CHAPTER II - EXPLOITATION OF DALITS: A STUDY OF THE SELECT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DALIT MARATHI WRITERS

To me Dalit is not a Caste,
He is a man exploited by the
Social and economic traditions of this country,
He does not believe in God,
Rebirth, Soul, Holy books teachings,
Separation, fate and Heaven
Because they have made him a slave. (Agarwal 4)

In Contextualizing Dalit Consciousness in Indian English Literature, Gangadhar Patwane, a Professor of Marathi and the founder editor of ‘Asmitadarsha’ defines ‘Dalit’ as a man who is continuously exploited in the name of religion practiced by the upper caste people in India. The second chapter’s main focus is on the autobiographies of popular Marathi Dalit Writers whose life histories unveil the suffering and exploitation of Dalits which can be seen even to this day. They expose the problems of Dalits such as unequal treatment, practice of untouchability, denial of basic necessities and most importantly denial of the right to education etc. Since time immemorial Dalits were made to live worse than animals by doing some menial jobs to fill their stomach without any identity of their own. In this regard, Arjun Dangle, in his book Poisoned Bread says: “Treated like animals, they lived apart from the village, and had to accept leftovers from the higher caste people, in return for their endless toil” (Dangle xxi).

The term ‘exploitation’ has become a synonym for the word ‘Dalit’ because, for as long as anyone can remember Dalits have been persistently exploited in one way or the other either directly or indirectly. In other words, exploitation of Dalits is found in every nook and corner of the society from the upper caste people and the Dalits are suffering from endless torture even to this day. These upper caste people have tortured Dalits in the name of religion and tradition and have kept them in ignorance by not educating them properly. Incidentally Sharankumar Limbale in his
Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations opines:

The Hindu religious order has considered the Dalits’ shadow, touch and speech to be impure. It has regarded them untouchable and guilty from birth. Dalits should not accumulate property or wear gold ornaments, they should live outside the village and own only donkeys and dogs. Furthermore they should partake of food only in clay utensils, use only shrouds for clothing and take inauspicious and crude names. Hindu scriptures are replete with numerous such commands. (Limbale 30)

Based on these rituals and codes put forth in the Hindu religious texts the upper caste Hindus bound the hands of the Dalits in the thread of religion and made them follow rules laid down in the Scriptures without raising their voice against it. In short, in the name of religion and by instigating fear in the minds of Dalits the upper caste Hindus are trying to keep Dalits in the lower position of the society by not encouraging them to come up in life. Moreover, the upper castes take Hindu religious texts to their support to treat Dalits inhumanly. The concept of the caste system finds its root during the time of Vedas and in the Purushasukta which is said to be of later addition to Rig Veda mentions about the existence of Chaturvarna system by giving the highest position to Brahmins followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya and the last position by Shudra. But during the era of Upanishads, Shudras, who constituted the fourth Varna in the caste system, participated equally with the other three upper castes in the metaphysical discussion. But it was in the era of revivalism that the discrimination on the basis of caste emerged and Dalits were regarded as impure and the concept of pure and impure theory dominated by relegating them to a very low position.

But though the Vedas and Sutras upheld the caste system the Upanishads emerged as a revolt against Brahmin supremacy. During this period the importance of family and Varna system got discriminated. S.M.Michael writes: “In the Upanishadic literature, a dark complexion is not considered necessarily bad. The Brahadaranyaka Upanishad mentions rituals for having a dark-complexioned son together with that for a blonde son” (Michael 63).
But the Upanishadic era of revolt against the supremacy of Brahmins ended with the birth of the era of Sutras which tried for the reassertion of the Varna hierarchy. For the first time, the Griha Sutras codified many sacraments or ‘sanskaras’ and it was made compulsory for a professional priest to officiate these sacraments in order to maintain their supremacy and to have a respectable position in the Varna system. Failure to officiate these sacraments resulted in the excommunication of such members from the community itself.

Even to this day Brahmins have succeeded in maintaining their absolute authority over the Dalits and the existence of the caste system along with the practice of untouchability can still be found in some places. Complete eradication of the caste system and untouchability is not possible though the government is trying maximum to put an end to this kind of exploitation.

Apart from governments’ effort to eradicate the caste system, social activists like Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule have sacrificed their whole life for the betterment of Dalits. Important among them was Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb who spent his entire life in fighting against social discrimination caused by the caste system and worked hard for the uplift of the Dalits in India. He claims Hinduism as the reason for the suffering and exploitation of Dalits and also condemns Hinduism in his Annihilation of Caste as “a religion of rules, compendium of rituals, regulation which are based on the caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability” (Michael 134). Dr.Ambedkar fought for about forty long years to restore Dalits their rights, dignity, and a respectable life and to deliver the depressed classes from the clutches of social evil that is the caste system. He entitles Hindus and their religion Hinduism as a cause for Dalits’ low state of life and writes: “Thirteen millions of people living in the midst of civilization are still in a savage state, and are leading the life of hereditary criminals!! But the Hindus have never felt ashamed of it. This is a phenomenon which in my view is quite unparalled” (Ambedkar Annihilation 52).

An additional way of exploiting Dalits was, they were denied to read Hindu Scriptures like Vedas, Sutras, Smritis, Puranas etc because the authority on them were meant only for the non Dalits and the reading of it by the Dalits will lead to its pollution. Kusumavati Deshpande in her work Pasang opines that “It is difficult for Dalits to find an articulate voice and be technically skilled because they are deprived of all sanskara” (Deshpande 3). But the question here that arises is what sanskara has
the non Dalits imbibed and followed in their life by reading Holy Scriptures? Can anybody call the sanskara of exploiting and humiliating Dalits and treating fellow human beings worse than animals as a good sanskara?

Non Dalits took religion as a tool for making Dalits to obey what they say and in a way Dalits followed blindly the duties prescribed by the upper caste Hindus without any revolt. Regarding this Rajkumar in his book Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity says:

It is mostly the karma theory with the aid of religion, which dissuaded the untouchables and other exploited classes from undertaking any revolt against their oppressors. What was worse was that the untouchables believed that if they performed the prescribed duty in this life, which were ordained by Providence, uncomplainingly, willingly and obediently, they would probably be born in a higher caste - group in their next birth. (Kumar 124)

If it is the case then can we consider the upper caste Hindus of this life as earlier Dalits? Because as said in Karma theory, Dalits by performing the prescribed duties can be born in upper caste in their next birth and the upper caste people of present will take birth as Dalits in the next birth because of the Karma they are doing by exploiting Dalits in their present birth. But unfortunately the upper caste Hindus consider their inhuman treatment of Dalits as their significant duty prescribed for them by god, the failure of which will result in accumulating sin for their behaviour. Their kind treatment towards Dalits will become unkind for them because they are ready to treat Dalits very brutally but not to violate the rules and regulations mentioned in Hindu scriptures considering the low caste people.

Repeatedly Ambedkar says that it is Hinduism which stands as an obstacle to remove the caste system in India and also gives a call to Dalits to come out of the caste system which is mentioned by Bhakshi in his book B. R. Ambedkar Statesman and Constitutionalist who says:

I ask you to ponder over the cause of your sufferings extending over a long period of thousands of years. The Hindu Dharma is the main cause for your suffering. Of all religions in the world, it is Hinduism that recognizes Caste distinctions and untouchability.
This was the cover, the cloak for all injustices perpetrated on the Scheduled Castes by the Caste Hindus. The position even today, I regret to say, is that in villages they cannot live with self-respect. We must discard Hinduism and refuse to submit to indignities any longer. What struck me most was that my community still continues to accept a position of humiliation only because Caste Hindus persist in dominating over them. You must rely on your own strength; shake off the notion that you are in anyway inferior to any community. (Bhakshi 58-59)

But unfortunately the efforts of Ambedkar were not fully successful in freeing Dalits from the clutches of the caste system. The authority of Hindus on Dalits was so strong that even to this day it is impossible to change the mindset of Dalits concerning their rights though it was said that the Hindus and their religion was responsible for their low state and inhuman life. The Dalits are still in dilemma whether to follow the Hindu religion and customs or to move away from it and follow their own ways. The reason for this is, the upper caste people have brain washed the minds of Dalits so much that they were made to believe that they have taken birth to serve the needs of the upper castes without any expectations from them. Even today there are some instances of following slavery in some villages by the upper caste people in the name of religion by keeping Dalits to work under them for very low wages. Ambedkar in his Annihilation of Caste expresses his resentment on Hinduism in the following words “If you touch the Caste System, the whole edifice of Hinduism will collapse, because Hinduism is nothing but caste” (Ambedkar 4). In other words the entire structure of Hinduism is standing on the strong foundation of caste system, the destruction of which is really impossible in India even in the 21st Century.

Apart from religious mistreatment, another way of exploiting Dalits is the practice of untouchability, the origin of which is not known even to this day. Since time immemorial Dalits are experiencing untouchability in many ways like they were not allowed to drink water from public wells and tanks, were not given right to live with other non-Dalit people but to live separately and the most inhuman thing is they were made to live without touching fellow human beings and polluting the sacredness of the upper caste people.
Regarding the practice of untouchability by the upper caste Hindus Narendra Jadhav in his book *Ambedkar: Awakening Indian’s Social Conscience* records the saying of Ambedkar who said:

Untouchability is such an inhuman practice that some of us can sacrifice even our lives to remove it. Touchables believe that the things defiled by our touch are purified by spraying cow urine. Things become impure by the touch of human beings of your own religion and can be purified by the urine of an animal! It is such a shameful thinking. In the view of Touchables, animal’s dung and urine are more pious than the human touch of the Untouchable. Is such a life worth living?. (Jadhav, *Ambedkar* 88)

The pain and agony of Ambedkar by witnessing the condition of untouchables remains immeasurable. The exploitation of Dalits in the name of untouchability was so inhuman that Ambedkar urged everyone to come out of this and to fight for their rights. He wanted every untouchable to participate in satyagraha and said “All Untouchables, whether women or children, should jump into this Satyagraha and get themselves purified in this Yajna” (Jadhav, *Ambedkar* 89). He even said: “The Untouchability has survived for so many years because of Untouchables only. They think that the Touchables are superior to them, the Touchables are their masters and they are servants” (Jadhav, *Ambedkar* 89).

Ambedkar wanted the Dalits to come out of this inferiority complex because of which they have suffered inhuman exploitation and mental torture at the hands of upper caste Hindus. The upper castes have put forward certain laws to be followed by Dalits who live in villages with other people, the failure of which lead Dalits to face cruel consequences. Regarding the position of untouchables in India, Keer in his book *Dr.Ambedkar’s life and Mission* say:

The Untouchables comprised a number of distinct groups which form the lowest stratum of Hindu society, and were condemned as Untouchables by the Caste Hindus through centuries untold…. The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called Outcastes, Untouchables, Pariahs, Panchamas,
Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyajas and Namashudras. Their social disabilities were specific and severe and numerous. (Keer 1)

From a very long time the status of untouchables was the same because during the ancient period even kings followed the caste system in their kingdom by giving more importance to Brahmins in every field. This is proved when one goes through the accounts of travellers who visited India from different parts of the world and can take their writings as a proof for the existence of the caste system in India. In India Through the Chinese Eyes Surendranathsen tells us about the observation of Huen-Tsang, a Chinese traveller who says: “The members of the untouchable community, while moving in the heart of the city were invariably expected to move in the left side of the street” (Surendranathsen 78). By this one can imagine the miserable condition of Dalits because strict rules were made for them even to walk, by making them to walk on the left side of the street thereby curtailing their social rights. In other words, it is really ironic that no such rules were made to be followed by animals and moreover they were freer to do what they want compared to Dalits which shows that Dalits were considered less than animals. Dr. A.R. Naronakar in his book Untouchability and Caste System in India mentions about Fahiana, another traveller who uncovers the condition of the Dalits in India and writes “The untouchables while moving in the city were expected to make noise by their rod so that others would avoid them” (Naronkar 96). These historical accounts of travelers clearly show the inhuman condition of the Dalits and their life which the upper caste Hindus forced on them. In this regard Arjun Dangle in Poisoned Bread writes:

The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchable to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes upon them. (Dangle xxi)

The upper caste people always tried to stay away from Dalits by avoiding their shadow also. Not only this, they were denied to draw water from public wells refuting their basic rights which clearly depict the callous condition of Dalits in India. Ambedkar wanted to put an end to this practice and undertook Mahad Satyagraha which took place on March 20 1927. Ambedkar, along with other untouchables
marched towards Chawdar Lake in order to draw water from that lake which was denied for them. During this Satyagraha Ambedkar gave a speech which is recorded by Jadhav in his book on Ambedkar. He said:

This water lake of Mahad is a public property. The Touchables of Mahad are so generous that they allow to draw water by all the people; even the Muslims and persons of other religions also are free to draw water from there. Not only that, they do not have objection to even animals to drink water from this lake. They allow all animals even those belonging to the Untouchables. The Touchable Hindus are so kind and peace-loving people that they never do any violence and never harm anybody…. But this same noble Touchable Hindus prevent people of their own religion from drawing water from this Mahad lake. (Jadhav, Ambedkar 91)

Ambedkar tries to find an answer to such behaviour of the upper caste Hindus and claims the Varna system as a reason behind such treatment of Dalits. Throughout his life though he achieved immense success in his life and became the architect of the Indian Constitution by his intellectual ability he cannot escape from the atrocities of the caste system. Even though working in a high position, the employees working under his control tortured him by following untouchability and treated Ambedkar very badly. However he says:

There are four Varna (class) of Hindus as per religious texts, but they are five by custom; i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and Untouchables. This system of Varna is the first of the devil rules of Hindu religion. One Varna below other is its second devilish rule. (Jadhav, Ambedkar 91)

Ambedkar’s main aim and intention was not only to remove untouchability and the caste system but to deal a strong blow at the very root of it and wanted to destroy the caste system completely without giving any chance for it to take birth again. He said:

Our aim should not be small and narrow. It should be high and mighty…. If Untouchability is removed, what happens? The Ati-Shudras will become Shudras! But could we say that
Untouchability, discrimination, inequality has vanished completely…. If you want to remove any harmful thing you must remove it from the roots; or else it will crop up again. (Jadhav, Ambedkar 93)

On the whole Ambedkar was against the caste system and its practices. The upper caste Hindus considered the Dalits only for namesake as belonging to their religion but in practice they were not treated as equal to them. Frustrated by this kind of brutal treatment of upper caste by utilizing religion to have hold of the Dalits in their hands Ambedkar said: “A religion which discriminates between one and its followers and another is partial and the religion which treats crores of its adherents worse than dogs and criminals and inflicts upon them insufferable disabilities is no religion at all” (Shahare 32).

His frustration regarding caste system reached its peak which made him to utter the words like “I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu” (Jadhav, Ambedkar 202). Ambedkar said these words at the Yeola Conference held on October 13, 1935 and these words clearly depict the annoyance of Ambedkar about the inhuman and humiliating life he was leading. Though he achieved success in life he could not protect his people from the practice of untouchability in complete terms. Just the name Hindu without any equal status with other upper caste Hindus was not required for Ambedkar. He was not ready to go through the exploitation and suffering and therefore decided to change his religion and got converted to Buddhism. His view about the practice of caste system expressed in Annihilation of Caste is:

…the Caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers…. The Caste system is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour- it is a hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other. (Ambedkar 215)

Like upper caste people Dalits are also human beings with same blood and flesh, but how the touch of Dalits will pollute the purity of non Dalits is the question which is not solved by any great thinkers and philosophers even to this day. Non Dalits try to escape to give answer to this question by pointing their finger at religious texts and say that they are doing it because it is mentioned in the text. However the
thing is, is there any rule for non Dalits to follow the religious text in their treatment of Dalits? In modern India, the constitution has made the rule regarding untouchability and has made to follow the principle of equality by abolishing untouchability. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes untouchability by declaring its practice as an offence which is liable for punishment according to the law.

But to what extent the problem of untouchability has gone out from the life of Dalits so far is today’s question. To know more about the suffering and exploitation of Dalits, this chapter focuses mainly on four autobiographies written by famous Dalit Marathi writers namely Narendra Jadhav, Laxman Gaikwad, Sharankumar Limbale and Vasanth Moon. All these writers have chronicled their life story in the form of autobiographies and have depicted their exploitation and struggle in front of the readers to give knowledge about the kind of life they were made to live and the level of exploitation they experienced.

The most inhuman experience of Dalits is in the form of the practice of untouchability which can be seen in the autobiographies of Marathi Dalit writers mentioned above. There life was full of sufferings and anguish and was followed by constant battle to escape from the hands of Hindus and their religion. Kuber in his book *Dr.Ambedkar-A Critical Study* gives a picture of the life of untouchables in the following lines:

The Untouchables form the lowest stratum of the Hindu society. They were in that position for centuries together. They were forbidden to keep animals, to use certain metals for ornaments, and had to live in unhygienic conditions at the outskirts of villages. They were denied the use of public wells, and their children were not admitted to schools attended by the children of caste Hindus. All temples were closed to them. They could not get service even from the barbers and the washer men. They were treated as subhuman by the caste Hindus. Public services, including police and military services, were closed to them. Naturally they followed hereditary occupations and trades of a degrading order. The social segregation kept them Untouchable throughout their life. (Kuber 1)
In relation to the problem of the caste system and untouchability it is very appropriate to go through Jadhav’s autobiography which bears the title of this inhuman practice namely Untouchables: My Family’s Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India. Like Mulk Raj Anand, Jadhav does not give only “Untouchable” as his book title; rather he continues saying it as his family’s journey in which they get success in coming out of the cruel caste system not in ancient India but in modern India which clearly indicates the existence of an inhuman caste system even to this day.

Narendra Jadhav opens his autobiography Untouchables: My Family’s Triumphant Journey out of the Caste System in Modern India by giving information about the population of Dalits in India which has been estimated as “equal to more than half the population of the United States” (Jadhav 1). He writes:

Every sixth human being in the world today is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an erstwhile untouchable, a Dalit. Today there are 165 million Dalits… and they continue to suffer under India’s 3,500-year-old caste system, which remains a stigma on humanity.

(Jadhav 1)

Jadhav, in the beginning itself gives an estimation of Dalit population and also traces the inhuman life which is full of exploitation and suffering at the hands of upper caste Hindus. In this famous autobiography, he chronicles the life of three generations namely his parents, himself and the life of his children. He tells the story of his parents which shows their hard journey to come out of the caste system. Jadhav opens his autobiography by telling about his father Damu, who as a young man in his twenties was assigned ‘yeskar’ duty which means the duties of village given to the Mahars. Damu’s wife Sonu explains the responsibility of Mahars doing ‘yeskar’ duty in these words:

Traditionally, the head of every Mahar household took turns performing this duty for three months. As a village servant, my man would go from house to house, bearing news of the village. He would announce deaths, and tend to the carcasses of cattle. He would be running in front of the carriages of government officials, singing their praises and announcing their arrival. In return he was
given a handful of grain and be allowed to go begging from house to house for leftovers. (Jadhav 30-31)

Damu was given the duty of guarding a dead body floating in a well till the fauzdar and police arrive at the spot. From the beginning of his autobiography, Jadhav uncovers the exploitation meted out to Mahars by the upper castes through his father Damu. Though Damu was not willing to guard the dead body, he was forced to do so even without a meal in the name of duty. However, Damu gets irritated by this and asks Namya, one of his cousins who has brought a meal for him saying “Why should I have to be the one to sit around without a meal since yesterday, when everybody else has his belly filled” (Jadhav 20). His cousin Namya tries to pacify him by saying, “That is for people like you and me. That is the way of life is … just accept it, what else can we do?” (Jadhav 20)

Narendra Jadhav in his autobiography talks about the inhuman condition of untouchables. According to him the upper caste Hindus have made untouchables to believe themselves that they are in the low position because of the wrong deeds they have done in their past life. In addition to this he says:

The Untouchables themselves were indoctrinated in the theory of karma, which stated that they were burdened with demeaning tasks only because of their own misdeeds in past lives. Their dharma-duty-now was to perform their tasks assiduously with the hope of redeeming themselves and aspiring to a better life in the next incarnation. A person belonging to a sweeper caste had to dutifully carry human excrement on his head with the hope that he could look forward to bettering his lot in another life. (Jadhav 4)

From centuries the upper caste Hindus has said the same thing in order to keep Dalits under their control. Due to this the Dalits were denied any education because of the fear that if they gain education they will become aware of the injustice and will escape from their strong hold. Moreover they were given only menial jobs and were told as their duty to be performed by Dalits alone. Jadhav in his autobiography gives an account of one such duty of Mahar’s in village which is very inferior and inhuman. He says Mahars were the “watchman and guardian of the village and the living chronicler of its concerns” (Jadhav 6). Besides, he also says:
Apart from arbitrating in boundary disputes and guarding the village, their duties also included carrying death notices and messages to other villages, bringing fuel to the cremation ground, mending the village walls, summoning landowners to pay land revenue in the chavadi (village hall), escorting those conveying the government treasury, sweeping the village roads, serving government officials, tracking thieves, and removing the carcasses of cattle from the village. (Jadhav 6)

These duties were made traditional by calling it as ‘yeskar’ duty and it was made compulsory that every Mahar family in a village had to perform this yeskar duty either willingly or unwillingly on a rotation basis. In return for this yeskar duty the Mahars gained ‘baluta’ which means a small amount of grain, dead animal’s meat and skin and also sometimes they got ‘watan’ which means a small amount of land.

Jadhav gives an account of castes in his village which included Mahar, Chambar, Dhor, and many who were all untouchables. Each caste got its own hereditary occupation. Chambars and Dhors made shoes and leather products while Mangs made baskets. But Mahars became village servants as they got no traditional duties and did many odd jobs for survival.

In his village the caste system was such that even the barbers refused to cut hair of a Mahar while they did not mind shaving buffaloes. This shows how the Mahars were treated worse than animals in his village. Not only this, they were not allowed inside the temple because even their shadows were regarded as impure and Mahars were made to pray standing outside the temple.

The poverty of Mahars was so severe that whenever they heard news about any animal’s death they went running to grab its meat. That particular day was like a feast for them and the whole Mahar community celebrated the death of an animal like a grand festival. Regarding this Damu says:

Whenever an animal in the village died, the news would spread like wildfire in the Maharwada. Everyone would run to the wasteland, even the children, women, and the old ones, for every hand was useful in getting some meat for the family. As soon as we heard of a cull, we would grab any container we could find in
the housepots, pans, buckets, baskets…Some people carried back meat even in the fold of their dhoti or sari if they could find nothing else. (Jadhav 73)

Poverty made the Dalits to follow the upper castes which made them to serve their needs and made them their puppets without giving any other option for doing other work. The Dalits were made to think of themselves as incapable of doing any work other than serving upper castes till their last breath with full honesty and integrity. The upper castes made some rules and regulations which had to be followed by the Dalits either willingly or unwillingly, the failure of which enforced them to face harsh consequences. Therefore they had to abide by the rules and regulations of the upper castes to lead their life in the village. But Jadhav’s father broke this tradition by refusing to do the yeskar duty which resulted in severe beating at the hands of the police.

Dalits were deprived of their social life by the Hindu society which made them to accept the life given to them by the upper castes. Regarding Dalits’ miserable life Ambedkar in his book Untouchables and Untouchability says:

In the Hindu society, the hereditary untouchables were assigned such low functions as those of scavengers, of remover of dead cattle and others. They are socially and legally debarred from any other profession. They had no right to study or enter the temple. They had to live in a separate area in the village or town and had no freedom to use public wells and tanks which the Caste Hindu used. (Ambedkar 100)

Jadhav’s father Damu was not an exception to the inhuman kind of exploitation from the hands of upper caste Hindus. According to him the non Dalits treated animals more respectfully than Dalits and for their hard work they were thrown food from far without touching them in order to escape themselves from pollution. Moreover he says:

Do you know what the upper castes say when they throw the baluta? ‘Aamcha anna ghe.Aamchi eeda ghe.Aamchi peeda ghe.’ (Take all our evils away as you take this food. Go, take the food away…better in your stomach than in the garbage, if you will take
our perils with it.) “We would probably treat dogs with more dignity”. (Jadhav 31)

Every Mahar wanted to fill their stomach and subsequently they did whatever work was given to them by the upper castes though the work was very low and menial. Poverty was the main reason for the Mahars to accept such menial work. It does not mean that Mahars were incapable of doing other work but the fear of the upper castes losing their supreme position compelled them to safeguard their supremacy by holding respectable jobs for themselves and by handing menial jobs to Dalits. Ambedkar was also against this custom and said “It is utterly disgraceful to sell your rights for a few crumbs of bread” (Jadhav 37).

Apart from this kind of exploitation, Jadhav shows the inhuman treatment of Dalits which is followed in the form of the practice of untouchability. They were prohibited to take water from public wells and tanks as mentioned earlier. One such incident had occurred in Jadhav’s life which he narrates in his autobiography. Once Damu accompanied his father on his way to work and on the way he asked his father for water as he was feeling thirsty. There was a large vat which was full of water under a tree and Damu wanted to drink water from it. But to his great wonder his father asked him to wait till somebody came and gave water to him. Fortunately somebody came and when water was asked from him he asked Damu to come near him. When Damu stretched his hand for a tumbler to drink water that man screams saying “How dare you try to touch this? You think you can take this from my hand” (Jadhav 65).

Shocked by these words Damu later on asks his father “Baba, he drank water straight from the vat. Why can’t I?” (Jadhav 65), for which his father replied: “We are Mahars. We can’t touch that water. 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” (Jadhav 65).

Not understanding clearly his father’s words, Damu looks back and sees a dog which was lapping water from the same vat. This particular incident makes him to speculate regarding his inhuman condition for the first time and exclaims “I wondered if it was better to be born a dog than to be born a Mahar” (Jadhav 65). Water itself never makes any distinction but the human beings who drinks it discriminates among themselves as high and low by making untouchables not to take water from public
wells and tanks to save water from their pollution. The right which the animals have in drinking water is not given to Dalits because they were treated lower than animals. For many years no one dared to oppose or revolt against such treatment against upper castes because Dalits were religiously tied by putting forth foolish laws by the upper caste Hindus. In this regard Ambedkar in his *Annihilation of Caste* says: “If you have to get rid of this same shameful condition, if you have to cleanse this filth and make use of this precious life, there is only one way and that is to throw off the shackles of Hindu religion and the Hindu society in which you are bound” (Ambedkar 17).

For a very long time the Dalits followed blindly the laws of Hindus till Ambedkar revolted against it and later on the Dalits got great support from people like Ambedkar and Phule and started revolting against the injustice done to them. It was Ambedkar who took initiative in attacking the purity of the Hindu religion and broke the tradition of upper castes by drinking water from public wells and tanks. He even went a step ahead and also entered the temples which were prohibited to Dalits earlier to prove that the untouchables are also human beings like the upper castes. But though Ambedkar, Phule and many others tried to make the upper castes realize their blunders in treating Dalits less than animals, their efforts were not fully successful as a result of which there is the existence of caste system in present times also.

Narendra Jadhav, who is a writer of the 21st Century, chronicles in his autobiography many instances where the readers can come across the kind of exploitation meted out to untouchables. In another incident Damu explains how he was humiliated and exploited because he was a Mahar by caste. During wedding feasts in the village the Mahars were summoned to help the upper castes in doing some “odd chores such as plastering the floor with cow dung, collecting twigs and dry branches for firewood, or grinding wheat on the stone wheel” (Jadhav 66). At one such wedding day Damu had no work to do, so he thought of helping them and took one of the platters with the intention of distributing sweets to guests. But to his great shock, Heerabai, his landlord’s mother shrieked like anything saying: “Eh you bloody Maharain, what do you think you are doing? ...you have polluted all our auspicious food, you fool” (Jadhav 66).

Damu stood still listening to her words without understanding what wrong he had done that made her so angry. She even threw that platter saying that the food got contaminated by his touch. Damu, in confusion asks himself “I could not figure out
why the food was contaminated. Just because I had touched that platter, the food was contaminated?” (Jadhav 67). He tries to know how the food got polluted by his touch and he even says:

I could never understand who had decided that things should be this way…I often wondered if we untouchables were worse than animals. I would assume that as they said, I must have committed a terrible sin in my last birth to be born as an outcaste in this life… This is a clever trick played by the highborn. That is what they have told us through the ages so that we would take it quietly and not challenge them. (Jadhav 67)

If it is agreed by Dalits that they were born as untouchables in their present birth because of the sin committed by them in their last birth, then it is also true that the so called upper caste of today will be Dalits in their next birth because of the sin they are committing now by treating untouchables as worse than animals. In other words, if the caste system continues like this then the present Dalits will become upper castes in their next birth.

Apart from telling the story of his parents, Jadhav also chronicles his life along with the exploitation he faced in the annals of society. While studying in school Jadhav was called by his high caste teachers as “government’s son-in-law” because of the exemption of fees for Dalits by the government. He also mentions another instance where he got good marks in Sanskrit which he calls as a divine language and which is said to be the subject of the “exclusive preserve of the high castes for centuries” (Jadhav 238-239). His school teacher who belonged to an upper caste, by witnessing Jadhav’s outstanding performance in Sanskrit subject says that he was losing faith in the education system. Instead of being happy for his student’s performance he became jealous because of a Dalit’s growth in the field of education which shows that the upper caste people wanted to hold complete authority on the education system and desired to relegate Dalits to a low place without imparting any knowledge to them.

Though Jadhav achieved success in education and carved a beautiful and respectable life for himself and his family he was looked upon not by the kind of success he gained but by the caste he was born into. He himself says that:
The bottom line always stood out: I was a mere Dalit, a Dalit, belonging to the lowest stratum of society. It was as if I had a tragic flaw inherited through birth. No matter what I did, where I went, or what success I achieved, I would always be looked upon as an untouchable, albeit one who had achieved success. (Jadhav 239)

In short, since time immemorial, the upper castes have kept Dalits in ignorance by not educating them properly regarding their fundamental rights and duties. Efforts have been made from ancient period to bring Dalits out of the exploitation through various protests and reform movements. One such effort was made by Gautama Buddha; the founder of Buddhism who raised his voice against the caste system during the ancient period and condemned the laws of Hindu Society which proved harmful to the rights and duties of untouchables. Jatava in his book *Social Philosophy of B.R.Ambedkar* says:

It was the Buddha, who for the first time examined the social laws of Hindu society. He rejected the theory of *chaturvarnas* because of its inherent tendency to degenerate into casteism, social tyranny and oppression. He demanded liberty and equality for the oppressed and the downtrodden. His powerful movement aroused not only with a body of doctrine, but also with “the formation of a society bound by certain rules”. The creed of the Buddha was not only a protest, but also a challenge to the whole of Hindu society’s unfair behavior-patterns. (Jatava 9)

In spite of the efforts made by great thinkers, philosophers and reform movements, the life of untouchables did not change suddenly but took a long time to achieve some stage where the Dalits got knowledge about their life through education. In *Untouchables* Jadhav shows the life of Mahars which was cut off from the mainstream life and they were living in a very miserable condition in uneven cottages, always at the mercy of the upper castes. In other words Jadhav exposes the harsh reality of the life of Mahars in his autobiography through his parent’s life. Another incident which depicts the life of Mahars is, every village has the practice of giving dead animals to the Mahars and once a bull died and as usual it was handed over to Mahars which made them very happy. Several Mahars gathered there with the usual
gusto to get the largest quantity of meat but as luck would have it, one of the neighbours revealed the truth that the bull was poisoned. By this news they did not feel relieved that they were saved, instead they got angry for missing an opportunity to eat meat. This incident shows their horrible condition of life due to poverty. Their earnings were not enough to meet their daily expenses and were unable to get three meals a day. In such a situation how could they think of having meat which was out of their bounds?

Mahars were always in debt because though they worked hard from morning till night, their earnings were very insufficient which was not enough to meet their daily necessities. Though they were willing to have good jobs by getting good education they were not entertained to do so but denied the right to education by the upper castes, the result of which led them to do some menial jobs to eke their livelihood. Among Dalits, some people were lucky to do at least some menial jobs while others, who were not able to do such jobs got into thieving because no other option was left for them and the necessity of life made them to take up thieving as their occupation to lead their life and unfortunately it became their profession. One such community was the Uchalya community which was branded as criminals by the British government and even today they lead their life by thieving and pick pocketing. Laxman Gaikwad, a famous Marathi Dalit writer who belongs to the same Uchalya community uncovers the life of his community in his autobiography namely The Branded. Regarding his community Rajkumar in his book Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity writes:

The Uchalya community is known as a thieving community by the so-called mainstream society even today. Before independence, the British government branded them as criminals under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes’ Act of 1871. After independence, though the Criminal Tribes’ Act of 1871 has been repealed by the Indian constitution, the people from the Uchalya community still carry the stigma of being born to a criminal tribe and are exploited by the people from the upper caste/class. (Kumar 200)

The unique feature of Gaikwad’s autobiography is that, he opens his autobiography by revealing to the readers about his condition saying: “NO NATIVE PLACE. NO birth date. No house or farm. No caste either. That is how I was born. In
an *Uchalya* community, at Dhanegaon in Taluka Latur” (Gaikwad 1). These words of Gaikwad shows the dreadful condition of Uchalyas who have no place of their own and not even a single regular job to do because, as said by Gaikwad, “Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals” (Gaikwad 2).

Gaikwad in this autobiography depicts the life of his community along with his life from childhood to youth in a place called Dhanegaon in Latur district. The Uchalya community themselves were ignorant about the origin of their caste and tribe. They are only aware that their community is known by two surnames namely Jadhav and Gaikwad and these two groups got had clans of their own. Though they had their first names they were not identified by their names but were called by their surnames. Apart from this, as said by Gaikwad, his community is also known as ‘Santmuchchar’ in which sant means ‘market’ and muchchar means ‘thief’. All these Uchalyas were deprived of their cultural roots and in this regard Gaikwad asks himself: “Where did our tribe originate? Where did it migrate from? I know nothing about this. I know of no maternal or paternal relatives” (Gaikwad 5). Regarding their position Gaikwad says: “The British government branded us as born criminals…. Denied of all decent and lawful means of livelihood the only alternative left to us is to exist by thieving, lifting, pickpocketing” (Gaikwad vii).

G.N.Devy in her book *A Nomad called Thief*, gives information about the people who were branded as criminals by birth. She said:

The social category generally known as Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India covers a population of approximately six crores. Some of them are included in the list of Scheduled Castes, some others in the Schedule of Tribes, and quite a few in the category of Other Backward Classes. But there are many of these tribes, which find place in none of the above. What is common to all these Denotified and Nomadic tribes (DNTs) is the fate of being branded as ‘born’ criminals. (Devy 21)

Treatment of Uchalyas was very inhuman and barbarous. They were not chained physically, but mentally, and their freedom of movement was curtailed by the upper castes. According to the Habitual Offenders Act, the movement of Uchalyas was restricted and they needed a pass to move from one place to another. In this
connection Gaikwad says: “We were reduced to the level of animals; for just as permits are needed for cattle to be moved to other places or to be sold in the market, we had to have passes to move about” (Gaikwad 3).

Ironically the Uchalyas started worshipping the pass as their God and also the blade as goddess Laxmi because it was with the help of blade that they got some wealth through which they survived. This may seem as a joke to others but for the Uchalyas this was a kind of life which the upper caste Hindus compelled them to live. Whenever some theft happened, whether the Uchalyas had done that particular thieving or not, the first and foremost suspicion of the police was on them. The police tormented them so much that, unable to bear and suffer the torture inflicted on them, the Uchalyas accepted the theft though they had not done it.

Gaikwad’s grandfather was compelled by the police to work as a state informer in order to help the police in finding culprits from his own community. Lingappa Gaikwad, Laxman Gaikwad’s grandfather started disclosing names who were thieving in his own community which led the villagers to hold a panchayat and finally decided to kill Lingappa Gaikwad because no other option was left for them. The community got no other work but had to do thieving, or pick pocketing. But due to Lingappa’s work the community found it difficult to do their work easily. So as per the panchayat’s decision one day the community people broke into Lingappa’s hut and hacked him to death with an axe. Lingappa’s death was not reported to the police and after his death the community people went on doing their usual business of pick pocketing and thieving without anybody’s fear.

Usually in the Uchalya community the children were not given academic education, instead they were trained in thieving and pick pocketing. Education was not important for them but developing skills in thieving which was their main business was very important for them. Laxman Gaikwad said:

In our community young apprentices (boys and girls) start their training with lessons in being beaten. They are trained to withstand physical beatings and all sorts of torture so that they will not disclose the names of their colleagues when caught and tortured by the police for information. They are trained to be tough and not to crack up when severely tortured. (Gaikwad 6)
Apart from this, Laxman Gaikwad in his autobiography mentions four kinds of thieving skills which looks ironical to the readers:

a. *Khistang Matne* - Picking Pockets  
b. *Chappal, mutual aane* - stealing footwear and bundles of things  
c. *Paddu ghalane* - deception; and  
d. *Uthawaari* – deception by sleight of hand while engaging persons in conversation, e.g. substituting spurious gold for the genuine (Gaikwad 10).

Along with this another ironic thing was that the parents of Uchalya community beat their children and compelled them to learn these skills perfectly. Like teachers in the field of education there existed teachers to teach these thieving talents to young people and in return for their teaching they took six months of their pupil’s earning which they made through thieving as their fee.

The Uchalya community was more exploited at the hands of the police in addition to the abuse by the upper caste Hindus. The torture of the police was so severe that though they had committed no crime the police would take away all their belongings inspite of knowing well that they were not stolen but purchased by paying money. The torture of the police of women was very brutal and ruthless. The police abused women physically and even their ‘mangalsutra’ which is said to be sacred was also snatched by the police in the name of investigation. One such incident happened to an Uchalya woman, Dhondamani, who never knew stealing at all but lost her mangalsutra because of other communities branding them as criminals by birth.

Though Gaikwad’s father wanted his children to get education, the others mocked him for his idea of giving education to his children and remarked “What’s there in school? Better learn thieving! I too felt that if I began thieving, I would be able to live a better life” (Gaikwad 34). Gaikwad’s father’s desire to see his son as a teacher encouraged him to get an education in spite of the comments given by his community people regarding his education plans.

The exploitation of Uchalyas was such that Laxman Gaikwad illustrates one incident where he accidently touched Isvya’s body, an upper caste boy who was holding a brass bowl in his hand while warming his body in front of the fire. Angered by this he said: “Lakshya, you’ve polluted my bowl” (Gaikwad 82) and started
cursing him for his polluting touch. Later Isvya put the bowl in the fire which was prepared by Laxman Gaikwad and took it out as if purged of pollution. If that was the case the question it raises is, can the upper caste Hindus expect Dalits to go through the fire for purification? If the Dalits purify themselves by going into fire will the upper caste Hindus accept Dalits into their Hindu fold and treat them as equal human beings? Regarding this Ambedkar in his *Writings and Speeches*, volume 7 says:

> The Hindus who touch them and become polluted thereby can become pure by undergoing purificatory ceremonies. But there is nothing that can make the untouchables pure. They are born impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of the impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability affixed to them. It is a state of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse. (Ambedkar 266)

The Uchalyas were double oppressed first by the practice of untouchability and then from the brutal system of the police. Though the Uchalya community thieved for survival the police utilized this act for their own use and gained more wealth and income from this community. Gaikwad says:

> Our people live in Kawatha, Salgara, Bhadgaon and live on picking and stealing. The money brought from outside goes into the pockets of the people of these places. And the rich people of these places latch on to our people. The money-lenders, the proprietors of gambling dens, and the liquor vendors of these places have built their fortunes by exploiting our community. (Gaikwad 181)

The Uchalyas became victims at the hands of upper caste Hindus who marred their life for their own benefits. Along with this the police also treated the Uchalyas very maliciously by forcing them to accept thefts when they were not capable in identifying the real culprit. Gaikwad’s grandmother narrates one such incident to him: “When the police catch me, they hang me upside down by the legs and lash the soles of my feet with a whip…. If I don’t confess to the theft, they bring shit near my mouth and force me to eat it and keep on beating me” (Gaikwad 8).
Another illustration of exploitation of Uchalyas by the upper caste is, once the Jamedar’s purse containing 10,000rs was pick pocketed by someone and he reported it to the police. He also told the police that Jayaba Gaikwad, who belonged to the Pathrut tribe or his gang, might have done this stealing. The reason for pointing out Jayaba was Jamedar has asked Jayaba to sell his land for a very low price to him for which Jayaba refused because like other members of his gang he was not working as a thief but was earning through farming and tile polishing. Not getting enough money by this, he started working at a lake project under the employment guarantee scheme. The refusal to listen to Jamedar’s words led Jayaba to face false allegations against him as a result of which he was arrested by the police. Jayaba pleaded with the police saying: “Saheb, I’m working here by this lake for the last six months. I’ve committed no unlawful act. Why do you arrest me?” (Gaikwad 208).

But being branded as ‘criminal’ by birth he became an easy prey for the police. The torture of the police was such that he was made to confess the theft saying the money was in his residence. When the police searched both his house and his farm, they failed to find the money. Angered by this the police started beating him again. Finally Jayaba requested one of the farmers to mortgage his land for 2000rs in which the police added 500rs more to cover their expenses. Finally Jayaba got the money and the police paid 2000rs to the court as the amount of the theft recovered by keeping 500rs for themselves. But after few days the real thief of Jamedar’s amount was traced and so Gaikwad went to the police and asked about the injustice done to Jayaba for which the police sub-inspector replied: “Jayaba is innocent. But I had to arrest him under the pressure brought on me by some persons” (Gaikwad 211). The police even promised to return Jayaba’s money but this promise of the police was never fulfilled and Jayaba did not get his money refunded by the court in spite of Gaikwad’s effort which went futile.

Every human being has got the right to live expect Dalits because their right to live has been restrained from them by the upper caste people. Being born in a family of thieves Gaikwad witnessed his family’s struggle to get shelter and their fight to overcome hunger. In spite of their effort and hard work they did not have full meals even a single day. Knowing well that thieving is not right, they did it because of no other option left for them. The Uchalyas were very unfortunate people because they were doubly exploited, one by the upper caste people and the other by the police.
Whoever did the thievery a case was filed against the Uchalya community and in the name of searching their house the police tortured and exploited women in a very bad manner. The treatment of women was so harsh and cruel that a non culprit also accepted the theft just to escape from the bitter treatment by the police.

Sometimes the police demanded money from them the failure of which resulted in the seizing of all their belongings in their hut even though they claimed that their belongings were brought and not got by thieving. Such demands of the police forced the Uchalyas to steal again to give them money and in a way it was the police who made these people to indulge in theft. The police officers, whose work was to wean these people of stealing, yet made them to take the wrong path and in a way became rich by exploiting the Uchalyas.

Apart from this Gaikwad also shows the practice of untouchability in his autobiography through some instances which clearly exhibits the life of Uchalyas in his village. Gaikwad’s father was working as a servant in Chamle’s house and once he gave Gaikwad an advice that: “We should live like other village people. The village people do not allow us to take water from wells. They give us water from a distance without touching us. They do not allow us to visit temples” (Gaikwad 21).

Another instance of untouchability was, there was a mill in the village and before an untouchable touched the grindstone the flour was removed from it because if an untouchable touched it then “the flour in it was regarded as polluted and unfit for consumption by high Caste people” (Gaikwad 23). Such ‘polluted’ flour was given to the untouchables because of which Gaikwad used to touch the grindstone with the intention of getting flour which was needed for them to fulfill their hunger.

Once there was a wedding feast of Patil Bhuani’s son and a sweetmeat called ‘bundi’ was served to the guests. Tempted by this Gaikwad also attended the wedding forgetting his caste and ate ‘bundi’ till his desire was satisfied by sitting in two or three rounds. But to his bad luck one of the servers who was serving food suspected him and in anger beat and threw him out of the dining hall cursing him as: “Fuck his mother, the bastard don’t know what Mahar, Mang caste he belongs to! He has polluted the feast by his unholy attendance and come and ate through two-three rounds” (Gaikwad 45).
This kind of ill-treatment of Uchalyas was very frequent and in a way they were used to it and took it as their lot till people like Gaikwad revolted against it. Witnessing the exploitation of Uchalyas by the high caste people on one hand and at the hands of the police on the other, Gaikwad asks the reader the following question:

Even now I often wonder why if Bharat is our country, we are discriminated against, why our race is branded and treated as a thieves’ community. If all Indians are brothers and sisters, why are not my brothers given jobs? Why do we not get land, decent houses? If we are all brothers, why are my brothers forced to resort to thieving in order to feed our people at home?. (Gaikwad 62)

Though the Uchalyas wanted to do some decent and dignified jobs, they were not given to them which compelled them to take up some indecent jobs like thieving, pick pocketing in order to lead their life. In a way they were stigmatized and though they were not willing to do thieving they were branded as criminals by birth and no other option was made open for them as a result of which they took up these odd jobs as their profession.

In a situation like this Laxman Gaikwad emerged as the only person from his community to get education and later on in his life he expressed his desire to read Ramayana, a great Hindu epic, in the temple. But he was chided by Govind Patil who said: “You belong to the community of pig and-cat-eaters, and you want to read the sacred book!” (Gaikwad 83). Since time immemorial the Dalits were deprived of reading sacred books in the name of pollution but Gaikwad expresses his desire to read sacred books which was out of the norms put forth by the upper castes to the Dalits.

Dr. Elizabeth Susan Paul in her article “The Denotified Tribes in Laxman Gaikwad’s Uchalya” says:

Their being branded as ‘criminals’ during the long period of British rule, and the absence of rehabilitation following independence, has left a mark on the way most Indians continue to view nomadic communities. They live as outcasts, outside villages; their children are not allowed into schools; they are denied steady jobs. Villagers and even administration officials
consider them criminals, and they remain easy targets for the police. (Paul 2)

The Uchalyas were uneducated and innocent and because of their illiterate nature they often faced difficulties with the police. Laxman Gaikwad in his autobiography narrates how his mother was tortured and thrashed by the police not because his mother had stolen something but because Laxman’s brother was caught stealing from an oil tank in the market. If any member committed theft the whole family was tortured including women and children just in the name of investigation and the family had to tolerate this kind of mistreatment because of the low position they had in the social ladder of society.

Laxman’s brother stealing made the police to break into Laxman’s hut and snatched his mother’s mangalsutra and arrested Laxman’s father and brother. The abuse did not end here but the police asked Laxman’s mother to give 200rs for their release. Not knowing what to do Laxman’s mother arranged for money by selling all her sheeps in the market. This kind of oppression and atrocities were common to the Uchalyas. They just had to undergo it without any kind of solution to their problems. Looking at this kind of exploitation Laxman Gaikwad said: “After all, we were thieves by profession; who could we lodge a complaint with? So we had to keep quiet” (Gaikwad 16).

The cruelty of the police was so heinous that once a pardhi woman called Hirabai Kale had nothing at home to eat after her delivery because her husband was arrested by the police on the charge of theft. Due to this Hirabai underwent tubectomy operation for which she received 200rs with which she bought a bag full of high quality jawar. At the same time the police were searching for a thief who had stolen jawar in the neighbouring village and unfortunately Hirabai was caught by the police as they found a bag full of jawar in her hut. Even though Hirabai pleaded with the police that the jawar was not stolen but brought with the money which she got from the operation the police were not ready to listen to her and did their duty mercilessly. Not only this, the Uchalyas were even afraid to wear any new clothes during festivals though they had bought it with their money because of the fear of being arrested by the police. Going through the miserable life of Uchalyas G.N.Devy writes: “Lynched, hounded from village to village, starved of all civil amenities, deprived of the means
of livelihood and gripped by the fear of police persecution, the DNTs of India are on the run. Freedom has still not reached them” (Devy 23).

Poverty and illiteracy made the Uchalyas to suffer mercilessly and due to poverty and lack of regular jobs they took up stealing which took away their right to lead a decent life. Along with upper castes the police also exploited the Uchalyas by branding even the innocent people as culprits and the torture given by the police was very rigorous which forced the Uchalyas to abide by their orders. Laxman Gaikwad says: “the police themselves were responsible for creating conditions in which we were left with no option but to steal” (Gaikwad 62). Brutal treatment of the police and demand for money to release them from jail compelled the Uchalyas to borrow money from money lenders at a very high rate of interest, the repayment of which lead them to steal again and to remain in poverty till their last breath.

The exploitation of Dalits was so harsh that they were not able to get houses for rent if they revealed their caste to the house owners. This led the Dalits to hide their caste and took houses for rent in the name of other upper caste. Laxman Gaikwad did the same and concealed his caste from his colleagues claiming to be Maratha. Even for basic necessities the Uchalyas had to struggle to get rid of poverty and hunger. They experienced all kinds of exploitation but in spite of all these they were not able to lead decent lives with decent jobs. If Gaikwad gives detailed information about his community’s life and their struggle, another kind of mistreatment has been chronicled by Limbale in his autobiography Outcaste: Akkarmashi in which he talks about how he was made to live as half caste due to the exploitation of her mother at the hands of a village Patil, who belonged to a high caste. In the beginning of his autobiography, Limbale writes:

My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother, landless. I am an akkarmashi (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate. (Limbale ix, acknowledgement)

In addition to this, he tells his readers the reason for writing his autobiography because he had no other person to share his pain and suffering with and therefore wanted to share with the readers the kind of wicked life he was made to live. He was
expelled from his own community for being an ‘akkarmashi’ meaning ‘half caste’, a position in which he belongs nowhere. In the beginning of his autobiography he writes:

I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable, as a half Caste, and as an impoverished man. There is a peril in every village who is also a landowner. He invariably has a whore. I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore. High-caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me, calling me ‘akkarmashi’….I have always lived with the burden of inferiority. (Limbale ix-x, acknowledgement)

These lines of Limbale give a clear picture of the caste system, the class distinction and the economic condition and the exploitation of Dalits especially women at the hands of the upper caste. Women were used as sexual objects and were treated very brutally without giving any value to her. In Maharashtra and in other parts of India, there exists a custom of giving Dalit girls to upper caste people to satisfy their lust and the children born to them were considered as illegitimate because, the upper caste people who utilized those women to fulfill their sexual urge refused to acknowledge the children as theirs and such women were treated as prostitutes in the society. In this regard Limbale says:

People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil’s whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect?. (Limbale 38)
The people belonging to upper caste are very conscious about their sacredness and afraid of polluting it but the question is: ‘Isn’t their sacredness polluted by having sex with women belonging to an untouchable caste? If having sex with a Dalit woman does not pollute high caste people, then how does just the touch of a Dalit pollute their sacred caste?’ Nobody is ready to answer these questions but continue to follow the brutal caste system by harassing and exploiting the Dalits.

Limbale published Outcaste: Akkarmashi when he was only 25 years old, where he chronicles his life which is full of pain and suffering. In his autobiography, Limbale talks about his life along with the life of his mother and thereby reveals the life their community is leading. In the preface to the first print of Akkarmashi, he wrote:

Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture and religion. But what of the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape in her womb. That rape has to be borne, fed and reared. And this rape acquires and lives a life. My autobiography holds in it the agony of such a life. My experiences are my words. What will remain if you take experience away from a life? A living corpse. (Limbale xxiv acknowledgement)

Poverty was a huge problem for Dalits which made them to take up any job given to them without looking at the value of such jobs whether high or low. Limbale says that because of poverty “A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit” (Limbale 8). Through his autobiography, poverty emerges as the main theme and the struggle of the Dalits to break the shackles of poverty in the midst of oppression from the non dalits.

Right from his childhood, Limbale was stigmatized as an outcaste because he was born out of a sexual relationship between his mother, a Dalit, and a village ‘Patil’ who belongs to the upper caste. Hence he cannot call himself an untouchable from his mother’s side or as a person belonging to the upper caste because the man who had sex with his mother is from a high caste. Therefore he was called as an “akkarmashi” meaning “outcaste” who belongs nowhere in the realms of society:
How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? … Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected?. (Limbale 38-39)

In a vast country like India, Limbale stands in the middle without anyone to claim him as belonging to their community. He feels orphaned not because he has no parents but because nobody accepted him into their fold. Though the village Patil had sex with his mother and became responsible for his birth he was not ready to call him as his son because of the rigid caste system. Fed up with the caste system, Limbale asks these questions to society and wants to know his status. He even questions his mother asking:

Why did my mother say ‘yes’ to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really?. (Limbale 37)

Born as an outcaste, Limbale wanted to know who his father is and he wants his father to claim him as his son. But unfortunately this didn’t happen and this made him to think about his father’s identity and who his relatives are. He craves very strongly to know about his roots and where he belongs to. In this regard he says:

My so-called father belonged to Baslegaon. What kind of place was Baslegoan, my fatherland? What sort of people were they? What were my relatives there like? What were my brothers and sisters like? What was my home there like? Should I go there in search of my roots? How many days would it take? Would my father recognize me?. (Limbale 63)
Many questions like this came to Limbale’s mind whenever he thinks about his father but he remains unsuccessful in his effort to find his father and his roots which made him very unhappy because everybody humiliated him as the one who does not know who his father is. Unhappy with this humiliation Limbale says: “Why didn’t my mother abort me when I was a foetus? Why did she not strangle me as soon as I was born? … What exactly is our fault? Why should a child suffer for the sin of its parents?” (Limbale 64).

Limbale even expresses his anger at his mother for giving birth to him saying: “Why did she commit adultery at all?”(Limbale 64). This anger and frustration of Limbale is not just towards his mother but also at the man who is responsible for his birth. But, as he belongs to low caste he fails to exercise his anger against the father and takes it out on his mother who is just a woman with flesh and blood with no freedom and rights of her own. If she had freedom and rights to do what she wants and do what she does not want, then she would have refused to have sex with the village ‘patil’, the failure of which lead to Limbale’s birth as an outcaste “akkarmashi”.

Limbale’s autobiography is full of details of exploitation and he unveils how the Dalits were exploited right from their childhood till their death. The upper caste people didn’t lose a single chance of abusing Dalits and they witnessed torture and humiliation from their first breath to the last. He says: “There is a saying, ‘children are the flowers of god’s abode, but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out… we had grown up like aliens since our infancy” (Limbale 5).

The birth of an untouchable child is not celebrated as a happy event but the upper caste people regarded the birth of an untouchable as an asset thinking that they had one more hand to work and serve for them. The lesson of purity was taught to children in the school itself and the teachers themselves sowed the seeds of purity and pollution in the minds of children. Not knowing anything about this the children from the upper caste followed their teachers and maintained some distance from the untouchables to save their purity. The untouchables were made to sit on the floors while other boys sat on a raised platform. Moreover the teachers assigned the work of smearing floor and walls with cow dung paste to the untouchables. All the hard work was given to the Mahars yet they were not allowed to live freely and happily from the upper caste people.
Another ironical matter is, the Mahars who used to dig and build the wells were not allowed to take water from the same well because of the fear of ‘pollution’. What was not there at the time of getting work from them appeared at the time of allowing Mahars to take water from the well. This happened in the case of Narayana Patil because Narayana Patil utilized Mahars to build the well but later they were not allowed to take water from it because he did not want to pollute his well water by the touch of Mahars.

Not enough of this, the Mahars were even more humiliated that even the barber in the village refused to shave Mahars’ head though they had money. Limbale narrates one such incident where Isunath, the barber refused to shave Limbale’s head in spite of his effort to convince him that he had money with him. Frustrated by this, Limbale says: “How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head?”(Limbale 22). But later police complaint was given against the barber as a result of which he started shaving Mahars head since then. Not just the barbers discriminated against Mahars but even the cobblers refused to repair chappals when they came to know that the footwear belonged to the Mahars.

Apart from this, the high caste people degraded the Mahars in the name of caste by following untouchability in village tea shops by keeping separate cups and saucers for them. One such tea shop was owned by Shivram in the village where the age old tradition of giving tea to Mahars in separate cups and saucers was followed by him. Even for drinking water an aluminum tumbler was kept separately for Mahars. Limbale notices that and says, after drinking tea: “the Mahars had to put the money for the tea on the ground or drop it from a height into the hands of the owner because for a Mahar or Mang to hand money directly to anyone was a sin” (Limbale 76).

The money which the Mahars touched and gave to high caste people was not an act of pollution. The upper caste people had no problem in taking the money which was touched by Dalits but the touch of their fellow human beings polluted their sacredness. This shows that the upper castes have modified tradition followed by them since centuries as per their whims and fancies. Regarding this tradition of refusing to take money directly from low caste people Rambaap, one of the customers of Shivram’s tea shop, noticing Limblae’s confused state of mind, says: “We are low castes. What you have seen is a long tradition that has come down to us from our
forefathers. What can we do about it? How can we go against the village customs?” (Limbale 76).

In the name of religion, tradition and custom, the upper caste people silenced the Dalits by curtailing their right to revolt against the injustice done to them since time immemorial. Limbale used to hear stories from her grandmother Santamai who used to talk about their miserable life and inhuman condition. By listening to such stories Limbale said: “What a miserable past we had lived! My agony was not limited to myself alone. Injustice done to me was not just today’s phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into history, for many thousands of years” (Limbale 79).

The Mahars were prohibited from entering fields of the upper caste in the village and in case any Mahar entered the fields of high castes then they were made to face punishments in a very cruel way. In every village usually it was the duty of women to graze cattle but even in this the Mahar women were not allowed to graze their cattle in the fields of upper caste people. If the cattle of Mahars strayed inside the fields of the upper caste people, then they came shouting: “Don’t graze your cattle here. We need grass for our own. Your whole community is monstrous… your cattle will spoil our crops” (Limbale 79). The upper caste people were more concerned about their sacredness than their grass in the field because they were afraid that if the cattle of Mahars eat grass in their field then the whole field would get polluted and the grass would become impure to give to their cattle. If a Mahar woman was found in the field of upper castes grazing her cattle, then she would be brutally beaten and insulted and sometimes they were sexually harassed by raping them. ‘Then, in what way did the upper castes maintain their purity when they had sex with a Mahar woman? Is it not polluting their caste?’

Another dominating theme which Limbale deals with in his autobiography is the constant battle of Dalits, with hunger. Denial of education made Dalits to take up menial jobs earning very less which was not enough to meet their daily needs. Not able to control their hunger sometimes the Dalits filled their stomach by begging which shows their miserable condition. Limbale was fortunate to attend school because sometimes he got lavish meals from the higher caste students for which his mother got angry for being selfish in eating alone without saving anything for her and
her sister. Apart from this Limbale’s grandmother used to eat bhakari made out of corn picked out of a pile of manure. In this regard Limbale says:

Santamai herself ate the bhakari made from the jowar collected from the dung, but for us she made bhakaris from the flour she had collected as alms… Santamai was used to eating such bhakari. It was like pushing garbage into the furnace, feeding its fire. (Limbale 11)

Most of the time Limbale’s family went empty stomach without anything to eat for an entire day. Many times Dada and Santamai went hungry themselves by giving bhakari to Limbale as he was a child who was not able to bear his hunger. In spite of these incredible sacrifices by her grandmother Santamai, Limbale family’s struggle for satisfying hunger continued and it lead even to begging on market days. Poverty and hunger were the two major reasons for the Dalits to get exploited by upper caste people. Poverty lead to hunger which made them obey the orders of higher castes to fill their stomach. Frustrated by this kind of life Limbale chides god by making one as rich and the other as poor, one as high and the other low and says: “What kind of God is this that makes human beings hate each other? We are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchable? We don’t approve of this God, nor this religion, nor this country because they ostracize us?” (Limbale 62).

The existence of caste system in society makes Limbale angry due to which he was made to live without any cultural roots of his own in his own place. He was humiliated by labelling him as an ‘outcaste’ and wants to know about his roots. He asks himself: “My father lives in a mansion, my mother in a hut, and I on the street. Where will I die? Where are my roots exactly?” (Limbale 62). In a way Limbale’s autobiography gives a clear picture of the suffering of Dalits and most importantly his suffering in his life as an ‘outcaste’ without any roots of his own and without any proper group which he can claim as his own. In spite of this humiliating life, Limbale successfully completed his education and emerged as a famous Marathi Dalit writer with an identity of his own which is like a strength to other Dalits to achieve their goals in life.
Like Limbale, another famous Marathi writer Vasanth Moon has experienced hardships to get education which he has explained clearly in his autobiography namely *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*. In his autobiography, which has the credit of being the first Dalit autobiography to be published in English, Vasanth Moon demonstrates the cruelty of the caste system and his struggle to get an education. Like Limbale, Moon also reveals the importance of education for Dalits in the Hindu society which helps them to claim their rights and identity in the annals of society. Throughout his autobiography, Moon talks about Ambedkar and the Ambedkarite movement which existed in the community.

Vasanth Moon was born on 22 January 1932 in Maharashtra in the city of Nagpur. From his childhood till the death of his grandfather, Moon lived happily without any problems and difficulties. But with the death of his grandfather and his father’s irresponsible behaviour Moon became aware of the poor situation of his family. Deserted by her husband Moon’s mother alone struggled very hard to give a better life to her children. In spite of this complex situation Moon’s mother encouraged her son to get educated by recognizing its value which can give a decent life for her children. Due to poverty, Vasanth Moon sought help from his classmates who used to give him clothes and food. Moon did not feel shame on receiving help from others in gaining education.

Vasanth Moon dedicates his autobiography to his late mother Purnabai because of whom he gained character and self-confidence. Having studied up to third grade during that time it was she who gave basic education to her children by realizing the importance of education for Dalits, as a result of which Vasanth Moon came out as a civil servant and a Dalit activist. But his struggle to get education was not a bed of roses, instead he went through many adversities to fulfill his mother’s dream and ultimately came out successful. He is also the editor of seventeen volumes of Dr. Ambedkar’s writing and speeches in English which is considered as a great work done by him.

Vasanth Moon calls his autobiography ‘Vasti’ meaning neighbourhood which tells the story of his community in Nagpur along with his life history. Moon’s ‘Vasti’ of ancient times is the “urban slum” in modern days in which he shows clearly the difficulty of a Dalit growing up in modern India. In this regard Rajkumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* calls Moon’s
autobiography as “a social document which tells us how difficult it is for a Dalit to
grow in India” (Kumar 194).

Being born in a poor family belonging to the Mahar community, Moon
struggled very hard to fill his stomach. They lived in a village called Sitabardi, but
unfortunately his father deserted his family when Moon was just nine years old. This
made Moon’s mother to migrate to Nagpur where they settled themselves in a slum
named Maharpura because Maharpura was full of Mahars. The absence of the father
compelled Moon’s mother to run the family by doing odd jobs, the earning of which
was not enough to meet their everyday requirements, which made them to depend
fully on the upper caste neighbourhoods. Lack of financial support made Moon to
discontinue his studies for some time and he started begging with his sister in the
neighbourhood with the intention of supporting his mother.

Moon’s grandfather Sadhashiv Lokhare was a man who had grown up in the
company of Europeans. It is from them that he imbibed discipline in his life. By
observing Europeans Lokhare got the idea of Saheb and he wanted Moon to become a
Saheb like the Europeans. He said:”Vasath should not even get dust on his feet. He
will be a Saheb” (Moon 10). It was his grandfather who made Vasanth learn
the
English alphabet and it was he who laid the foundation of a better life which was like
a dream for Mahars in those days.

Moon also gives an account of his life of poverty and his mother’s struggle to
fill their stomach. Married to a widower Waman, Moon’s mother Purnabai suffered a
lot because Waman left her and settled with his first wife’s children. Though Moon’s
father was in good job of that of a driver to a Parsi and was getting 250rs per year, his
life became miserable due to his drinking habit. Unable to bear this, Moon’s mother
sent a message to her father saying “It’s impossible for me to live. The children are in
danger” (Moon 19). But the real life of poverty started after the death of Sadhashiv
and this made Moon’s mother to search for jobs for survival.

On seeing his mother’s struggle, Moon and his sister Malti thought of begging
and also tried it out, but the fear of getting beaten up put an end to their idea of
begging. But later on he started collecting used tubes from cycle shops and sold them
in order to earn some money and support his mother in running the family.
Though Moon’s family was fighting hard to come out of poverty, they were not successful and were always at the mercy of upper caste Hindus. But in spite of this Moon’s mother Purnabai, realizing the value of education got him admitted to Bute School. Regarding the education of Mahars, Vasanth Moon in his autobiography mentions the sayings of older people in the community who said: “Brahman teachers, rather than encouraging Mahar students, always destroyed their self-confidence” (Moon 83). Earlier the Brahmins discouraged Mahars’ education because they were afraid of facing competition from Mahars after getting education. So they tried not to give education to them and used religion as their tool as a result of which Mahars were deprived of getting education. But later Dalits started protesting against the injustice done to them by the upper caste Hindus and demanded their right to education by realizing its value. It is this realization which made Moon’s mother to give education to him in spite of her poverty.

Mahars faced discrimination even in getting education. As mentioned in the book, Moon says: “After passing eighth, most of the Brahman boys would be put in the A class, which was English medium. In the B class were Marathi-medium students” (Moon 85). Like Brahman students, Moon wanted to take science and thought “… if Brahman students took it, why shouldn’t I? He even asked his science teacher and expressed his desire to study science for which they discouraged him. This shows discrimination in terms of education and they were denied their rights to study what they wanted and liked. Not just Vasanth Moon experienced this but Ambedkar also faced the same situation when he expressed his inclination to study Sanskrit. He said “Though I had desire to learn Sanskrit, I was compelled to leave it on account of the narrow attitude of our teachers” (Bhakshi 1). But later on Ambedkar became master not only in Sanskrit language but in many languages which proved his excellence in the field of education. He is also the architect of the Indian Constitution which is a work of great mastery. If Ambedkar remained like other Dalits by following blindly the laws of upper caste Hindus then he would not have been able to achieve success in his life and become a role model to other Dalits. Vasanth Moon, by following the footsteps of Ambedkar accomplished what he wanted and thereby became a great writer and exposed the problems of his people through his writings.

Vasanth Moon was a realist, who in his autobiography tries to put an end to cruelty and injustice prevailing in the society due to the caste system. Moon and his
friends disliked to be called as “Harijans” and even refused to take scholarship from the government which was given to Dalits for their uplift. This particular attitude of Moon and his friends shows that in spite of their suffering, pain, and exploitation they wanted to carve a respectable life for themselves through their own effort and hard work.

Throughout his autobiography Moon discusses caste conflicts which existed in his community and the exploitation of Mahars which existed in every field like social, political, economic, religious etc. In his autobiography he gives an account of the growth of a Dalit from a poor boy to a civil servant and explains in detail the hardships he went through to achieve success in his life. He calls Dr. Ambedkar as his inspiration, because of whom his dreams got realized and emerged as a successful Marathi Dalit writer.

Achieving success in the midst of Hindu religion with an empty hand is not possible for a Dalit and for this Ambedkar suggested some options and solutions and showed the way to get their rights and duties by getting political power into their hands. He gave more importance to political power and wanted Dalits to take political power in order to fight against their maltreatment.

Regarding the sufferings of Dalits, Narendra Jadhav in his book *Ambedkar: Awakening India’s Social conscience* recalls the words of Voltaire who repudiates the concept of “isms” especially Gandhism because Gandhiji, the father of our nation believed in the caste system and argued in favour of Varna system. Voltaire said: “Oh! Mockery to say people that the suffering of some brings joy to others and works good to the whole. What solace is it to a dying man to know that from his decaying body a thousand worms will come into life?” (Jadhav, *Ambedkar* 395).

On the whole it is said that the experience of untouchables remains same though the name of the village is different. In Limbale’s book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* he talks about the exploitation of Dalits which has become universal. If one takes Dalit Literature written by Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, or Telugu writers, the life and suffering of untouchables are identical which is full of ill-treatment, injustice, and illegal oppression. Further he says:

Untouchables’ experiences of untouchability are identical. The name of the village may well be different, but the nature of tyranny
against Dalits is the same. Social boycott, separate bastis, wells and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal caste; denial of admission to public places; injustice done to Dalit women; dragging and cutting of dead animals; and the barber refusing to cut hair - these experiences are alike for all Dalits. (Limbale, Towards an Aesthetic 35)

These are not just experiences but the kinds of exploitation which the Dalits have tolerated for centuries without raising any voice but recently fed up by this have started revolting against such inhuman oppression. In other words apart from experiencing exploitation at the hands of upper castes, the Dalits have also revolted and struggled against them to gain their identity which will be discussed in chapter four of the thesis.

The particular chapter’s main focus is on the ways of exploitation experienced by Dalits which is shown in the select autobiographies of Jadhav, Gaikwad, Limbale, and Moon. All these writers have chronicled their life style to give a clear picture to the readers about their horrible condition and their efforts to come out of it. Since this chapter is about the exploitation it is shown how Dalits were exploited by upper caste Hindus in different ways and in different places. Some Dalits were branded as criminals which is explored by Laxman Gaikwad in The Branded while in Out caste Limbale shows his sufferings as an ‘akkarmashi’ due to the practice of caste system. Similarly Narendra Jadhav and Vasanth Moon explore Dalits discrimination and suppression in their own way in their respective autobiographies claiming education as an important tool to come out of exploitation. In short the second chapter deals mainly with different kinds of exploitation of Dalits that existed in modern India which is discussed clearly through the writings of four Marathi Dalit Writers whereas their struggle to get freedom and identity will be discussed in chapter four of the thesis.
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PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


