CHAPTER V
Margins within Margins: A Study of Adivasis and Denotified Tribes in Laxman Gaikwad’s The Branded

The British have an Empire. So have the Hindus. For is not Hinduism a form of imperialism and are not the Untouchables a subject race, owing their allegiance and their servitude to their Hindu masters? If Churchill must be asked to declare his war aims how could anybody avoid asking Mr. Gandhi and the Hindus to declare their war aims.

(Ambedkar, Annihilation 78)

This chapter, like the previous chapters, continues to investigate into the questions associated with the suppressive ‘tradition’ and the resulting marginalisation of dalits in the Indian nation. The primary objective is to focus on the issues of marginalisation, exclusion, deprival and injustice. The concept of caste creates distinctions and makes one section inferior to the other. Dalits have always been treated as ‘peripheral’ identities and as ‘margins’ whereas Brahmins have always occupied the central position and are recognized as the ‘centre’. The problem addressed here is the continued oppression of the dalits and denotified tribes in relation to the issue of their representation by non-dalit authors. Although untouchability, along with the caste system, has been abolished, caste remains a brutal fact of everyday Indian life. The untouchables, whose shadows were thought to be polluting, are still among India’s poorest and most disempowered people. I intend to explore the construction and politics of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ and the role assumed by literature in the perpetuation of the same. Dalits, denotified and nomadic tribes face a similar kind of oppression and subjugation. The plight of denotified and nomadic tribes is even worse as most of these communities do not even have the constitutional safeguards that exist for dalit communities.
In the first part, this chapter proposes to analyse briefly the historical aspect of the caste system in India which has resulted in a highly stratified societal structure with a hierarchy of castes. There is an effort to take into account dalit resistance to all kinds of dehumanization and the factors leading to their rebellion. I take up the case study of an autobiography by Laxman Gaikwad and examine how there are “margins within margins”. Gaikwad writes about the plight of denotified and nomadic tribes which are oppressed like the dalit population but in a different way. The difference lies in the fact that denotified tribes do not have constitutional safeguards like the other weak sections. They are not supported by policies like protective discrimination. I study the state of denotified tribes and raise some relevant issues and questions. Subsequently, I examine the case of dalit autobiographies and try to theorise about the characteristics of dalit discourse.

The Caste situation in India and beyond

Louis Dumont argues that the caste system should be understood in relation to ideas and values, as a system grounded in distinctly religious ideology of hierarchy. This is a reality because the caste system derives its sustenance from religious principles. But social scientists of this tradition failed to examine the religious grounding of the system in its day-to-day operations. The relations and systems of caste were always viewed from the perspective of high/low, purity/impurity, cleanliness/pollution and never viewed from the perspective of affluence/poverty, domination/subordination and domination/deprivation. One of the most crucial and vital facts that was overlooked by even the later day analysts of the caste system was that the interpreters were from the dominant castes.

It is vital to review the status of dalits in Indian society. Apart from being historically prosecuted on the basis of varna and caste, they are still faced with new forms of oppression and casteism. Different manifestations have been taking shape with the change of time. Originally all such issues were revolving around forms of untouchability. But it has taken new forms and shapes now and dalits as
a whole are posed with new challenges and tasks. A realistic exploration of history was never done in the past, until Phule, Ambedkar and a few others began to review it from a different viewpoint. Most of Ambedkar’s work revolved around exploring the unknown history of the battered people whom he often referred as ‘Broken’ men. Hence an alternative picture of varna and caste was exposed before the nation. Prior to that, the unchallenged and documented reality focused only on a core brahminism. Therefore dalits have a base today to fight against the caste forces. However, with the growth of understanding among dalits and other marginalized sections, the tenor and mode of oppression has also taken new forms and shapes.

There are several safeguards in the Indian constitution as well as laws enacted in the parliament including the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act which was passed in 1989. But these legal safeguards have not proved very effective in eradicating the oppression of dalits within the caste system.\(^1\) The power structure of law-enforcement agencies and the prejudice of the general public make it almost impossible for dalits to get legal redress from discrimination and violence. The laws against injustice are in operation but not sufficient. For the real redress, the existing power structure must be dismantled and restructured. Some recent publications give an idea of the force of the dalit intellectual movement and tell us how this exhibits intolerance for the continuation of the oppressive system. The provocative tone of the book *Why I am not a Hindu* by Kancha Ilaiah is an illustration of the radical thoughts of some dalit activists. Many of educated dalits look at their historical conditions and their contemporary solutions differently from the mainstream. They find shared grievance with oppressed people outside India. They challenge Hinduism. They take pride in their culture and frown on adopting the cultural habits of the upper castes. To give one example, where lower caste people were once denied the use of their caste names or forced to conceal their caste names, some dalit leaders now openly add their caste name to their name. In Tamil Nadu dalit Ezhumalai, Krishnaswamy

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Parayanar are examples. This is to announce their identity publicly and to demand their acceptance in that form. Some dalit meetings make it a point to serve beef and toddy as a celebration of their customs. There is a developing genre of dalit literature where dalit cultural words are used which is prohibited in the mainstream literature. All this is to break the norms accepted in the mainstream society and to highlight the dignity of oppressed people. There is more to caste other than merely untouchability. The members of denotified tribes too face discrimination on the basis of birth. A member of these ‘branded’ tribes can never live a life of dignity and social respect. The tragedy is that they do not live in a fixed place. And the general populace and the local police treat them as criminals as they did previously for over a century. Between 1977 and 1982 more than 42 Lodha tribemen were brutally killed as criminals. The only Lodha tribal girl Chunikotel who wanted to be an anthropologist was forced to commit suicide because she did not compromise her self-esteem before the upper caste people.

(ambedkar.org)

It is very difficult to know who the denotified tribes are and what actually has been happening to them for the last century and a quarter. Most Indians find it hard to believe that every year such tribes are either mob-lynched or are killed by the police or forcedly kept engaged in criminal activities like daring robberies, so that the police, the political worthies and the receivers of stolen goods can grow rich. In such cases, they are always brutally punished. It is not customary that a receiver of stolen goods is made accountable and the question of punishing the police does not arise at all. In fact the police and the politicians are frustrated when these tribes refuse to commit crimes. It is only recently that representative people from these communities like Gaikwad make their presence felt through writing books and thus help their people raise their voice in protest. Despite some changes, the position of most dalits in post-independence India has not improved significantly. The situation is even worse for the so-called ‘Denotified Tribes’ as
their condition is quite different, having been landless nomadic groups to begin with and subject to persecution under the British which continues to this day.

**The Branded (Uchlaya) by Laxman Gaikwad – A Case Study**

No Native place. No birth-date. No house or farm. No caste either. This is how I was born. In an Uchlaya community, at Dhanegaon in Taluks Latur. (Gaikwad, 1)

*Uchlaya* (The Branded) which was originally written in Marathi literally means ‘pilferer’. This work has been translated in various languages. It came out as *Uchakka* in Hindi. The Branded by Laxman Gaikwad is an autobiographical novel which received several awards including Sahitya Akademy award in 1988. Gaikwad is a social worker and not a professional writer. In one of his interviews, he reveals that writing novels does not fascinate him. He does not write for the claims of authorship but to expose the age-long humiliation and agony that actually forced him to write about his experiences.

Laxman Gaikwad, who was born in 1956 in Dhanegaon, Latur District, Maharashtra, gained recognition with the 1998 publication of The Branded. His novel, for the first time, brings to the world of literature the trials and tribulations of his tribe. ‘Uchlaya’ is a term coined by the British who classified the tribe as criminal. His treatment of the dalit theme, in which his own delicate subjectivity is a part, is widely acclaimed for its masterful sensitivity and supreme craftsmanship. He depicts in all their subtlety and poignancy the inner feelings, sufferings and emotional complexities of a tribe historically viewed as criminals. He has three other books to his credit.

Gaikwad’s literary carrier started in 1977 when he wrote a ballad expounding the innumerable agonies of the exploited people in society. The Sahitya Akademi award winning work by Gaikwad has gained wider readership after P.A. Kohlharkar’s work of translating this to English. Kolharkar, a teacher by profession, has translated several works from Marathi to English. Kolharkar dives
Gaikwad’s work deals with the social category generally known as the Denotified and Nomadic tribes which has 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 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. The Branded documents the events of a stereotyped underdog, a representative of a section of society thriving on petty crimes. It is a poignant satire on social equality and proves the hollowness of the claims of 58 years of Indian independence. Gaikwad describes his life and the society around him to convey that there resides a section of Indian society which lives in sub-human circumstances.

Gaikwad narrates a world where people survive on just water for three consecutive days, where food comprises cats, rats, roots and leaves and where life is abominably unhygienic. The indoctrination into the thieving profession is carefully described by Gaikwad. There are categories, classifications and techniques in stealing, which seem to reach the form of an ‘art’ if one can use the word. It was Gaikwad’s good fortune that his father was a watchman and, thereby, exposed to the outside world. He realised the value of education, especially with regard to his youngest son, “Lachchman”. The son worked as a cotton mill worker, moving on to become a powerful trade union leader and finally, a social worker. That apart, he wrote The Branded which holds tremendous weight in the literary sphere.

Gaikwad’s work is an eloquent attempt to lay bare upper caste prejudices and awaken readers to the people he belongs to who are human beings and deserve to join the mainstream of social life. Just like other dalit autobiographies, as
discussed in the second section of the chapter, the tone of *Uchlaya* is frank and militant. The author does not intend to write like a canonical author; he simply tries to dispel the myths and misconceptions about his people. He does not want to waste the opportunity that someone like him rarely gets. He is aware of the fact that there is no systematic ethnological, historical and sociological study available on these tribes and therefore he presents his life story in such a way that the readers get a comprehensive view of the problem and its causes. The opening page, which reflects his stark reality, gives us an idea of some of the harsh and brutal facts of Gaikwad’s life:

> My name is Laxman Gaikwad... I was born in a vagabond family with no home, no land to plough, not even a caste to call our own. I told folks that I am from Ghanegao as I was born there and grew up during my early years. My childhood was spent in a bird-nest-like hut. To enter it, one had to bend their knees. My grandmother Narasabai ran the household. Her husband, my grandfather, Lingappa, had no job and had to report to the local police station twice a day. He once had a flourishing practice. He would go to far way towns, pick pockets, steal shopping bags and come home by night. He was a famous thief of his time in this part of the country. His name was well known even in Nizaam’s kingdom. (1)

Gaikwad, through his own life experiences, makes explicit the operation of a vicious circle which is in place that not only hinders their growth but also questions their existence in the society. He exposes all those hegemonic strategies that are employed against the low caste people and denotified tribes to subjugate them. He narrates how from the impressionable age in school, the language, mode of expression, socialization and role models are all given by the hegemonic system of brahmans; there is not a trace of their original language, customs and culture.
Gaikwad’s childhood experiences are no exceptions to this general norm. The following lines reveal the embarrassment that he faces in his school. He does not complain that there is no teacher to reprimand his classmates as the teachers make him feel worse:

When I went to school, the boys in my class sniggered at me. They mocked derisively: ‘Lakshya, Patharut boy, has come to school!’ I used to sit in a corner meekly as if I had been forcibly dragged there….some of the boys in the school used to call me Lachhmantata, crab-curry khataa. (34)

Dalit students are only taught to be ashamed of their being. They are forcibly taken away from their original culture and therefore in the process made to emulate the upper caste people. The concept of sanskritisation² precisely points to this process. Gaikwad, the student, does not resist this stereotyping and he alongwith everyone in his family are made to believe that their lower-caste status is not man-made but God-send:

Since then everybody in the school called me Lachhmantata. But I did not feel piqued. For I believed that because I belonged to the Parhrut clan, a lower clan, they were privileged to mock at me. I did feel angry sometimes. But I kept quiet. If I told anybody at home, they abused me soundly. (34)

The history of the denotified tribes goes back to the early years of colonial rule. In those times, whoever opposed the British colonial expansion was perceived as a potential criminal. Particularly, if any attempt was made to oppose the colonial government with the use of arms, the charge of criminality was inevitable. The British in their list of criminal groups included many of the wandering minstrels, fakirs, petty traders, rustic transporters and disbanded groups of soldiers. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the tribes in the Northwest frontier were
declared ‘criminal tribes’. This category became increasingly open-ended and by 1871, the British had prepared an official list of Criminal Tribes and an act to regulate criminal tribes was passed in that year. For instance, the Bhils, who had fought the British in Khandesh and other territories were convicted under Section 110 of the Indian Penal Code and recognized as criminal tribes. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) made provisions for establishing reformatory settlements where the criminal adivasis could be kept in confinement and subjected to low paid work. They were required to report to the guard rooms several times every day so that they did not escape from the oppressive settlements. A close reading of The Branded makes it clear that like the dalits, marginalisation of denotified tribes is carried out in similar ways:

a) The Denotified tribes are not permitted to enter the streets and houses of other castes. The members of Denotified tribes can touch others or be touched by others but they also suffer from a similar kind of social ostracism.

b) The members of Denotified tribes are forced to reside in separate settlements. Seclusion at the outskirts of the village or settlement may rightly be called social boycott or ostracism.

c) Concepts like “defilement, pollution, impurity and exclusion” are blatantly attributed to the Denotified tribes. The idea that impurity can be transmitted by the mere touch of these people or by their approach within a certain distance prevails.

d) Provision of separate tea glasses in rural and semi-urban areas (serving tea in tins separately allocated only for Denotified tribes) is common in public tea stalls. The Denotified tribes are served tea, not in glasses or mud cups like people of other castes but in aluminum tins.
c) The Denotified tribes are not allowed to fetch water from common water sources-wells, tanks and ponds. Village wells are still out of the reach of the Denotified tribes.

f) The Denotified tribes are not allowed to utilize the services of barbers or washermen.

g) The Denotified tribes are not allowed to bathe in common water sources.

h) The Denotified tribes are denied the right to move freely through the streets of other caste people. Even the dead bodies of Denotified tribes are not allowed to be taken to burial grounds through the other-caste streets.

i) The Denotified tribes are not permitted to use benches to sit in the village bus stops.

j) The Denotified tribes are forced to stand, or give way to other caste people, on the roads. They are also forced to use narrow dirt tracks.

k) The Denotified tribes are prohibited to wear chappals in the streets of other-caste people. They must carry them in their hands and walk barefoot.

l) The labour of Denotified tribe’s members is exploited in the name of bondage by advancing money.

m) The labourers of Denotified tribes are paid lower wages than those prescribed in the Minimum Wages Act.

n) People of other castes often extract free, compulsory labour from Denotified tribes.

o) In the name of religious rituals, Denotified tribes are often forced to beg for food in the houses of other-caste people.
The women of these tribes who work as agricultural hired workers regularly face physical abuse and sexual exploitation from the landowners, who normally belong to upper castes.

Despite their marginal position, denotified tribes and adivasis have contributed enormously to Indian history and society. Over a long period of time, many Adivasi traditions were incorporated into Hinduism and Buddhism. In various parts of India Adivasis and DNTs were incorporated into local states. In some cases they became the ruling families, in others the untouchable lower castes. Some were hired to fight wars for Indian kings and under British rule they offered some of the fiercest resistance. As soon as the British took over Eastern India, tribal revolts broke out to challenge alien rule. In the early years of colonization, no other community in India offered such heroic resistance to British rule or faced such tragic consequences as did the numerous Adivasi communities of the now Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Bengal. In 1772, the Paharia revolt broke out which was followed by a five year uprising led by Tilka Manjhi who was hanged in Bhagalpur in 1785. The Tamar and Munda revolts followed. In the next two decades, revolts took place in Singhbhum, Gumla, Birbhum, Bankura, Manbhoom and Palamau, followed by the great Kol Risings of 1832 and the Khewar and Bhumij revolts (1832-34). In 1855, the Santhals waged war against the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis and a year later, numerous adivasi leaders played key roles in the 1857 war of independence (ambedkar.org). But the defeat of 1858 only intensified British exploitation of national wealth and resources. A forest regulation passed in 1865 empowered the British government to declare any land covered with trees or brushwood as government forest and to make rules to manage it under the terms of its own choosing. The act made no provision regarding the rights of the Adivasi users. A more comprehensive Indian Forest Act was passed in 1878 which imposed severe restrictions upon Adivasi rights over forest land and produce in the protected and reserved forests. The act...
radically changed the nature of the traditional common property of the Adivasi communities and made it state property.

There have not been many sociologists to examine the lives of these people and explore what it means to brand entire communities as criminal, to live one’s life treated as a criminal simply because one is born in that community. Gaikwad narrates a number of incidents which reveal the acute trauma and turbulence that he and his people had to face at the hands of the Indian social system. He explains that taking birth in a denotified tribe is considered to be the biggest crime in society. It is so because if one is a member of any such tribe, the whole system is up in arms against that person. Gaikwad does not try to conceal anything negative about his family. In fact, he is open about all their misfortunes. He is not inhibited in saying that thieving is his family profession. He presents the case of his grandfather which makes it amply clear how difficult the life circle is for the members of a denotified tribe:

My grandfather, Lingappa, did maintain our household in his heydays, picking pockets, lifting valuables and odd things at markets and fairs. He was a well-known and respected thief in our tribe and area. The Nizam State records mentioned him as a most notorious and dangerous thief. Nobody ever dared cross his path. Once while drunk he attempted to pick the money tied in the knot of a dhoti tied around a stranger’s waist. In cutting the knot with a blade (Bharat Blade was most suitable for such jobs) he cut too deep, making a long, deep gash in the stranger’s body from buttocks to waist. The man bawled in pain as blood gushed from the wound. (1)

After his grandfather is caught thieving, he is not treated like ordinary thieves or offenders. He is put through a severe torture. The same treatment is meted out to his family. Leave aside the need for a fair trial, he is not even provided with basic
human rights. The kind of punishment they get before the trial raises serious questions about our legal system:

The police caught our grandfather and dragged him to our hut, beating him severely all the way. They wanted to search our hut for stolen goods. While they looked around, I lay like a dead pup in an old, tattered coverlet in a corner of our rickety grass hut. Grandfather was handcuffed and the police kept asking him: ‘Tell us where you’ve hidden the stolen money and gold. Show or we’ll smash your bones.’ Grandfather wailed piteously: ‘See Saab, see for yourself, there’s nothing in the hut.’ ‘Your whore will know,’ cried the police and grabbed our grandmother by the hair and thrashed her all over. My mother, Dhondabai, had already slipped away into the woods as soon as she had heard of the arrival of the police. The police were beating whomsoever their eyes fell upon -- women, children. They squeezed grandmother’s breasts, asking her to show the stolen goods. Then they left, taking grandfather with them. He was jailed for some months.

The torture does not end even after completing the punishment and the trauma continues. Once a branded always a branded. Everyday, newspapers and media come up with reports about atrocities that the denotified tribe members have to face at the hands of state administration, particularly the police. In Purulia, there is this annual orgy of the Police, of snatching any Shabar (a denotified tribe) man or woman and killing them brutally, as it earns the police promotion, patronage from the political worthies and other benefits (ambedkar.org). Gaikwad rightly says that if a denotified tribe person gives up the profession of thieving, he cannot survive
as no one would employ him/her to any job and police would continue to harass him/her on unreasonable grounds:

After his release he was ordered to report to the police station twice a day. Every morning and evening grandfather rode on a donkey to report to the police station. Subsequently, they made him a State informer, offering him suitable rewards if he disclosed the names of thieves and pickpockets belonging to our tribe. He had to accompany the police to help them trace the addresses and whereabouts of suspected thieves. If he ever failed to report to the police station the police came and beat everybody in our hut. Grandfather was thus forced to give up his pilfering business, report to the police regularly and work as a Nizam State informer helping the police to catch thieves from our own tribe. Nobody would offer work to my father, Martand, as we were known to belong to a branded tribe of criminals. They would not employ my mother, Dhondabai, even as a farm-hand. (5)

The Nomadic and Denotified tribes constitute about five million in Maharashtra and about 60 million all over India. There are 313 Nomadic Tribes and 198 Denotified Tribes. Due to their wandering traditions over hundreds of years without any ostensible means of livelihood under the influence of the caste system, they are forced to live under subhuman conditions. The large section of these tribes is known as ‘Vimukta jaatis’ or the Ex-Criminal Tribes because they were branded as criminals by birth under the ‘Criminal Tribes Act 1871’, enacted by the British Government. In spite of the repeal of the act in 1952, they are still treated as Criminals by birth and subjected to harassment and persecution at the hands of the police and the state machinery. However, they have been deprived of the status of Scheduled Tribes provided by the constitution due to certain historical
circumstances and the acts of omission and commission on part of the Government and the society.

Most members of these tribes live in dismal conditions - often on the outskirts of a city - and are extremely poor. Even the educated members of these communities, who form the first generation of office goers or professionals, are looked upon suspiciously and insulted. This traditional bias against these tribes, a legacy of British rule, persists despite nearly 60 years of government efforts to bring all tribals and other backward communities to parity with the more privileged members of society. Gaikwad reveals the insensitivity as it exists in society towards these communities:

Some officers keep as pet dogs worth Rs 10 to 15 thousands today. They kiss their dogs. I have seen them doing it with my own times. I feel seeing this, that our people keep dogs to fill their bellies.... But I feel sad to see that people from the nomadic and denotified tribes are still looked upon as thieves by the police and the society. Their houses are regularly searched. Even their broken and hole-ridden utensils are confiscated. Not even a single enquiry is held in respect of officers who amass enormous wealth and properties well beyond their legitimate means and income. (223)

The so-called denotified tribes of India are among the lasting victims of British imperialism. Originally “notified” by the government as criminals in 1871, the DNTs have not participated in the independence that came to the rest of India’s people in 1947. Instead, they have languished as the most handicapped community in the nation, with health, literacy and employment levels far below the average. The British decided to solve their law and order problems and consolidate their hold over the Indian countryside by enacting the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871. This and subsequent Acts gave colonial administrators sweeping powers to declare
certain ‘tribes, gangs, or classes’ as addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences. Once a tribe becomes ‘notified’ as criminal, all its members are required to register with the local magistrate. Anyone failing to register would be charged with a crime under the Indian Penal Code. Further, the Act forcibly moves the notified tribes to permanent reformatory settlements - like Chharanagar - that acted as virtual prisons for the tribes and sources of cheap labour to fuel the booming cities of the colonial era.

These criminal tribes were completely denotified in 1952 after India’s independence. India’s new administrators repealed the Criminal Tribes Act on August 30, 1952 and liberated - i.e. ‘de-notified’ - the tribal communities. Thus, many such de-notified communities now celebrate August 30th as their second Independence Day. But unfortunately, the government concurrently enacted a series of Habitual Offenders Acts in 1959. These Acts exhort police authorities to investigate a suspect’s criminal tendencies and whether his occupation is conducive to settled way of life. Police forces around the country used these laws liberally to persecute the De-notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs). Tribals are regularly subjected to public humiliation, beatings and custodial deaths. They are reclassified as habitual offenders. The stigma of the criminal label still follows them to this day. Many laws and regulations in various states prohibit certain communities of people from traveling. Others must still register at police stations in the districts they pass through. This close association with authority makes nomadic tribes especially liable to suspicion when crimes actually occur. The percentage of DNTs in custody and under investigation is greatly disproportionate to their population.

This official validation of behaviour towards DNTs mirrors and reinforces the prejudices of the public at large - the ‘criminal’ label was enough to close the doors to regular employment and DNT communities remain socially and economically far behind most other Indian communities. Although the government
has only abolished the Habitual Offenders Act in the 1990s but the culture of racism and police brutality towards DNTs remains to this day. The literacy rate amongst the DNTs is even lower than that of the adivasi population as a whole which is below 30 per cent. Dilip D’Souza has chronicled the plight of the DNTs collected in his book Branded by Law and has described in detail what illiteracy, poverty and oppression mean in practice:

The British rulers of India had difficulties in grasping the complexities of India’s social diversity. They were confused by the multitude of caste, creed and culture-codes. Most of this confusion manifested in the fields of knowledge they and the other European scholars, constructed in the nineteenth century. One of these was the colonial notion of criminality and its working in Indian social systems. Nobody will ever argue that criminality is a genetically transmitted mental trait. But the colonial rulers were convinced that those who accepted the life of crime were slotted to be criminals ‘by birth’, that ‘crime’ is an entire community’s sole occupation. (97)

The British labeled them criminals because they pursued a nomadic way of life. The nomadic tribes traditionally carried important commodities such as salt and honey between the coasts and the inland forests. The British relied on these networks to establish their own trading relationships and to guide their armies through unknown regions. Indeed, these traders and transporters of goods were crucial informants for the new rulers, who benefited from tribal knowledge of flora and fauna, transportation and communication. As railways and telegraphs were built in the 1850s, such networks became redundant. The colonial authorities grew nervous about people who moved around, carrying intelligence they could
not control directly. In the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, these former allies were seen as potential enemies. In 1871, an Act was passed for “the notification of criminal tribes.” Hundreds of tribes that traditionally collected food from the forest became criminals with the stroke of a pen. When they could not be forcibly settled, they were sometimes shot at sight. Those who were settled were subjected to a pass system to control their movements and were ‘rehabilitated’ through rigorous labour.

To ‘reform’ and ‘civilise’ these communities, the colonial government brought in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871, creating a chapter of brutality and legal discrimination in India’s social history. The communities brought under the CTA provisions were neither criminal nor were most of them tribes. The CTA was not amended till the first quarter of the twentieth century and dominated the lives of nearly 190 communities all over India. Only the Northeastern parts of India remained unaffected.

Apart from priests, merchants, soldiers, farmers - understood in terms of the varnas - the pre-colonial Indian society comprised of sedentary agriculturalists, forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and nomadic traders. They were inter-dependent. The pastoralists tended animal herds and kept moving in fixed orbits; the hunter-gatherers brought in supplies of forest products and medicine; the nomads kept the supply line by transacting merchandise and cultural dissemination. The British had inherited an idealised picture of the pastoralists through the Greek-Roman mythology as well as Christianity. The pastoral was a synonym for divine innocence. The forest-dweller, on the other hand, was a ‘demon’ whom the British wanted to put all their ‘reason’ to service. Nomads throughout Europe’s history have been suspects. During the colonial times, the nomads of India also came to be seen as suspects and criminals. The nomadic communities targeted by the CTA included long-range peripatetic traders such as the Banjaras, hunters who ventured into the weekly markets with birds and
animals, the *Pardhis*, stone masons who moved from site to site, the *wadars* and the *chamthas*, the ironsmiths, the *gadia-lohars*, the snake charmers, as well as the *madaris*, entertainers, gymnasts, dramatists, the *nayaks*, the medicine gatherers, the *vadus* and similar communities. The disbanded soldiers of the defeated princes too were certified ‘criminals’.

The minting and trading of coins had always been in the private domain. Coin-makers, *meenas* were added to the category by the British since minting was made an official government prerogative. The eunuchs were also added. Thus, all those who were non-sedentary, non-pastoral, non-forest-dwellers, non-gentry, were all lumped together in the mind-boggling social engineering. Special reformatory ‘settlements’ were created for the ‘criminal tribes’. These were placed outside the cantonment areas, far from the cities, to avoid ‘contamination’.

The ‘prisoners’ were used for creating the colonial empire infrastructure by forcing them to labour at the construction of railways, bridges and dams. They were also transported to other colonial countries to serve the empire; and they were carried to the work sites everyday tied by ropes or in handcuffs. Out of the perpetual fear of their prison-breaking, they were made to report to the police posts during the night. The result of this legalised slave-holding is that their image as ‘criminal’ communities is instilled in the minds of the Indian people.

The government of India decided to ‘denotify’ the ‘criminal’ communities in 1952. By then the Schedule of Tribes and the Schedule of Castes had already been officially prepared. So, when the barbed wires of the settlements were cut open at Solapur, Baramati, Ahmedabad, Tanjore, Hubli and other places, the inmates found that they had emerged in a world which had for three generations stereotyped them as born criminals. These communities neither owned any land nor had any skills to engage in other occupations.
Now, in ‘free India’ they were seen as prime suspects by the police. These were the years when the formation of Indian states was in progress. So these communities were arbitrarily put in the lists of castes, tribes or other backward castes, without any uniformity. The ‘denotified’ communities were face to face with a difficult future. The villagers refused to accept them since they did not fit into the caste-power structures; the cities treated them as the worst social garbage and forced them to own all petty crimes as their doing. The police exploited the situation for personal gains by actually forcing most of these communities into a life of crime; and the government gifted them, when the Criminal Tribes Act was annulled, with a Habitual Offenders Act which was almost similar to the CTA. Repeatedly mob-lynched, hounded and shunned, the denotified communities have lived a life for the past 59 years that perhaps the Jews in Hitler’s Germany alone may fully understand. Their estimated population of about 6 crore is constantly traumatized by hunger, exploitation and injustice.

Like Gaikwad, Laxman Mane of the Kakadi nomadic community has published his autobiography in Marathi under the title Upara (the rootless/uninvited/alien). Under the influence of these two powerful narratives, other Marathi writers from a variety of the ‘wronged communities’ have started narrativizing their life stories. In Bangla, Mahashweta Devi has written about the denotified tribes such as the Khedia Shabars and the Lodhas. She has been working continuously to bring out the agonies of the people of these communities. In 1998, she filed a case in the Calcutta High Court and won it, when Budhan Shabar was killed in Purulia’s police custody. There is no let up in the exploitation and victimization of denotified and nomadic tribes as expressed by Gaikwad towards the end of his narrative:

I too wander today, but that is to demand justice, rights, reformation and transformation for my people in the present steel industry. There is definitely a world of difference
between my nomadism and the traditional nomadism of my forefathers. But I feel that not a single problem of the nomadic and denotified tribes has yet been solved. Even today the attitude of political and social leaders is vitiated. (232)

Despite a century long experience with reservations/quotas and over five decades of constitutionally mandated affirmative action/protective discrimination policies and programmes, discrimination against dalits/denotified tribes/tribals continues to remain widespread and that even existing quotas remain routinely unfilled. Denotified communities find themselves in a deplorable situation as all of them do not have constitutional safeguards to help their cause.

**Dalit Autobiographies: Some Observations**

In the present context, it can be said that dalit literature questions mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the neglected aspects of dalit existence. Dalit literature is experience-based. This ‘anubhava’ (experience) takes precedence over ‘anumana’ (speculation). Thus to dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one believe. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the outcastes and under-privileged in Indian society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the dalit writers has become sharp.

It is well accepted that the first dalit autobiographies and a majority of those which followed, were written by authors not only from those castes marked by the social stigma of untouchability administratively known as Scheduled castes of the population of Maharashtra and among them almost exclusively those Mahar people who belong to the buddhist tradition reactivated by Ambedkar after 1956.
(the year Ambedkar adopted Buddhism). Still, representatives of other ostracized communities (tribal, nomadic and criminal communities) were soon driven by the same desire, namely, to denounce and put an end to the altogether inhuman condition to which they had been condemned for ages. Few among them are non-buddhist dalit autobiographies.

It is imperative for a complete understanding of the dalit autobiographies that we always keep the historical context before us. Dalit autobiographies are literary versions of social protest practices. The general notion about the literary practice of dalit literature is often evaluated in general as being one dimensional, namely negatively focusing on only revolt and upheaval. I intend to shed light on the inadequacy of such analysis and evaluation. It is nevertheless obviously a literature especially the component of poetry which often pours forth protest and expresses sentiments of hatred and contempt accumulated over centuries. But that alleged ‘negativity’ is actually a form of bold, genuine and strong positive assertion. This literature is a site where repressed and ruined human beings break the status of animal servility to which they were reduced by a strong outcry of revolt which indicates revival of one’s human status. The primary intent remains a strong urge to raise one’s voice, to speak up and denounce as loudly as possible, breaking forever a silence imposed for centuries.

It is an issue of great concern that the so-called ‘mainstream’ literature does not contemplate giving space or reflect the agonies and sufferings of a large section of Indian population. It is difficult to understand how literature can exclude a vast world of the exploited from its purview. A tremendous space is attributed to the explication of human problems and challenges but its scope is limited. In addition to this, there seems to be a tacit unwillingness to understand the suffering of a particular set of people and this unwillingness to understand their problems goes on to show that the neglected section is not part of the human domain. Although Mulk Raj Anand in his works tries to indicate the hollowness of
Indian independence while talking about the gruesome state of dalits but such attempts are few and far between.

Moreover, the social establishment and valorization of critical canons of style and aesthetics are highly privileged exercises, hegemonic in nature and reflect power structures. For instance, for centuries, cutting across nations and races, women’s literary styles have been criticised by critics, almost always male and certain characteristics of women’s narratives found in men’s writings termed weak, soft, feminine and so on. The writer of the biography of Vithabai Mang, Queen of Tamasha, has tampered with words and reality. Baby Kamble’s narrative becomes problematic for the classical canons that dominate critical appreciation and is also evidently judged for being an unrelenting witness to the injustices of the brahmanical orders which produce these critics. Still, if passion is valorised as a quality in literary production, Baby Kamble’s Our Existence can be rescued.

Within this context itself, it is also significant to remember that dalit literature did not first appear in the form of life narratives but mainly as short poetic writings, life testimonies and short stories. We may even consider that the genre of autobiography emerges as an extension of sorts in the practice of short stories. Many autobiographies actually look like a series of short narratives.

The themes of self-assertion and protest and the quest for an identity of one’s own, on the part of those who have been denied full human dignity, whose consciousness is made to forcibly internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social subalternity, is a major literary phenomenon. This is a field of investigation upon which social scientists have hardly focused their attention.

It must be stressed that the literary representation of dalit resentment and anger towards upper caste dominance as the manifestation of their self-awareness, consciousness and imagination has been a historical phenomenon. The emergence of distinct dalit poetry, literary participation and the creation of ‘text of resistance’ and ‘protest literature’ not only reflects a changing consciousness but also
symbolizes the intensification of the dalit quest for dignity and social justice (Satyanarayana, 42). As far as the genre of autobiographies is concerned, autobiographical literature is characteristic in the Western civilization of the rise of bourgeoisie as dominant class; it rests upon concepts of person and individual specific to western societies, or the myth of the ‘I’. (Lejeune, 340)

Another essential feature of dalit autobiographical narratives is that they do not isolate the individual from his/her whole historical environment, family, community and society at large. The distinctive difference does not seem to lie between the individual as an isolated subject and the context against which he/she carves out his/her subjective identity as a world by itself. The oppression, struggles, assertion and quest for identity of the individual who is the subject-matter or the ‘actant’ of the narrative seem never dissociated from the shape that the system of social relation and history has given him/her. The actant of the narrative usually is a social personage, one from among and within a whole community and a wider society. The assertion of the individual structurally appears as an outcry, denunciation or assertion of an individual, as one from within a given social constellation. The individual is emblematic of a personal social practice not of an ‘ego’ emerging and arising against his/her world but of an individual within his family and community.

This general feature raises another question, that of the subject as a pole of autonomy. Dalit literature in general and autobiography in particular insists at length upon the condition and mechanism of oppression of the individuals and their communities and also upon the access to schooling and education as the essential way towards employment and social mobility in a modern urbanized setting, that is, allowing for an escape from the grip of traditional repressive systems. This does not touch upon the question of the will to autonomy of the subject as distinct from his social personage and appearance as an individual among others. In reference to the will to liberation that motivates the dalit
autobiography, the critical question that my analysis points to is about the individual not only as one from within his community but as he himself wishes to stand in front of his community and society.

Ambedkar strongly states that brahmans have succeeded “to idealize the real and to realize the ideal” (The Collected Works, vol. 7, 31-32). ‘Caste is divine’, ‘Caste is sacred’ and the practice of Untouchability is a dharmic conduct, nothing of a sin. Ambedkar has given a new interpretation to the concept of graded inequality in What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables. In Revolution and Counter-Revolution (320) Ambedkar remarks:

Students of social organization have been content with noting the difference between equality and inequality. None have realized that in addition to equality and inequality there is such a thing as graded inequality. Yet inequality is not half as dangerous as graded inequality. (215)

‘Graded inequality’ is ‘the soul of chaturvarna’ (Who are the Untouchables, 307). It is dangerous because every one --every caste-- has internalized it. It gives to every one a social advantage, expressing its difference from the others, constituting its identity, its uniqueness. Here is the reason why Hinduism has survived for millennia. Ambedkar always answered to the unconditional admirers in the West as well as in India of that wonderfully long life of Hinduism, proof for them of its unique quality:

There are many modes of survival and not all are equally commendable”. It is a kind of in-built mechanism which guarantees the perpetuation of the social system. Students of social organization have been content with noting the difference between equality and inequality. None have realized that in addition to equality and inequality there is
such a thing as graded inequality. Yet inequality is not half as dangerous as graded inequality and “prevents the rise of general discontent against inequity (The Collected Works, vol. 7, 307).

Some autobiographies are strongly emotional testimonies about the suffering of past life as “pains of death” (an existence which was just generating death). They want to testify about them and project them as historical evidence, in front of the tribunal of mankind, to condemn the Hindu social dispensation as a crime against humanity. The wish to forget a former condition of repression and its semantics make them angry: one ought not to be ashamed of a past which was “not our fault but society’s crime”. To put the past on record is a duty to the ancestors whose humanity was smothered and crushed but could not be altogether eliminated by the Hindu dharma. Keeping record of their agonies and efforts to survive is to redeem them, on the one hand and on the other, remind the new generations, who tend to return into the folds of a culturally repressive society, of the one who has shown humanity the way of justice and love.

Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on ‘to be dalit’ has now disappeared. Now dalitness is a source of confrontation. This change has its essence in the desire for justice for all mankind. Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total being. Thus, individual, culture, social burden and dalitness cannot be isolated. For this new dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification. Today’s dalit literature rejects the degraded Hindu social set-up. Dalit writers relentlessly expose the inhumanities and prejudices of caste society and instil a new social and cultural consciousness.
Very few non-dalit writers have written on and about the life of dalits and most of these wrote out of mere sympathy. Mere sympathy does not help produce realistic and reformative literature. In non-dalit plays the image of the dalit and the interpretation of his life is distorted. Needless to say, the leading Marathi playwrights have projected a dalit image of weakness and folly in their plays. There has been a great deal of insensitivity and neglect with regard to dalit representation in mainstream literature. If we analyse the case of one of the most popular authors, Premchand, dalit writers and critics have generally looked favourably on his stories that depict dalit characters as simple, moral, hardworking and compassionate, however victimized they may be by the caste system. But in Premchand’s realism, sometimes a corrupt system breeds corrupt victims, as in his story *Kafan*, largely regarded in dominant Hindi literary histories as one of his most classic stories. In this famous story, the two main characters are dalits but rather than being idealized victims they themselves are slothful and immoral and as Premchand writes, ‘knew how to profit from their impotence.’ Though many non-dalit critics have detected in Premchand’s story a critique of institutionalized systems of poverty and caste oppression that are forces for dehumanization, many dalit writers have severely criticized Premchand’s depiction of these two Chamar characters as heartless and lazy drunks.

An important aspect of dalit literature is self-criticism or self-protest. They do not hesitate to attack inferiority complexes among themselves. Regardless of the particular writer or literary form, dalit literature is, ultimately, a declaration of independence. It is impossible to understand the revolutionary quality of dalit literature without understanding the people to whom it is addressed. It speaks for them and to them.

**Dalit literatures: an overview**

Dalit literatures not only discuss social discriminations now, they also assert their identities and prove their creative potentialities. Dalit literature deals
with socio-cultural liberation. Dalit literatures are no longer emotive expressions of pain and suffering. Being liberative in nature, they represent dalit lifestyle, ceremonies, rituals and rites that form the background of their expression. They are also intertwined with their real life experiences. These literatures have to survive against distortion and misrepresentation by market forces, both by the mediators within and outside India.

Inspired by black literature and struggle, dalit struggle expectedly led to the formation of the dalit Panthers, a dalit revolutionary movement, which seemed to set a new paradigm of revolutionary politics in the country. But, the desired results were nowhere to be seen. The ideological weakness manifested itself in the fact that the Dalit Panthers split even before they could conjure up their manifesto. It followed thereafter the path of the Republican Party of India in Maharashtra, mutating into countless factions and eventually losing its own identity. It is interesting that Namdeo Dhasal, the creative and fiercest of all is seen today joining hands with Bal Thakaray, the sworn enemy of Ambedkarite dalits. He represents ideological fluidity of dalitism when he justifies his moves and still appeals to some dalits. One of the Dalit Panther factions came to be known as Bharatiya Dalit Panther ironically implies the end of defiance that characterized the Panthers as well as the end of creativity of its precursor- dalit literature. Sharan Kumar Limbale, author of Akkarmashi (Bastard) which came out in 1984, first served as a teacher and then later on, took a job as telephone operator. He introduces himself as a worker of the Dalit Panther and a bastard akkarmashi. The Marathi word refers to the child born from extra-marital relations and is used only as an abuse. As a child, the author used to stay in the Maharvada (the residential area of the Mahars, at some distance from the village). people used to tease him there by using this derogatory word, which he deliberately chose as the title for his book: “I was born out of the sexual exploitation of Dalit women by caste Hindus”. The mother was a Mahar, a landless woman, an agricultural labourer and his
father a landlord and village chieftain, Patil, “This is not a life of mine. This slavery is forced on me.” An attitude of blunt confrontation of the overall inhuman social order is maintained throughout the book.

The mainstream critique of dalit literature accused the book of being one dimensional, focusing on revolt only. It can be analysed this charge failed to understand its essence. It could not be dalit literature if it did not pour forth revolt and discharge a burden of hatred and contempt accumulated for centuries, or even sometimes hurl abuses at high castes the venom that they had to swallow for ages. The alleged ‘negativity’ is actually a form of bold, genuine and strongly positive assertion. It is a volcanic rupture in which repressed and ruined human beings broke their status of animal servility by a shout of protest that signaled the birth of a new human being.

To start with, these were the concerns of dalit literature. Gradually, dalit literature, could not extricate itself from indulgence in self-pity, obsession with identity, hymn-singing to Ambedkar that lent him almost a godhood and rhetorical talk of revolt without any action. A trend surfaced in Maharashtra that objected to some of these features of dalit literature and insisted that it be called Phuley-Ambedkarite literature. It pleaded that after the religious conversion, the dalits are no more dalits. Beyond the quibbling around nomenclature, however, they have not been able to provide any alternate perspective or vision. It was not mere naivety but the reaction of this trend that had killed the Dalit Panther in its womb. It is well known that the Dalit Panther had split on the issue of the Manifesto, one section disputing the radical manifesto that was drawn up under the plea that it was not confirming to Buddhist tenets. It is the same section that hankers on the change in name. Its entire thrust is to rob dalit literature of whatever militant content that it had and make it more surrealist.

Dalit literature has not yet been acknowledged as a literature in its own right and no reference to it is found in the standard literary journals of India. But
its reverberations are now being heard all over the globe. The chief malady of dalit literature is that it could not relate with the contemporary lives of the majority of dalits. It suffers heavily on account of its reach because of the extremely low literacy levels of dalit population and thereafter the access issue on account of poverty. Dalit literature faced a potential dilemma right from its inception. While it aspired to play up dalit identity with the premise of distinct dalit consciousness, it remains essentially a middle class phenomenon like any other literature. It does not strive consciously to preserve its umbilical chord with the dalit masses, 75 per cent of whom slog on farms in villages. It is therefore that it could not relate with any of the contemporary happenings, some certainly catastrophic in proportion such as the mill strike in Bombay, the lay offs that followed thereafter, the deaths of students on account of non-payment of scholarships, the municipal strikes and many communal conflagrations, to say the least. The dilemma accentuated after the demise of the Dalit Panthers, with which most of the dalit writers were linked.

The role of literature is not merely to hold a mirror to the society but also to help it construct a vision for the future. Dalit literature did perform this role in its early phase but shorn of its connection with dalit movement, soon failed to do either. That is why it has been blamed of tiring weakness and suffered in its creative expression which used to be its forte.

Despite these drawbacks, the contribution of dalit literature in resetting the developmental paradigm for dalits has been immense. First and foremost, it has effectively threatened the brahmanic hegemony at the literary level. It has spurred dalit masses toward dissent and rebellion. Dalits now have a reference point to guide themselves forward in their struggle. It stirred up thinking among dalit intellectuals and catalysed the creation of organic intellectuals among them. Dalit literature has rejuvenated the sagging spirit of Ambedkarism, giving rise to youth organizations all over the country. It broadens the world view of dalits in as much as they learn to relate with the struggles of other oppressed people in the world.
highlights the cultural resources of dalits and demonstrates how they could be effectively used in their battle for emancipation. Moreover, it breaks away from the stereotypes that creep into dalit movements and demonstrates a new paradigm of people-oriented politics. Dalit literature appears highly dynamic in nature and new dimensions may reflect in it with the passage of time.

NOTES

1 A recent article in The Hindu reported that of the 1.47 lakh cases to date under this Act, only 1.14 per cent resulted in convictions 19.90 per cent resulted in acquittals. The rest are pending due to sluggish Indian justice system.

2 Sanskritization is a term coined by the eminent Indian sociologist, M.N.Srinivas, to denote the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes.

3 In 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism and launched a massive conversion movement as a radical denunciation and absolute denial of a Hindu tradition stigmatised as an anti-human ideological order.