

CHAPTER – II

DALITS:THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS

The caste system in India, a social hierarchy that has shaped the country's socio-economic and cultural aspects, originates in the ancient scriptures of Hinduism. The 'Rig Veda,' one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, introduces the concept of 'Varna,' initially more flexible and profession-based, which over time ossified into a rigid, birth-based caste system. Over the centuries, the 'Varna' system evolved into a more complex and rigid structure known as the 'Jati' system. According to scholar Dipankar Gupta, the Jati system was characterized by an "elaborate hierarchy where the ritual status of a caste depends on its relative ranking to others" (67). The caste system was about social ranking and notions of purity and pollution. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution and a major Dalit icon, wrote that the caste system is not merely a division of labor, but also a "division of laborers," divided based on inherent purity and impurity (36).

As mentioned in the ancient Hindu scriptures, the Varna system was initially a flexible social order based on profession and duty, not birth. In the *Rig Veda*, society is divided into four main Varnas: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (servants). This ideal division of society's responsibilities was designed to maintain social harmony. Renowned scholar Romila Thapar, in her book *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300 (2004)*, emphasizes the fluidity of the Varna system during the Vedic period. Thapar points out, "The Varna system was initially intended to organize society but became a hierarchical social order as the idea of purity and pollution got incorporated" (187).

This is the time we must acknowledge that the historical change has to occur to the patriarchal stereotype. All women as a universal entity have to fight for their dignity and identity as not only the Dalit women even the non- Dalit women are also subjugated by the norms and mores of the society. The question here is – who will do it? A clear conscious study will show that only the mere feminist leaders cannot do it, because their experience is different to the Dalit women. Hence, conscious educated Dalit women only can produce this narrative more aptly. There is another side to the Dalit women:

the representation of the agonies of them in literature and politics. The appealing fact is that Dalit literature projects Dalit women in the same patriarchal norms – womanhood and their problems. Dalit politics considers Dalit women in the vortex of ‘our women’. So, the result is more marginalization as far as Dalit women and human rights are concerned. It is, that is why, the best time for a social change for an alternate world view if all women Dalit or non- Dalit come together under the same umbrella to voice against the prejudices and tortures of the patriarchal society. Otherwise, no one knows what will happen to other minority communities.

“The society always treated women as object of sex and sexual exploitation. It was an established fact that women was looked down in all aspects of life. Discrimination is shown towards her in all spheres, in the disguise of tradition and culture.” (P.G. Jogdand 93)

Indian literature states controversial standpoints on the dignity and status of women in our society. In some places, it says that mother ought to be a symbol of great respect more than the father and the teacher, hence, mothers should be respected more and one should not leave his mother in her distress. But in some other places it says that women should not be given liberty to live and must be under the control of male. Bharati (2018) says that Dalit female was presented in both the epics- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. She further discusses some female characters namely the Matanga Kanyas of Satya Harishchandra, Tataka, Surpanakha, Aayomukhi and Mandodari – all of the Ramayana. She skillfully explores these characters and shows how their womanly attributes were disrespected by so- called upper class people. The Matanga Kanyas were distorted only because they were treated as the untouchables by the high-class Hindu law. Tataka, Surpanakha, Aayomukhi - all were disrespected by Rama and Laxmana. Mandodari, the wife of Ravana was tortured by the Rama’s army. One may say about Sita but she was treated well and looked after respectfully. If we study these texts, the descriptions will show the inhuman treatment of the society to the lower caste. According to Bharati, even the modern literature does not want to depict the Dalit characters properly. She adds, “It is time the writers to imbibe the spirit of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who fought for human values and women liberation through their writings, specially of oppressed classes.” (Jogdand 104)

However, the flexibility of the Varna system began to change over time, transitioning into the rigid, birth-based caste system. Historian D.D. Kosambi, in his *"Culture and Civilization of Ancient India (1991)"*, notes the slow and steady "ossification" of the Varna system into the caste system, which he considers as a "rigidification of social order to sustain political and economic stability" (142).

The fourfold Varna system gradually evolved into a more complex and rigid Jati system as centuries passed. Unlike the Varna system, the Jati system was characterized by thousands of sub-castes within each Varna, further adding complexity to the social hierarchy. This shift towards the Jati system was significant as it marked the transition from a fluid, profession-based social order to a rigid, birth-based one. Purity and pollution became central aspects of caste identity, with specific communities deemed 'untouchable' due to their association with polluting occupations. The caste system's impacts on the Dalit community are numerous and pervasive. The system inherently marginalizes Dalits, denying them access to resources, opportunities, and human dignity.

The history of the Dalit community is also marked by resistance and struggle for social justice and equality. Many Dalit movements have been throughout the years that have aimed at challenging caste oppression and asserting the Dalit identity. In Maharashtra, the Dalit Panthers movement emerged in the 1970s, which was influenced by the Black Panther Party of the U.S. The Dalit Panthers sought to challenge caste-based discrimination through political action and literature. The Dalit experience is not monolithic; it is shaped by the specific socio-cultural context in which it unfolds. Thus, though bound by shared experiences of marginalization and discrimination, the Dalit communities in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have unique socio-cultural characteristics shaped by regional factors.

With its legacy of social reform movements and the pivotal role played by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Maharashtra has a significant history of Dalit assertion and mobilization. As Pawar argues, "The social reform movement in Maharashtra in the late 19th and early 20th century...created a climate of social awakening among the lower castes" (Pawar 76). Maharashtra's socio-cultural milieu, marked by the influential work of social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar, has profoundly impacted the Dalit movement in the state.

On the other hand, Tamil Nadu's Dalit struggle is deeply influenced by the Dravidian movement and its ideology. Bama states, "The Dravidian movement has been a strong factor in shaping the social and political landscape of Tamil Nadu and has influenced how the Dalit question has been articulated" (93). The Dravidian movement's emphasis on Tamil identity and language and its critique of Brahmanical dominance have provided a unique platform for articulating Dalit identity in Tamil Nadu.

Despite the legal measures taken to prohibit caste discrimination, the caste system continues to pervade many aspects of social, economic, and political life in India. This is particularly evident in the lives of the Dalit community, who continue to face considerable obstacles.

Economic hardship and deprivation are often associated with the Dalit community, with many Dalits confined to low-paying, manual labor jobs. In fact, in a sense, the caste system is not the categorization of labours; it is mainly the segmentation of labourers as well. This caste-based economic stratification often prevents Dalits from moving up the economic ladder, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and deprivation. Moreover, Dalits are often the victims of social ostracization and violence, particularly in rural areas where caste hierarchies are more entrenched. As Bama observes, "Caste prejudices and violence are more visible in rural areas where the traditional caste hierarchy is still deeply ingrained" (101).

Dalit women face the added burden of gender discrimination, often experiencing violence and marginalization. Viramma argues, "Dalit women are at the bottom of the caste and gender hierarchies, often bearing the brunt of caste violence and patriarchal domination" (39). While the experience of caste-based discrimination is a commonality amongst Dalits across India, it is crucial to recognize the diversity within the Dalit community, reflecting regional, linguistic, and cultural differences. These differences are particularly evident when comparing the socio-cultural contexts of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. The autobiographies of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma offer a wealth of insight into the lived experiences of Dalit women in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. They illustrate the dual burden of caste and gender, elucidating the specific and unique challenges Dalit women face.

In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar provides an intensely personal narrative about growing up as a Dalit woman in a rural Maharashtrian community. She

highlights the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender, noting, "For us, life was a constant struggle against poverty, against the scorn of upper-caste people, and against the physical and mental torture inflicted by men" (Pawar 88). Her narrative, while deeply personal, is also a testament to the collective struggle of Dalit women in Maharashtra. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is a candid depiction of the harrowing realities faced by the Mahar Dalit community. Kamble explored the communal memories of her people, the vicious circle of poverty, ignorance, and superstition they were trapped in. She writes, "For generations, we have been trapped, crushed under the weight of tradition, religion, and savage social customs" (78).

Bama's *Karukku*, the first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer in Tamil, foregrounds her lived experience as a Dalit Christian woman. She illustrates her struggle against the double caste discrimination within the Church and the wider Tamil society. She asserts, "We were treated as untouchables in a religion that claimed to see everyone as equal" (91). Finally, Viramma's narrative, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, provides a stark and honest account of her life as a Dalit woman laboring in the rice fields of rural Tamil Nadu. Her experiences echo the widespread marginalization and exploitation of Dalit women in agricultural labor. She states, "We were the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Even our names were erased, replaced by derogatory terms that reduced us to our caste status" (65).

These selected autobiographies collectively reflect the resilience, resistance, and self-assertion of Dalit women. Through their narratives, the silent voices of millions of Dalit women find expression. Urmila Pawar, for instance, depicts her resistance to patriarchal norms by pursuing education, thereby challenging the gendered power structures within her family and community. She writes, "I refused to accept the future predestined for me. I wanted to study, and I persisted against all odds" (Pawar 155). This determination underscores her resistance against the norms that sought to confine her to the domestic sphere.

In *The Prisons We Broke*; Baby Kamble presents a scathing critique of the caste system and vehemently resists the structures that oppress her. She notes, "Every pore of my being rebelled against my caste, which was nothing but an invisible prison"(122). Her autobiography stands out as a powerful manifesto of Dalit feminism.

Bama, in *Karukku*, explores the idea of faith as a means of resistance. For Bama, faith becomes a tool to challenge the caste hierarchies within the Church. She declares, "My faith did not make me subservient; rather, it was my weapon against the injustices inflicted upon us" (133).

Viramma's narrative is replete with instances of small, everyday forms of resistance. For example, she recounts an episode where she defiantly confronts an upper-caste landlord over unjust wages, stating, "I might be a Dalit, but I am a human being first. I stood up for my rights, even if the world was against me" (88). Caste oppression, combined with gender discrimination, exerts a debilitating impact on Dalit women's lives. This is further nuanced by regional variations across different states in India, primarily due to cultural, social, and linguistic differences.

In Maharashtra, the cultural fabric is intertwined with the significant presence of Marathi literature and the Dalit Panthers movement, both playing an influential role in shaping the lives of Dalit women, as evident in the works of Pawar and Kamble. Pawar, in her autobiography, notes the impact of the movement on her personal and social life: "The Dalit Panthers movement opened my eyes to the power of resistance. It instilled in me the courage to fight against the norms that had shackled us for generations" (97).

On the other hand, the Tamil community's socio-cultural landscape is distinctly different. Bama and Viramma, hailing from Tamil Nadu, provide insights into the unique forms of caste and gender oppression prevalent in the region. Bama vividly describes the caste discrimination within the Church, individual to Tamil society, writing, "My faith was meant to set me free, but the Church was as much a prisoner of caste as the society outside" (188).

Moreover, Viramma's account underscores the acute poverty and deprivation faced by many Dalits in rural Tamil Nadu, demonstrating the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class in the lives of Dalit women. She recounts, "Even as an untouchable, I was treated differently because I was a woman and poor. Each identity had its burden" (102). India's caste system is believed to have originated from the ancient "varna" system, as already discussed. However, this theoretical four-fold division evolved with time into a more complex and rigid structure known as the 'Jati' system, where society

was stratified into numerous hereditary, endogamous, occupationally specialized groups.

The development of the Jati system marked a significant evolution in the social structure, leading to the further ossification of caste-based divisions. Jatis were often associated with specific occupations, reinforcing caste-based labour division and perpetuating economic exploitation. Furthermore, each Jati was governed by its unique customs, rituals, and taboos, creating a complex social norms and prohibitions matrix.

This rigid Jati system continues to define the lives of many Dalits in India. The autobiographies selected for this study reflect the lived reality of this system and its impact on Dalit women's lives. For instance, Bama notes, "Our birth in a particular jati predetermined our life's course. It defined what we could and could not do, the life we could aspire to and the life we were forced to accept" (52). The development of the Jati system marked a significant evolution in the social structure, leading to the further ossification of caste-based divisions.

The Dalits at the bottom of the Jati hierarchy have faced centuries of discrimination and violence. Their identity has been fashioned against a backdrop of caste-based oppression. The notion of "untouchability," which originates from the Jati system, has been a critical component of the Dalit identity.

"Untouchability," as described by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution and a prominent Dalit leader, is not just a social practice but an "attitude," a "state of mind" that perceives the Dalits as "inferior" and "impure"(74). This "untouchability" underscores their social alienation and economic marginalization. In the case of Dalit women, their identity is shaped by the double burden of caste and gender. As Rege points out "For Dalit women, life is a continuous negotiation between caste and gender. They are doubly disadvantaged, first by their caste and then by their gender" (34).

The rigidification of India's caste system, or the jati system, was facilitated through several religious, cultural, and political forces. Foremost among these was the codification in ancient texts and the subsequent influence of British colonial rule. Ancient texts like the *Manusmriti* played a significant role in codifying and enforcing the caste system. In *Manusmriti*, the social order is explicitly defined, it places the

Brahmins at the top and the Sudras at the bottom considering the works they are intended to perform and this paves the ways to the stratification of the society.

British colonial authorities used the caste system to their advantage. They institutionalized the caste system as a cornerstone of their administrative and census processes. As Dirks notes in his work *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India (2001)*, the British, through their obsession with classifying and categorizing, effectively "invented" the modern caste system (53).

Despite India's constitutional and legal prohibitions against caste-based discrimination, it remains an integral part of Indian society, affecting everything from access to resources to political power and social relationships. Dalits' struggle is intensified by their position at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* vividly brings these struggles to the forefront. Pawar's narrative chronicles her personal and collective experiences as a Dalit woman growing up in Maharashtra, revealing the systemic injustices and everyday humiliations endured by her community. For instance, she writes, "I was born in the Mahar community, the largest untouchable caste in Maharashtra...As untouchables, we were forced to live on the outskirts of the village and denied access to common amenities like the village well and the temple" (21). Her words underline the spatial and social segregation that Dalits were subjected to and how the caste system permeated the most mundane aspects of life. Despite being written in the 21st century, Pawar's memoir reflects the enduring legacy of the caste system, drawing attention to the systemic and individual barriers that Dalits continue to face. She illuminates how Dalit women, like herself, are doubly disadvantaged and marginalized by caste and gender discrimination.

Despite legal protections and affirmative action policies, the struggle against caste discrimination and equality remains a crucial issue for the Dalit community today. This ongoing struggle underscores the deep-rooted nature of caste discrimination and the need for sustained efforts to dismantle it. Not only does the caste system continue to result in social and cultural discrimination, but it also contributes to significant economic disparity in Indian society. The economic marginalization of Dalits is a direct consequence of the caste system, as centuries of social exclusion and discrimination have limited their access to resources, education, and opportunities.

Pawar speaks about the economic hardships faced by her family and the wider Dalit community. She notes, "Our people were poor, but my family was even poorer" (35). This statement succinctly encapsulates the economic challenges faced by Dalits, who have historically been confined to low-paying, menial jobs and denied opportunities for social mobility. Pawar's narrative also highlights the gendered nature of economic inequality among Dalits. She recalls, "I used to go to the seashore to collect firewood for selling...the sea and the seashore became my sources of livelihood" (45). These experiences show the extent Dalit women are compelled to take up physically demanding and low-paying jobs due to a lack of better opportunities.

A lack of access to quality education further compounds Dalits' economic challenges. Pawar writes about her struggle to receive an education, a journey marked by financial struggles, social stigmatization, and the threat of sexual violence. The concept of purity and pollution is deeply entrenched in the caste system. It reinforces hierarchies and sustains discrimination and social exclusion, particularly towards the Dalits or the 'untouchables.' This cultural mechanism of caste assigns 'purity' to the upper castes and 'pollution' to the lower castes, creating a rigid social order with minimal mobility.

Bama, in her work *Karukku*, provides a powerful examination of this system. She notes, "Our caste-ridden society has placed us, the Dalits, so low that there is no further fall. We were born polluted, and we pollute whatever we touch" (31). This reveals the deeply internalized sense of stigma and the societal view of the Dalits as inherently impure and contaminating. Moreover, the idea of purity and pollution is not only about physical cleanliness but extends to moral and spiritual realms as well. It is entrenched in daily practices and social customs, dictating whom one can interact with, marry, or even eat with. The impact of such cultural practices is especially significant for Dalit women, who face the compounded effects of caste and gender-based discrimination.

As Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* describes, "The men from the upper caste can defile us, but they cannot eat our food because it's polluted" (57). This starkly illustrates the hypocrisy of the purity-pollution dichotomy and how it is used to justify oppression and exploitation, particularly of Dalit women. The notion of untouchability is another crucial aspect that shapes the Dalit identity. Notions of untouchability are not

merely religious or social constructs; they have material and physical manifestations. The Dalit community, labeled as 'untouchables,' is often relegated to live on the fringes of the villages or towns, and their interaction with the upper castes is severely limited and regulated.

Baby Kamble, in *The Prisons We Broke*, elucidates the dehumanizing effects of untouchability: "Untouchability was not just a word. It was a terrifying demon that caused us to shiver in fright" (29). This elucidates how untouchability, as a lived reality, generates a pervasive atmosphere of fear and oppression among the Dalit community. Moreover, untouchability often forces Dalits into menial and degrading occupations, adding another layer to their marginalized status. Viramma, in her life story *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, provides a vivid account of this: "We were born to clean, to sweep, to remove the impurities of the world" (36).

This explicit portrayal of the caste-ordained professions of Dalits, often associated with impurity and pollution, highlights the structural nature of caste oppression. It's not just an isolated individual experience but a shared historical and collective suffering that constructs the Dalit identity.

In Maharashtra, the Dalit Panther movement emerged in the 1970s as a radical political organization striving for Dalit emancipation. In Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect Movement initiated by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy contributed to the assertion of Dalit rights. These movements have shaped the Dalit struggle for equality and dignity.

In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar delves into the deeply ingrained cultural mechanisms of caste in Indian society, particularly the concepts of purity and pollution. This theme is recurrent in Pawar's autobiography, where she recounts her experiences of social exclusion and caste-based discrimination.

Pawar writes, "Our touch would pollute them... their life depended on their vigilance in maintaining the purity of their caste" (32). This quote underscores the extent to which the notion of purity and pollution was intertwined with the caste hierarchy, wherein the Dalits were considered impure and polluting. Pawar's narrative vividly captures the lived reality of this cultural mechanism and its impact on Dalits' everyday life. One of the most poignant examples in Pawar's memoir is her account of her childhood experience of having to wait until the upper-caste children had eaten

before she could partake in the school meal. This was a practice meant to prevent the perceived "pollution" that would come from a Dalit child's touch or proximity (45).

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble provides an account of her life, shedding light on the stark realities and harsh experiences faced by Dalit women contextualized within the framework of caste. Kamble's memoir underlines the cruel practices instituted to maintain the supposed purity of the upper castes and to perpetuate the notion of pollution associated with the Dalit community. Kamble describes in detail the humiliating ritual of "Balutedari," a caste-based occupation system in Maharashtra, which effectively bound the Dalits to serve the upper castes. She writes, "They considered our touch to be polluting and maintained strict vigilance lest they become contaminated" (68). This quote demonstrates how these oppressive practices were not just social or economic but also profoundly symbolic acts reinforcing the supposed purity-pollution dichotomy. The use of separate utensils for the Dalits in the families of so-called upper class to secure them from becoming impure shows the picture of caste-based discrimination significantly proclaims the idea of purity and pollution or impurity in the shares of Indian life.

In her book, Bama recounts the cultural mechanisms of caste that served to marginalize and ostracize the Dalit community. Bama describes the living conditions of the Dalit community as being closely tied to their perceived polluting status. The "Dalits were forced to live on the peripheries of the village, a geographical representation of their marginalized social group" (30). Furthermore, Bama provides insight into the oppressive caste-based practices within the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu. Despite professing values of equality and brotherhood, the church, according to Bama, mirrored the discriminatory practices of the wider society. She writes, "Even in the House of God, we were considered polluted and made to stand in the last rows" (52). This quote demonstrates the deep-rooted nature of the caste system and its pervasive influence on all aspects of life. For an encompassing understanding of the Dalit experience, it is imperative to examine the historical events that have shaped the Dalit struggle for dignity and equality. This part of the thesis aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the historical journey of the Dalit community, emphasizing critical moments of struggle and assertion and highlighting the tenacity of the Dalit community in the face of immense adversity.

The Indian government has made significant attempts to address caste-based discrimination by introducing a series of reforms and legal provisions. Landmark legislation like the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 has been implemented to curb violence against the Dalit community (Borooah et al. 514). Similarly, the system of reservation in education, government jobs, and legislature has been a significant step toward addressing historical injustices. However, all of these provisions have criticism and ample evidences to reject.

Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful medium of expression and protest against caste-based atrocities. Literally, Dalits used their literature as a tool to give expressions to their experiences including social injustice, atrocities, caste discrimination, and their identity. Dalit women's autobiographies have played a very significant part to showcase the peculiar combat against the hatred they face welcoming indispensable move towards the artistic terrain of India. Jyotirao Phule, one of the pioneers in challenging caste and gender inequality, established the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873. This organization propagated social equality, advocating for education and rights for women and lower castes, challenging the Brahminical domination of social and religious practices. Gail Omvedt once opines that Phule's work in uplifting the oppressed classes influenced Dalit consciousness and self-esteem. (*Seeking Begumpura 2008*).

The influence of these anti-caste movements on the formation of Dalit identity has been significant. The narrative of resistance against oppression and assertion of equal rights is deeply ingrained in the collective Dalit consciousness. This resistance was not only against the external caste system but also a revolt against the internalization of 'untouchability' and the associated stigma. Moreover, the anti-caste movements fostered a sense of community among Dalits, helping them to recognize their shared struggles and collective strength. This has been instrumental in driving change both at the community level and in individual lives.

For instance, in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, the influence of Ambedkar's movement is profoundly depicted. Kamble narrates the transformative power of Ambedkar's message for her community in Maharashtra. She writes, "We began to feel human...We realized that our life until then had been lived in sub-human conditions. This realization was both shocking and liberating...We could not be the

same again" (28). The awakening that Kamble describes is a testament to the power of these movements in shaping Dalit identity and driving their emancipation.

Similarly, in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, the role of Phule's teachings in shaping her feminist and anti-caste consciousness is evident. Pawar recounts how her mother, inspired by Phule's philosophy, fought against oppressive practices within her community, furthering education among girls and rejecting caste-based labour. These instances demonstrate the transformative power of anti-caste movements on Dalit identity.

Despite the legal abolition of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, the narratives of these Dalit women authors demonstrate that the social reality remains starkly different. The deep-rooted prejudices and biases associated with the caste system continue to shape the lives of the Dalits in various ways.

In Bama's *Karukku*, caste discrimination manifests itself in a different form in the state of Tamil Nadu. She describes the societal pressures faced by Dalit Christians who are discriminated against by upper-caste Christians. She states, "Even within the Church, we were segregated. The sense of untouchability was prevalent even among those who were supposed to preach equality and brotherhood" (78).

Focusing on Viramma's self-titled autobiography, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, one finds that caste-based discrimination persistently endures despite her migration from rural to urban spaces. The degrading treatment by higher castes becomes even more pronounced as they maintain the facade of modernity. Viramma's experience with urban caste dynamics is captured when she narrates, "In the city, it wasn't any better, the humiliation was just dressed differently, polished with the language of civility, but underneath, it was the same caste discrimination that persisted" (89).

Similarly, in *Karukku*, Bama recounts the impact of the caste system on their educational experiences. The school was no safe haven from the caste system; instead, it amplified and reinforced caste hierarchies. Bama writes, "Our teachers, instead of discouraging such discriminatory behaviour, seemed to encourage it, subtly ingraining in us the consciousness of our lower caste status" (102).

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble provides a moving account of how discrimination percolates down to the most basic human needs. She writes about a "separate well" for Dalits, stating, "This well bore silent testimony to the gross

inhumanity that had seeped into the hearts of humans, an inhumanity that drew lines between fellow beings on the basis of an ancient and regressive caste system" (46).

Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* speaks volumes about the plight of Dalit women in Maharashtra. The author, through her personal journey, highlights the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender within the Maharashtrian context. For instance, Pawar shares her experiences with caste and gender-based discrimination at a tender age. "By the time I turned ten, I knew I was a Mahar and a girl... The villagers never let me forget either" (29). Her experiences resonate with the socio-cultural dynamics of Maharashtra, where Dalit women bear the brunt of double marginalization based on caste and gender. This is exemplified in her account of her mother's life, marked by untold hardship, marginalization, and a relentless struggle for survival.

Turning to Tamil Nadu, Bama's *Karukku* provides a compelling account of the Dalit Christian community's socio-cultural dynamics. She demonstrates the pervasiveness of caste-based discrimination, even within the realm of Christianity, which supposedly espouses egalitarian principles. Bama recounts, "Even inside the church, we had a separate place to sit, away from the upper castes. God might have been the same, but the divisions remained" (80). Furthermore, Bama speaks on the alienation felt by her community due to linguistic domination. She reflects on the imposition of Sanskritized Tamil, sidelining the dialect spoken by the Dalit community, thereby silencing their voices and obscuring their experiences.

The post-independence era marked a significant period in the history of Dalit movements in India. Following the country's independence in 1947, Dalits found new avenues to articulate their struggle against caste-based oppression and discrimination.

In the literary field, Dalit Panthers, founded in Maharashtra in 1972, was a crucial initiative. This radical movement drew inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the United States. It is found that the "Dalit Panthers also sought to give voice against the suppressions for fighting for their rights." (J.V.Pawar 17).

In the late 20th century, the Bahujan Samaj Party, led by Kanshi Ram and later Mayawati, emerged as a significant political force representing Dalits. Their rise to power in Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most populous states, indicated a significant shift in the dynamics of caste-based politics. The impact of these movements and the fight for equality that followed is best captured in the autobiographical narratives penned by

Dalit authors. In *The Weave of My Life*, for instance, Urmila Pawar recounts her experiences growing up in the post-independence era, her encounter with the work of Ambedkar, and her subsequent involvement in the Dalit Panther movement. She writes, "The fire that Ambedkar had kindled was now a flame in my heart" (74). Pawar's narrative is an embodiment of the struggles and hopes of many Dalits of her generation, who found a beacon of hope in Ambedkar's vision.

In another seminal work, *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble provides an unflinching portrayal of the life and trials of the Dalit community in Maharashtra. Her narrative underscores the continued relevance of these movements in empowering Dalits and challenging oppressive norms. As Kamble puts it, "The real prison is the prison of caste, and we were born there. We broke that prison" (92).

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Bama, illuminates the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy and how they interplay in the life of a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu. Bama's narrative lays bare the double marginalization she faced – as a Dalit and as a woman. Reflecting on her journey, she states, "In truth, when I was growing up, I was not aware that I was a Dalit. But I knew that I was poorer than the poorest of the poor and lower than the lowest of the low. I knew I was a slave." (43). Similarly, Viramma's life story, as narrated in *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, speaks volumes about the extreme forms of oppression and discrimination that Dalit women face. The narrative provides a chilling account of her experiences as an agricultural labourer in rural Tamil Nadu, underlining

the profoundly entrenched caste hierarchies and gender bias. As Viramma recounts, "I was not even ten years old when I began to work in the fields. My childhood was short. I became an adult very quickly" (52).

The authors of these autobiographies have not shied away from exposing the cruel and inhuman treatment of Dalit communities in India, which often takes the form of systemic violence and atrocities. The recurrence of such violent episodes in their narratives serves as a grim reminder of the deep-seated caste prejudices that continue to plague Indian society.

The Weave of My Life by Urmila Pawar provides a harrowing account of caste-based violence and atrocities that she and her community faced in Maharashtra. Through her autobiographical narrative, she presents the lived experiences of Dalits, particularly women, under the oppressive caste system, thereby enabling readers to understand the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination and violence. Pawar vividly describes several instances of brutal violence against Dalits. These episodes expose the deep-seated caste prejudices that have long persisted in Indian society. For example, she recounts an incident in which a Dalit boy is mercilessly beaten by a group of upper-caste men for daring to wear a new shirt, symbolizing a threat to the caste hierarchy. She writes, "Once, a group of upper-caste men surrounded a Dalit boy and beat him until he was barely breathing. His crime? He dared to wear a new shirt. They couldn't bear to see a Dalit boy dressed well" (87).

Pawar's narrative further sheds light on how Dalit women are often targets of sexual violence and abuse as part of this caste-based oppression. She does not shy away from revealing the horrific realities of these violent experiences, making her narrative a crucial resource for understanding the intersection of caste and gender-based violence in India. Her memoir stands as a testament to the resilience of Dalit women in the face of such systemic oppression, demonstrating the necessity of their narratives in the broader discourse of social justice and equality. Pawar also tackles the discrimination Dalits face within their day-to-day lives, not just in exceptional instances of violence. She narrates the indignities she had to suffer as a child: being forced to sit separately in school, not being allowed to touch the water source, and constantly being reminded of her 'lower' status. These daily incidents of discrimination show how the caste system permeates all aspects of life in India, making it a systemic and institutionalized problem.

Pawar's stories underscore the impunity with which upper castes often carry out violence and discrimination against Dalits, a reflection of the failure of legal systems and societal structures to protect the marginalized. She observes, "Justice is a strange thing. Those who should protect us from harm become the ones who cause the most pain. We realized that we were alone, with no one to turn to" (126). Importantly, Pawar's memoir illuminates how caste-based violence and atrocities continue to be perpetuated in post-Independence India, challenging the myth of social progress and equality. This highlights the significance of understanding and acknowledging caste-based violence, which is often erased from mainstream discourses on social justice.

Throughout the book, Pawar employs her personal experiences as a powerful critique of the caste system and its corresponding violence and discrimination. The raw and brutal honesty of her narrative prompts readers to question the social structures that allow such injustices to continue. Her book serves as a crucial reminder that caste-based violence is not an anomaly but a systemic issue deeply entrenched in Indian society.

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble offers a stark portrayal of caste-based violence and atrocities, particularly against Dalit women in Maharashtra, India. Kamble, herself a Dalit woman, uses her personal experiences and observations to provide an intimate look at these injustices. One of the most impactful sections of the book is Kamble's recounting of caste-based atrocities and the normalization of such violence within her community. Kamble writes, "If a Mahar gets murdered, nobody cares. It's just one less pig on earth. If a bullock dies, it's a different story altogether. A human life is cheaper than a bullock's. They value a bullock's life more than a man's" (84).

These lines highlight the shocking disregard for Dalit lives and the systemic devaluation of their existence. The comparison of a Dalit life to that of a bullock, an animal used for labour, reflects the harsh reality of caste-based discrimination and violence. Further, Kamble underscores the gendered aspect of caste violence, revealing how Dalit women are doubly marginalized - by caste and by gender. Instances of sexual violence and exploitation are rampant and often go unreported due to the shame and fear associated with it. Kamble poignantly articulates this when she says, "The Mahar woman is not just a slave; she is the slave of a slave" (119).

The Prisons We Broke serves as a powerful testament to the enduring caste-based violence and atrocities against Dalits, and more specifically, Dalit women, in

India. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing this issue in contemporary society, especially given its often-invisible nature within mainstream discourse. Another significant issue the book touches upon is the impunity with which upper-caste people can inflict violence on Dalits. Kamble recounts several incidents where Dalits are beaten or even killed for minor transgressions, or for no reason at all, with little to no repercussions for the perpetrators. She notes, "It was common to beat up Mahars. Anyone could beat them and get away with it" (97).

The book also illuminates the added burden that Dalit women face as victims of caste and gender-based violence. From sexual exploitation to domestic abuse, Kamble doesn't shy away from highlighting the brutal realities of life as a Dalit woman. In all these ways, *The Prisons We Broke* provides an eye-opening look at the atrocities and violence endured by the Dalit community, particularly Dalit women, in the caste-based social structure of India.

Bama's *Karukku* illuminates the reality of caste-based violence and atrocities endured by the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, South India. One of the most compelling aspects of *Karukku* is the way Bama interweaves her personal experiences of caste discrimination with more significant societal issues, highlighting the pervasive and deep-seated nature of caste violence. It illuminates the reality of caste-based violence and atrocities endured by the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, South India. One of the most compelling aspects of "Karukku" is the way Bama interweaves her personal experiences of caste discrimination with more significant societal issues, highlighting the pervasive and deep-seated nature of caste violence.

One notable aspect of caste violence that Bama discusses is the psychological abuse inflicted on Dalit children. She shares her experience in the school run by nuns, where she became aware of her Dalit identity and the discrimination attached to it. Bama writes, "It was only when I began school that I became aware of caste. [...] We, the children of the porayaar (Dalits), would be punished often, for no reason at all" (26). This quote underscores how the caste system enforces social hierarchies from an early age and normalizes violence against Dalits. She also focuses on the violence inflicted on the Dalit community by upper-caste individuals and the authorities. She recounts the incident when a higher-caste man accuses an innocent Dalit man of a crime he did not commit. Bama describes the event in vivid detail, "They thrashed him black and blue;

he begged them to stop beating him. But the more he screamed, the more they hit him" (64). This episode not only demonstrates the physical violence Dalits are subjected to but also the gross injustices they face due to biased law enforcement practices.

Furthermore, Bama underlines the multiple forms of violence. Dalit women are subjected to including domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, and the burden of hard labour. These women face not only the violence of caste but also that of patriarchy. In *Karukku*, Bama shines a light on the often-overlooked issue of caste violence, illuminating the harsh realities faced by India's Dalit community.

In *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, Viramma, a Dalit woman, vividly recounts the everyday instances of caste-based violence and atrocities experienced by the Dalit community in rural Tamil Nadu. Viramma's testimony, as an oral history, provides a unique perspective into the intricacies of caste hierarchy and the everyday violence inflicted upon the Dalit community. A key theme throughout Viramma's narrative is the deep-seated, systemic nature of caste violence. She speaks of instances where Dalits were ill-treated, humiliated, and physically harmed by the upper-caste community for perceived transgressions of caste norms. Viramma states, "One day, an old pariah [Dalit] who had a little toddy got drunk...he was beaten until he lost consciousness. They tied him to a tree, left him there all day in the hot sun" (123). This incident, as narrated by Viramma, illustrates the intense brutality the Dalit community faces.

Another form of violence Viramma's narrative brings to light is the exploitation of Dalit women, often subjected to sexual violence by upper-caste men. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable due to their intersecting caste and gender identities, bearing the brunt of both caste-based and gender-based discrimination. In addition, Viramma also addresses the economic violence inflicted upon the Dalit community, who are compelled to perform the most menial, underpaid jobs. She herself worked as a bonded labourer, a modern form of slavery that continues in some parts of rural India.

The Dalit experience in India is multifaceted, characterized by differences in regional, social, and cultural contexts. The states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, although both in India, provide different landscapes for the exploration of Dalit lives and identities. While sharing the joint struggle against the oppressive caste system, Dalit communities in these regions have had unique historical and cultural trajectories that have shaped their experiences and struggles.

Maharashtra is home to a vibrant and influential Dalit movement, primarily inspired by the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a social reformer and political leader from Maharashtra who advocated for the rights of Dalits. The Dalit Panthers, a radical political group that emerged in Maharashtra in the 1970s, played a critical role in bringing Dalit issues to the forefront of political and social discourse. Dalit literature in Marathi, especially autobiographies, also grew during this period, providing a voice to the experiences and aspirations of the Dalit community. Autobiographies like *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble reveal the double discrimination faced by Dalit women in Maharashtra as victims of both caste and gender oppression.

On the other hand, Tamil Nadu has a long history of anti-caste activism, starting with the Self-Respect Movement in the 1920s and later the Dravidian Movement, which challenged Brahminical supremacy and advocated for the rights of lower-caste communities. These movements laid the groundwork for the assertion of Dalit identity and ownership in Tamil Nadu.

These regional differences are significant as they demonstrate the heterogeneity within the Dalit community. The experiences and struggles of Dalits are not monolithic but are influenced by a variety of social, cultural, and regional factors. By studying the Dalit experience in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu through their autobiographical narratives, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of caste and gender oppression in different regional contexts.

The regional variations of the Dalit experience across Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu provide a unique perspective on how caste and culture intersect in diverse ways. In broad terms, the influence of these movements on Dalit literature and culture can be seen in the emergence of a new consciousness and expression of Dalit identity. Dalit literature, steeped in the realities of oppression, evolved as a powerful voice of protest against caste discrimination and social injustice. It was driven by the lived experiences of Dalit writers and brought to light the harsh realities of caste oppression that were often ignored in mainstream literature.

The Mahad Satyagraha, Dalit Panther Movement, and Buddhist Conversion Movement, among others, significantly influenced the themes, tone, and narrative style of Dalit literature. The literature that emerged from these movements was not just a

reflection of Dalit pain and suffering but also a powerful tool of resistance and assertion of Dalit identity.

Writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble, and Baburao Bagul drew inspiration from these movements and used their writings to challenge and critique the oppressive caste structures. Their works reflected the anger, disillusionment, and aspirations of the Dalit community, serving as a form of cultural and ideological resistance. The Buddhist Conversion Movement, in particular, had a profound impact on Dalit culture. The mass conversion to Buddhism was not just a religious shift but also a cultural revolution for Dalits. It instilled in them a sense of dignity, self-respect, and liberation from the dehumanizing caste norms.

The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu is another noteworthy socio-political revolution that had a profound impact on the Dalits. This movement originated in the early 20th century as a response to Brahmanical hegemony and aimed to establish a non-Brahman Dravidian identity rooted in the Tamil language, culture, and history. One of the fundamental tenets of the Dravidian movement was social equality, which found resonance with the marginalized Dalit community. The movement's leaders, such as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, championed the cause of caste abolition and worked relentlessly to uplift the Dalit community. Periyar's philosophy of "self-respect" played a crucial role in empowering the Dalits and other marginalized communities. His vigorous advocacy for social justice and equality bolstered the Dalits' struggle against caste oppression. In the context of literature, the Dravidian movement had a significant impact on fostering a culture of Dalit writings in Tamil. Influenced by the movement's ideology, Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu was marked by its bold critique of casteism and fervor for social equality.

While the Dravidian movement indeed contributed significantly to the empowerment of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, it was not without its limitations. Raghavan argues that despite the movement's rhetoric of social equality, Dalits often remained marginalized within the movement itself, which was predominantly led by the non-Brahman upper castes. In defiance of the absolute animating principle, the Dravidian Movement miserably fails to accommodate the faith of the Dalits. The action of the leaders of this social movement constantly maintained relationships with the non-Brahmin high class people extending elusive configuration of caste pyramid.

While the Dravidian movement certainly made strides in advocating for the rights of the marginalized, including Dalits, it was not without its shortcomings. Despite its progressive ideology, critics argue that the movement, much like the larger society it sought to change, was marred by internal hierarchies and caste discrimination. Dalits, who formed the base of the social pyramid, were often left on the fringes, their voices drowned out by the louder proclamations of non-Brahmin leaders. Consequently, the lived realities of Dalit struggles, particularly those of Dalit women, remained largely unaddressed. "While the Dravidian movement provided a powerful counter-narrative to Brahmanical hegemony, it was less successful in dismantling its own internal hierarchies." (Menon 55).

This criticism, however, does not detract from the invaluable contributions of the Dravidian movement. It served as a platform for Dalits to voice their grievances, challenge their oppressed status, and strive for social equality. Moreover, it was a springboard for the emergence of independent Dalit movements and literature that truly encapsulated their experiences and aspirations.

In his book titled *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009), Gopal Guru highlights the importance of establishing a dignified identity for the ex-untouchables in India. He argues that this identity should transcend the conventional frame of referentiality imposed by the Brahminical forces, which historically have designated the oppressed communities in India. The author emphasized the necessity of embracing a "rejection of rejection" concept, which entails establishing an autonomous identity for the untouchable population in India that transcends the prevailing caste ideology and its detrimental characteristics. The author analyzed the discrimination and oppression experienced by Dalits in the caste-based society within the theoretical framework of humiliation. The author emphasized the link between humiliation and the imposition of an inferior identity on Dalits by dominant caste groups.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations* (2004), provides a detailed analysis of the semantic implications of the term 'Dalit' and elucidated its historical and political relevance. According to his statement:

Harijans and neo-Buddhists do not exclusively encompass all Dalits. The term Dalit encompasses untouchable communities residing beyond the confines of

the village, as well as Adivasis, landless agricultural labourers, workers, marginalized populations, and nomadic and criminal tribes. When elucidating the term, it is inadequate to make reference to the castes deemed untouchable. It is imperative to incorporate individuals who are experiencing economic disadvantage into the inclusive framework. (30)

The advent of Dalit literature in India has signified a significant transformation in both the intellectual and political realms of the nation, highlighting the rise of marginalized voices. The authors of Dalit literature predominantly consist of individuals belonging to ex-untouchable communities. They utilize the medium of Dalit literature to articulate their subjective encounters with anguish, adversity, and subjugation within the caste-based Hindu society. The literature itself serves as a medium for promoting "social change" by highlighting the adverse elements of Indian society and advocating for a transformation of the existing societal norms.

Dalit literature encompasses a quest for a dignified sense of identity among individuals belonging to the Dalit community. The Dalit community has been subjected to marginalization within Hindu society as a result of the enduring presence of caste-based biases and stereotypes. Dalits constitute the most marginalized demographic within the Indian population, enduring the dual burdens of physical and psychological subjugation. The literature under consideration is firmly grounded in the subjective sensibilities of the authors, who have endured personal experiences characterized by denial, subjugation, and oppression. The aforementioned statement pertains to the manifestation of the marginal self, which experiences the confluence of slavery and oppression within the context of Hindu society. This literary work serves as a response to the pervasive societal influence that systematically marginalizes individuals belonging to the Dalit community, thereby denying them their rightful positions within the social hierarchy. The objective of this endeavour is twofold: firstly, to disassociate oneself from the caste identity that has been imposed upon the ex-untouchables by the Hindu religious texts and secondly, to establish a dignified identity for marginalized communities within Hindu society.

Dalit literature is closely linked to the rise of the subaltern or marginalized individuals who have historically been deprived of a voice. Throughout numerous centuries, individuals belonging to the Dalit community have faced systematic

exclusion from attaining a respectable status within the realm of literature. This exclusionary practice has effectively perpetuated the dominance and sole authority of caste Hindus over Brahminical literature. In contrast to the mainstream literature in India, which tends to render Dalits marginalized and devoid of agency, Dalit literature actively positions them as central figures within its literary framework. The enduring presence of a 'casteist social order' within mainstream Brahminical literature effectively precludes any opportunity for Dalit representation or inclusion within its thematic framework. Consequently, Dalits are compelled to generate their own body of literature. Dalit literature sheds light on the enduring presence of 'feudalism' and 'Brahmanism' within the established Brahminical literary canon while simultaneously presenting an alternative perspective that envisions a society characterized by justice and equality through its literary domains.

The emergence of Dalit literature can be attributed to the Phule-Ambedkarite counter-public in Western India, particularly in the state of Maharashtra. The formation of the Dalit Panthers during the 1970s resulted in a significant increase in the production of literature by members of the Dalit community. The initial inspiration or model originated from the lived experiences of African Americans who endured a longstanding policy of social segregation in the United States of America over the course of several centuries. The initial inspiration for writers of Dalit literature was derived from the 'Slave narratives' of formerly enslaved African Americans, which served as a significant mode or source of the literary imagination. The prominent figure of Ambedkar holds a significant role in Dalit literature as he endeavoured to elevate the marginalized awareness of historically oppressed communities through his literary works on caste, untouchability, and the potential liberation of Dalits.

Dalit literature emerges as a manifestation of the collective awareness and identity of the Dalit community. The aforementioned consciousness emerges as a result of the systemic oppression and marginalization prevalent within Hindu society. The aforementioned consciousness does not exhibit a disposition of submissiveness or subservience towards the prevailing Brahminical imagination or its divisive ethos. The foundation of this concept is rooted solely in the principles of humanism and universalism. It vocalizes a desire for equal treatment, individual rights, and the absence of constraints. The persistence of untouchability practices towards Dalits, despite the

constitutional abolition of such inhumane treatment, underscores the ongoing violation of their human dignity. The sensibility in question encompasses both constructive and deconstructive elements.

Limbale has formulated a theoretical framework for the analysis of Dalit literature, which is grounded in the specific social and historical context of the Dalit community's ongoing struggle. According to his statement, the Dalit writer engages in the creation of Dalit literature as a result of their social obligation, as it represents the sole means through which a vision of a just society, founded upon the principles of inclusivity and humanism, can be envisioned. The portrayal of worldviews in Dalit literature diverges from that found in canonical Hindu religious literature, as it articulates a discourse rooted in the concealed aspects of "reality" that remain unacknowledged within the prevailing nationalist imagination. The incorporation of uncouth and impolite language by Dalits serves as a central element in this literature, thereby eliminating any potential for exoticism and emphasizing the rawness of lived experiences. "The language of 'basti' is favoured in Dalit literature over the standard language used by the educated classes. Limbale asserts "Dalit writing serves as a mechanism for the emancipation of individuals" (35).

Contextualizing Dalit Autobiographies:

The emergence of autobiographies authored by Dalits represents a significant transformation within the realm of Dalit literature. The utilization of Dalit autobiographies has witnessed a growing trend in highlighting and conveying the shared sentiments of anguish, hardship, and subjugation experienced by Dalits within the hierarchical Hindu social structure. In the realm of literature, Dalit autobiographies are commonly known as Dalit testimonies or Dalit personal narratives.

The emergence of Dalit autobiographies signifies the collective inclination of a historically marginalized community to convey the shared experiences of anguish, hardship, and marginalization to a broader audience of readers. This action demonstrates a purposeful effort to increase the visibility of marginalized social groups and provide platforms for their self-expression and community engagement. The act of composing autobiographical narratives by individuals belonging to the Dalit community

can be understood as a political endeavour aimed at dismantling the caste system and challenging its inherently discriminatory characteristics. Additionally, it aims to guarantee the self-representation of Dalits. Dalit autobiographies exhibit distinct characteristics when compared to the conventional bourgeois autobiographies of the dominant caste groups prevalent in India. This statement represents the manifestation of a marginalized perspective that endeavours to articulate itself within the realm of public discourse. The primary motivation underlying the production of these autobiographies is the advancement of human liberty and the establishment of a comprehensive community founded on principles of equality. In the Hindi language, the term 'Dalit Atmakathan' is used to refer to personal narratives, which serve as a means of self-expression.

The confessional style in Dalit autobiographies provides a unique opportunity to explore the life experiences of individuals from the Dalit community, enabling us to gain insight into their emotions of anguish, hardship, and social exclusion within a repressive societal structure. The narratives presented possess both personal and collective dimensions, as they encapsulate the collective expression of the community rooted in a shared experiential reality. The unifying motif across all autobiographies authored by Dalit individuals is the shared narrative of enduring caste-based oppression and the resultant suffering.

To understand the Dalit autobiographies, one has to see the social, political and inventive aspects of it. Literally, the writings of the upper caste people are devoid of the true presentation of the Dalits. It is not like the autobiographies written by the believers of Brahmanical heritage. It never glamourizes the idea of the psyche. The literature produced by upper-caste/middle-class Indians lacks any reference to the lived experiences of Dalits. In stark contrast to the autobiographical narratives within the Brahminical tradition, Dalit self-narratives exhibit a notable absence of romanticized conceptions of the self. Self-glorification which is found in other autobiographies, is totally absent in the Dalit autobiographies.

In her book titled "*Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*" (2006), Sharmila Rege discusses the emergence of Dalit autobiographies within the framework of a Brahmana/non-Brahmanical perspectives on caste. She emphasized that these narratives present an 'epistemological challenge' to the

prevailing modes of intellectual and literary production. The user made reference to Guru's theory regarding the categorization of individuals as either 'empirical Shudras' or 'theoretical Brahmins.' According to her, the emergence of Dalit writings, particularly personal narratives, has played a significant role in raising awareness about the caste-based oppression experienced by marginalized social groups. The individual in question has conveyed a profound aversion towards individuals who level accusations against Dalit life narratives, asserting that such narratives merely unearth distressing recollections from the past. The act of reevaluating historical events through the lens of the Dalit perspective, and acknowledging the enduring oppression and subjugation experienced by Dalits throughout history, did not elicit any objections from her.

Rege considers Dalit autobiographies to be significant historical documents, as they provide personal narratives that chronicle and emphasize the various socio-political changes that have had a direct or indirect impact on the collective existence of these marginalized communities in India. Gopal Guru regards these narratives as fulfilling dual functions. Firstly, proponents of Dalit empowerment employ a strategy of instilling a sense of triumph in Dalits, thereby imposing an inferiority complex on their adversaries. Secondly, they aim to evoke a sense of guilt among dominant social groups for the historical transgressions committed by their predecessors. (86) A comprehensive understanding of the political significance of Dalit autobiographies is imperative in order to effectively interpret the underlying implications embedded within these individual narratives. The Dalit personal narratives serve as a platform for the expression of political ideologies centered on social justice and self-recognition. Dalit autobiographical writers employ their recollections not solely as a means to contemplate the systemic oppression and anguish associated with the caste system but also as a means to envision and establish a more equitable society founded upon principles of humanism and the cultivation of a dignified sense of self.

In her publication titled *Writing Caste /Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006), Sharmila Rege emphasized the incorporation of a feminist lens in the analysis of the Dalit movement and literature. Furthermore, it promotes the notion of autonomous feminism for Dalit women, as their specific concerns and issues are often overlooked by leaders within the mainstream feminist movement. In this instance, the author appears to be delineating feminist ideology

through the lens of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical perspectives. The author's conceptualization of 'unmarked feminism' resulted in the development of a counteractive Dalit feminist pedagogy that is founded “on a nuanced comprehension of social positioning, lived experiences, and historical context” (95). Hence, it is imperative to examine the pluralistic nature of Dalit experiences through the lens of gender in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dimensions of caste and class-based oppression and exploitation, which detrimentally affect the well-being of Dalit women. Rege (2006) demonstrated the manner in which the expressions and experiences of Dalit women underscore the interconnectedness of caste and gender, “thereby presenting alternative narratives that contest the limited recollection and singular historical perspective of both the Dalit and women's movements” (99).

Autobiographical accounts authored by individuals belonging to the Dalit community, both men and women, depict a distressing portrayal of Indian society, shedding light on the divisive dynamics inherent within the caste-based Hindu social structure. The text highlights the pervasive nature of the social hierarchy in Indian society, which continues to marginalize a significant portion of its population as outcastes, resulting in the denial of fundamental human rights to these individuals. Despite over seventy years of independence, India has yet to achieve a state of societal equality wherein all citizens are afforded the fundamental necessities for a satisfactory standard of living.

Dalit personal narratives resonate with the egalitarian ideals of prominent anti-caste figures like Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar, who envisioned a society that is both equal and inclusive, devoid of any forms of discrimination and exploitation. The juxtaposition of 'Puruskrut Bharat' (an ideal India) and 'Bahiskrut Bharat' (a polluting India) is evident throughout the nation, serving as a poignant visual representation of Ambedkar's aspirational vision of 'Prabudda Bharat' (an inclusive and enlightened India) for Dalits, wherein all communities and groups can coexist harmoniously. The portrayal of King Bali, as propagated by Jyotiba Phule, gained significant prominence as a representation of an egalitarian society devoid of the concepts of purity and pollution.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life (2003) by Omprakash Valmiki is a poignant autobiographical account that delves into the profound encounters and stark actualities of existence as experienced by a Dalit writer. Within this personal narrative, the author

provides a depiction of the anguish experienced as a member of the Dalit community within the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. The occurrence of his birth proved to be a continuous cause of sadness for both him and his family. Having been raised in a socioeconomically disadvantaged Dalit household, he encountered numerous instances of systemic oppression and discrimination rooted in caste and class distinctions. During the course of recounting his personal narrative, the individual conveyed a profound aversion towards the caste ideology, expressing deep dissatisfaction with its divisive nature. Furthermore, he exhibited remarkable resilience and courage in challenging the prevailing hegemonic social structure.

Sharan KumarLimbale provides a detailed account of his personal experiences, highlighting the challenges he faced as a result of his untouchable and illegitimate status within Hindu society. Limbale's identity as the offspring of a Dalit mother and an upper-caste father subjected him to a profound sense of marginalization, restricted freedom, and social stigma. The individual's existence appears to be predominantly characterized by a profound struggle with matters of personal identity, resulting in the autobiographical work serving as a critical evaluation of the Hindu community. The individual employed this medium as a means of articulating his discontent and opposition towards the divisive hierarchical structure within Hindu society, which segregates individuals based on their caste affiliations. Simultaneously, she has expressed disapproval towards the sexual exploitation endured by Dalit women at the hands of men belonging to the caste Hindu community. Limbale has also formulated an internal critique of Dalit communities, highlighting their tendency to internalize the Brahmanical oppression that Dalits are expected to oppose actively. The individual's lifelong journey was marked by a persistent quest for a sense of self-worth, as he encountered a lack of adequate resolution to the perplexing inquiries surrounding his personal identity. According to Limbale, "To whom is my umbilical cord attached?" (39)

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble sheds light on the deplorable living conditions experienced by Dalits and the extreme poverty they are compelled to endure within the hierarchical Hindu caste system. She unveiled the primary origins of the systematic subjugation and degradation experienced by Dalits in their everyday existence. The autobiographical narrative of the author has effectively exposed the

prevailing structures of inequality and oppression within Hindu society. The author's portrayal of her village and the socio-spatial segregation or isolation of Dalit households from the upper caste settlements highlights the pervasive existence of caste-based spatial division in rural regions of India. The author's examination of the caste-based tensions that exist between caste Hindus and Dalits emphasized the psychological distinctions that exist among various castes. The profound psychological distress and devaluation experienced by individuals from the Dalit community as a result of the caste system's hierarchical structure has been profoundly distressing and condemnatory. According to Kamble, "The children trailed behind the women, grasping onto their garments." (52)

In his memoir titled *The Outcaste*, published in 2003, Sharan Kumar Limbale provides a critical analysis of the prevalent discrimination and exclusion experienced by Dalits within educational establishments. Throughout the course of history, the Dalit community has been systematically excluded from the realm of educational opportunities, primarily due to Manusmriti's prohibition on reading for individuals belonging to lower castes. The *Manusmriti* and other Hindu religious texts have been observed to restrict the equal access of Dalits to education, as the responsibility for cultivating knowledge has been predominantly assigned to individuals belonging to the Hindu caste community. The author documented a series of discriminatory and oppressive experiences endured during his formative years in his autobiographical account, specifically highlighting the actions of a schoolmaster belonging to the high caste. Limbale perceives the Hindu caste teachers as emblematic of the systemic oppression and exploitation associated with the caste system. Rather than facilitating the assimilation of principles such as equality, freedom, empathy, and social responsibility among the students, the teachers belonging to the Hindu caste community exploited the young Dalit students, viewing them as targets to satisfy their shared animosity and contempt towards Dalit groups. Limbale effectively depicted the abhorrent characteristics of these cruel educators in a vivid manner:

Upon the teachers' observation of my seemingly idle state, their annoyance escalated, leading to an outburst wherein they exclaimed, "You, individual of questionable character, commence the act of writing immediately!" Do you have a preference for consuming bovine meat?... the teacher is referring to me

as a derogatory term and making an offensive comment about my dietary preferences. What is the recommended approach for initiating the composition of the essay as per the instructions provided by the instructor? (3-4),

The caste teachers demonstrated a severe lack of civility and propriety by publicly addressing Dalit students using their caste names, thereby subjecting them to public humiliation in the presence of students from other castes. The normalization of insensitive and disparaging actions by caste-Hindu teachers signifies the suppression of caste-based discrimination and the marginalization of Dalit students within educational establishments. The aforementioned situation highlights the profound nature and coarseness of caste biases, as well as the continuation of infringements upon human rights, which result in a profound psychological impact on the impressionable intellects of students from historically marginalized social groups. This observation highlights the concerning condition of educational institutions and the enduring presence of caste-based animosity towards Dalits. The prevalence of exclusion and discrimination in the educational sector highlights the profound educational disadvantage faced by students from marginalized social backgrounds. Although the recognition of primary education as a basic right for all individuals in India has been acknowledged, it is evident that this provision does not effectively safeguard the human dignity of Dalit students.

The book *Bama in Sangati: Events* (2005) provides a comprehensive account of numerous occurrences of caste-based violence and sexual oppression inflicted upon Dalit women by males belonging to the Hindu caste community. The author provided a narrative account of the lived experiences of a cohort of Dalit women who were compelled to endure a life characterized by ongoing oppression and dehumanization resulting from the intersecting forces of patriarchal dominance and caste-based discrimination. The author sought to transcend her personal identity and emphasize the collective narratives of violence and mistreatment through a gendered lens, thereby highlighting the pervasive existence of two dominant systems of power - Dalit and Brahmanical patriarchies. In this context, the autobiography undergoes a transformation into a collective representation of a community, thereby emphasizing the communal aspect of Dalit identity from a gender perspective. The individual's intersectional identity enabled her to articulate the systems of oppression and violence through the lens of gender and caste.

In his autobiographical work titled *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, published in 2018, Manoranjan Byapari explores the historical roots of his caste, the Chandals, alternatively known as the Namashudras. This particular social group was historically regarded as one of the most marginalized and impure segments within Hindu society. According to Hindu shastras, individuals belonging to the Chandal community are considered untouchable due to their lineage originating from practicum marriages, which involve the union of an upper-caste woman and a Shudra man. Byapari highlighted the distressing condition of his ancestors, who were subjected to a prolonged period of deprivation, constant stigmatization, and marginalization as a result of their perceived status as 'untouchables.' (Byapari 9)

The upper class advocated that those born into families not involved in the major caste divisions can never come into contact the upper-class Hindu; they are the 'untouchables'. To this day, the discrimination of caste exists in our Indian society. The upper-class people never want to mix up with these lower-class people, they are supposed to do the degrading works- they are economically and socially not stable and have to experience humility and hatred. Of course, the Constitution of India introduced many laws to prevent this discrimination but all are in vain only. Even different Commissions have been set up for promoting harmony and to facilitate the problems of the Dalits but again unfortunately, these efforts are not fruitful. It is seen in the course of study that the main problem is the implementation of law and the system of justice. Yet, it is far away from the reach of the Dalits.

Any kind of cultural habits and social attitudes are the main reasons behind the discrimination among people. People thought themselves that they are the superiors and others are only inferior beings as they are labeled and leveled to enjoy all human rights and can reach the system of justice. It is but not the creation of God rather is orthodoxically 'man-made'. God did never teach us to divide among human kind but it is the societal norm that teaches us to divide people according to their birth. What is more unfortunate is that it becomes very distinct even in this globalized digital era. Ironically, the high-class people never understand that they have no right to stop others from celebrating their rights and identity. The Constitution has not given the right to the upper caste to treat the lower class as the 'untouchables. The insightful study shows that

miserably the high-class people of our society think that the untouchables are not equal to them because they born in the low caste family. Though constitutionally oppression is relaxed, yet the issue of social exclusion is evident as are not permitted to participate in the social and religious events in public. Even Dalits are not allowed to enter into the temples to worship as they are said to be the untouchables. It is always well accepted even in intellectual academia that the worst victims are the illiterate Dalit men by the upper caste; but who are horribly affected are the Dalit women for the patriarchy stereotype. The fleshly and cerebral ache that the Dalit women deal with is exclusively sex- oriented.