Chapter – III

Dalits Become Conscious and self-Esteemed

The Dalits became conscious of the tyranny, caste discrimination, injustice, atrocities they were experiencing. Ambedkar’s social reform movements carried a significant place for the betterment of Dalit community in general. Educational awareness was created for Dalits by the architect of the Indian constitution. Dalits became socially conscious about the circumstances and social problems of untouchability and caste discrimination meted out to them.

Establishment of the British colonial rule in India made a huge difference in the lives of the downtrodden people. English Education was introduced in India for the first time. Various British policies brought a sense of hope for the marginalized communities. The doors of Education were open for all sections of society. Mahatma Phule who belonged to the Mali Community of Maharashtra realized that, if the community remained uneducated, they would not be able to emancipate themselves. So he started massive work on education by establishing various schools in and around Pune. Earlier, Dalits were denied education for centuries, and the Brahmins of Pune opposed education for Dalits. Phule came out against the exploitation of the farmers. He appreciated Christian missionaries for their noble work in school education.
Ambedkar’s social reform movements carried a significant place for the Dalit community in general and for Dalits of Maharashtra in particular. With educational awareness created in the Indian constitution, Dalits became socially conscious about the circumstances and social problems of untouchability and caste discrimination. Limbale observes:

The period from 1920 to 1956 was influenced by the writings and political activities of Dr. Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar. He argued the case of the untouchables from the boundaries of the villages to the Round Table Conferences. He fought powerful forces raging from the upper caste Hindu gate keepers to God for their rights. The entire Dalit Society felt the impact of Baba Saheb’s Work (Limbale: 24)

The education that the Dalit youths received in the post-independence period gave them the idea for revolution and voice for protest. The works produced were not only the expression of anguish but of emphatic assertion of a newly-discovered power. After 1960s, Marathi Dalit Literature was introduced by a new stream called the Dalit Literary Stream. This new literary stream gave impetus to the Marathi Dalit writers. Thus the Marathi writers began expressing themselves by writing poems, short-stories, novels, plays, and autobiographies.

Ambedkar launched the social liberation movement for social rights and opportunities of the deprived and downtrodden section of society. The early phase of the Marathi writing was upper caste centric. It had description of nature and
imagination of the life and trees of the upper castes, whereas the downtrodden and the marginalized class was absent in their writings.

The Marathi writing produced at that point of time was no way connected with the condition of the ordinary people. But the Dalit writings produced in the 1960s were replete with Dalit experiences and Dalit consciousness. These Dalit writers subverted the myths of the upper caste writings. They wrote against the dominant mode of traditional Marathi upper caste writing. They wrote what they felt. Thus the works by the Dalit writers raised conscious socially, politically and culturally and established a new paths in the early 1960s.

Dalit consciousness played a major role in the making of Dalit writers who analyze the minutest things in the society to portray those in their writings. The Dalit consciousness believes in change. Therefore, the writing which comes out through Dalit consciousness is revolutionary in nature. The consciousness thus fights for social justice and equality and demands for an egalitarian society. As Limbale suggests:

Dalit consciousness in Dalit Literature has a revolutionary mentality. It is connected with struggle. It is a rebellion against the caste system. The recognition of human being is its focus. Ambedkarite thought is its inspiration. It is separated and distinct from any other consciousness. Dalit Literature is unique because of its Dalit consciousness. (Limbale:P32)

As Daya Pawar puts it in his comments on Dalit consciousness in Vasudev Mulate’s books, “Dalit consciousness is that revolutionary consciousness which
intersects the framework set by the upper middle class society. It shows affection towards the downtrodden” (Mulate: 13). Commenting on Dalit consciousness in the same book, Sharad Chandra Muktibodh says, “Being a Dalit is different from having Dalit consciousness. The literature which is produced from Dalit consciousness is Dalit Literature”. (Mulate: 13).

From the above mentioned view of Dalit consciousness, it is clear that Dalit consciousness differs from any other consciousness. It is ‘human-centric’ and it is related to the experiences of the Dalit communities. The Dalit experience is an integral part of a Dalit writer. After being conscious, the Dalit writers march ahead to fight against social ills and evils. This consciousness awakens in a Dalit writer through analysis of the ‘self’. Thus, Dalit literature is not individualistic in nature. The consciousness in Dalit literature is socio-centric and it vows for social change.

Dalit writers have presented a vision of “pain”, “rebellion” and “rejection” through their writings. The social mainstream considers one set of human beings superior and the others inferior, and thus differentiates between people. The birth of a person in a particular caste becomes the criterion for judging him/her:

The pain of a Dalit writer has been expressed by many Dalit writers. In Kolhatyacha Por, Kishor Shantabai Kale talks about it through Baluta. Daya Pawar depicts it. Thus, the pain of a Dalit writer becomes the focal point of Dalit literature in general and Dalit autobiography in particular.
The Dalit literature does not believe in shading tears and expressing grief but in revolting against the repressive trends in the society (Limbale: 134).

Dalits have suffered for ages. Lately, they have become conscious and have realized their potential. They no longer want to be subjugated to the upper castes. They have the torch of Ambedkar to take them forward. They have broken the shackles and have smashed all the barriers and hurdles in their paths. They are revolting for equal status in the society. ‘Rejection’ and ‘revolt’ in Dalit Literature has been born from the womb of Dalit pain. They are directed against a human system that was imposed on them. The rejection and revolt in Dalit Literature is portrayed socially and collectively. The rejection is aimed at the unequal order which has exploited Dalits. In the words of Limbale, “Its form is double-edged rejecting the unequal order and demanding equality, liberty, fraternity and Justice” (Limbale: P-31). As Limbale declares:

Resentment in Dalit literature has been the result of suppressed imitation for many years. This very resentment is the expression of anguish, rage and rebellion. The unequal social system caused anguish among Dalits. Since the pain of the Dalit writers gushed forth like a ‘burst Dam’, it is inappropriate to expect this pain to be restrained and artistic. It had remained suppressed for thousands of years. Now, the expectation of liberation has given it an explosive form (Limbale: P-36).

From the above statement, it is clear that Dalits, after gaining consciousness, began to improve themselves. Their lives were pathetic and
miserable. They experienced all sorts of hardships. Nobody tolerates repression after a certain period of time. A stage comes when the suppressed fight back. Now, that stage has come and the Dalits are fighting for their rights and equal opportunities.

Now, the Dalits have realized what is good and what is bad for them. Because of education, the Dalits have become more conscious and now they cannot be deceived by the upper caste people. They have launched their protest by using poetry. They have expressed themselves openly through poetry.

Marathi Dalit writing considers Jotiba Phule as a pioneering champion of the downtrodden and of Dalit rights. Mahatma Phule’s contribution towards the emancipation of Dalits is outstanding. Phule expressed his views on Dalits’ education frequently in his writings that, to be on par with men, women need to be educated first. Therefore, Mahatma Phule emphasized the need for education of Dalits. He believed that education for Dalits was the only weapon for eliminating social inequality. He realized that if a Dalit is educated, he/she can educate all his/her family members. Phule criticized about the atrocities against Dalits. He took a strong exception to cultural oppression by upper caste.

Phule believed that social activation would generate a solution to the multiple problems of Dalits. He fought relentlessly for the cause of Dalits’ education. He worked every possible way for the betterment of Dalits. He made them aware of their being throughout his entire life. He strove hard for liberation, emancipation, and education of Dalits. He had immense faith in education
through his mission called ‘Satya Sodhak Samaj’ (Fact Finding Society). Phule campaigned for the cause of the downtrodden.

It was during the twentieth century that Ambedkar continued Jotiba Phule’s work of a struggle for social emancipation. In fact Ambedkar considered Phule as one of his gurus. In order to lodge a strong protest, Ambedkar burnt Manusmruti (a holy book of the Hindus) which was considered to be the Manifesto of caste system. Ambedkar criticized the Manudharma Sastra severely as it imposed a number of restrictions on Dalits. Ambedkar wanted to eliminate such age-old customary beliefs. He wanted to eradicate the caste system and bring about social justice for the Dalits. Through his speeches and writings, Ambedkar tried to awaken the consciousness of Dalits. He attended the Round Table Conferences for equal rights of Dalits. Ambedkar wanted to liberate Dalits from the clutches of Brahminical domination.

Later, in the Indian constitution Ambedkar incorporated the principles of equality, freedom, and brotherhood and thus tried to liberate Dalits. Ambedkar prioritized the Dalits cause in the constitution. In this way, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and Ambedkar inspired Marathi Dalit writing. They devoted themselves to the liberation of Dalits from slavery. They honoured Dalits and even made some legal amendments to give Dalits equal status with the people of the upper caste:

The Dalits represent their communities and in that their biographies really are socio-biographies. The very act of writing and autobiography for a
Dalit woman in Marathi represents a movement of self-realization for the entire community because the act of writing is located in a political struggle (Patil: 91-93).

Dalits have been inspired by Ambedkar’s ideology. They have written poems and autobiographies and have asserted themselves. The dominant discourse of the Dalit movements does not adequately incorporate the contribution of Dalits to the movements. The autobiographies, therefore, continue to be meaningful for several generations in a caste-driven society for different readers in different social formations. No matter how specific they are referentially, they are major intercultural texts. Testimonies can be interpreted as a powerful moral medium to protest against the adversaries both from and outside it. Dalit testimonies can be seen as a potential initiative to engage with Dalit patriarchy and a larger social patriarchy. Dalit personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation by the state on the one hand and market on the other. Dalit Autobiographies are also statements of protest against their exclusion from the Dalit public sphere, literary gatherings, academic gathering, publishing spheres, and other spheres of recognition.

Baby Kamble’s *The Prison We Broke* has been written in a deep rooted urge to engage with the history of the Mahar community’s oppression. The political edge of the writing comes obviously from the radical, self assertive policies of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar to whose movements she belongs. Baby Kamble asserts in the ‘foreward’ of her book that she is writing for her people:
Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar, but what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of this Maharastra. We are its original inhabitants, the sons of the soil. The name of this land is also derived from our name… I love this word ‘Mahar’, our caste name. It flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth (Kamble- ix).

Baby Kamble makes her stand very clear by stating herself in direct and self-conscious way in the very beginning of her book. Baby Kamble’s autobiography is located in the tradition of direct self-consciousness. It also goes two steps ahead. It is a head-on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other. Without trying to glorify the life of the Dalit community (Mahar) in a celebratory mode of address, she explicitly states that her intention is to demonstrate how Brahminical domination has turned mahars into slaves, forcing them to live in conditions worse than animals. It is worthwhile to quote Baby Kamble at this point:

I have described in this book the details of the life of our community as I experienced it in the last fifty years. The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, and daughters-in-laws and for my grand children to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realize what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. I also want to show them what the great soul Dr. Baba
Saheb Ambedkar single handedly achieved which no one else had achieved in ages (Kamble: IX – X).

Kamble states in very clear terms what she intends to do in her book. Kamble’s book is almost like a social biography. It educates the readers about the history of the Mahars of Maharashtra in the last fifty years. Kamble doesn’t seem to hide anything. She says whatever she has witnessed in her life. She is very clever and straightforward in terms of her outlook and thinking. In a way, Baby Kamble’s book unravels the facts about the Mahar community in an explicit manner. It is a rich source of social survey. It exhibits the social reality of the Mahar community in a striking way. This book can also be considered a great social documentation of the Mahars of Maharashtra. Kamble’s autobiography presents extremely graphic description of Dalit women’s torturous lives. She has given enough information about the women who have been exploited and harassed in the name of God, religion, rituals, customs and traditions. For instance, girls married off at the age of five to six years and forced to do all the work of the household at such a tender age. If at all a girl made a mistake, she was punished severely. The mother-in-law of the girl ensures that the couple does not have the opportunity of being together.

The girls suffer a lot at their husband’s house. Sometimes, they run away from their husband’s house to the parents’ house. But they are inevitably taken back and beaten black and blue. In case, the husband suspects their fidelity, the mother-in-law of the girl also supports her son against his wife. The in-laws of the girl chop off her nose which is a sign of her disloyalty to her husband. These are
the ways in which many Dalit women have suffered throughout their lives. The mother in-law would pour poison in her son’s ears against his hapless wife. She would whisper into his ears.

Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair. You are her husband, but obviously the bitch prefers some one else. I suspect that this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us (Kamble: 100).

In this way, a newly married girl is harassed by her in-laws. According to Baby Kamble, a wild practice is to inculcate the idea of “humble Mahar woman, fall at your masters feet.” It was made mandatory for them to say this phrase whenever they came across any upper caste man or even a young upper caste child. Sometimes, if a newly married girl failed to say this, there would be a huge fuss: “Who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?”(Kamble: 51).

Kamble narrates the condition of the people of her community in a vivid manner. The title of the book, *The Prison We Broke* indicates the living conditions of her people. She describes the conditions of her people thus “We were just like animals but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise, there was no difference between us and the animals. But how we had been reduced to this bestial state? Who was
responsible? Who else, but the people of the high castes!” (Kamble: 47). Kamble criticizes the upper caste Hindus here for their deeds. She expressed her views in a very straight forward and explicit manner. She seems to be agonized by the fact that the upper caste people had been exploiting Dalits for ages. They harassed them, troubled them, etc. She talks here from her experience. Her words look very pointed and sharp. We feel as if tremendous fire is coming out from her mouth when she reveals the painful experiences of her community. But at the same time, her statements look very promising and challenging.

In another incident, Kamble describes how the village women gather wood from the forest and sell it to make their both ends meet. They labour hard to collect it. But if the upper caste ‘Kaki’ in the village found even a small piece of thread along with the collected wood, the Dalit women were threatened and punished severely. In the course of her narration, Baby Kamble narrates a world which is constituted by a difference in location. This difference is not only in terms of geographical entity but also a linguistic one. A Dalit woman’s world is physically located on the margins of the village and also on the margins of the social imagery. The customs, the rituals, the rights, the festival, the “Jatras” that Baby Kamble describes are indeed a source of unexplored treasure for a sociologist. As Maxine Bernson says in her introduction to the Marathi edition of the book, they represent the composite apparatus of Brahminical domination, maintained to weave a web of superstition, illiteracy, ignorance, and oppressive practices. Baby Kamble debunks this apparatus in many ways using the dialect of her community, matching the rhythms but filling them with a subversive content.
Baby Kamble elaborates in some details about traditions in the Mahar community such as the offering of boys (the eldest one) to god as “portraj” and the girls as the “Murali” to the goddess. She paints towards the conniving and hypocritical politics of the upper caste. For example, the “waghya-murali” tradition among the Mahars was established long back in Maharastra. In her autobiography, Baby Kamble criticizes such rituals and practices among the Mahars. She describes the Devadasi system which brings disrespect to their individual selfhood. In the Devadasi system, young girls are married either to a god or goddess. This is done for the well-being and survival of a male child. The Devadasi system is prevalent among Dalits in several states in India. Baby Kamble criticizes the humiliating practice of the Devadasi system in the country. She also criticizes Dalit men for supporting this heinous system. She feels terribly disturbed by these wicked practices. In some parts of Maharastra, it is still prevalent and has become a source of exploitation of the lower castes. In Devadasi System, the marriage usually occurs before the girls reach puberty and it requires the girls to become prostitute for upper caste community.

Such girls are known as ‘Joginis’. They are forbidden to enter into a real marriage. The term Devadasi means ‘a female servant of God’. Dalits offer their sons and daughters to the deity Khandoba (Jejuri in Maharastra). The terms used are ‘Waghya’ for male and ‘Murali’ for female. Murali whose token marriage is performed with Khandoba remains unmarried throughout her life and leads a life as a Devadasi of Yellama.
Kamble describes in her autobiography that she rejects all forms of superstitions. She claims that, from her early childhood, she saw things such as giving one’s own child to the “Potraj” or leaving a girl to become a “Murali” torturing a daughter-in-law in the name of God under the pretext that she is possessed by ghosts, etc. Kamble declares, “I detest all these practices. It is partly because of this feeling of disgust that I wrote the autobiography” (Pawar and moon: 297).

Baby Kamble criticizes both the upper caste social system as well as the Dalit patriarchal system severely. The Dalit women experienced patriarchal oppression, given that the oppressions of both caste and patriarchal system marked the lives of Dalit women in a particular way. The Dalit woman was exploited in the society because of her caste and her status as a weaker sex. She was looked down upon in the society. She was given a very heinous treatment both from the upper caste and the Dalit society. ‘The Prisons We Broke’ is a stringent criticism of the patriarchal norms of society as well as within the Mahar community. Kamble’s insistence on the charitable spirit of Dalit women and their love for husband is more a denunciation of the upper caste exploitation of Dalit women rather than patriarchal norms. She reveals many interesting facts about the political and ideological discourses reflected in folk literature as well as for the upper caste people. ‘The Prisons We Broke’ brings forward amazingly infuriating and inspiring facts about Dalit women. In this regard, the remarks of Urmila Power against Dalit patriarchy are very apt: “Dalit men fight for humanity, but
what is humanity even they do not know, because they do not have humanity towards theirs wives” (Tapan: 237).

The above remarks by Urmila Power are appropriate and pertinent. She writes from her own experiences. Dalit Women decisively destroy the myths of patriarchal society which is proclaimed as democratic. Baby Kamble too in her autobiography exposes the suffering and physical tortures faced by Dalit Women. ‘The Prison We Broke’ shows the inhuman face of Dalit patriarchy. Many of the Dalit men torture their women inhumanly. They often beat them privately as well as publicly. They are suspicious by nature. They always suspect the fidelity of their wives. Physical torture not only causes harm to a woman’s body but also affect the woman psychologically. Dalit men in The Prison We Broke punish their wives severely for no fault. They chop off the nose of their women who are allegedly not loyal to them. Kamble vehemently criticizes Dalit patriarchy in general and the dominating nature of her husband in particular. She says:

My husband was very suspicious by nature. He used to beat me almost every day. The men folk of those times used to play with the lives of young girls without reason in this way. Sometimes I would be so scared of this harassment that I felt like committing suicide (Power and Moon: 294).

Baby Kamble further elaborates on her personal experiences. She says that she suffered a great deal in her household due to domestic violence. There was nobody to whom they could complain about this. She tolerated all these humiliations and suffering over the years. She says that her life was caught
between the blades of a pair of scissors. Kamble’s greatness lies in struggling against these adverse conditions and emerging victorious in a male-dominated social setup because of the inspiring message of B. R. Ambedkar. She asserts how and why she gave utmost priority and preference to the Ambedkar ideology in her life. She was immensely influenced and motivated by Ambedkar’s writings and social movements. Kamble worked with Ambedkar movements for social emancipation. Writing about this influence she says:

Ambedkar visited Phaltan when I was a child. The speech I heard then is fixed in my mind, ‘get educated, eat less but educate yourselves.’ Unless you are educated you will not lift yourselves up. Hinduism has until now shut the Dalits up in the darkness of ignorance, in the framework of the four varnas, but through education you can make progress (Power and Moon: 295).

Kamble discusses in her writings how she was attracted to the Ambedkar movement in the later stages of her life. Her husband never objected to her association with the Ambedkar movement. He was also an ardent follower of Ambedkar. She quotes Ambedkar’s statement while comparing Ambedkar and Gandhi in terms of social service and says that Gandhi only showed sympathy towards untouchability and did not do anything substantial for the deprived sections of the society. Ambedkar however, worked to eradicate social misery from its roots. She feels that “… only when you are born in that race you can feel the real pain” (Pawar and Moon: 296).
Kamble’s constitution to the Ambedkar movement cannot be sidelined. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon appreciate the sterling work done by Dalit women for the growth of the Ambedkar movement. They interviewed all the Dalit Women who were instrumental in the movement. Urmila Pawar’s Amhihi Itihass Ghadawala focuses on the involvement of women in various Dalit struggles from the early twentieth century drawing on diverse sources. It provides rich materials for historians. This book also throws light on how the social change took place in the society with the entry of Dalit women into the revolution. This book talks about the participation and contribution of Dalit women in various Dalit struggles during the early twentieth century. It is an important work documenting detailed interviews, and the history and the struggles of women in the early untouchable liberation movements. Ambedkar was converted to Buddhism. Buddhism means good character, the person who preaches Buddhism has to be morally upright and lead a virtuous and uncorrupted life. Advice from a pure tongue, such as the Dalit saint Chokha Mela, will transform millions of followers of Bhim into pure beings. The aim is to serve mother India well. That is why Ambedkar introduced Buddhism philosophy as the part of truth and righteousness. His greatness is apparent in the following lines:

Before him, millions of our people had broken their heads against the stone steps of temples, trying to reach their voices to gods who would not hear them. Generation after generation, they gave births to children, only to see them turn to dust. The creator gave us a human form, sent us down to earth, and abandoned us. He turned a blind eye to what was happening
in the world. It was our Bhim who finally breathed life into lifeless statues, i.e. the people of our community. It was he who lighted a lamp in each heart and brought light to our dark lives. First, he gave us life and then made us human being. The first need of a human being was education. He made it possible for us to receive education. He even spent his own money for that. He helped us to graduate and helped us obtain prestigious jobs. He made our household rich. He empowered us to obtain wealth and power. He demonstrated to the whole world that we had the ability to reach the highest position. (The Prison We Broke: 118)

The struggles yielded them three levels; humanity, education, and the religion of the Buddha. Baby Kamble was inspired by Ambedkar’s thoughts. She joined the movement when she was eight. Ambedkar activists like Pandari Nath Kakade, Navachiwale, Laxman Kakade were all educated. They used to bring two news papers such as Daily Kesav and Daily Sakel to the Chowdi and read those out to the people sitting in the courtyard. Ambedkar published a news paper called Bahishkrut in which his speeches were reproduced. Men from both the Mahar lanes gathered to listen to them. The readers explained the issues to the people. The entire community was beginning to be aware. She grew up in that charged atmosphere. Ambedkar taught them that character is the foundation of human society. When compassion and morality follow character, society achieves its real strength. He wanted to transform society in the light of this philosophy. Many Dalits irrespective of religion embraced Buddhism after the influence of Ambedkar and his ideology, with the inspiration of Baba Saheb’s speech. She sent
her children to school. Her sons studied very well. They became educated, with the help of her children. She started Ashrama Shala for the orphans. She was the president of Mahatma Phule Dhyan Vikas Prasarak Samstha.

Rejection and revolt in Dalit autobiographies have emerged from the womb of Dalit pain. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit autobiography is in the nature of a collective social voice, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. This rejection is aimed at the unique order which has exploited Dalits. Its form is double-edged rejecting the unequal order and demanding equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice. Dalit writers use autobiography as a means to political and social assertion and portray their real-life problems and experiences. They choose the strongest means i.e. autobiography to fight against the social inequalities and injustices.

Dalit consciousness played a major role in the making of Dalit writers. The Dalit conscious writing by nature is intellectual and, therefore, scientific. The writer with Dalit consciousness analyzes the movements in society. The consciousness believes in change. Therefore, the writing which comes out from Dalit consciousness fights for social justice and equality and depends on an egalitarian society. ‘Dalit consciousness’ in Dalit literature has a revolutionary mentality. It is connected with struggle. It is a rebellion against the caste system and the recognition of human being is its focus. Ambedkarite thought is its inspiration. It is separate and distinct from any other consciousness. Dalit literature is unique because of its Dalit consciousness.
Education is the means of realizing one’s desire which will help in developing one’s personality and in improving one’s status in all respects. Education has direct association with the socio-economic and political status of women. It is due to lack of education that the Dalit women are not able to come out of their poverty and marginalized conditions. This lack of education makes them to be ignorant and innocent. They are not aware of their own rights. They fail to take proper care for their hearts.

Most of Dalit women’s assertions and liberation movements started with the speeches of Ambedkar. His speeches changed their lives significantly. Women also made history in the Ambedkar movement. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon discuss several changes that accrued during the times of Ambedkar. Ambedkar started empowering women from his home. He made his wife Ramabai read and write. He was insistent on women getting educated as men and upper caste women. He stressed more on education, moral education and self-dignity in his speeches.

Ambedkar speeches at the Mahad Satyagraha brought about a revolution among the untouchable. Their thoughts and behaviour began to change. They began to participate in meetings and conferences in large member. Women’s organizations were formed. Women began to speak with vigour at meetings and conferences. They went on processions and became active in the movement and its struggles. “We cannot forget that Ambedkar’s liberal views on women were a motivating force behind this transformation of untouchable women” (Pawar and Moon: 158).
When Ambedkar was in the U. S., he wrote a letter to his neighbour congratulating him for sending his daughter to school. He said that it was wrong to say parents only give birth and rest of the life of the child depends on his Karma. He said, “Children must be moulded. If girls as well as boys are educated, there is no reason why we should not make rapid progress. So you must spread these thoughts at least among your close relatives.” Baba Saheb here succinctly points out about the responsibility of parents in the educating girl children (Pawar and Moon:158).

He started a co-education college also. The concept of co-education was not prevalent at that time. “Baba Saheb showed every one that girls had an independent existence in society as individuals” (Pawar and Moon: 158). He talked on child marriages cleanliness among women, responsibility of a mother to encourage her children to send them to school, morals, etc.:

However hard your life may be, send your sons and daughters to school. If the men bring home the meat of carcasses, oppose them strictly: Even if your clothes are torn, mend them and wash them before you wear them. There should be no visible difference between you and caste Hindu Women. Even if you do this much, it will be as if you are playing on important role in the activity of liberating our community (Pawar and Moon: 159-160).

He further explained the responsibility of family planning. He said that poverty and large number of children would hinder the progress of the
community. He stressed on the pain of a mother for bearing fourteen to fifteen children. He explained to them about the consequences and problems if a mother bore more children. Most of his speeches aimed at liberating and empowering Dalit women. The writers mentioned in the book by Pawar and Moon, reasoned that the western education had inculcated a liberal ideology (gender, equality) in Ambedkar. He appealed to women to give up prostitution: “Give up prostitution and live a moral life. We are not afraid of poverty; it is with us from our birth. So do not take up this profession for fear of poverty.” He gave a lot of opportunities to women in agitations and in press – *Janata Weekly* (Pawar and Moon: 165).

Another essay in the book, “Enlightenment Through Literature” brings out different Dalit women voices in black and white. The women established a literary discussion society to discuss literature, folk songs, and debates on different issues. The main reason was to assert the voice of women along with voices of mainly Dalit and mainstream male writers. Swathy Margaret in her essay “Dalit Women Writers” talked about how one should not give speech for the others to define them. In an autobiographical account of her life in the University of Hyderabad, she critiqued the domination of Dalit male students in Ambedkar Students’ Association, she mentions that the Dalit girl students are meant to give away the bouquets and to distribute refreshments. She thought of women’s participation in the student union. Women began to articulate their opinions through letters in the newspapers. They began to ask questions in the newspapers about the events taking place around them. They thus transformed them into writings. “Dalit women writers took the position that all must be aware
of the need to limit the number of children. Birth control is the responsibility of both men and women. Just as women help men in all their work, men should help women in child birth, child rearing, and the education of children” (Pawar and Moon: 170).

The book brought out the writings of many Dalit women who wrote for Janata Weekly. An article entitled “Fashionable Young Women” by Sheel Shejwal satirizes the basic rules for the bride and bridegroom during marriages. A major column visible in these writings was by women in education. Mahatma Phule, pointing out that there is no progress without education, says:

For want of living, the mind was lost  
For want of a mind, morality was lost  
For want of morality, attention was lost  
For want of attention wealth was lost  
The Sudras collapsed from lack of wealth  
So much loss from a lack of learning (171)

He says further that “Baba Saheb’s emphasis in all his teaching was education. So in any meeting, he would first speak on education. Now women also began writing in periodicals on this subject” (Pawar and Moon: 171). Parvathi Pachade writes an article on the subject of Education:

Women should not expect to get men’s sympathy in every task they do. They should not continue themselves to the kitchen and the children. They must develop themselves. We must seek out grains of knowledge for
ourselves. Women must remember that their progress can only come from education (Pawar and Moon: 172).

Let us now turn to Bama for her views on Dalit consciousness as explained in her writing. ‘Bama’ is the pen name of a Tamil women writer. She has published an autobiography, *Karukku* (1992). She belongs to a Roman Catholic family. She was one of the first Dalit women writers to be widely recognized and translated. She was a school teacher in Uthiramerur. *Karukku* is one of the first Dalit women autobiographies by a woman from Tamilnadu. For a long time, Dalit literature was thought to be the product of Maharastra alone. Literary works, like Bama’s *Karukku*, have opened the horizons of Dalit literature to other nearby states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and so on. While Marathi Dalit writers showed their hostile life styles in their literary works, Bama not only showed injustice and inequality in her village but also paved the way for achieving an egalitarian society. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits, doubly oppressed by a patriarchal and caste tyrannical society. A Dalit woman nonetheless has exemplary endurance and the indomitable spirit to bounce back against all odds. The time has come for Dalit writers to challenge their subjugation through their writings.

Lakshmi Holmstrom in the introduction to this book mentions some of the insights of Raj Gauthaman who says that Dalit writing should awaken every reader and develop a consciousness about their oppression. Raj Gouthaman also suggests that the new Dalit writing should be “an Indian version of World-wide Literature of the Oppressed” (*Karukku*:P-10) Hence, as I understand it, the main
function of such writings is to show the reality and raise the consciousness of human rights, social justice, and equality in the minds of the Dalits. The irony is that many of the Dalits themselves do not know the pain, suffering, and agony of their community. The other part of the community lives as if the oppressed life is what God had ordained for them. Baby Kamble questions such beliefs of her own community in her autobiography ‘The Prisons We Broke’. It was believed that goddess Satwai and God Barana visit the house at midnight to write the future of a new born on its forehead. She brings out very interesting arguments of gods practicing discrimination. She sarcastically points out that they might use a readymade sharp object to write the future of a Dalit child who is born to bear the cross of suffering as he or she grows up. She bluntly mentions that religion must have bribed them quite well to do so. “In order to challenge their state or affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God’s word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them” (XIII). Says Bama in the author’s note to Karukku. This shows her dedication, determination, intellectual and visionary aspirations to educate her community. The title too is very carefully thought out and is aptly chosen for the context. Her explanation of the title creates an interest in the readers and it is aptly substantiated by the context of the text. Karukku is a Tamil word which means “palmyra leaves”. It has very sharp edges like a sword. She explains the intended pun on the title. “Karu” means a seed that connotes “freshness” and “newness”. It is metaphorically used as double-edged sword. She refers to it as the words of God,
“for the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. Piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intention of the hearts” (Hebrews 4:10). So, her autobiography is a double-edged sword. It cuts across many boundaries and brings out the ultimate truth. As she observes:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged and me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these, taken together.

(Karukku: XIII )

Bama’s Karukku is an autobiographical statement of a Dalit woman. Generally, a Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst the Dalits. She is thus doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. One edge challenges the oppression and another edge brings out the reforms. These edges that have cut her a lot till then have turned their violent sides now. In Bama’s case, her position is further endangered by her existence as Dalit Christian. Hence, Karukku focuses on the essential forces that cut across and seam Bama’s life, namely; caste, gender and religion. One edges challenges the oppressors and another edges brings out reforms. These edges that had cut her a lot till then have turned their violent side now.in Bama’s case her position is further endangered by her existence as a dalit
Christian, hence karukku focus on three essential forces that cuts across and sears Bama’s life, namely; caste, gender and religion.

*Karukku* explains Bama’s life journey to success. On the contrary, *Karukku* is a painful journey that is open-ended and many questions are left unanswered. It is not a “complete success story” like a connectional autobiography. It is rather a revolution of bitter reality of the society confronted by a Dalit woman. *Karukku* is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, education, etc. Through these perspectives, Bama gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression given out in portions to the Dalit Christians not only by the the upper caste society but more so with in the catholic church itself. Bama has always had an inner urge to actively engage herself in alleviating the sufferings of the oppressed. She comes forward to fulfill her aspirations. But very soon she realizes that the catholic institutions are filled with caste prejudice and hatred. The book is about Bama’s inner quest for trying to establish the existence of “the police are searching for clues “ they are searching for the self-discovery and the resultant courage, which is forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live the life of a Dalit Woman.

Bama has never heard people speak openly of untouchability until her third standard in school when she realizes for the first time, her community’s pathetic state is ironically tinged with humour. As she was coming back from school, she finds an elder person from her street holding out a small packet of snacks, in a string without touching it and giving it to Naickers in the village. Bama first could not help laughing out, looking at that funny sight. “The manner
in which he was walking along made me want to double up. I wanted to shrink –
exclamation mark with laughter it the sight of such a big man carrying a small
pocket in that fashion” (Bama: 2000: 2-15). When she went home, she again fell
in a bout of laughter while relating that incident to her elder brother. But Annan
(elder brother) did not laugh. He explained to her that the elder from the street
was carrying the parcel like that because he was a parayan, an untouchable.

The Naickers were the upper caste men and, hence, would not touch
anything brought by the parayas. That incident showed the first seed of fury and
revolt in Bama. The very thought that an elder person of her community should be
put to such humiliation made her furious. The self-questioning had begun. Bama
began to wonder, “What did it mean when they call us ‘paraya’? Had the name
become obscene? But we too are human beings” (Bama: 13).

Bama started to look out for means to uplift herself and her community
from this trampled existence. Her Annan shows her the right and tells her that
education is the only way to attain equality:

Because we are born into the paraya jati, we are never given any honour
or dignity with respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and
make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care,
learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will
come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard
and learn (Bama: 15).
These words of her brother really encouraged her considerably. She did what he said: “The words that Annan spoke to me that day made a deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class and because of that many people became my friends. Even though, I am a parachi” (Bama 15) this shows how important is the role of education and the use of intellect are for the betterment of the self and the community.

Sometimes, it appears as if the brain is not adequately used in the revolt of Dalits. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar advocated Dalits to unite, educate, and enlighten themselves to agitate. Baby Kamble in The Prisons We Broke writes how the speeches of Ambedkar had helped them know their state of living. However, Bama never mentions the name of Ambedkar in playing a role in her visionary aspirations to educate her community. Baby Kamble mentions how Ambedkar had been received at her place. “This man is nothing less than a miracle of God, that’s why he’s been able to cross the seven seas you know” (Kamble: 63). His speeches made them realize that they would have ever thought of them though there is no obvious reference to the spirit of what Ambedkar says to be present in Bama’s work.

Bama was a very good observer even as a child “when I was studying in the third class, I had not yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is”. She writes in the beginning of the second chapter that every Dalit experienced such humiliation and discrimination. They believe that they came to them naturally as
rains in the rainy season and sun lights in the summer. One cannot oppose these acts of suppression without knowing the basic freedom and human rights he or she possesses in such a democratic country like India. This happens only if one is educated. With the support and help of her brother, she understands the importance of Education. Education, thus, works as a path of light in their dark lives of suffering. Bama realizes the oppression by herself knowing the problem very well. She resolves to study well and make wonders like any upper caste student. Bama, on the other hand, realizes their potential through the speeches of Ambedkar. Kumde Pawde in “The Story of My Sanskrit” too had experienced such humiliation in her life. Those humiliations have helped her pursue what a Dalit could not even think of – reading Sanskrit. Besides learning it, she even teaches it. She explains how she has been inspired to do so in her autobiography “this disgust is extremely familiar to me.”

Another important issue in the lives of Dalits which has been discussed in Karukku is “the act of naming”. Names do play an important role in everyone’s life. But in a Dalit’s life, it has a very different role. The names sometimes proclaim the caste and class. The names are not fashionable or good to hear. So, they are mocked at by the upper caste villagers. Bama has narrated a lot of incidents in the book related to names wherein she describes how each one is named based on his or her talent and peculiar quality. A lot of affection is evident when the people in the community call each other by their names:

The names you heard along our street really surprise you. People’s baptismal names given at church were one thing, the names we used in the
street were quite another. One child’s name was Munkovam, short-temper. A woman was called Midday-masala as one day she ground masala at midday and made curry. A certain child who was very dark-skinned and plump was named Murugan-spring pig. It seems that pigs wandered about, well-fed and plump, by the spring of Murugan; that’s why. There was a woman who leaked all over her legs when she revealed herself; she was called Kazhinja, leaky. A small girl who went off to practice swimming in the well, but could only manage to float, was promptly named Medenda, Floater…. I could go on and on. Konnavachi (Starter), Deaf-one, Dumbo, Crazy, Severiyaa(Xavier), Black-ant, Manacchi (Flatnose), Uzhamuki (Running Nose), Green-nose, Needle-bum. All sorts of names are like that (Bama: 7-8).

Naming is a part of the life of the Dalits and Bama has narrated these very realistically and ordinarily. It happens in each and every generation. “My mother in her village is called “Bodi” (shaven-head) because my grandmother used to always shave her head in her childhood. These names continue even now. They call me “Cheemudu Mukku” (Running Nose) because I used to have a cold and running nose always, even in summer in my childhood. This is how the names are coined in villages. No one gets offended.” This is the reality and ordinariness that Bama narrates in the book.

Religious disparities are another issue that drew my attention in the book. Dalits always follow the precepts of the church very closely because they are made to believe that they should follow them more strictly than anyone else as
doing so rewards them a better life. They are made to believe that it is God who has made everyone and everyone is equal in the eyes of God.

The homily of a priest on Sunday starts, “You should come to church regularly. He gives everything you need, and He knows your hearts desires”. Such preaching increases their hopes for a better life. Being a Christian and, moreover, an ex-seminarian, I agree with some of the things. Bama has narrated that the church (priests, pastors) sometimes respects the upper caste people more than Dalits. Even the church is not devoid of discriminations. Bama has clearly and boldly narrated how Dalits are treated by some of the priests in her village. The priests, who are meant to be representatives of Christ, never treat Dalits equally. Much of Dalit literature has talked about Hinduism exploiting Dalits, but to my knowledge, this is the first autobiography to bring out the disparities in Christianity. The missionaries who came to India decades ago have induced Dalits to convert to Christianity for money and material benefits. But at the same time, we must not forget the efforts they have made to treat Dalits as human beings. These missionaries were the first human beings to do so. The first letters of alphabet were taught to Dalits by these missionaries. Baby Kumble writes how Ambedkar had been criticized by some of the Dalits as having imposed western and Christian thoughts on them when he appealed to them to get educated and stop daily material jobs for upper caste people.

Education has always had a western and Christian tag attached to it. But it is surprising to see how these practices have turned against the Dalits. Bama dreamt for a better life after becoming a nun so as to educate her community. Her
efforts went in vain. She found no difference over there too. The priests and nuns had been oppressing Dalits like any other upper castes. “Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper caste who hold all the high positions, show off their authority and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business”(Bama: 69). These things incited the others as well like the school teacher who prevented her from going to celebrate her first communion rapping. “What celebration can there be in your caste for communion?” (Bama: 11) What do Dalit do in such situation? To whom could they complain? Bama, a staunch believer and devotee, was hurt by the orders and practices of the convent which were imposed on the Dalits. She thought that being a nun would help her achieve her heart’s desire to educate her community. But it ended up as a futile attempt. She was discovered with the discrimination within the convent and by the convent clergy.

The rich and upper caste people were always given preference and were respected. This is not what a man or a priest is expected to do. She found that they lived a life of poverty. Is God listening to their cries? God only knows that the priests in the village never help them in their troubles and tribulations. There are incidents in Karukku when the priest helped the police and were not willing to conduct mass for them in their victory when they won the judgment in their favour regarding the cemetery issue. She narrated how the church exploited them. The entire autobiography is an account of her spiritual journey from being a child devotee to becoming a nun with a desire to uplift her community. It is her self-
education and revelations that made her show the world that the life of a Dalit Christian woman could strengthen her vision and aspirations. She realizes the importance of education for herself and for her community at large. Her prime motive in joining the nunnery was to help the poor and alleviate their suffering and to educate them.

Bama asserts at the end of the autobiography that children and grown-ups will no longer listen to everything they are told open-mouthed and nodding their heads. They have realized that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves up. They have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God (94). We can see how she had Ambedkarite thoughts even if she did not openly acknowledge being influenced by his speeches. Bama polished the other edge of her sword at the end of her autobiography to challenge the upper caste by saying:

They have become aware that they too were created by God. There is a new strength within them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far respected, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion (Bama: 94).

She almost becomes a revolutionary at the end. She raises her voices asking how long they can deceive us with hypocrisy. Education has helped her know their conditions and proclaim it to the world. This too works like a double-edged sword.
But how easy is it for a Dalit to go to school and study for a minimum of fifteen years to get a job? Can the Dalit parents afford to do that? Do ‘reservations’ help them in any sense? They rather divide them into groups. Bama too has explained their conflict in the book:

God knows what will happen at the end. They fight to the death one moment and the other moment, they join together again. Suddenly and for no reason at all, they will be fighting and wrestling with each other. A hundred times a second there are scuffles amongst them. Shameless fellows. Of course the upper-caste men will laugh at them. Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end? (Bama: 41)

She gives a clear picture of Dalits in villages which is very much true. There are lots of silly fights between some lower caste people. Sometimes the scenario becomes very hostile and serious and the police have to visit the place to put things under control. Bama uses all these anecdotes and incidents to show how they have been victimized several times. There would be fights between upper caste people, but the police interfere only to find fault with the Dalits always. Such is the ignorance of the Dalits. Bama has insisted on this. Their ignorance is the capital for the upper caste people to exploit them. Baby Kamble mentions Ambedkar’s speech where he begins saying, “You do not worship God; you worship your ignorance!” (Kamble: 64) Everyone banks on this ignorance to exploit the Dalits. Sometimes they do no even listen to educated people.
Ambedkar’s speech was debated by Dalits as to whether to follow it or not. His thoughts have faced very horrid criticism. One of the Dalit elders said:

Why do you want us to put our children in school? Are they going to become teachers? Or are they going to become Brahmins? Send them to school indeed! That’s pure drivel! Listen, you can’t make the river flow backwards. The village land is our mother. We have to carry forward whatever order she has given us. Why do we need foreign knowledge? The yesker’s stick is the mark of happiness of the land. We have in us real Mahar flesh and blood. And you preach this Christian knowledge?....That women also keep blabbering the same nonsense constantly (Kamble: 67).

Old habits die hard, especially among older people. Baby Kamble later in the book mentions: “However, they could not hold their own in the arguments with the young men and found themselves completely outwitted” (Kamble: 69). She highlights the kinds of changes that occurred after Ambedkar’s speeches.

Besides this typical notion of elders, they face another problem that prevents them from studying is poverty. This poverty prevents a girl child from seeing how school books live. A girl child as Bama mentions is meant for looking after the house. “It was always the girl children who had to look after chores at home” (Bama: 45). Bama states a little later:

Life is difficult if you happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper castes. When this is the case, the condition of those, who are born into the paraya community, as the poorest of the poor, struggling for
daily survival, doesn’t need spelling out… In the midst of all this, how can they be expected to look after their children and make sure they go to school? In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies and doing household chores (Bama: 68).

Everyone has to work to eat. There is no distinction between men and women. Dalit women do a lot more work than men, but the wages they get at the end of the day is lesser than what a man gets. There is a lot of exploitation here too. The concept of pollution is a lot more severe for Dalit women than for Dalit men. Bama narrates how she found these things funny yet painful at the end.

Among all these disparities, the girl child is always loaded with work during the village festivals. She gets some sort of false happiness as Baby Kamble puts it. Bama used to work a lot during Christmas and Easter celebrations. Girl children are made to work like machines during these days. Comparatively, it is a very huge task for Dalit women to be educated because they lack the supports they need from their family. The feeling that their daughter is studying further increases their worries. It is a difficult task for them to get a husband in the same caste. This is one of the reasons why girl children are not encouraged to go for higher studies. “Then they said it would be difficult for me to find a husband in my community if I went for further education. So they wrote off to a few places to find out about teacher training.” (Bama: 64)
Teachers play an important role in the Dalit student’s life. The Dalit students are severely punished. “I don’t want to be beaten by teacher; I want to study well; I want to be clever. We prayed all sorts of things like that” (Bama: 77). There are a lot of discriminations in the school such as low caste, low class, and so on. The triple oppression of a Dalit girl starts in the school. Though Bama was the topper in the class, she had to face a lot of humiliation:

The PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up either at assembly, or during lessons. We’d stand, they’d write down our names, and then ask us to sit down again. We felt really bad then. We’d stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating. (Bama:18)

The irony is that, for most of the students, the teacher was the first role model. Needless to say, even Bama too was inspired by the names who were teachers in the school. They had indirectly planted a seed of seeing and making her entire community foresee a better tomorrow. It was not until she experienced the real things. She was very much disappointed to see them with naked eyes in the convent paradoxically. Bama chose the same field to become a nun and to uplift her community:

It struck me overwhelmingly that these nuns collectively oppressed Dalit children and teachers so very much; why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept under such a control? (Bama: 20).
Another important issue commonly discussed by most of the Dalit women writers is of women being possessed. No one knows how far these treacherous acts are true. But in the name of being possessed, women were being brutally tortured. This is such a painful act. Sometimes the women were beaten black and blue to get the devil out of the house. Bama has narrated the incidents which happened in their villages:

This is also an act of ignorance. I saw some women in my village being tied to a tree and whipped. No upper caste woman has ever been possessed according to my knowledge. Surprised by the fact, I asked my Grandmother. She replied that the upper caste women never come out of their houses, and these devils roam around the fields and enter some Dalit woman who always works in the fields (Kamble: 60).

Bama, unlike other autobiographers who seemed to have escaping tendencies, thought to help her community understand the value of education. Sarah Beth examined how the educated Dalits found it difficult to come back to where they lived.

She reasons out that the education has opened new doors for them. They are no more willing to bear humiliation from the upper caste people. Dalit women are always at the receiving end of the most vulgar and abusive language. Dalit women being called by names is a common phenomenon. SivaKami in *Grip of Change* narrates how her father calls her names: “Panchaimmal was once selected to enact a male role in the school play. On stage, instead of saying, ‘the women
from Bombay’, she said ‘the bitch from Bombay’. The drama committee decided, “Lower caste students should not be given roles in school plays” (163). Bama too narrates the way they were being called “children of whores” (58) by the upper caste people.

Bama in *Karukku* has described the painful life of herself as well as of her community. Her perseverance to get education is exemplary. I have tried to argue that she too has mentioned that it is education that has helped her understand her state of life and it is education that has helped her to show the reality to the world and to aim to come out of it. She has not thought from a selfish perspective. She has aspired to educate her own community by bringing them together, by making them understand the harsh realities of Dalit life, and then by agitating them to come out of such oppression.

Bama contemplates, ‘In this society, if you are born into a lower caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Caste difference does not disappear wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up. Caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why, a wretched life style is all that is left to us.

If you are born into low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle… We are forced to suffer pain and humiliation… Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such
attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don’t even possess human dignity and if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect (Bama: 24).

It was against these odds that Bama completed her Under-Graduation and B. Ed. and decided to become a teacher. She worked in a convent and found that the nuns working there constantly oppressed the Dalit children studying there and treated them with contempt. She painfully recalls the nuns commenting on the Dalit children thus “look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes, but look at the state in which they came back from home – just skin and bone” (Bama: 2000: 17-18). It was then that Bama was suddenly struck with the idea of becoming a nun and truly to help the Dalit children. She took a drastic step of resigning her job as a teacher and extend the religious order. She entered a particular order since she “had read about the woman who founded that particular order how she had done so for the sake of the poor and lowly; lived and died for them alone. I wanted to be like her, living only for the poor and downtrodden” (Bama: 20-21). Bama worked in a Christian Order which is a British-based monthly magazine for traditional Catholics. Originally called the Christians democrat, it changed its name in January 1960 where the Tamils were considered inferior and a Tamil Parayar was the lowest of the lot and held no esteem. The order itself had its own reservation about the Harijan women
and “would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns” and felt “that there was a separate order for them somewhere.” (Bama: 22).

Bama was admitted to the order only after it was confirmed that a convent had asked for her services. After Bama became a nun, she joined the convent with the single purpose of serving the under-privileged. But to her horror, she found that the convent is not devoid of caste consciousness. The upper caste students enjoyed a better status and more respect from the nuns. The nuns in the convent constantly threw insults and abuses against the Dalit students. The Dalit children did jobs like sweeping the premises and washing and cleaning the lavatories. The nuns felt that “low caste people are all degraded in some way. They think we have no more moral discipline nor cleanliness and culture” (Bama 2000:22-23)

She looks back on her own attitude towards Christianity and religious faith. She realizes that religious activities were forced on the Dalit converts right from their childhood. She recalls that they were forced to attend the Bible classes and memorize original oral instructions of religion. Catechisms are usually written in the form of questions and answers. Classes and the morning pusai (prayer) were a must for all Dalit children. Absence from the classes was severely dealt with. “The cane fell on us with the sharpness of a whip” (Bama: 2000:71) so ironically fear was instilled in the children to spread the gospel of love! Even the weekly confessions were to be learnt by heart:

I praise to the lord omnipotent. Bless me Sami, for I have sinned, it is a week since I made my last confession. I lied four times; I stole five times,
I have not obeyed my elders; I was daydreaming in the church, I repent these and those sins that I have forgotten saami. This was always the formula (Bama:73).

Religion itself was a formulaic. It was only after Bama left school did “the fear – bhayam that I felt towards God gradually left me, and love – Paasam grew” (Bama: 2000:87). In spite of all those mechanical drills, Bama still had faith in religion. She believed to be spreading the message of love and brotherhood living in the convent as a nun. She found that there was sea of divide between two; Christian belief and practice. The nuns left the Bible preaching to move theory, literally carrying nothing of it to practice.

Jesus associated himself with the poor and oppressed and fought for justice and fairness. But nobody in the convent seemed to insist that God is righteous and would be angered by injustice and falsehood. “There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus what is made known through daily pieties” (Bama: 2000:90). Bama realizes that she cannot live a life of duplicity, pleading. Duplicity of pleading consists in multiplicity of distinct matter to one and the same thing, whereunto several answers are required. Duplicity may occur in one and the same pleading, and play a dual role. One has to be true to oneself. Having realized that there was no connection between the “Convert’s God” and the suffering poor, Bama’s mind is tormented. Completely alienated from her environment, Bama decides to leave the order. But “how long can one play-act this way? Any way it was not possible for me. I had to leave the order come into
the world” (Bama 200:93). Bama thus “leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as a Dalit woman).” (Holmstrom 2000:1X)

Having come out of the religious order, Bama feels a sense of fulfillment and “belonging” to the community of Dalit women despite the fact that she is economically insecure. *Karukku* is thus a pathetic and moving statement of suffocation and suppression of the trampled and marginalized existence of the Dalits. The book is also revolution of the inner strength and vigor of Dalit women as represented by Bama. Bama’s experiences open up new perspective for Dalit women. We find these centuries of oppression have not succeeded in completely sapping the vitality and inner strength of the Dalits. Dalit women in particular have enormous strengths and vigour to bounce back against all odds if Karukku explodes with the realistic description of the subjugated.

Narendra Jadhav’s ‘Outcaste: A memoir’ (2002) discusses various stages of his parents’ lives. His family struggled for equality and justice. While his community accepted its status as its fate, Jadhav’s father became consciousness of his oppression and caste discrimination. He rebelled against the oppression of the caste system and traveled from a small village at Ozar in Maharashtra to the city of Mumbai to escape prosecution. At the beginning of ‘Outcaste’, 20 years old Damu, the chief protagonist of the story is addressed contemptuously as “Mahar”. Mahar is Damu’s caste, stigma, and destiny. It tells the world that he is the lowest of the low in the Hindu ‘chaturvarna’ system, the system of four castes. He belongs to a lower caste and his touch pollutes. The place is Damu’s ancestral village in western Maharashtra. The date is March 1, 1930. Three years before
this Mr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar had thousand of Dalits at the Choudhar pond in Mahad in a peaceful agitation for water rights, soon after Damu’s present ordeals. He will launch a satyagraha demanding entry for Dalits into the Kala Ram temple in Nasik. Damu stands facing the fouzdar, the police chief. The fouzdar ordered him to get the body out. Damu refused and cried out thus:

“I will die but I will not bow down before you. Come on, beat me all you come and kill me. Let the world know that a helpless Mahar was killed during his duty. See, the entire village is witnessing your atrocities for refusing to do a task that talks outside his traditional village duties. Such defiance from an untouchable is not to be tolerated. The Fouzdar abuses and whips him. Damu pleads for mercy but will not give in. Instead, the Fouzdar turns his foul tongue on Baba Saheb Ambedkar for Damu that is blasphemy. Baba Saheb is his God. On that day, he felt very insulted. Damu’s reaction is noteworthy:

Damu let out a scream, asking Sonu to shut up. This was a matter between men. A woman had no say in this. ‘What kind of tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs!’ Damu yelled. ‘I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am not going to abide by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for baluta. What are all of you going to do? Kill me?’ (Outcaste: A Memoir: 10)

He threw away the miserable crutches of traditional village duties which he had been saddled with and returned to Mumbai. He worked in Mumbai before and knew the freedom and dignity of “touchability” and reclaimed human dignity
before in Mumbai. Damu and his wife Sonu did not see the latter’s mother for nearly five years. They did not have any work in Mumbai. They had come to Ozar. He hoped that, in his village, he would do some work. So he visited his village and stayed with his parents for a few days. It was only three hours away, to his wife Sonu’s village. She recalled the desperation of their lives in Mumbai. She had desperately prayed for some changes in the situation. Her prayer had been answered and some changes were in the offing. The word had come from her husband village that it was his turn to perform the Yeskar duty.

Traditionally, every Mahar household took turns performing this duty for three months as a village servant. A Yeskar went from house to house bearing news of the village. He announced Deaths and tended to the carcass of cattle. He ran as a human pilot in front of the carriages of government officials, signing their praises and announcing their arrival. Any odd job thus came up was assigned arbitrarily to the yeskar who never dared to question the practice in return. He was given a handful of grain and was allowed to go begging from house to house for leftovers.

When he was called upon to undertake his annual duty, he was enraged that his uncles and cousins still expected him to carry out such a humiliating task. His wife Sonu for the first time saw him walking from house to house asking for Baluta. She realized why he was so averse to being a yeskar. He was reluctant to perform yeskar duties. “We must have self-respect. We must have dignity as human beings. How can I take to begging from door to door? Baluta is our birth right. They proudly claim! My foot. Have you seen how they throw the food? I
don’t want rights as a dog. I want my human rights.” He was determined to establish his identity as a respectful human being. He was reluctant to perform yeskar duties and went back to Mumbai to participate in Babasaheb Ambedkar’s social movement.

Ambedkar’s social reform movements carried a significant place for Dalit community in general and for Dalits of Maharashtra in particular with educational awareness created by the architect of the Indian constitution. Dalits became socially conscious about the circumstances and social problems of untouchability and caste discrimination during the period from 1920 to 1956. He was influenced by the writings and political activities of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar. He argued the case of the untouchables from the boundaries of the village to the round table conference. Ambedkar launched the social liberation movement for equal rights and opportunities of the deprived and downtrodden section of society. In 1924, after years of struggle in Mumbai, when he got a regular job in the Railways, he met the Tau Master and sought his blessing. He was the only educated Mahar from his village. Tau Master said finally just as he was about to leave. “There is a meeting tomorrow evening at Narely Park. Meet me outside Parel station at six” (Outcaste: A Memoir: 21) Ambedkar’s call to Dalits to “educate, unite, agitate was the slogan chanted at Baba Saheb Ambedkar’s rally that day. He felt excited thinking about the potent energy of the social movement. The untouchables finally found a savior. In 1926, when he got married, his wife Sonu was too young to join him. So they returned to Mumbai from his village. The Dalit meeting would be held at Mahar near Mumbai.
Ambedkar’s speeches at the Mahar Satya Graha brought out a revolution among the untouchables and their thoughts and behaviors began to change. Following the initiative of the state legislative, the Mahar municipality had passed a resolution to allow the untouchables for full access to all village waterfronts. Under the hostile eyes of the upper caste people, this resolution remained only on paper and the untouchables never dared to exercise their rights. Baba sahib decided to hold the meeting at Mahad for the execution of the resolution for the untouchables.

He explained the untouchables to do away with the humiliating and enslaving traditions of village duties like carrying away dead cattle, etc. “It is utterly disgraceful to sell your human rights for a few crumbs of bread.” “We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect and gain self-knowledge.” He talked about cleanliness among the Dalits and the responsibility of parents towards their children to send them to school. “There will be no difference between parents and animals if they do not desire to see their children in better position than their own”. It was 19 March, 1927 when he reached Mahad. Tens of thousands of people had assembled there. People of all ages came there to participate in the great event. The plan was that everyone would go marching to the Choudar tank. There was a water reservoir from which upper caste Hindus took water. The procession started with Baba sahib in the lead. They marched in a disciplined manner in rows of four shouting slogans to ‘educate, unite and agitate’. The square reservoir was surrounded by houses of Brahmins on all sides. At every door and window of their houses, there were full
of people who looked on helplessly at the huge crowd gathering around their tank and polluting its sanctity. Baba Saheb walked with the thousand of expectant followers, calmly bent down, cupped some water in his palms, and drank it.

“There was a loud excited cheer of ‘Jai Bhim’ as all of us took a symbolic sip of water.” “Then, Baba Saheb proclaimed publicly that we were asserting our rights as human beings. We were making history”. “We were equally human beings. Why should our touch pollute the water. We had cupped the water in our palms and sipped it! Water was still water….” (Outcaste: A Memoir: 23). This consciousness strengthened their fight for social justice and equality and demand for an egalitarian society. “Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature has a revolutionary mentality. It is connected with strength. It is a rebellion against the caste system. The recognition of human being is its focus. Ambedkarite thoughts are its inspiration. Then they returned to Mumbai only to learn that the Mahar had the Brahman priests “purify” the impure water reservoir by pouring 108 pots of curd, milk, cow dung and cow-urine in to it amidst loud religious chants. They realized that the march to the Chaudar tank had brightened the untouchables’ flame of dignity and self-respect. It was the beginning of an awakening. Consequently, on 4th August 1927, the Mahad municipality revoked its earlier resolution of granting the untouchables’ access to the water tank. Baba Saheb took this up as a challenge. It was decided that there would be another protest meeting in Mahad. In December 1927, Ambedkar started a bigger meeting in a Mahad, where he challenged the Hindu authorities. Ambedkar’s speeches at the
Mahad satyagraha brought about a revolution among the untouchables. He announced:

Just as they were Hindus, we are also Hindus. If you say your religion is our religion, your rights and ours must be equal. Is this the case? If not, on what grounds do you say that we must remain in the Hindu fold?  
(Outcaste: A Memoir: 24)

In order to keep the social movement up, Baba Saheb denounced Manu Smruti, the sacred law book of the Hindus, stating that it stunted the growth of the untouchables. It destroyed their self respect and perpetrated social, economic, religious, and political slavery. In order to lodge a strong protest, he gave a call to burn Manu Smruti. Ambedkar burnt publicly Manu Smruti, the holy book of the Hindus, which was considered to be the manifesto of caste system. Ambedkar severely criticized the Manu Dharma Shastra. Manu imposed a number of restrictions on Dalits. It was an act that sent shock waves amongst the people of the higher castes.

The social movement inspired by Baba Saheb Ambedkar had full revolutionary thinking developed among the Dalits. Damu knew that he was imbued with new courage and self-realization. Damu first realized that he was an untouchable when he was a child. He recalled about his childhood memories. He said that one day his father was called by some people in the village to chop wood for them. He kept insisting that he would go along with father. At first his father refused saying that the sun was too hot, but he was adamant. Then his father took
him along with him. They walked some distance on their way to the workplace until he began to regret his stubbornness of coming with his father. His eyes were smarting under the glare of the sun and his throat was dry. He wanted to go home but did not dare ask his father. They came across a huge, blossoming tree. Someone had left a large vat of water under it. The water looked cool and inviting. “Baba”, he said to his father, “I want to drink water”. His father looked scared and looked around. “Just wait”, his father said, “someone will come soon”. He did not understand, “But why do we have to wait?” Just then a man came by. “Johar, Maay – baap”, his father greeted him with the traditional reverent greeting of the low castes. “Please, my son is thirsty. Can you let him have a drink of water?” “Are you trying to scorch him to death in this heat?” the man shirked. The man followed him without his knowing. His father said carefully, “I am on my way to cut some wood.” (Outcaste: A Memoir: 46)

The man was dark and his clothes were dirty. He went near the water and picked upon an iron tumbler lying near it. A dog was resting under the shade of the tree. The man came and kicked the dog aside and dipped the tumbler in the water. Damu looked at him expectantly, but the man drank it himself and some of water spilled, matting the dark hair on his chest. He washed his face. Then dipped the tumbler again and turned to me. He said, “Come here and sit there.” Damu sat on the ground and stretched this hand out for the tumbler. The man screamed at Damu, “How dare you try to touch this? You think you can take this from my hand?”
Damu’s father pleaded with the man, “Forgive my ignorant boy, Maay-baap. What does he know? He is still a child.” Then his father showed to him “Now, keep your hands like this, my boy and drink only the water you get in your palm.” He sat down again with his hands cupped and the man poured water into his palm. Some of the water trickled down. He raised his hands closer to the water, and drank. Then he asked his father, “Baba, he drank water straight from the vat. Why can’t we touch the water?” His father replied, “If we do, we will be punished because the water will get polluted. And then no one else will be able to drink from it. The child Damu was taught to observe strict rules regarding the river.

Because he was an untouchable in his village, whenever a wedding feast was held at his landlord’s house, they would be called to help. At one of the wedding sessions, he was waiting to be given some work to do when some girls from the bride’s family were carrying platters full of sweets. He had nothing to do, so he thought he would help them. He picked up one of the platter to distribute around. He started offering sweets to the guests, the landlord’s mother screamed, “Bloody Maharin, what do you think you are doing?” Damu managed to say that he had not done anything and he had not eaten anything from here. She said, “You have polluted all our auspicious food, you fool. Who is going to make good for this, that one-eyed father of yours? You scoundrels, your caste will never change; give you an inch and you grab a mile.” She had pushed the platter from his hands. The platter fell out of his hands and landed with a loud and crashing sound and the food scattered all around. “Your shadow has contaminated the
food. It is not fit for eating.” So he grew such a Mahar householder who challenged the daily indignities inflicted on him. But as Baba Saheb says, we have to organize and agitate. Damu narrated that his people believed God to be the only remedy. The untouchables would worship the goddess Mariaai in their village. They believed that Mariaai would solve their problems. They had strong faith in their traditional gods. They were offering buffaloes to the goddess as potraj. With the influence of Ambedkar thoughts, Dalits were conscious of their poverty and superstitions and their traditions. This consciousness was connected with struggle.

“It was a rebellion against the caste system for the recognition of human beings in its focus. Dalits launched a Satyagraha and civil disobedience movement until they were allowed to enter Hindu temples.” “We are equally human and moreover, we are Hindus. We must be given entry into temples.” They had participated in Baba Saheb’s movements and redeemed the promise that they had made to themselves stand up against injustice at all costs. (Outcaste: A Memoir: 134)

Education was most important for the Dalits which would help in developing one’s personality and improving one status in all respects. Education had direct association with the socio-economic and political status of Dalits.

As a result of Ambedkar liberation movements, Dalits changed their lives significantly. Damu discusses several changes that occurred during the time of Ambedkar. Ambedkar, in his speeches at the Mahad satyagraha, stressed more on
education, moral education, self-dignity, and consciousness of oppression. Under
the influence of Ambedkar, Damu participated in the social movements. Damu’s
journey started from a small village in Ozar in Maharashtra to Mumbai to escape
persecution. In the city, although illiterate and despite the disadvantages of his
Mahar caste, Damu earned respect in the various odd jobs he undertook. He
began going to the station doing all sorts of odd jobs. Slowly, people started
recognizing him and got to know him better. A man named Gangaram hired him
to sell newspapers. He earned 5 annas on the first day. Then he started news
paper business. The newspaper business was booming. Every night he went from
one press to the other settling accounts and asking often all the people he knew
there. They gave him some information about the Bomboy Samachar press.
Then he would go to the press offices. A couple of years went away. All of a
sudden, Gangaram died. The paper agency began to lose money and he left the
paper agency. He was looking for a work to maintain his livelihood. Fortunately,
he was quite quickly hired by the Great Indian Peninsula (GIP) railway but only
as a daily wage laborer. This meant that he had to go and wait outside the
premises every morning. If they had extra work, he would be called in.
Someday, they paid 11 annas per day. After that, he found some work in Thane
where a new railway line was being laid. There he had to work with cement and
concrete. They dug large ditches for the electricity poles and filled them with
cement after holding the poles in place. His job was to get the work done and
give a report to his boss. The workers appreciated and always cooperated. This
project was complete a few days later and his file returned to the Kurla car shed.
He was given some odd jobs like unloading sacks of cement from the truck and taking them inside the warehouse. Once when he was carrying water from Kurla station, he met a Gora Saheb and said, “I want work.” Gora Saheb said, “What work?” He said, “I will do any work.” Immediately, he took him and got him examined by a doctor. On 1st November 1924, he became a regular worker of the G. I. P. Railways. He was a temporary worker and with great difficulty, he would earn eighteen rupees per month. When he became a permanent worker, he earned twenty rupees and 8 Annas. He worked with William Saheb. He explained his duties to him very patiently. He learned much from him within few days.

It was around 1925, when the electric train started in Mumbai on the harbor railway track. A power house was being built next to the main track. A three inch-by-three inch hole was dug about a furlong away from this power house. The engineers connected a wire to the overhead wire and put its other end in the hole which had water in it. At the same time, they saw the water begin to bubble and spelt out. The Saheb knew then that electricity had arrived. They inaugurated the electric train. After that, he was transferred to the main railway station called Victoria terminals. Gora Saheb named this station after Queen Victoria. His friend William Saheb was also working there. He worked under him for two years at Bori Bunder. Here, he had to fix whatever problems the drivers faced. He cleaned any oil spills and carbon soot that had accumulated on the engine. He was friendly with all the drivers. His payment went up to Rs. 27 month. He worked perfectly with the help of William Saheb. He got promoted to the post of electric motor mechanic. His pay was raised and he started receiving
forty two rupees. Then, he was transferred to the Karla Car shed. In his new job, he had to inspect every train. Those who had worked with him in his previous department looked at him with respect. Anyway, good days arrived finally and he could reach the goal of economic independence. Then he participated in Baba Saheb Ambedkar’s social movements. He became Guruji’s assistant. There are lots of works to be done. It was a big challenge to organize such a huge conference like Dalit movement.

Ambedkar announced a change of strategy in our struggle. Our efforts towards securing respect, independence and equality with others through the education, we want our children to grow up and have a dignified life. They want to be respected to sent to school. Dalits remain Hindus. Dalits are always treated as inferior. They will never have respect in our society.

Years had passed and Damu was blessed with the first child. Later he had six babies including four sons named Janu, Sudha, Dina, Chootu and two daughters Leela and Trushe. All of them would go to school. Baba Saheb called the Dalits to renounce Hinduism because Hindu religion did not allow Dalits to enter the Hindu temples. Why should the Dalit community favour the religion that preaches untouchability and discrimination! Who has given the Brahmin class the authority to decide their fate? They decided to leave Hinduism. Dalits opted for conversion only after being convinced that Buddhism had no priestly class and certainly nobody was considered untouchables. All men and all women were equal and they were treated as such. There were no rituals or rites, or strict disciplines to follow. You only follow your hearts and devotion.
Baba Saheb finally chose the dates for conversion to Buddhism. The initiation ceremony was to be held at Nagpur. All the followers of Dalits and the Buddhist priests were to chant mantras. Babasaheb would be converted to Buddhism and all the Dalits would follow him. Most of the Dalits were going to embrace Buddhism. Dalits left the boundaries of Hinduism and, led by Baba Saheb, entered the new religion of equality, compassion, and understanding. Damu’s children were studying well and would fulfill all his aspirations, rising to high positions in their chosen careers and overcome the caste discrimination, humiliation, poverty. Jadhav studied well and he got Doctoral Degree in Economics from America. He reached high position, and then he joined the I.M.F. and in effect representing the country even though he was merely a Mahar, a Dalit Harijan, and a scheduled caste belonging to the lowest stratum of society. His forefathers were village servants. So what? He achieved a high position with the influenced by Ambedkar’s persona. Janu passed matriculation in 1956 he inspired by Baba Saheb meetings and participated as a Dalit student. He took admission in Siddartha College. He was doing odd jobs. He applied for the prestigious Indian Administrative Service. He was selected to join the service in 1963 even his father was a class IV employee and belonged to Mahar caste. He was selected to the I. A. S. and he won this honour with Baba Saheb’s inspiration.

Dina was a boxer. He took classes while studying in Siddartha College. He went on to become a successful Boxer. His children reached high positions. They managed to achieve those through hard work and perseverance challenging the
morasses of untouchability, illiteracy and backwardness. His journey was from poverty and suffering towards self-sufficiently and self-esteem with the help of education.

Another autobiography is Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* in which we examine the nature and scope of pain and resistance. It traces social consciousness in its various manifestations. This chapter also analyses the social transformation that took place due to the impact of Dalit social movements and the changes which have come about in Marathi Dalit writing. Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography *Akkarmashi* is distinct in terms of experiences of the writers. He reflected pain and rebellion, protest, social suffering, etc. His autobiography is the milestone in Marathi Dalit literature. It represents Dalit life in a different way. His autobiography portrays written documents of suffering, exclusion and tolerances of the Mahar community of Maharashtra. These documents are instances of deprivation, violation, exploitation, and protest against the upper caste and their own community as well. He also demands the right to live in the world on equal status. His texts transcend the boundaries of personal narrative and operate at once as a social, historical, and political record.

Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* portrays the wretched life of the writer. It also reflects the anguish against the unequal and unjust society. Limbale mentions in his preface that ‘the book should be looked at as an act of social atrocity and not merely a piece of art. Limbale lodges protest against the upper caste Hindu society. He protests because he is not accepted by both the Dalit community and the upper caste community. He laments that he is expelled by his
own community for his stand on *Akkarmashi*. His life experiences are entirely
different from those of other Dalit autobiography.

As Limbale grows, he is constantly and continuously haunted by the serious
thoughts of his social identity. At times, he expresses his anger and becomes
emotional. He becomes rebellious because of the existing social circumstances.
The pain and suffering of Limbale are not because he is an untouchable or
because he is poor, but because he is rejected within his own community, which
enrages him further. It pains and troubles him psychologically and disturbs
personally.

Limbale’s autobiography is a nightmare. His question- ‘who am I?’ cannot
be answered easily because it has connotations. Behind the answer to his question,
there is a great irony of fate. Limbale does not question himself. He questions the
entire society. Limbale’s father lives in a mansion and his mother in a hut,
whereas he is on street. In this way, the entire life of Limbale seems to be trapped
in *chakravyuha* where there is no escape even after death. Janardhan wagemore
pointed out his book, *sahityachintan*. Limbale’s situation is like Hamlet. Limbale
protests against the upper caste social system and Hindu society. Though his
protest looks very noisy and ferocious on the superficial level, it does not reflect
the same in his actions. Limbale meditates and ponders over his helpless
conditions throughout the entire text. Limbale portrays himself as a helpless
inconsistent being. He gains sympathy from the readers.
Limbale’s autobiography doesn’t talk about Dalit patriarchy. He doesn’t cite any specific example of Dalits explicitly in his autobiography. He talks about the upper caste male chauvinism in his autobiography. He also presents a painstaking picture of Dalit women. The upper caste Patils in the village harass, torture, and deceive the Dalit women. They play with their lives and are not repentant about it. It happens so because of the upper caste male dominance which makes the Dalit women in the village suffer so much.

At the outset, Sharan Kumar Limbale mentions as to what made him write an autobiography like Akkarmashi in such a way. He makes his point very clear. He says that the entire autobiography revolves around the questions of his ‘identity’. It resonates throughout the book. Limbale asserts:

I lived as an Akkarmashi, as on untouchable and poor which is what I wrote in Akkarmashi. Everything I mentioned explicitly in my autobiography i.e., the way I lived, experienced life from my childhood, the reminiscence of whatever I heard in the childhood are still fresh in me like a fresh wound. I looked at my fast with cat’s eye. I recollected my life experiences, I felt like telling them therefore I wrote (Limbale: 6).

The pain of a wretched life has been narrated in Akkarmashi. The anguish is against an unjust and unequal society. Limable mentions in his preface that “the book should be looked as an act of social atrocity and not merely a piece of art” (Limbale-8). Through Akkarmashi, Limbale has exposed the wrong-doings of all the upper caste Patils of the villages. He declares that he is one of the victims of
this social set-up. He makes his stand very clear when he says that we look at the text as a means of social propagation. Hence, it is essential to tell about our slavish predicaments in order to alert our fellow beings. At the beginning of the autobiography, Limbale talks about his ‘bifurcated personality’. He says, “I am bifurcated in terms of everything i.e. in terms of village, language, motherhood, fatherhood, caste and religion.” He further elaborates:

I am a person with no fixed identity or fractured identity I have lost my personality. The social system here has treated me like a criminal where my very birth is proved illegal and illicit”. Limbale claims that society norms are largely responsible for his predicament. “I lived through out my life like the way a raped woman lives. I lived in rages, the social system treated me brutally (Limbale: 5)

Limbale strongly protests against the rigid, orthodox, and conservative upper caste society. He expresses his profound anguish in the beginning of the text. He realizes that the unacceptable and intolerable rules and regulations made by the upper caste people made him suffer throughout. He laments over his ‘Akkarmashi-ness’ of being called an Akkarmashi. The pain inflicted upon him by the society troubles and tortures him throughout this life. Limbale lodges his protest against the Hindu social and religious systems. He says the upper caste people can do anything and everything they want on the basis of their religion, caste, power, property, and culture. Nobody questions them. They harass the untouchable women and play with the women’s lives. They exploit Dalit women without compunction through cruel sexual abuse. The unruly behavior of the
upper castes disturbs Limbale. He claims that the Hindu caste system is solely responsible for dividing one person from the other. It promotes the feeling of hatred, ego, and inferiority. People with such mentality cannot treat others equally. The upper castes’ behavior is egoistic in manner. It is the Hindu social system which is responsible for keeping out the lower caste from the developmental opportunities. The untouchables have suffered for ages altogether because of lack of education, culture, property, self-respect and dignity. Limbale, therefore, strongly believes that the entire Dalit literature is nothing but a saga of pain and suffering. Limbale further elaborates the wrong-doings of the upper castes:

The upper castes have property and belonging to their ancestors. They have played with the lives of the untouchable women. At times, they have also destroyed their married lives. The Patils and Zamindars of the villages have kept untouchable women as their whore. The Mahar women rely on them solely. They are always at the mercy of the Patils. The entire Dalit household calls these houses as the houses of Patils’ whore and their sons as the sons of Patil’s whore (Limbale: 50)

Limbale expresses his deepest concern over the helpless conditions of the Mahar women. He is terribly disturbed by the fact that he is also a son of one such Patil’s whore. Limbale’s comments on religion are important and relevant. Limbale criticizes the Hindu religion. Talking about his own household, he mentions the relationship between his grandmother, Santamai (a Mahar woman),
and a man whom he called ‘Dada’ (a man named Dostagir, a Muslim man) despite having different religions and castes.

Santamai and Dada Dastagir lived together till the end. Dada Dastagir accompanied Santamai till the end of her life. Their religions never became an obstacle in their relationship. They stayed together happily. Limbale further decides that his grandmother Santamai and dada Dastagir loved and liked him equally. Here, at this point of time, Limbale raises significant questions regarding religion. Limbale queries whether man prevents religion or religion prevents man. “Whose width is bigger – religion’s or man’s? Who’s for whom? Whether man is for religion or religion is for man? Is it not possible for a man to live without a religion?” (Limbale: 51). Thus, Limbale questions the basic tenets of religion. He also underscores the significance of valuing each other as human beings and not making distinctions between people on the basis of their caste, creed, or religion. Limbale thinks that man should be recognized as a human being. His other affiliations such as caste and religion should not become hurdles in his path. Limbale’s plea is that man should be recognized and valued as man. The life experience of Limbale is entirely different from that of others. Limbale is born out of an illicit relationship between an upper caste father and a Mahar mother.

Hanmanta Limbale, an upper caste Patil, refuses to accept that Limbale in his own son. Limbale writes with utmost anguish:

Why did my mother say ‘yes’ to the rape which brought one into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse?
Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? Which family would claim me as its descendants? Whose son am I, really? (Limbale: 36)

As he grows, Limbale is constantly and continuously haunted by the serious thought of social identity. At times, he expresses his anger and becomes emotional. He questions himself. He becomes religious because of the existing social circumstance. The pain and the suffering of Limbale is not because he is an untouchable or because he is poor, but because he has been rejected within his own community. His own community boycotts him. This adds fuel to fire. It troubles him psychologically. The pain of Limbale’s unacceptance perplexes him, and he is traumatized by the bitter and harsh social experiences. He is utterly confused. Sometimes he behaves in an eccentric manner. The existing social circumstances are responsible for Limbale’s suffering and for torturous life. There are many factors in a Dalit’s life because of which they suffer. Hunger is one of the most important factors in Dalit autobiographies. Limbale narrates his school experience to show how he suffered because of hunger.

Once as child, Limbale narrates his school trip along with his classmates. During the lunch hour, their teachers distributed the leftovers of the upper caste children’s lunch to Limbale and his friends. In order to satisfy their insatiable hunger, Limbale and his friends attacked the leftovers like hungry vulture. When Limbale returned home, he narrated the entire incident to Masamai. Hearing about it, his mother replied, “Why did not you get at least a small portion of it for me? Leftover food is nectar”. (Limbale: 3).
Untouchability is another significant factor in Dalit autobiographies. It is also one of the reasons why the upper castes tortured and troubled the untouchables. Limbale thinks that he was born to an untouchable woman and, therefore, he is an untouchable. Masamai is an untouchable. She is also poor. She is harassed and betrayed by the upper castes. Commenting on poverty, Limbale says that poverty makes man do anything and everything. Thus Masmai goes to the Patil and is forced to live with him as his whore because of her poverty. Comprehended to poverty is illiteracy and this leads to superstitious beliefs of many kinds. Limbale narrates that his people believed God to be the only remedy. The untouchable women in the village worshipped ‘Mariaai’. They believed that Mariaai would solve their problems. They had strong faith in their traditional gods. Caste is discussed at length in Dalit autobiographies. Limbale’s Akkarmashi presents a gruesome portrayal of caste discrimination. Dalits have suffered because of their caste. Limbale is the son of an upper caste man Hanmanta Limbale who derives his fatherhood to Sharan Kumar Limbale because he was born to a Mahar woman. In fact, he tells Masamai that Sharan Kumar Limbale is not his son. That he is the son of somebody and, therefore, he disowns him. Masamai is the protagonist in Limbale’s Akkaramarshi. She is harassed by the upper caste Patils of the village. Her entire life takes a different turn. She keeps physical relations with upper caste people and bears many children. Her marriage to Vithal Kamble breaks up when Hanmanta Patil forces his attentions on her and their caste panchayat orders the husband to desert Masamai, taking their two sons with him. She is then forced to seek refuge with Hanmanta Limbale
and later with different upper caste Patils. Masamai changes men like clothes. All the men in her life deceived her throughout. Masamai, however, uses this as a strategy of survival and lives her life on her own terms. She bears Sidram Patel nine children and takes care of all of them. Masamai leads a very pathetic life, a whore despite numerous odds. She educates Limbale which is something praiseworthy.

But Masamai’s action influences her daughter Nagi, who roams with Chandu Patil all over the village. Masamai is unable to control or influence her own daughter. Santamai Sharan Kumar’s grandmother also takes a similar position. She lives with a Muslim man, Daba Dastagir. Overall, women in Akkarmashi influence one another by their acts or deeds. They also get affected by each others’ behaviour.

Women in Akkarmashi are portrayed as shameless, unthinking, submissive, immoral, and characterless by Limbale. They are portrayed in a negative light. They are not safe. They are treated as sexual objects that exist to satisfy the needs of the upper caste males. They do not seem to fight against their condition, rather they are shown to submissively accept and tolerate every other’s atrocity perpetrated against them. Women characters in Akkarmashi almost behave or imitate each other.

Limbale gives account of three generations of women in his autobiography. They are Nirmi, Masamai and Santamai respectively. Women have been given secondary status in Limbale’s autobiography. They are shown to
be helpless and poor. Limbale has committed a “character assassination” of his own mother. The untouchable women are shown as selling wine. They are often tormented and taunted by the men in the village. Interestingly, in one of the incidents, when Nagi, Limbale’s sister, roams around with Chandu Patil, Limbale threatens her and beats her up instead of going and beating Chandu Patil. When Limbale complains to Masamai regarding the behavior of Nagi, she replies that Nagi may behave the way she wants. She tells him to mind his own business and not interfere in her personal life. Limbale feels terribly disturbed on listening to this. He feels alienated in his own house. He feels like a criminal at this juncture.

The upper caste men of the village, the Patils, in Akkarmashi are opportunistic by nature. They are very crafty and cunning. They are responsible for spoiling the married lives of many Mahar women. The Patils keep relations forcefully with the Mahar women. Hanmantha Limbale and Sidram Patil disrespect the women and treat them as their whores. They have their eye on young and beautiful Mahar girls and women in the village. Thus, the Patil community in the village creates trouble and is behind the social atrocities against the Mahars.

In his autobiography, Limbale portrays himself as helpless. He complains about the discrimination and seems lacking courage to fight back against his adverse conditions in his life. He laments over his wretched and pathetic situation. In such helpless conditions, he cannot lodge his strong protest against the upper caste community. He only ponders over his helpless conditions. He lacks courage and potentials to win over the gruesome circumstances. Limbale
does not seem to be taking any direct action against the upper caste; rather he tolerates and suffers. His feelings do not go hand in hand with his relations.

There are many incidents in *Akkarmashi* which give evidence of Limbale’s immoral nature. There is an incident where Limbale’s mother-in-law does not allow him to sleep with his wife. He cannot control his sexual desire and asks for money from his mother-in-law for seeing a prostitute. Limbale also suffers from an Oedipus complex. He feels that his mother creates a torturous situation for him that leads to all the consequent suffering in his life. He is perplexed with the pitiable condition of his sisters and their utter poverty. He even thinks of marrying one of his sisters to improve her living conditions (Limbale: 73). This kind of thinking from an educated man is quite unexpected. His thoughts go against Ambedkar’s thinking and ideology. He seems to be lacking both self-respect and dignity for which Dr. B. R. Ambedkar fought relentlessly throughout his life.

Dalit pain has its roots in the caste system and they continue to live their lives under various kinds of oppression. Dalit women experience “double oppression of being Dalit and being women. Limbale asserts, “My words are my experiences.” According to him, many Dalit autobiographies would be written and the entire Indian Literature would be strengthened. Limbale says that the problems of the untouchable have to be discussed openly. There is a need to bring the problem of the downtrodden to the fore. As he puts it, “The people should know about our lives therefore we write” (Limbale: 13).
When he was attending school regularly, the teacher asked his father’s name. He did not know his father’s name because his mother was not married to Hanmanta. So he faced a painful experience during his school days. Then he completed primary and high school education. He studied hard and stood second in final school exams. He passed with merit marks. His friend Mallaya and he studied up to B. A. He got a job of telephone operator at Ahmedpur. He became financially independent. His life became comfortable as he had enough money to spend. With the influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s movement, he renounced Hinduism to convert to Buddhism because Buddhism has no priest class and certainly nobody is considered untouchable. All men and women are equal.

Siddalingaih’s *Ooru Keri* explains the context of the social and economical and cultural dimensions through the lens of his own life in the contemporary social system. Autobiography as commonly understood presents the facts or fiction recounted by a person from the circumstances of his life. He may represent social and economic conditions of his community through his autobiography. *Ooru Keri* means neighborhood roughly. It is similar to *Vasti*, an Autobiography by the Marathi writers Vasant Moon. Both these works recount the trauma, and suffering not only of an individual but also of the whole community.

His autobiography lays bare facts about Dalits. It is revolutionary in nature and ignites the sensitivity of the Dalit community. It is a tirade against the upper caste chauvinists. It is written in the realistic and naturalistic mode in his autobiography. He describes various stages of the writer’s life. He explains
poverty and caste humiliation as the most pertinent Dalit issues. Poverty that strikes Siddalingaiah’s family is beyond his comprehension as a boy. “It was amusing to watch the two men trundle on like bullocks, while the third followed them swinging a whip and making them plough. A strange agony gripped me the moment I realized that one of the men carrying the yoke was my father” (Siddalingaiah; 2003:2). Some women who came to where we were standing and sighed, “What a plight has befallen poor Dyavanna!” This doubled his agony. In his childhood, he always grows like a Dalit boy. He is socially humiliated and economically oppressed, but he is incapable of understanding as to why his family suffers poverty. He is in the grip of anger and frustration and ultimately awareness leads him to become the most influential Dalit writers of Kannada literature. He first emerged on the public scenes as a student leader in the 1970s, a period when Dalit rights–issues had begun triggering conflict with the upper class people. At that time, the Bandaya movement which stood for all progressive movements sanitized Siddalingaiah’s thoughts.

When he was studying, he faced many problems because of his social and economical status. When he studied in primary and secondary standard at Magadi and Manchanabele, he joined a Government Primary School because a teacher called Andalamma was working in his school. She had special affection on him because of his poverty. She gave him books and pencils because of their poverty. Poverty that strikes Siddalingaiah’s family is beyond his comprehension as a boy. Born of an illiterate couple, Siddalingaiah conquers poverty and social discrimination through imagination. The writer is seen waging a relentless battle
against social chauvinism and economic misery. In this process, they choose a
democratic path for the solution of social issues. The writer subverts the basic
notion and rises up to an optimistic vision about the Dalit future. The question is
whether his narrative mode is within the ambit of the Dalits. He suggests other
ways of overcoming social problems through imagination. In other words, Dalits
can envisage a better future and nature. Their own culture for social identity, in a
way, shows a similarity to Limbale’s view that “the central purpose of the Dalit
Literature is to enable the development of a new consciousness and identity
among Dalits” (Limbale: 15).

Gangamalaiah, one of his father’s elder brothers, gave some advice to him
and taught him public speaking. He explained how to speak on a given topic.
When he studied in childhood days, he went to several free libraries and read up
books and journals. He would attend meetings organized by rail blockade
agitations by Kannada and Tamil people in Srirampura. He used to listen to them.
He was inspired by their speeches. When he studied in his childhood days,
National Days were celebrated at the hostel. They insisted the leaders such as S.
Nijalingappa, B. Rachaiah, Nagappa Alva and several others. They would be
thrilled to hear the speeches. In those days, news of his Oratory spread all over the
colony. People asked him to give speeches and enjoyed hearing to him. He gave
speeches on the streets where everyone listened to his speeches. It was Ambedkar
Day at Town Hall in Srirampura. The Chief Minister Veerendra Patil and the
High Court judge Beemaiah and IAS officer Baranaiah and minister Rachaiah
were the guests. He heard several things about Ambedkar and gained enough
confidence to speak about him. Some students knew that he would give a speech on Ambedkar ideology. They invited Siddalingaiah to speak. He spoke with confidence about the hostel problems. When he studied during college days, Bangalore University had launched an ‘earn while you learn’ scheme to help the students. He joined the soap factory to work between five and nine every evening. It was a part-time job that he found very useful. Then Dalit students founded Vicharavadi Parishad. They visited all the Dalit hostels in Bangalore and got to know the problem of Dalits. They would not get proper arrangements in the hostels for bathing and lavatory were in bad condition. Lavatories did not have doors. They visited the hostel and instilled courage among the students. His friends knew the students’ problems and explained those to the Chief Minister. Scholarship amount had to be increased. Hostel buildings were repaired and mess hostel were built. Chief Minister called his personal secretary and instructed him to solve the problems. When he was doing M. A. in Kannada, he became direct disciple of Dr. G. S. Shivarudrappa. He had not paid his hostel fees. He was thus not in a position to take his exams. Dr. K. Murali Siddappa paid his fees and made it possible to write exams. Nevertheless, he was awarded gold medal in his Post-Graduation. In spite of such hurdles, he got a lecturer job in the Kannada department and he led a comfortable life with self-esteem. This all became possible with the help of education.

Aravind Malagatti’s autobiography Government Brahmana tells us the story about painful experiences of his life in different levels. During his childhood days in his village, there were three families know for their affluence.
Those were the Setjis, Marathis, and the Veerashaivas. There seemed to be a competition among these three families. Any death in the village made us happy. One day somebody died in the Veerashaiva family. There was a custom of throwing coins on the corpse during the funeral procession. It must have been a matter of prestige for them. Once the money thrown on the corpse fell on the ground, it was the job of the Dalit, to fight among themselves to pick up the coins on the corpse, during the funeral procession. During marriages and festivals, his community people had to pick up the coins. He explains all caste experiences in all facets of the society. The author reflects on specific instances from his childhood and student days that illustrate the normative cruelty practiced by caste Hindu society on Dalits. He describes the caste system not only between people on the basis of their birth but also among the animals. When he was ten years old, his mother used to tell him:

The only she-buffalo in our lane used to be in our house. It was the offspring of the she-buffalo that was sent as a gift to my aayi by her parents. Aayi was thus proud of owning the only she-buffalo in the lane. There was no he-buffalo in our village to mate with our she-buffalo. But in two neighboring villages, Kuntoji and Basarkod, there were two he-buffaloes. These buffaloes belonged to the village heads. There is no use raising he-buffaloes in the hot plains. They can not be used for ploughing as they lack the capacity to withstand heat. So, common people never reared he-buffaloes. For the village Gowda and Desai, it was a matter of prestige to rear he-buffaloes. Therefore, the village Gowda’s and Desai’s
The buffaloes were in great demand. Kuntoji is closer to our place than Basarkod. My aayi decided to take the buffalo to Kuntoji. But it was already dusk. It would be completely dark before one reached Kuntoji. They would not let the he-buffalo mate with our she-buffalo in the night (Government Brahmana: 19-20).

So this tells the past experiences of the caste system not only between the people on the basis of their births but also among the animals. Aravind Malgatti elaborates in some detail about traditions in the Dalits community. It is a custom that the Okuli’s festival should be celebrated every year in Sravana, the fifth month of the Hindu calendar. The Okuli of Bidarakundi was famous in the surrounding area. The tradition went like this: Dalit women had to remove their blouses and wear *aduganchche*, a lower garment worn above the kneecaps, hemmed tightly and tucked in to the waist band. A sari was worn to cover the waist and the loose end of it was used to cover the head. The women had to help several long branches of the lucky tree. Standing opposite these women were non-Dalit and non-brahmin men. This group usually comprised the notorious elements of the village. He describes superstitions in his village in the name of the tradition of the untouchable colony. They watch the Eastman colour movie Okuli in the name of tradition. Aravind malagatti asserts in his autobiography that we reject all forms of superstitions. Here, Tharakeswar aptly pointed out that these incidents culminated in the episode, “my ex-beloved” and “some girls flirt with future”. Here, he could not marry his lover because of his social status and family as the representative of caste system obstructed them. In these particular cases, the
caste society failed to stop the physical union for the time being, but ensures that the union is truncated and does not get institutionalized.” (Afterword to Government Brahmana: 122) Malagatti describes how he was discriminated by fellow students and he talks that it is a capitalist education system. Malagatti admits that there were too great aims in his life where he started his research. The first aim was to marry her and the second was to work as a lecturer at least for a day in Karnataka University, Dharwad. He faced a lot of problems. However, he got a job as lecturer in Government College under Karnataka University, Dharwad. His life became comfortable enough and he achieved self-respect with the help of education.

Vasant Moon’s autobiography Growing Up Untouchable in India (2001) also describes the importance of his community in Nagpur. He eloquently describes growing up in a Dalit slum in the city of Nagpur in central Maharashtra Model Mills. Moon’s autobiography presents us with powerful personal and collective memory of caste oppression and struggle in India beginning from the 19th century. He explains the poor condition of his community and how most of his people depend on mills for work. His mother was also a worker in the mill. His mother left her husband and returned to her father with her two children after the death of his Grandfather Sadasiv. His mother faced lot of problems. She married Waman who was a widower. He had four daughters and one son from his first wife. His father was a driver for the Parsis at 250 rupees per year. It was not a small amount at that time, but he was addicted to drinking alcohol. So she left her drunken husband and returned to her father. Before the death of her father, she
had never put a foot outside of the house for work. She was unused to manual labour. (Growing Up untouchable: 22)

She would not have got any household work or cooking because of the caste system which Moon describes with aching poignancy and which is of great uncertainty, impoverishment, and most pervasive hunger. She left her husband and returned to her father and two children. Leaving her young children in the care of the neighbours, Purna set out day after day in search of work. Since Hindu households would not employ untouchables because of the social system, Moon reaches the Dalit political movements to discard the caste-based occupations. Around 1930, Dasharath Patil gave a call for reforming his community and Mahars from miles around stopped carrying away dead animals. In every village, boycotts were imposed on these rebels by caste Hindus. Mahars who went to the market could not make purchases. Mills in the villages were closed to them. In some incidents, Mahars were beaten up. Dasarath Patil proclaimed, “Let us have our own markets”. Mahars established the market in front of his house in Vela. Dasarath Patil bought enough supplies from his own pockets. He joined Babasaheb’s movement in 1920 and, from then onwards, he spent his whole life in social service.

Moon considers it a paradigm shift to the world of modernity. He recollects the political practices of the Dalit activists like Dasarath Patil. At the time, Dalits tried to appropriate market for their mobility in the monitored Indian society. Moon considered the above-mentioned shifts as redemption from the social backwardness. When he passed Fourth Grade examination and joined fifth
class, his mother was very poor. It was impossible for his mother to manage. He has been portrayed as an agent who fought with the casteist Dalit Indian patriarchy. His uncle Hari admitted him to the Patwardhan High School. His uncle paid the school fees and he brought the books, note books, pencils, and other equipments because of their poverty. During his school days, he did not have sufficient clothes. Still Moon rejected the scholarship of Harijan Seva Sangh because of the casteist implication of the word Harijan. At that time, many of the children, who otherwise would have been forced into joining the labour force, now had the privilege of being able to attend school. There was also an urgent recognition in the community that education might be the ticket to help one come out of desperate circumstances. Moon explains that they were educated against all the odds through a social network that provided timely help through the collective raising of tuition funds and donations of clothes and school suppliers from the economically stronger members in the community. Often such help came from school teachers themselves, most of whom were upper caste Brahmans who had been influenced by Gandhi’s ideal of eradicating untouchablity and Moon writes of the great sympathy and consideration that many of his upper-caste teachers extended to him and to other Dalit students. His discussion of the Gandhian movement, however, also recalled the deep fissures that emerged between Gandhi’s conception of a top down reform strategy through moral expectations to upper-caste Hindus to reject untouchability and a more militant anti-caste struggle led by Ambedkar. He called to leave Hinduism and published ‘Janata,’ a newspaper. All the news papers would come to our organization. The Samatha Sainik
Dal people gathered in the evening. One person would read the news aloud so that everyone could discuss it. People began to think about Ambedkar’s call to leave Hinduism. The Samata Sainik Dal organized a house-to-house publicity campaign. This was in the mid 1930s before the Scheduled Caste Federation was established. Under the leadership of Waman Godbole, the elders could see the activities of the youth in the community. At least, one boy from each family became a volunteer of the organization. Wamanrao Godbole called the young boys to a meeting. He explained Baba Saheb’s thinking and told them to spread the word. “From now on, don’t celebrate Hindu Festivals” (Growing up untouchable: 43). To establish the Scheduled Caste Federation, the Scheduled Caste Federation conference was set to be held on 17 July, 1942.

Vamana Rao took double responsibility of the arrangements for the conference and the protection of Baba Saheb. He himself traveled everywhere to organize the youth. Branches of the organization were established in all the neighborhoods. After the Scheduled Caste Federation was founded in 1942, in the same year, a student organization was established by high school and college students. Then elections for the students’ organization were declared. Students’ elections were formed. Thus, an all-India scheduled caste student federation was established in Bombay in 1942 and a conference was held. In this conference, thousands of students were present for the welcoming ceremony of Mandal. Discussions went on student issues, this organization to fight on behalf of their own problems. The Dalit movement turned to be a Mahar movement. So, many people from Mahar community dedicated their lives to the Ambedkar movement.
and also became a Buddhist. In 1946, Nagpur city was burning with movements. Baba Saheb Ambedkar’s movement had tremendous effect on the cultural life of the community. Dalits were inspired by Ambedkar’s ideology. They wrote poems, plays, balladeers, hymn and sang songs about Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dalit poets raised their voice against atrocities on Dalits. As education spread among the Dalit community, its cultural consciousness began to be transformed. With the inspiration of Ambedkar, Moon completed B.A. Degree. Then he got the employment in the office of the Deputy Accountant General in Post and Telegraph. With the help of education, he became self-reliant and triumphant of hope, self-respect and optimism. The Dalits’ works were influenced by the ideology of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The Dalit movements influenced people to participate in political and cultural and literary activities. Dalit writers wanted to change the oppressors with their writings. They produced dramas and opened schools. Vasant Moon wrote many articles and poems published in the magazines for his community. In these movements, many Dalits dedicated their lives to the Ambedkar Movements and also to the Buddhist movement. He had begun a program of giving free milk to the children in the community in 1946. There was a battle between congress party and Mahar youths. The Poona Act was proposed by Ambedkar and the congress party was against the Act. Ambedkar firmly believed that we should fight for social independence ever before we fight for political independence. He published many news papers and magazines for Dalits to spread political awakening.
Another autobiography is Valmiki’s *Joothan* which is known to be one of the first Dalit literary texts in Hindi. This is an autobiographical account of Valmiki’s life journey from his birth as an ‘untouchable’ to becoming a Dalit. The word *Joothan* means the ‘leftover’. The leftover of the upper caste is the food of the Dalits. It is the price the upper caste pay for Dalit labours. A *Joothan* is that which is rejected. Valmiki’s mother had confronted Sukhdev Singh who gave her ‘*Joothan*’. This autobiography also shows the rebellion of Dalits. His mother’s act of rejection and rebellion had implanted seeds of rebellion in Omprakash’s heart. Their pain and anger turned to rebellion in some of the incidents narrated in the autobiography. The autobiography *Jootan*, on the whole, discusses Omprakash Valmiki’s life journey to study and get educated ‘to improve his caste’. His father supported him immensely. His father had a visionary’s hope of seeing his son reading the ‘four letters’ and living a better life. He remembers:

A Christian used to visit our neighbourhood. His name was Sewak Ram Masihi. He would sit with the children of Chuhras around him. He used to teach them reading and writing. The government schools did not allow these children to enroll. My family sent only myself to Sewak Ram Masihi. My brothers are all working. There was no question of sending our sister to school. I learnt my alphabet in Master Sewak Ram Masihi’s open air school, a school without mats and Rooms. One day, Sewak Ram Masihi and my father had an argument. My father took me to the Basic Primary School. There my father begged Master Har Phool Singh;
‘Masterji, I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two (Valmiki: 2).

Every parent lives with a hope, a hope to see their children live in society equally on all grounds where there is no caste discrimination. They want to see their children coming like other children. They don’t want them to work like them in the fields. Valmiki’s autobiography discusses larger issues of Dalits’ life and issues that are very vast and profound. He narrated untouchability, caste discrimination, poverty, inferiority complex, etc. that Valmiki faced:

Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit away behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded (Valmiki: 2-3).

His perseverance to cross all hurdles in life and prove himself self-sufficient is noteworthy in his life. He experienced a thorny life. Despite many shortcomings, he never gave up his dream of starting on his own feet. The support from his father is very impressive. The teachers in the school never encouraged Valmiki:

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking
about a great guru, I remember all those teacher who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them (Valmiki: 4).

This is the common experience that happens to most of the Dalit women students, but it is boys in Joothan. The incident where Valmiki was made to sweep the entire school is very much pitiable:

Obeying headmaster’s orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, “After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the play ground. The play ground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day (Joothan : 4-5).

The teachers’ severe discrimination of Dalit students discourages them a lot. Kumud Powde and Urmila Pawar, Dalit woman writers, too, have written about their share of suffering at the hands of their teachers. Urmila Pawar treated her teacher as one of her four enemies. Powde’s teacher discouraged her by refusing to teach her Sanskrit because she was a Dalit. Caste is the root cause of all these problems. Valmiki’s father insisted a lot on improving his caste status through the education of his child. Can caste be wiped away with education? For that matter, can anything on this earth take away the caste you are born in? Caste
is like wheels to a vehicle called life. Blessed is the one who is born in an upper caste family and woe to a person who is born in the lower caste. Caste discourages and makes a person a slave or a boss. It creates imbalances in society. Every problem has its roots in this monstrous caste-system. Valmiki remarks:

He (my father) seldom asked me to do anything by way of help because he wanted me to be able to focus single-mindedly on my education. He constantly said that I should improve my “caste” by getting an education. He did not know that “caste” cannot be improved by education. It can only be improved by taking in the right caste (Valmiki: 58).

Untouchability is the breed of caste system. Untouchability was very prevalent during pre-independent India and early post-independent India. This made the lives of Dalits miserable. The indignities and discrimination they faced were very hostile. Though there were some Dalits who were well off, they were not considered humans at all. Not many Dalits raised their voice to protest. It was only those educated children who used their pen as a weapon to protest and it was the educated or school going children who reached it easily in life. Bama in Karukku realized it when she was about ten years old and Ambedkar in autobiographical notes remarks that he relieved it when he was nine years old in Goneagon railway station on his visit to his father who worked there. Discrimination from peers, colleagues, and fellow-students hurts Dalit students a lot. Most of the drop-outs occur in villages due to this reason. Bama had to pass through upper caste houses to go to school. She was blamed for plucking flowers
in their houses many times even though she did not even look at them. Also, some upper caste women made her work in their houses before she went to school. Valmiki also had to work in the fields of upper caste men on the day of his exam:

Study at night... come with me. I have to sow cane.” Fauza ordered. I told him repeatedly that I had to study for my paper tomorrow, but he was adamant. He held me by the elbow and dragged me to his field. He threatened me to do the work or else. My mind was set aflame by his swearing’ (Valmiki: 57)

He was mocked at for studying by both the upper caste and by his own community. His villagers would say to his father, “Why are you making a nincompoop of your son by letting him study? He will belong neither at home nor in the outside world. Educated people are generally quite foolish, any way” (Valmiki: 59).

But he never got discouraged by such statements. He went to many houses to send children to schools. No one responded to him positively. “What is the point of sending him to school? When has crow become a swan?” (Valmiki: 6). He had only one thing in his mind; improving the “caste” (Valmiki:6). His father’s encouragements and his determination paid off and he got a job in the ordinance factory. Though he shifted to a technical job for his livelihood, he never gave up writing and acting in plays. He had to undergo discrimination wherever he went. His name ‘Valmiki’ created a lot of controversy in the minds of Savaranas. When he was studying in Dehradun, he was teased by his friends.
for his poverty. He did not have good clothes to protect himself from the severe cold. He used to wear his uncle’s sweater which looked big and funny on him. His friends used to make fun of him. He was very much humiliated when his friends called him ‘abbey chuhra’. He was mocked at by his classmates and friends on his looks and dress. Poverty laughs at Dalits. Caste, untouchability, and poverty are the kith and kin of Dalits. No Dalit is born from these three evils, but they have to fight and overcome these factors throughout their life. An educated Dalit can be an inspiration for other Dalits. Ambedkar is a living example of this. He inspired many Dalits to take up education seriously, to live a life of dignity, and to raise their voice against the barbaric nature of the upper caste people.

Dalit consciousness played a major role in the making of Dalit writers who analyzed the minutest things in the society to portray those in their writings. The Dalit consciousness believed in change. Therefore, the writing which came out through this consciousness was revolutionary in nature. This consciousness prompted them to fight for social justice and equality and demand for an egalitarian society. Baby Kamble’s autobiography The Prison We Broke is located in the tradition of direct self-consciousness. It is a head-on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other. It demonstrates how Brahminical domination turned the Mahars into slaves, forcing them to live in conditions worse than animals. It also shows the inhuman face of Dalit patriarchy where many of the Dalit men tortured their women inhumanly. Bama’s Karukku is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, education, etc. Through these perspectives, she gives us a clear picture of the caste oppression given out in portions
to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the
catholic church itself. She describes the painful life of herself as well as of her
community. Narendra Jadhav’s ‘Outcaste: A memoir’ discusses various stages of his
parents’ lives and how his family struggled for equality and justice. While his
community accepted its status as its fate, Damu, Jadhav’s father and the protagonist
of the autobiography, became consciousness of his oppression and caste
discrimination and rebelled against this.

Another autobiography is Sharankumar Limbale’s Akkarmashi in which the
nature and scope of pain and resistance has been examined. It traces social
consciousness in its various manifestations. Akkarmashi is distinct in terms of
experiences of the writers. He reflectes pain, protest, social suffering, etc. His
autobiography is the milestone in Marathi Dalit literature. It represents Dalit life in a
different way. It also reflects the anguish against the unequal and unjust society.
Siddalingaih’s Ooru Keri explains the context of the social and economical and
cultural dimensions through the lens of his own life in the contemporary social
system. His autobiography lays bare facts about Dalits. It is revolutionary in nature
and it ignites the sensitivity of the Dalit community. It is a tirade against the upper
caste chauvinists. Arvind Malagatti’s autobiography Government Brahma na tells us
the story about painful experiences of his life in different levels. The author reflects
on specific instances from his childhood and student days that illustrate the normative
cruelty practiced by caste Hindu society on Dalits. Vasant Moon’s autobiography
Growing Up Untouchable in India presents us with powerful personal and collective
memory of caste oppression and struggle in India beginning from the 19th century.
Valmiki’s *Joothan* which is known to be one of the first Dalit literary texts in Hindi gives an autobiographical account of Valmiki’s life journey from his birth as an ‘untouchable’ to becoming a Dalit. This autobiography also shows how the pain and anger of the Dalits turned to rebellion in some of the incidents narrated in the autobiography.

Dalits have suffered for ages. Lately, they have become conscious and have realized their potential. They no longer want to be subjugated to the upper castes. They have the torch of Ambedkar to take them forward. Ambedkar’s social reform movements carried a significant place for the Dalit community. Phule also played an important role for the emancipation of the Dalits. When English education was introduced in India and the Brahmins of Pune opposed education for Dalits, Phule came out strongly in support of the Dalits. With educational awareness created in the Indian constitution, Dalits became socially conscious about the circumstances and social problems of untouchability and caste discrimination. The education that the Dalit youths received in the post-independence period gave them the idea for revolution and voice for protest. Now, the Dalits realized what is good and what is bad for them. Because of education, the Dalits became more conscious and now they cannot be deceived by the upper caste people. This also helped them to change their lifestyles and their approach to deal with their problems which will be covered in the following chapter.
Work Cited


