

**The Significance of Dalit Autobiography in Marathi Literature: A  
Study of Narendra Jadhav's 'Outcaste: A Memoir'**

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**Abstract:**

Literature is manifested in many forms since time immemorial. Autobiography also has become one of the important literary forms. Particularly in twentieth century literature it has developed to its culmination. In a country like India where there is lot of caste discrimination, it is not that easy for the Dalit's to express themselves openly and freely. The agony and anguish they have experienced since thousands of years in this country cannot be overlooked. Nobody attempted to write about those agonies. Even writers like Mulk Raj Anand tried to mention at least the untouchability, he wrote completely as an outer. Only the persons who experienced that agony can write it with reality and effectively. Narendra Jadhav is one of the important Dalit writer in Marathi literature. In his "Outcaste: A Memoir" Jadhav exposed the realistic picture of the problem of the untouchability in India. And how his father Damu and mother Sonu have experienced the pain of discrimination in the society. Jadhav also gives the fights and struggles of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the removal of untouchability in India. This paper deals with the autobiography of Narendra Jadhav's outcaste: A Memoir.

**Key words: Untouchability, Suppression, Discrimination, Rights, Equality.**

The 'autobiography' as a literary form was followed by many political and social leaders in India including Mahatma Gandhi and Javahar La Nehru in the cotemporary period to construct a national pride. In the Marathi literature, the autobiographical writings were available from 13<sup>th</sup> century. Saint Namdev and Chandraswami followed by many saints during Bhakti movement composed their literature in autobiographical tone.

Maharashtra had produced a fascinating account of innumerable autobiographical literature from 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. sou. Suhasini Irlekar , a renowned critic of saint literature in Marathi, has documented the initial attempts of autobiographical literature in Maharashtra in Mahanubhav and Varkari sects in her book 'Adhya Marathi Atmcharitarkar: Sant Namdev'. She explained that saint Namdev 's 152 *Abhangas* was the first attempt of autobiographical literature in Marathi those who were composed during 1296 to 1297, whereas' *Lilacharita Ekank'* was recomposed in 1310.

However, the modern form of autobiography was evident only during the British rule in India. At present, there more than five hundred autobiographies available in Marathi literature. Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar and Baba Padamanji were considered the first auto biographers who had composed their full pledged autobiographies in Marathi at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both of them have been inspired to depict their experiences in the context of their religion and caste - identities.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra, Ramabhai Ranade wrote her first woman autobiography in Marathi in which she had depicted the life and ideology of her upper caste Hindu Brahmin family and her husband justice M.G.Randae. Ramabhai Ranade was followed by Lakshmibai Tilak , another Brahmin woman , married to reverend Narayan Waman Tilak. Being born in the orthodox Brahmin family and married into another orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, Lakshmibhai Tilak had explored the upper caste Brahmin perspective of her families and relatives which was much challenged and reshaped when she followed her Christian converted husband. Later many Brahmin women like Lilabhai Patwardhan, Kamalbai Deshpande tried to uphold the Hindu religious upper caste Brahmin identity and its privilege.

On the one hand, the Maratha men like Vinayak Damodhar Savarkar, Dattatreya Balakrushna Kalelkar, Shripad Mahadev Mate and Vitthal Ramji Shinde tried to be secular and sympathetic towards untouchables. Thus the tradition of autobiography tried to mould towards nationalism by the authors like Gopal Nilknta Dandekar , who was famous for romanticizing historical period of Chaptrapati Shivaji inn his historical novels.

From the 1960s, Dalits came out with their caste based humiliation and its resistance in their literature, predominantly autobiographical in tone. Soon after the Dalit literature was backed up by the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. Daya Pawar's autobiography 'Baluta 'became the landmark in Dalit literature where the protagonist had condemned his Hindu religious untouchable Mahar caste identity. the tremendous success of this first Dalit autobiography invented a new trend of Dalit autobiographies in Marathi literature and many authors like Sharankumar Limbale , Baby Kamble, Shantabhai Kamble wrote their autobiographies where the protagonists have categorically exposed how the Hindu religion and its cast system had caused the devastation of their lives for ages.

On the other hand, Anand Yadav, an upper caste Maratha author and an acclaimed academician had attempted to romanticize the Brahmin caste and its culture while suggesting his community to emulate the Brahmins as role models. He invented a new trend in Marathi i.e. Gramin Marathi literature, promising a space for upper caste Marathas to explore their anxiety for economic deprivation in the villages and their loss of Hindu caste status in the urban areas in his autobiography 'Zombie'. His autobiography also represented the upper caste Marathas aspiration for equal status with the Brahmins where he had maintained Brahmin Hindu religious ideology.

However, the Dalit autobiographers like Uttam Tupe, Kumud Pawade, Mukta Sarwagod, Kishore Kale, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Dadasaheb More, Janabhia Girthe have explored the different horizons where the suppressed sections of the society were exploited and discriminated. Particularly, Dr. Narendra Jadhav explored the Dalits to the level of universal citizenship whereas Urmila Pawar opened new vistas for Dalit woman's triple suppression.

Dr. Narendra Jadhav , a Dalit writer, is famous all over the world as an acclaimed Indian bureaucrat , economist, thinker, social scientist and educationist . He was the youngest child born into a Mahar caste family, which was residing then at Wadala slum area in Mumbai which was dominated by the gangsters. In his childhood, Narendra Jadhav appropriated his dreams to be a peon, teacher, and writer along with his understanding of caste system. When he scored a topper in Sanskrit language in his secondary school examination, he got the confidence to dominate the caste system with education. Because, getting mastery over Sanskrit language is possible only to the Brahmins. The Dalits were not considered clever enough to learn Sanskrit language and get mastery over it.

The slogan of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was “educate, agitate and organize”. So education is the only way for the Dalits to develop themselves and fight against the caste discrimination in India. Because, Dalits are completely economically backward. They don’t have land resources except doing labour in other’s lands. Dr. Narendra Jadhav is the best example who followed Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and succeeded in his efforts.

Dr. Narendra Jadhav was introduced to the racial discrimination in America during his four years stay at Washington D.C. where he wrote this autobiography with global readership in mind. He has constructed cosmopolitan Dalit identity in his outcaste Memoir. He says,

“I wonder how many swans waste their lives thinking of themselves as ugly ducklings, trapped and punished by the inequities of our caste system. And how many more ugly ducklings pretend to be swans and get away with it. The beautiful swan inherently present in all mankind, needs to be encouraged and guided to emerge in all its glory. Countless Dalits were inspired to search for the swan within, after Babasaheb Ambedkar touched their lives.”(Jadhav, 227)

Dr. Narendra Jadhav begins his memoir by foregrounding the history of how his father had out rightly declined to act against the Hindu caste structure which assigned menial jobs to the Mahars by thoroughly being inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s radical messages. Jadhav tried to historicize the significant contribution of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in the lives of Mahars in

general and in their lives practically. He explained how his father had inculcated the values, views, morals and visions of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his family and also how Jadhav has taken the conviction for the vision of Dr. B.R Ambedkar who envisaged the emancipation of the entire downtrodden untouchable communities across the nation.

Jadhav's autobiography explains historically how the Hindu religion and its caste structure had operated, deprived and discriminated the untouchables at the feudal village level. His narrated his autobiography with the experiences of his father Damodhar and his mother Sonu, and his brothers Janardhan, Sudhakar and Dinesh and his daughter Apoorva. He began the experience of his father how he had to escape the caste oppression from Ozar, his native village in Nashik district in Maharashtra to Mumbai.

Jadhav clearly explains the difference between the city life and village life. Mumbai has been the destiny of many people to settle their lives. Not only Mumbai but also other cities in India have become the source of their lives. He explains the things that had happened in his father's life and how his mother had brought them to Mumbai. Jadhav's father Damodhar (Damu) was born to Runjaji and Rahibai the Mahar caste parents at Ozar, his native village in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Maharashtra. After the untimely demise of his father Runjaji, Damu, being an untouchable Mahar had to undergo many problems in the caste ridden village society at Ozar. It was the period of 1919 when Madhav, Damu's cousin had an illicit love affair with an upper caste woman in their village. When this love affair had become known to the entire village, all the villager of the upper caste attacked hm. Since madhav was a wrestler, he could survive and eventually run away from his village to Mumbai. But still, the upper caste people wanted to retaliate his relatives in the village. Knowing the indignation of the upper caste Rahibai, Damu's mother took her children Damu and his sister Najuka to Mumbai. In Mumbai there is no need to do the caste based jobs as they do in villages. So, they searched for other jobs irrespective of their caste. While selling newspapers in Mumbai at the railway station, he got acquaintance with a British officer called Ron Cronikar. Later, he started working in the British's house and acquired some technical knowledge of the railway engine and subsequently he got a

small job in the railway department. Damu had neither experienced any caste discrimination nor the practice of untouchability during these days. He says,

“I was their employee, but I never felt inferior, and they never treated me like a servant. Most of all, I had forgotten that I was a Mahar and an untouchable. Nobody had ever mentioned it. It was a strange world but I had smoothly and come out of it an entirely different person.” (Jadhav, 101)

The modern urban life and his small job had provided Damu some relief in his life. Later, he had come to know the struggles made by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the emancipation of the untouchables. Damu started participating actively. Dr. Ambedkar targeted the stigmatized minds of the upper caste people. The untouchables were not allowed to take water from the public water places. They had to wait for some upper caste man to come give them some water. In this regard, the Mahad municipality had passed a resolution allowing the untouchables to take water directly from all the public water places in its constituency. But the resolution was not implemented due to the pressure of the upper caste people. So, Dr. Ambedkar decided to exercise the resolution on the public water lake at Mahad itself.

Nothing in this world has come to the Dalits very easily. Everything was acquired by struggles and fights. Damu had actively participated in the Mahad Satyagraha initiated by Dr. Ambedkar in 1927. Dr. Ambedkar always says that untouchability was not a simple matter; it was the mother of all our poverty and lowliness and it had brought us to the abject state they were in. He says,

“It is utterly disgracefully to sell your human rights for a few crumbs of bread.. we will attain self- elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self –respect and gain self- knowledge.” (Jadhav , 22)

The revival spirit and questioning spirit in the Dalits ignited by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar has roused fury in the upper caste society and some bureaucrats. Due to the great economic depression in 1929, many people had to lose their jobs and Damu also had lost his railway job. Damu had to come back to his village and take up his caste based menial *yeskar* job. As an *yeskar*, he had to drag carcasses of animals out of the village; he had to circulate the death news of the upper caste people for which he would be given a handful of grain and was allowed to beg leftovers in the locality of upper caste villagers. It was called his *baluta* for all his services to the villagers. But when Damu rejected to bring out the dead body of an upper caste who drowned in well, the superintendent of police started abusing Damu. He says,

“I know the reason why you lowly creatures are suddenly meeting our gaze and raising your voices, talking back to us. It is all due to that Mahar Ambedkar. He thinks that just because he has learned a book or two, he will suddenly become a high-caste Brahmin from a Mahar. And you listen to his talk and start thinking that by talking back you to us, you can get away with it.” (Jadhav,8)

Damu was beaten up by the superintendent of police and other constables and insisted him to do that job. They reminded him that as a Mahar, he had to be loyal to the masters and serve to them obediently. Thus, the low status of Mahar caste too the upper caste was naturally internalized in the Mahars. But Damu who was greatly influenced by Ambedkar was not convinced, rather he countered their understanding boldly. He says,

“What kind of tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs? I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am not going to abide by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for Baluta. What are all of you going to do? Kill me? (Jadhav, 10)

The tragedy that we find in India, even today, is that we don't have dignity of labour. We don't respect the people who are doing menial jobs. If the scavengers don't do their job, what would happen to India? That is why we don't find upper caste people in menial jobs. They look down upon the people who do that kind of insignificant jobs. It is the social discrimination which humiliates the Dalits. They are not treated equally with other caste people in India.

Dr. Narendra Jadhav, in his interview to Times of India on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2004, reminded that when Gandhiji was advising people to "go to the villages", Dr. Ambedkar was advising his followers to do just the opposite- 'go to the cities'. Dr. Jadhav further explained that Dr. Ambedkar believed that moving out of the confines of caste ridden villages to the anonymity provided by the cities would space in modernity where they could reject their caste identity and traditional caste occupations. The modernity provided them education, economic status, skill based jobs and equality. The untouchable could secure different skill based jobs in railways, mill and factories in the urban areas. Consequently, the traditional hierarchy was replaced with the economic strengths in the cities. Thus the untouchables rejected Gandhian principle that 'caste work should be respected but people should continue to do it as their swadharma'. Thus Damu could reject the *yeskar* duties of his Mahar caste identity in the modern city Mumbai where he was able to secure a job on the railway department.

Another important incident that Jadhav speaks of in his autobiography is the Satyagraha movement in 1930. Damu, on his way back to Mumbai, came to know that Dr. Ambedkar gave a call for Satyagraha demanding an entry for the Dalits into the Kalaram temple at Nasik in March 1930. The untouchable from all over Maharashtra gathered there to enter the Kalaram temple. They started shouting slogans "Jai Bhim, Hail Babasaheb" and there were posters containing the message: god belonged to everyone; all Hindus must be allowed into the temple. Immediately, Damu along with Sonu enrolled their names in the office for participating in the Satyagraha and they were given badges. Dr. Ambedkar had decided to hold satyagraha until the upper caste Brahmins would allow the untouchable inside the Kalaram temple. Dr. Ambedkar argued that

“We will not die if we are not allowed into the temple, nor are we going to be immortalized by gaining entry. We are fighting for equal rights as human beings, and we are going to accept anything less or more ... they can no longer deny us our basic human rights, and the benefits of civilization and culture. We must continue our movement till we succeed in claiming our birth right.(Jadhav, 128,130)

The Dalit leaders severely challenged the Hindu traditions, customs and religious rituals. They have opposed completely the segregation and discrimination. They wanted to do away with all the practices of suppression. Particularly, Dr. Ambedkar had spoken against the dogmas of the Brahminical Hindu socio- religious practices and values. He questions all the Brahmins who separate themselves from the other sections of society. He even questions how the Dalits can remain in Hinduism, when they don't have equal rights with them. That's the reason he had left Hinduism and taken up Buddhism.

If you say that your religion, your rights and our rights must be equal. Is this the case? If not, on what ground do you say we must remain in the Hindu fold?( Jadhav, 24)

While walking on the path of Ambedkar movement, Damu found that his eldest son Jayavant was selected in the Indian Administrative Service. Dinesh, another son, became an Administrative officer at the Mumbai municipal corporation. And above all Narendra Jadhav became an acclaimed economist in IMF, RBI etc. Thus Damu's second generation struggled against their stigma of untouchability with their hard work, education and rationality.

The story is multi –dimensional- at one level, it is a personal saga of man’s journey from untouchability to touchability , at another level, it a loving tribute from a son to his parents and at third level, it is full-fledged historical account of the caste system and its debilitating effects. Damu being the man protagonist here, deals with the issue of the caste system in its contemporary reality.

Damu’s wife Sonu also had confronted serious and humiliating interaction with the upper caste woman in her childhood at her village khedra. In her childhood, she was summoned to work at the upper caste landlord’s house where she was assigned menial things like plastering the floor with cow dung, collecting twigs for firewood and grinding wheat on the stone wheel etc. after finishing all her works, she saw an upper caste girl carrying the platters full of sweets and she was in need of help. To help her, the little Sonu took one of the platters of sweet and started offering them to the guests of upper caste. All of a sudden, she was shocked by the shouting voices of Heerabhai, the upper caste woman. She said, “Eh, you bloody maharin, what do you think you are doing? Your shadow has contaminated the food. It is not fit for eating.”( Jadhav, 47,48)

The irony is that the hypocrisy of the caste system was unveiled through the incidents which revealed in the story that although the upper castes felt polluted and defiled by the mere touch of their lower caste counterparts yet this does not prevent them from hitting or beating them whenever necessary. This indicates the hypocrisy of the upper caste.

Later, Jadhav explains how the families of Dalits shifted to cities like Mumbai and the caste structure in the villages continued through different Hindu religious traditions and fairs of the deities where the caste identities are renewed annually. Jadhav also describes how the Dalits, even though they live in city, go to their native

places every year to celebrate their own festivals. The Dalits used to gather every year on the day of Chaitra Poornima(full moon day) at Jejuri to attend the fair of god Khandoba, their family deity. They used to prepare special recipe 'khanduri' .

Damu was completely influenced by Dr. Ambedkar who was fighting for equality. Not only Damu fought for equality, but also he himself practiced it in his own life. Damu always used to think of his community. Whenever he gets work assignments from the upper caste people like seths, he used to invite all other people in his community to share the work opportunity. He never thought of for extra benefits or commissions. On the contrary, he used to bring refreshments to all. So, dalits have learned the importance of sharing the opportunities.

Similarly, when Rama, the young boy of Mahar community, comes from Ozar to Mumbai in search of job, Damu , despite his worst economic condition , helps him a lot till he gets a job. Damu not only sheltered him at their own house but also taught him the city manners that are required to get a job. In his adverse condition, Damu buys a tie, shoes and dress for the boy. And later Rama becomes one of the important activists in the dalit movement.

Jadhav also mentions of Gandhi's ideology regarding religious conversions. Gandhi opposed religious conversions of Dr. Ambedkar. Gandhi says the problem of untouchability could be solved in the Hindu religious fold only. Gandhiji intentionally coined the word ' Harijans' for the untouchables. He wanted to sympathies with the untouchables. He even proposed the removal untouchability in the congress party agenda. But Dr. Ambedkar strongly opposed such sympathy towards the dalits. While Gandhi called the untouchables as 'harijans' which means people of god', Ambedkar called them as 'Dalits' which means 'the suppressed' which suits to the conditions of

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the untouchables in India. Dr. Ambedkar represented the feeling of every untouchable while declaring his decision to change the religion. He says,

Unfortunately, I am born a Hindu untouchable- there was nothing I could do to prevent it. However, it is well within my power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu. ( Jadhav, 163)

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