of a lower caste, then half of this punishment was be awarded and if she was of higher caste, he was to be sentenced to death together with confiscation of all his property. (Kumar Essays 18)

This affirms the crime against lower-caste people with religious authenticity which will deepen the miseries of Dalits. Despite the acceptance of our constitution, we have hardly made it into practice. Our religious scripts have enrooted social discrepancy so deeply that it has become difficult to uproot the old and worn out norms which are invalid now. The identity of caste plays major role in deciding the punishment for any crime, in fact any crime is justified in favour of the upper caste.

Children born in such conditions will have access neither into lower class not upper caste society; those kids live an untouchable’s life among untouchables. Sharan questions his destiny for the punishment that he does not deserve, “Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the fetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? ... Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really?” (Limbale, Outcaste 37). Narrator’s pendulum-like situation leaves him in despair and confusion he is not accepted by any family. The very happiness of being born itself is absent; the joy of childhood is smashed by illegitimacy, affection of parents is scattered by fatherlessness, it has no identity but a shame on families. The newly born child faces a discriminatory attitude from the relatives and society. The child is not able
to find out his identity. The stigma of being an illegitimate gnaws the heart of Sharan and he raises those basic questions.

Sharan’s quest for identity turns out to be more complicated when he finds fractured identities before him leaving him completely astray. He is in a dilemma and is uncertain to choose one identity for himself as none of them accept him. He feels affinity with a mythical character, Jarasandha portrayed in the epic Mahabharata. Feeling extremely alienated he says:

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother’s father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. My Grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can’t the Jamadar’s affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected? (Limbale, Outcaste 38)

The existential crisis over Sharan’s birth and belongingness form the background to his autobiography. His simple questions make us think over the identities that we have formed and maintained since centuries. If Lingayat and Mahar communities are to be God’s creation, how could Sharan’s birth occur? Those imagined identities are shaken by the birth of this illegitimate child, which is real. A notable thing is that Dalit autobiographies raise questions over the inhuman treatment, but do not end up in devastation. With the intervention of village school headmaster Bhosale, he gets his biological father’s name added to his name in the
school record. Hanmanta Limbale, Patil of Basalegaon is recorded as his father but he hesitates to accept him as his son. He faces a problem of his identity when he applies for freeship and wants to have a signature of Sarpanch on freeship application form. The Sarpanch refuses to sign the form of Sharan on the pretext of not knowing the real husband of Masamai. He disproves the name Masamai Hanmant Limbale. Bhosale guruji proposes the his granny’s name, Santamai Rama Balshankar, but Sarpanch refuses on account of his grandmother living with a Muslim, Mahmood. The Sarpanch finds it intricate to identify him. Sharan at very young age raises a philosophical question and wants to be recognized as a human being. He remarks, “But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body?” (Limbale, *Outcaste* 59). The grip of karma theory is loosened by such constant churning of thoughts in this autobiography.

Sharankumar Limbale is critical of the tradition of identifying a person by his religion, caste or father’s name. He foregrounds the question to those who claim themselves as legitimate and questions if anyone can guarantee that he or she is the offspring of the father whose name is added to his or her Name. His dessolution errupts in this furious question, “Has anyone seen the intercourse of his parents that resulted in his birth?” (Limbale, *Outcaste* 59). Gradually, he becomes aware of the exploitation of his mother and concludes that Hindu Caste system grants permission to the high caste men to sexually exploit the women of low caste and brand the children born out of their relations as illegitimate without any stigma on the exploiters.

The speaker’s intimation with Dalit Panther Movement which preaches the unity of all the Dalits makes him more conscious about his Dalit identity. Sharan finds his umbilical cord associated with Ambedkarite Movement which speaks about the emancipation of the Dalits and every Hindu ritual is replaced by the idea
of Ambedkar. But still he feels alienated and his ‘low and impure blood’ keeps him away from the people in the movement who he feels as pure Mahars. Constant marital refusal from Mahars makes him feels nauseaus. His being conscious of Dalit and growing struggle with villagers pitch him for severe dilemma.

He is caught in two opposite emotions; pride and bitterness or self-esteem and self-conceemn. He expressses his dolours and says, “We hated the very idea of untouchability. With our education, there grew in us a sese of pride. Casteism made us bitter… those days when we went around the village and walked with pride the high-caste pepole hated our confidence. They didn’t want us to enjoy any self-esteem. But we had realised that self-esteem had unusual strength.” Continuing he introspects, “What can I do about it? How can we go against village customs?” (Limbale, Outcaste 76). His caste follows him even after his transfer to Latur. He doesn’t get a house on rent due to his low caste. Though earlier Sharan used to rever God Shiva now he doesn’t think that the people who rever icons and consecrate threads are his people. He says, “I used clean clothes, bathed every day and washed myself clean with soap, and brushed my teeth with toothpaste. There was nothing unclean about me. Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable!” (Limbale, Outcaste 107).

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and social justice are known to be synonyms. His life story which is indefatigable fight agianst injustice itself is the ‘Gita’ to Dalits. His concrete and upright ideology inspired Dalits even at worst state. Amid hopeless conditions, Sharan kept his nerve and conitued to question himself. As a result, the narrator’s rebellious spirit continued to assert Dalit identity, “But some day we ought to rebel. How long can we mutely suffer all this? How many times are we going to be born and live thus against our wish? Some time we ought to reject all this” (Limbale, Outcaste 76).
Similar questions haunt him when he listenes to Santamai’s stories of humiliation. He compares himself to Shivaji who listened to Jijabai who narrated stories of injustice and made to Shivaji restless. As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar has had asked his followers to give up the religion which discriminates between man and man, Sharan gets associated with Dalit movement he gets aware about the discriminatory treatment of Hindu religion and he decides to give up religion, God and everything which ostracize human beings. Lastly he associates his agony with the agony of Buddha due to which he give up his Kingdom, his beautiful wife and son. He wants to take refuge in Dhamma promulgated by Buddha. He finds his mother in the great personality of Babasaheb. At last he finds nothing meaningful in branding oneself the follower of particular religion. He takes refuge in humanism. He realises that loving kindness can win the hearts of men irrespective of the religion they belong to.

As Raj Kumar aptly observes, “Dalits used autobiographical mode as a mode of assertion of their hitherto neglected selves” (Kumar, Narratives 157), and Sharankumar Limbale’s search for identity in The Outcaste seems to end in the assertion Dalit identity, emancipatiory philosophy of Buddha and revolutionary ideals of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who preach the upheaval of the downtroddens of the society. Yet, his never-ending questions on his birth, and his association with Dalit Panthers keep him watchful of the ideology of Ambedkarite Movement. Some nagging questions of his life are recaputalated at the end of the autobiography which are left unanswered, “Who will undertake Dada’s funeral after his death? Will Muslims attend his cremation? How can they perform rituals after his death? Where would they bury his body? What will happen to his corpse? What will its fate be? In which graveyard will they cremate him? Would people come for the rituals on Santamai’s and Masamai’s deaths? Why this labyrinth of
customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong, and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow?” (Limbale, *Outcaste* 113). This philosophical thrust in search of human identity of Dalits’ makes *The Outcaste* an outstanding and seminal autobiography in the history of Indian literature.

Dalit autobiographies are considered to be an emergent mode of Dalit discourse. The autobiographies seem to have succeeded in raising a big protest against the ubiquitous form of caste discrimination. With the arrival of many Dalit writers on the literary scene of the elites and upper-castes, the edifice of the so-called literary establishment and circle is already cracked and its mentors are left brow-beaten. It should be noted that Dalit life narratives have played an important role in redefining the holistic body of Dalit consciousness and identity.

As stated earlier the narratives have arisen from the widespread caste and identity conflict. They challenged the hegemony of the established tradition of canonical or “Hindu literature” constituting a vital segment as Dalit literature. Most of these narratives are the tales of intense personal suffering. Raj Kumar succinctly says that on the face of several oppressive forces, these writers with their growing perceptions and mature imagination capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between ‘loss of identity’ and ‘asserting of self’. It should be noted that the experiences recorded in their works paved way to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize it against the oppression. Dalit autobiographies are microcosm of the world of subjugated and exploited people. The works have been reviewed as path-breaking social experiments meant for the eye opening of the oppressors.
The Branded by Laxman Gaikwad and Government Brahmana by Aravind Malagatti stand in the same line. Their struggle to establish their identity has been seminal act. Gaikwad and Malagatti try to take their communities from dark to light through their social and literary works. By diving into the world of letters, these writers created history out of their miserable experiences. Like Ooru Keri, these two autobiographies too portray their identity struggle. The following discussion will spread light the government brahmana and the branded critically and analyse their way of assertion of Dalit identity.

In the initial stage of the chapter it is discussed that The Branded is a narrative that constitutes ironically a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a buoyant hope for its possible transformation. The Dalit sensibility shows a deep concern for the Dalit point of view that needs a deeper insight into the animal-like stark Dalit lives. The book is saga of Laxman Gaikwad who violates the community’s convention by going to school. Though Dalits were forbidden from getting education, he faced the abuses and insults from his own society and high caste students during his school and college life. He pursued his studies with indomitable desire to seek knowledge. Gradually he was honoured by his people when they realized his commitment towards the untouchables. The Uchalya community and Laxman Gaikwad, live the life excluded from mainstream society and individual opportunities. Their social exclusion results in deprivation of fundamental rights to live. Later on, he secures a government job. It is a fulfillment of a long cherished dream of his father to educate him.

Marginalization of Uchalya community is the result of social institution and processes that discriminate isolate and deprive the tribes and the poor. In India the caste system forms an accorded base for the social, cultural and economic life of the people. It is a system of social and economic governance or organisation that is
based on certain customary rules and norms, which are unique and distinct. This segregation of people with a forcefully entitled identity, Uchalya community struggles to lead life which is equal to animals. As Vasant observes:

The separate social organisations of people have the predetermined rights such as civil, religious, cultural and economic. These rights are ascribed by birth and made hereditary. Their assignment is unequal and hierarchal because of endogamy, the central feature of the caste system. The system also provides the 'instruments of social ostracism' or a system of social and economic penalties to enforce the social and economic organisation. (Moon 95)

The upper castes and classes of our society never treated them as human beings. The theory of purity and pollution granted by Hindu philosophy and religion discriminated and excluded the Uchalya community and segregated them from the human capability and capacity building processes. The Uchalya community is forced to live an outsider’s life in the country. It also isolated them from the Upper caste Hindus like Maratha, Deshumkh and Brahmins. The Uchalyas live on the margins of the village where “Women from the village used that spot for shitting... In the morning heaps of human-dung could be seen all over the place” (Gaikwad 12-13). Shit-yard becomes their dwelling place where they roasted and ate pigs. This food culture ostracized them as untouchables. The rest of village people did not allow the Pathruts to take water from public well. Even they did not touch and did not allow the Pathruts to visit their temples. The untouchability did not occur just because of food culture alone, it is a stigma attached to one’s birth; caste is affiliated to birth, not just to one’s profession. Thus the Pathruts were humiliated and reduced to the level of animals.

The principle of rank and gradation of the caste system is the core of different Hindu communities or castes, which confirms community identity and
tries to keep the iron fist on it. It provides the provisions of strong social, religious and economic ostracism supported by social and religious ideology to maintain the Hindu social order. The community panchayat of Uchalyas here maintains the Hindu social order by ostracizing the community people in the form of social and economic penalties. The importance and impact of community panchayat can easily be traced in this life narrative. Gaikwad says, “If anybody dared disobey the panchayat resolutions, he would be ostracized, nobody would even touch him; they served him food from a distance, he would neither be invited nor permitted to attend marriages. No marital relations would be allowed with such an ostracized person. If he visited the house of an in-law he would be served food in a basket and given water in a plate” (Gaikwad 17). It is an attempt to keep the identity strong and intact. At surface level it looks like an independent formation of community culture. But, it is an agenda to separate the Uchalya community by providing separate entity overtly to it. That’s how the identity of untouchability is being maintained. The communication between different sections of our society is marred by the communal identities.

It is universal truth that food is our basic need, but the same food becomes an obsession of humanity as it is controlled by handful of landlords. In this context, the Uchalya people were forced to become thieves. The fire of hunger forced the people of Uchalya community to eat all sorts of leaves and animals. While avoiding starvation, thieving and pick-pocketing descend upon them the wretched calamities. Laxman Gaikwad’s struggle with abject poverty makes him poorer, wretched and miserable untouchable. He suffers from the humiliation created by his torn and worn stolen dress. Throwing away the Bharat blade and hereditary profession of thieving Gaikwad dares to take a slate and pencil with the help of his father. But when he starts going to school there he faces the harassment from the urchins. They mocked him saying ‘Lachiman Tata Crab-curry khata.’ The
Uchalya community that trains their children for thieving opposed the schooling of Gaikwad.

Laxman’s and his father’s constant efforts are put at risk as his struggle to get out of old stigma drags him to severity. The school atmosphere does not change his identity at school, as an integral part of the society, carries forward the same shadow of the society. But again, it is Gaikwad’s school teacher who justifies the presence of Laxman in the school. The people of this community thought if their children started going to school, their race would be doomed, it is the result of prevailing ideas of caste system in the society.

The upper caste Hindus’ view towards lower castes here clearly is brought out. The lower castes like Uchalya or Pathrut think that the education is sanctioned by religion and tradition only to Brahmans or upper strata of our society. Though he tries to live a decent life by working in a factory, his identity persecutes him constantly. The narrator says, “Wages were not sufficient even to meet daily requirement of the household. As a result workers were forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates of interest raging from 10 to 15 rupees for ten days. Workers took loans even at this rate of interest to face the acute household problems” (Gaikwad 154). Due to coerced poverty Gaikwad loses everything. Poverty takes away his mother, brother and father. His father could have lived some more years. But poverty deprives him of medical aid and starvation kills him.

Gaikwad’s assertion of Dalit identity is explained explicitly in the “Reflections”. He declares that he is born into a community that is branded as criminal, wherein, “The higher castes and classes have fully exploited this miserable, helpless situation of ours for their own selfish purposes” (Gaikwad vii). Hence, their marginal existence and awakened self are proved by the false allegations of police officers on these branded communities, theory of purity and
pollution, untouchability and their ostracization, their struggle with poverty and their reduction to animal.

The self-realization gears up and starts questioning the established and mainstream dumb society. “Why is it then that the whole community is branded as thieves? Why are we denied opportunities to live a decent life...? Are we to be proud of this varied heritage because we have been inured to these conditions for ages?” (Gaikwad 63). This awakening of social consciousness is found among Gaikwad and the Uchalya community. This nomadic 'Denotified tribe', undergoes inhuman treatment by the law-enforcing agencies like police, court and jail. The forced occupations of thieving, lifting and pick pocketing becomes hereditary and compulsory because of the denial of all decent and lawful means of livelihood. The Uchalya community goes for the thieving profession out of compulsion. Beating and torments are thus attached to their lives.

The most important thing to be noticed here is that the underdog experience nourishes their capacity to resist against inequality and injustice to come into the respectable mainstream of society. The ‘Sickle and Banner Morcha’ or ‘Gaikwad’s Morcha’ symbolically gathers people belonging to several tribes and castes for equal community identity. The people participated in the rally were shouting for equality and justice in the name of communist identity.

One cannot justify the anti-social deeds, but these coerced deeds certainly lead to social and political awakening among the Dalits. The identity of being an untouchable was once a curse bit is a flip-flopped into a strong assertion of Dalit’s existence. Ha ma Nagarjun argues, “The autobiography tells the story of those who experience the responsibility of being the title bearers of hunger, poverty unemployment and crime (Malagatti, Charitre 858). The banner of humiliation has become the flag of pride. Therefore, Gaikwad loudly declares, “Now my obsession is to seek various ways in which to foster and strengthen tribal movements can be
achieved of the Nomadic, and Denotified Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, and the exploited and downtrodden underdogs” (Nagarjun 233).

*Government Brahmana*, by Aravind Malagatti, is another prominent Dalit autobiography that celebrates the Dalit identity by portraying the human sufferings, and victory over such sufferings. In contrast with *The Branded*, it stands unique due to its subtle expressions, choice of language and incidents, and narration of those incidents. The opening line of the autobiography establishes a direct contact between the narrator and the reader. Aravind Malagatti confesses, “I do not have any illusions of becoming Mahatma by presenting these few pages of my life story. I am quite ordinary” (Malagatti, *Government Brahmana* 1). In these words, Malagatti means to say that he has no intention of being as great as mahatma, but he is an individual with sub-ordinary experiences, ‘a self’ who has his own dreams and ambitions. Through his autobiography, he wishes that the readers would come to know about the problems of an ordinary Dalit in our society. Indeed, they would be the first readers of his life experiences.

Malagatti is referred to by his community name Maali, by the upper caste people. Wherever he went he couldn’t reveal his real identity. Sharanamma Gorebala says, “*Government Brahmana* is like a truth that explodes after talking the last man of the society….it is an example where a voiceless can speak convincingly when he is given letters… *Government Brahmana* is an expansion of strength of human kind rather than mere Dalit autobiography” (Malagatti, *Charitre* 760). To his white-collared friends, if he revealed his identity, they would not understand, but would only be bewildered by him. If he had to go to his old friends as a white-collared gentleman, they would not accept him as before. It was a precarious situation of social identity.
Malagatti has narrated how upper caste people take pride in the underdog experience of Dalits, through the tradition and the rituals followed by Maali community in the autobiography. In the chapter “Coins on the Corpse and the Wedding Feast”, he discusses the tradition that is followed in the three upper class families. There is a custom of throwing coins on the corpse during the funeral procession. This ritual can happen only if Dalits come to pick up the coins. For upper castes this act was an act of redemption. But, close analysis of the text reveals that it is tact of upper caste people to keep the Dalits in dark so that they cannot have economical independence, which is the key to enter into modern world.

Dalits were called for the wedding feast of upper caste people. This incident takes place in Shetjis daughter’s wedding where Dalits of the surrounding villages outnumber other communities in the village. There are always rules imposed on Dalits during these occasions like, not to ask for more food, to accept only as much food as you can eat, not to carry any food home. As we know, always the giver will have upper hand, and will command. To be called ‘master’, one must possess power on another called ‘slave’, and Dalits have been subjected to slavery in various ways. This episode reminds the Victorian society of British, represented in Charles Dickens novel Nicholas Nickleby, where orphans were controlled by forcing them starve so that they can never think of independency and brighter worlds.

At school, Malagatti was given the duty of sweeping classrooms and other rooms, and was given other manual tasks. But he had to sit only on the floor. The children from upper castes would be allowed to sit on the benches. Teachers treated the Dalit students different from other students. It is a paradoxical situation where the upper caste teacher kept students away from learning, and the same upper caste teachers helped many Dalit leaders in achieving great knowledge
which was like a window to world knowledge, such were exceptional cases like all the four authors of the study here.

Aravind Malagatti was not called by his fellow students of upper castes by his name, but they insulted him by calling him as katti (‘katti’ means donkey or ass). At every level of school, a Dalit has no self identity. Thus, at school also there was prejudice shown against the Dalit students. The social prejudice has cheated Dalits for centuries in providing equal opportunities. The baseless prejudice never considers individual’s ability to attain or seek knowledge. Thus, education, a modern element is kept as aloof from Dalits.

The crisis in Dalits’ lives is well portrayed in a section called “When Handya’s hose was slashed”. Handya is a dog owned by Dyavamma, a female sweeper in Malagatti’s colony. Handya’s hose was slashed because he had mated with the sahukar’s bitch. The untouchability was extended even to animals that are entitled to lead a natural life. The caste system overshadows everything on the earth. Even buffalos are not exempted; it is a matter of pride for landlords to possess he-buffalo. If it is she-buffalo, landlords will not let it mate with the Dalits’ he-buffalo. Human untouchability exceeds all boundaries and creates nausea.

Malagatti metaphorically mentions how he studied in his colony to tell the readers how Dalits children are kept in dark deliberately. His house was near prostitutes’ colony. No houses in Dalit lane could afford electricity. Malagatti had to study only under the street light (like many other poor people from other castes); even for this there was lot of opposition. Dalits not only lost their self-respect in the name of caste, they even lost their identity, since Dalits were also economically downtrodden.

Socialization is one of the key factors wherein individual gets an opportunity to step with changing times and move on. Though Dalits are willing to mingle with
non-Dalits by entering into every sphere, non-Dalits had hardly space for such social amalgamation. As a young boy Malagatti had great affinity and devotion towards Lord Raghavendra. Malagatti drew a picture of Lord Raghavendra and donated to the Raghavendra temple in the village. Malagatti zealously gifted the framed picture to the temple. The priest was his father’s friend, so at first the priest accepted and appreciated the painting and kept it inside the temple. Inside the rampart the priest performed some kind of worship by sprinkling holy water for purification on the painting. About this purification, however, Malagatti did not bother and felt happy about his painting in the temple. Later when Malagatti visited the temple he could not find any trace of his painting anywhere. This incident really had a telling effect on Malagatti and even created an aversion in him towards gods.

Malagatti was always haunted by his Dalit identity wherever he went. Whenever he was invited by his friends for lunch, there would always be his caste mentioned. Once, Malagatti was invited by his Marxist friend for tea. His friend was a Marxist; so Malagatti thought his friend had extended his friendly hands to everyone, but when they were chatting his friend commented, “I don’t believe in caste discrimination, Many harijans come home, have tea and food…” (Malagatti, *Government Brahmana* 97). During the Dalit movement, Bandaya had created a hope among Dalits, but soon it was also dismantled by pseudo progressive thinkers.

The episode of Manthralaya is an extended version of his identity crisis, where Malagatti hides his Dalit identity to seek the blessings of God. He disguises himself as a Brahmin and enters the temple. Thus, ‘government Brahmana’ became a fake Brahmana which was an experiment on the caste identity. As Sharanamma Gorebala observes, “in these hundred pages of self-narrative, there are innumerable tears of pains, endurance, a possible resistance, strength of smiles that
overshadow the flinging incivility, stoical saga of an emergence from the dungeon of misery” (Malagatti, *Charitre* 754).

Malagatti remembers the incidents at Dharwad University during Bandaya days, how his upper class colleagues used his identity for their ‘pro-modern’ status. These friends represent modern ideologies which deepened his wound of caste identity. But for an ordinary person, for an ordinary Dalit like Malagatti’s father, freedom is nothing but the drawing of water from the village well like other caste people. Malagatti questions this denial of equality for ages, and he has become the voice for his whole community whose struggle still continues.

Keeping aside the whole discussion for while, one can just have glance at the title and the name of the author. ‘Government Brahmana’ is the one who enjoys the privileges of government like Brahmins who enjoyed the courtesy of kings and other governing bodies throughout history. But, for the first time, the oppressed classes get an opportunity to come out of the dungeon of orthodoxy. So, they are mocked by calling them with the same privileged name ‘Brahman’. Loaded term of all untouchables’, ‘Government Brahmana’ is used as an equivalent to the word ‘Dalit’. It is imperative that it is used only where unmistakable goodwill exists between conversationalists or correspondents, since the author says that he was teased that way. It is a narrative of two shores of orthodoxy and modern world, and a struggle to reach either.

Prabha Mukherjee, in the preface, aptly observes, “Dalit literature is one of the major sites of their resistance and creativity” (*Joothan* xxiv). Therefore, Dalit personal narratives have added new dimensions significantly to the growing corpus of discourse on caste gender and identity in India. The narratives create rich mosaic of national consciousness and ethos by exploring the dialectic binaries of privileged-unprivileged, rich-poor, upper-caste- low caste and male- female. They
unravel the complexities about the atrocities and discrimination that they underwent.

The autobiography as a genre seems to have helped them to fortify their existential awareness and confidence against the backdrop of oppression with its wide ramification on the social system. Moreover, they demand serious moral and social scrutiny in order to strengthen the values like humanity, solidarity, gender-equality and women’s empowerment. These narratives tend to carve a new image of Dalit woman far different from the upper-caste-class Indian women. Above all, they unravel the politics of evil and the dual face of patriarchy functioning in their world. It should also be noted that the genesis of Dalit’s self-narrative was formulated with the objective of radically transforming the marginal Dalit into socially conscious human beings. It aims to make them self-assertive, self-reliant and indiscernible against the backdrop of their continuous exploitation and multiple deprivations.
References


