CHAPTER I

CONTEXTUALISING AUTOBIOGRAPHY:
WRITING FOR THE COMMUNITY

The introductory chapter sets out to explore the importance of Dalit autobiography and its significant move in terms of reconstructing Dalit political history through memories of struggle and experience of caste discrimination. It also examines how Dalit autobiographies mark a formidable literary alternative formulation by breaking the established norms, content and form of the mainstream autobiography. Further, the impact of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit literature and on Dalit autobiography has been examined. The chapter explores the genesis and growth of the autobiography in the Indian context without entering into the Western debates on the subject.

The practice of writing autobiography is considered an independent and respectable mode of expression. Yet it is confined mainly to a small section of people belonging to the upper caste elites. The Dalits had little or nothing to do with it. As a result, it failed to form part of the Dalit consciousness and gradually staled into a stereotyped medium of mere self-exaltation. The large majority of the Dalit population remained
untouched by this practice of writing the self mainly because the elite Hindus wrote it in English, a language which only a small section of the Dalits had an opportunity to learn and write.

I

Literary means of autobiography is an account of a person’s life written by himself or herself. The term autobiography appears to have been first used by Southey in 1809. Autobiography speaks not only about writers and incidents but also about their experiences. Roy Pascal defines, “Autobiography is historical in method and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world.”\(^1\) It is clear that an autobiography is the true representation of the extraordinary, renowned and popular men’s life, achievements and experiences. But in the case of Dalits, ordinary men and women, who do not hold any prominent position in the social history and politics write autobiographies. They keep aside the established style of writing autobiographies. Moreover, it is important to see why the ‘community’ is given more importance than the ‘self’ in the Dalit autobiographies. According to A.M. Clark, “Autobiography is not the ‘annals of a man’s life’, but it’s a ‘philosophical history.’”\(^2\)
Roy Pascal views, “Every experience is a nucleus from which energies radiate in various directions. In any worthwhile life there is a dominant direction that is not accidental; therefore ultimately the life is a sort of graph linking the experiences.”³ One should have a ‘worthwhile’ life to write an autobiography and such worthwhile personality should have ‘great experiences’ to influence vast majority of people. Further, Roy Pascal’s kind of analysis denies a space for Dalit autobiographies.

In this context, the main argument contests the form, contents and notions framed around the idea of autobiography by the mainstream and elite writers. Roy Pascal opines, “The value of an autobiography depends ultimately on the quality of spirit of the writer.”⁴ Further, he stresses, “Good autobiography represents a new of stage self-knowledge and a new formulation of responsibility towards the self; it involves mental exploration and champ of attitude.”⁵

Autobiography is a presentation of the wholeness of personal identity in only a particular work and ‘self knowledge’ is then a primary motive of any autobiography. Understanding an autobiography is to know the psychological insight of the writer. Roy Pascal considers Susanne Langer’s definition of autobiography, “Autobiography is the achievement of art which
explores the intuitive knowledge of some unique experience.”⁶ It is understood from Pascal’s argument that true autobiography can be written only by men and women pledged to their innermost selves...beyond fastened truth, beyond the ‘likeness’, the autobiography has to give that unique truth of life as it is seen from inside, and in this respect it has not submitted or rival.⁷

II

In the Indian literary context, autobiography as an area of academic study has not been widely debated as much as other literary genres like novel, poetry and drama. M.K. Naik in A History of Indian English Literature (1982) categorised the Indian autobiographies into different groups. Firstly, he gives a list of the autobiographies belonging to the pre-independence time. They include D.K. Karve's Looking Back (1936) and N.C. Banerji's At the Cross-Roads (1950), both of which are known as the autobiographies of public men. Autobiographies by revolutionary thinkers include Barindrakumari Ghose's The Tale of My Exile (1928), B. K. Sinha’s In Andamans: The Indian Bastille (1939), and General Mohan Singh’s Leaves from My Diary (1946). The earliest autobiographies are Dhan Gopal Mukerji’s Caste and Outcaste (1923), which describes his
nostalgic recollections of his boyhood in India and his visit to Japan and sojourn in the United States of America.

M.K. Naik further gives a list of the autobiographies written by Hindu philosophers, scientists and other noble men, which include, Swami Ramdas’ *In Quest of God*, (1923), Purohit Swami’s *An Indian Monk*, (1932) and Sitanath Tattvabhusan’s * Autobiography*, (1942); *Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist* (1932), P.C. Ray’s * Autobiography*, (1958), G.K. Chettur’s *The Last Enchantment*, (1933), Bhola Singh’s *How to Climb the Service Ladder*, (1933), and a jurist Chimanlal Setalwad’s *Recollections and Reflections : An Autobiography*, (1946) are some of the pre-independence autobiographies.⁸


Naik also records the significant autobiographies written by women writers. They are: Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s *So I became a Minister and Prison Days* (1936). Krishna Huthee Singh’s *With No Regrets* (1944) and *We Nehrus* (1968), the Maha Rani of Cooch Behar, Sunity Devi’s *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921), Cornelia Sorabji’s *India Calling* (1935) and *India Recalled* (1936), novelist Santha Rama Rau’s *Home to India* (1945), and *Gifts of Passage*, (1961) and a Khoja Muslim Isvani’s, *The Brocaded Sari* (1946)—also published under the title, *Girl in Bombay*, London, 1947).\(^9\) All these autobiographies are published before the Independence.

Other autobiographies written by women include Savitri Devi Nanda’s *A City of Two Gateways* (1950)—a picture of childhood in a Punjabi aristocratic family, Brinda Manarani of
Kapurthala’s *The Story of An Indian Princess* (1953)—a saga of high life and not so high a sexual code, Nayantara Sahgal’s, whose *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1961) are the studies of the Nehru family. Sita Rathnamal’s *Beyond the Jungle* (1968)—a fascinating account of tribal life seen through the eyes of an insider turned outsider, Kamala Dongerkery’s *On the Wings of Time*, (1968), Kamala Dass’ *My Story* (1976), Maharani of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi’s *A Princess Remembers*, (1976), and Lady Dhanvanthi Rama Rau’s (mother of the novelist Santha Rama Rau) *An Inheritance* (1978) reveals how a modern Indian woman can imbibe the best in the West without sacrificing her oriental inheritance; and Durgabai Deshmukh’s *Chintamani and I* (1980) is a fascinating account of the career of one of the most distinguished couple in modern India.

In fact, it could be noticed that all these autobiographies are written by well-known Indians within the prescribed style, content and form of the genre. Though caste plays a kernel role in the Indian context, there is no mention of caste in these accomplished autobiographies. The success or failure of an individual is determined by one’s caste. Yet caste has been completely absent in those autobiographies. No writer has
‘truthfully’ represented his/her experience and encounter with the ‘other’ community. This applies to socially and politically conscious figures like Gandhi and Nehru, who are no exception in terms of either trivializing the caste or deliberately overlooking it. Moreover, Gandhi has romanticized his upper caste prestige and prejudice. He foregrounded his caste history and tried to show that he hailed from a baniya (business) community. Apart from his caste dominance he has revived the Hinduism and has strongly established the modern paradigm of Hindu nationalism through his political activities.

One cannot easily overlook the fact that Gandhi provided the ideological impetus to the present day Hindutva ideology. Scholars such as Gauri Viswanathan and Lancy Lobo point out that “Gandhi’s approach and the [present] Hindutva approach have much in common as both of them stem from the same religious roots.”10 The ideological as well as the punitive aggression of the Hindutva forces such as BJP, VHP, RSS, Shiva Sena, Ramnirmana Sena and Bajrang Dal cannot be attributed to their obvious ideologues like Tilak and Savarkar alone. Gandhi has vehemently opposed and contorted Dalits’ interests. For instance, Dalits were pursuing the conversion as one of the
social emancipations. But Gandhi was against the conversions as he wrote in *My Experiments with Truth*:

When I was a youth, I remember a Hindu having become a convert to Christianity. The whole town understood that the initiation took the shape of this well-bred Hindu partaking of beef and brandy in the name of Jesus Christ. These things got on my nerves.

Gandhi reinforces his view:

I developed a sort of dislike for Christianity. And for a reason, in those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this... I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized. He had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume...Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one’s own clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.
Gandhi’s views exemplify the orthodox Brahminical world. There is no taboo of eating beef and drinking liquor or changing the dress by the Dalits. From Rajaramohan Roy to Gandhi, the agenda of their autobiographies has been to redefine the Hinduism with modern face so as to reinforced the caste.

M.K Naik’s traces only one autobiography, Hazari’s *An Indian Out-caste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable* (1951), the first Dalit autobiography written by, the pseudonym of Marcus Abraham Malik. He was the first man from the depressed classes to write an autobiography."

It is important, in this context, to briefly review some of the extracts from Hazari’s autobiography which negates Gandhian perspective of caste and conversion completely. Hazari’s *An Indian Out-caste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable* (1951) broke the mainstream trends in terms of language, content and conception. This is the story of the struggles of a deeply sensitive and ambitious person belonging to the lowest stratum of the Indian Hindu society. Fortunately he was engaged by one English family as a servant. From them he received kind and affectionate treatment which he would never dare to dream of getting from an upper caste Indian Hindu, “...An Indian would give one anna and think he was giving a fortune, the Anglo-
Indian two annas and think it sheer robbery, while the British Tommy would give four annas and still think he had not given enough...  

On the suggestion of his well-wishers, Hazari began to attend a school. It was a great thing for him to carry books under his arm every morning as he had watched other children do. He encounters with his fellow students and yet, he is pushed into thinking deeply about the reasons for the caste discrimination. Hazari writes:

Yet my inner consciousness was never at rest and the perpetual conflict within me was something of which I could not speak to anyone. In play with other children, I was happy only to a certain point, because I knew it was only make believe, and that my real life was quite different to that of my school fellows. They had something which I wanted not only for myself but for my family and my community. 

An interesting phenomenon is that Hazari was taken into the service of Mr. Newman, a teacher at the Aligarh Muslim University. Both Mr. Newman and the Muslim community of Aligarh played a decisive role in his life. Mr. Newman encouraged him in his studies while the Muslim community gave
him his long –cherished footing in society on the basis of equality and fraternity. Hence, his conversion to Islam became inevitable. Hazari writes, “I felt very happy to know that in spite of my caste I was held in high esteem; a friendly handshake from people of high rank and caste meant so much to me.” In exposing the hollowness of society, he is restrained but convincing. As a waiter in a hotel he had an opportunity to see people in their true colour:

I knew the Mohammedans who came to drink and eat pastries made with lard, and I knew also the Hindus who relished a cold beef sandwich with their drink. I knew those women who came to wait for their lovers. I knew the foolish young Indians who came with women of doubtful character. 

M.K. Naik views that Hazari’s autobiography has broken the long lasting silence in terms of Dalit representation. In fact, the argument is that Hazari’s experience of life is not like that of Gandhi. Hazari had observed and experienced the caste discrimination throughout his life as a student and as a servant. Caste is a central issue in his life whereas it has never been a serious issue to Gandhi. Gandhi took a strategic move on caste issue but it is the everyday experience of Dalits. That is the
basic difference between the perspectives of Dalits and upper caste elite.

According to K. Satya Narayana’s argument Dr. Ambedkar’s *Waiting for Visa*, published after his death, is also considered the first Dalit autobiography. He says that it may not be out of place to know what R.C.P. Sinha’s views regarding the matter:

R.C.P. Sinha, a scholar on Indian autobiographies in English describes an *Indian Outcaste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable* (1951) as the, first autobiography of an untouchable known as Hazari. This autobiography is the story of the struggles of an untouchable in the early decades of 20\(^{th}\) century. It was written in 1930s but was published very late in 1951 (R.C.P Sinha, P.71). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of Dalits, wrote six autobiographical ‘illustrations’, as Ambedkar refers to them, titled “Waiting for Visa” which was published after his death. (Vasant Moon, Pp.665-71) He discusses some of ‘the events’ in his life in order to bring the oppression of untouchability into public, to the notice of the foreigners. Scholars have indicated that these six autobiographical extracts might have been written between 1946-47.\(^{17}\)
There is a wide gap between the perspectives of Dalit autobiography and the mainstream autobiography. Dalit movement has influenced the Dalit literature. The Dalit autobiography is one of the successful genres of Dalit literatures.

III

The driving force behind contemporary Dalit literature is the thought of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. According to Nimbalkar, one of the contemporary Dalit writers, Dr B.R. Ambedkar is the source of inspiration:

The immense potential of Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy was not restricted to himself or any one particular individual. He handed over to them the flares of his philosophy for development...His thoughts contained a graph of the progress of the people at the grass roots of the society. For this, Dr. Ambedkar’s life itself had become a revolution. This revolution had changed the consciousness of the Dalits...That is why, Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy is the source of Dalit literature. The roots of new consciousness can be traced in the thoughts of Buddha.18
Dalit literature fulfills the leftover social responsibilities of Lord Buddha, Mahatma Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. It targets to sham the hierarchy in the name of caste, tribe and gender and it is always in rescue of the depressed people. Eleanor Zelliot, a human rights activist compares the Dalit Panthers’ movement in Maharashtra with the Black movements of American Black Panthers. She writes:

In the early 1970s, two Maharastrian movements achieved enough prominence to be noticed by the English language press the Dalit Panthers and Dalit literature. By substituting the word “Black” for “Dalit” the reader can immediately understand that a phenomenon comparable to the American Black Panthers and Black literature has surfaced among the lower castes in social and literary affairs in western India. Like the American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit School of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity...There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma, and justified caste hierarchy.19

Many thinkers, literary analysts and critics defined Dalit literature and its nature. Baburao Bagul, an eminent Dalit writer, opines that, “Dalit means one who wants to destroy the
system of Varna the society along with its complete though base...Dalit means one who wants to restructure this world and life...Dalit means one whose hands in this age have been made intelligent and transformable and for whom all weapons and sciences have been made available.\textsuperscript{20}

The function of Dalit literature is to get rid of rotten customs and traditions and by the acceptance of new values of life, create literature having affinity with life. Baburao Bagul also opines that Dr. Ambedkar is the inspiration behind the Dalit movement in India. He states:

With these utterances I recalled the life of Dr. Babasaheb was highly qualified. But his peon on learning his caste threw away his files and saved his religion from being defiled by the breeze blowing across him...Dr. Babasaheb was the brain behind Mahad Liberation Movement...It was giving birth to a great war and to a Buddha, and to a great movement and thus Babasaheb created history...Babasaheb had changed his religion. As a result, Buddhism which became a forgotten religion since the thirteen century became the religion of thousands of his followers...\textsuperscript{21}
Another critic G.B. Sardar analyses the relevance of the thought of Ambedkar and its influence on the emerging Dalit writers. In his words:

Dr. Ambedkar’s movement revitalized Dalit community and turned it towards self respect. Forgetting their suffering, they got the inspiration to struggle for their natural rights from this movement...The new poets amongst them declared through each and every word a resolve by saying ‘today we see in each and every hut a full sun’. ‘They said no to the dark death like life and marched forward through their writing towards bright life.\textsuperscript{22}

Arjun Dangle states that studying Dalit literature and its role from only a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it. It must be assessed in the sociological framework.\textsuperscript{23} Dangle states further: While both Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust class structure and while it is true their teachings and ideas are inspiring even today a historical and objective examination of the situation reveals that it was Dr. Ambedkar who was the enabling factor in Dalit literature because of his ideas outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just.\textsuperscript{24}
To Dangle, a famous critic on Dalit literature and known for his polemical book *Poisoned Bread* (1992), Dr. Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits. The literary manifestation of the social awareness is Dalit literature. Om Prakash Valmiki writes, “Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrong doers. Dalit autobiography will provide inspiration to our future generations.”

IV

The autobiography became an important channel to reach the Dalit communities. It reflects the self of the community on the whole. Susie Tharu considers that the Dalit autobiography is the biography of its community. Dalit autobiographies are considered as the literary forms of social protest and practices. Sarah Beth gives some insightful comments on Dalit autobiography in Hindi. She states that “Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability.” She observes that Dalit autobiography contests both the basis of caste-discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer functions as a social force.
in modern India. It can be understood that Dalit autobiographies contextualize within certain larger socio-historical processes. This suggests as to why autobiography became an important genre, and why Dalit writers articulate this specific narrative agenda.

Sarah Beth considers that Dalit autobiography has given the Dalit writers a way of uniting with a larger ‘Dalit community to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against caste discrimination.

Dalit autobiographies represent life-stories of the Dalits where the ‘ordinary’ or ‘representative’ Dalit individuals use their narratives to raise their voices for those who are silenced by caste oppression for generations together. Hence the construction of subjectivity in Dalit autobiography reflects its writer’s desire to re-establishing links with the Dalit community. It is in this sense that Dalit narratives will be viewed as a means for writers to re-establish a feeling to connection to a community. Through the process of narrating their life-story with a focus on their Dalit identity, Dalit writers are able to form a powerful group which can then assert itself against the main obstacles they still face.
Dalit writers emphasize the ‘experience of discrimination’ and ‘Dalit identity’ as two necessary criteria for both writing and critiquing Dalit autobiography. Kancha Illaiah views in his polemical work *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) that narratives of personal experiences are the best contexts that enables to compare and contrast the social forms and personal experiences. He further argues, “This method of examining socio-cultural and economic history is central to the social sciences; significantly, the method of narrating and deconstructing experiences has been used by feminists. Further, Indian Dalit-Bahujan thinkers like Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar Ramaswami Naicker have also used this method. Instead of depending on Western methods, Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar spoke and wrote on the day-to-day experiences of the Dalit-Bahujan castes.”

Illaiah further argues that writing personal narratives is possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place.

Sara Beth writes, “Dalit autobiographers also negotiate the issue of authority to represent the Dalit community by presenting their autobiography not as a result of their desire for personal recognition, but as a response to the requests from the
Dalit community for representation.” Autobiography serves as a means for Dalit writers to reclaim narrative authority over the construction of the Dalit itself. While dominant Indian society has identified Dalits as ‘inferior’ and ‘polluted,’ Dalit writers through their autobiographies re-write selfhood in their description of their life and the life of their community.

Watching the community continually oppressed by the upper castes, the protagonist of the Dalit autobiography does not experience his pain passively, but rather pain incites him to unite with his community in a fight against caste discrimination. The autobiography serves the additional function of re-affirming and strengthening the link between the individual Dalit writer and the larger Dalit community. Sarah Beth argues “Dalit autobiography is considered a form of political assertion for a number of reasons. Besides giving Dalit entrance into a public space through identity-based narrative authority, the autobiography provides a space for Dalit writers to regain control over the constitution and meaning of Dalit selfhood and join in a show of strength with the larger Dalit community.”

Arjun Dangle writes that it was firstly in Marathi that a discernible category of Dalit autobiography emerged during 1978-1986. It has to be noted that the first major leaders of the
Dalit movement emerged in Maharashtra. Jotiba Phule and Ambedkar have provided inspiration and direction to the Dalit writers in Maharashtra." 31 Dangle enlists some of the remarkable Dalit autobiographies produced during Dalit Panther’s movement (1972). They include Daya Pawar’s *Baluta*, Lakshman Mane’s *Upara*, Shankarrao Charat’s *Taral Antaral*, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarnmshi* and Kumud Pawde’s *Antasphot*. He also points out that one can see varying facets of the Dalit movement in the Dalit autobiographies. The Dalit autobiographies succinctly explore the struggle for survival, the emotional universe of a Dalit’s life, the man-woman relationship, the experience of humiliation and atrocities and the question of Dalit assertion and identity.

Dalit literature is the literature of regional protest against its counterparts. Arjun Dangle illustrates the influence of the Dalit Panthers movement on the Dalit literature. He states that between 1972 and 2000, under the influence of the Dalit Panthers movement, writers drawn from the Dalit communities of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamilnadu began to write about caste and caste related themes. As some Dalit autobiographies have been translated into English and French, Dalit literature in India got a momentum. He states that
Dalit literature and its emergence can be traced in several other Indian languages in the 1980s and 1990s.

There has been a sudden spurt in the publication of the Dalit writings. Dalit writing is being translated and published not only in English, but in other European languages too. Three important texts: Narendra Jadhav’s *Outcaste: A Memoir* in English, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, translated from Marathi into English, and Joseph Macwan’s *Angaliyat*, translated from Gujarati were published by Penguin and Oxford houses in the year 2003. Jadhav’s *Outcaste*, Bama’s *Karakku* (1999) and *Sangati* (2004) were translated into French. It is significant to note that the Dalit writers, Bama, Jadhav and Kishore Shanthabai Kale (author of *Against All Odds*, an autobiography) were invited to *Les Belles Estrangeres* in 2002, a literary festival in France, attended by 17 other Indian writers. It needs to locate this new interest in Dalit writing in the context of the internationalisation of the caste question in the 1990s.

The new visibility of Dalits and the debate on caste in the global arena created a new interest in Dalits and their literature. The present view about Dalit literature in India is a matter of not only looking for the space to exist, survive and struggle for identity but also to reconstruct the forbidden history of the
community through their oral narratives. In the process of exploring the history of suffering from caste discrimination, particularly in the realm of education, politics and gender, the important questions are re-visited in the following chapters through the autobiographies of Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (2003), Narendhra Jadav’s *Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (2003) and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008).

The following chapter entitled “Denial of Education: Subverting the Monopoly” examines how the narrators and other Dalits as children in the select autobiographies experienced discrimination in terms of education at schools, colleges and other places of education. An attempt has also been made to trace the problems of pedagogy of the Brahmins and how the Brahminical pedagogy excluded the Dalit children out of the purview of education.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4 Roy, Pascal, 19.

5 Roy, Pascal, 183.

6 Roy, Pascal, 186.

7 Roy, Pascal, 195.


9 M.K. Naik, 139.


14 Hazari, 61.

15 Hazari, 121.

16 Hazari, 104.


21 Woman Nimbalkar, 43-44.

22 Woman Nimbalkar, 45.


24 Arjun Dangle, 237-238.


30 Sarah Beth, 11.