

Chapter II

Dalit Writing in India

In this chapter, I have mainly concentrated on Dalit writings in Marathi, Hindi and Tamil. I have divided this chapter into three sections – Marathi Dalit literature, Hindi Dalit literature, and Tamil Dalit literature – to have a pan-Indian understanding of Dalit literature. In the first section, I have looked at the Marathi Dalit literature. I have more precisely tried to find out its characteristic features and analyzed its impact on the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra as well as on other Indian regional languages. The second section talks about Hindi Dalit literature. In this section, I have tried to find out whether Hindi Dalit literature has moved along the path of Marathi Dalit literature or has a different viewpoint. The third and the last section focuses Tamil Dalit literature. I have chosen Tamil Dalit literature because of availability of translations of Dalit writing. Keeping Marathi Dalit literature at the centre of the Dalit writing, I have also analyzed its influence in the northern and the southern part of India.

2.1: Marathi Dalit Writing

The term “Dalit literature” came into use in 1958, when the first conference of *Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha* (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) was held in Mumbai. Dalit literature, which looks at history, current events and life itself from a Dalit point of view, has come to occupy a niche in the body of Indian literary expression. It has formed an important and distinct part of Indian literature and politics. The primary motive of Dalit literature is to give voice to the relentless oppression of Dalits in India's caste hierarchy and to attempt to increase the possibility of their social, economic, and cultural development. Dalit literature has its roots in the lives of the people who are suppressed, crushed, downtrodden, or broken to pieces.

The characters of its literary pieces worked as manual labourers cleaning streets, toilets, and sewers. Therefore, the primary objective of Dalit literature is the protest and liberation of Dalits.

Dalit literary production has gained ground steadily over the years from the turn of the twentieth century onward, more particularly, since India's independence. The period of the 1960s and thereafter has seen considerable outpouring of literary works. Dalit writers have used almost all the genres – poetry, novel, short story, autobiography, and drama.

In the first chapter, I have already discussed how the rise and development of Dalit movement is centrally linked to the question of Dalit identity. Many attempts have been made by number of scholars for identifying the origin of the Dalit literary movement. For some it has its origination in the writings of Lord Buddha while some Marathi Dalit writers, in their efforts at identity formation, have begun to trace their linkages to low caste saint poets of the Bhakti movement. Poet Namdev was a Shimpri (tailor) by caste. Poet Chokha Mela was an untouchable Mahar. The saint poets belonging to the lower social order demonstrated the courage to raise their voice against caste hierarchy and cultural practices of untouchability. Chokha Mela himself protested against his caste as Eleanor Zelliot has quoted the end one of Chokha Mela's *abhangas* thus,

In the beginning,
at the end
there is nothing but pollution.
No one knows anyone who is born pure.
Chokha says, in wonder,
Who is pure? (1992 b, 270)

Some of the Marathi Dalit writers have considered Mahatma Phule as the pioneer as he successfully argued against the notion of caste and untouchability and exposed the Brahminical

ideology in his writings namely *Trutiya Ratna* (1855), *Gulamgiri* (1873), and *Shetkarayacha Asude* (1883). If Mahatma Phule's direct influence on Dalit writing is considered somewhat limited, Ambedkar's is quite extensive. Ambedkar is a primary impetus for most of the Dalit writers. Also a group of Marathi Dalit writers considers Ambedkar as the pioneer of not only the Dalit movement but of the Dalit literature. As Dr. Kamlakar Gangawane has stated, "All these agitations which were led by Ambedkar have been transformed into Songs and Powadas. The message of the protest reached the people through folksongs, Tamashas, Jalsas and conventional folk art" (17). Tarachand Khandekar also notes the impact of Ambedkar on Marathi Dalit literature:

In the 1930s through the writings published in *Bhashkrit Bharat*, *Janta*, *Muknayak*, and later on through *Prabuddha Bharat* and *Dharmayan*, new writers portrayed the miseries of untouchable brethren and their sufferings and aspirations were made the subject-matter of the various literary forms viz. poetry, short-stories, fiction, drama for the first time. (5)

Thus, based on the above two views it can be said that Marathi Dalit literature took a new shape during the Ambedkar era, i.e. from 1927 to 1956.

In the following section, I present an overview of the Marathi Dalit writing.¹ In order to understand Marathi Dalit literary movement, I find the classification of Marathi Dalit writing given by Veena Deo to be very useful. She has classified Marathi Dalit writing under three heads which are, Pre-Panther Dalit Writing, Dalit Panther movement and after, and Dalit and Buddhist Women's Writing (367).

As the name suggests, Pre-Panther Writing refers to Dalit writing before the formation of the Dalit Panthers group. Before Ambedkar started his movement, few Dalits expressed their

¹ The overview of Marathi Dalit literature is based on my reading of *Introduction to Poisoned Bread* by Arjun Dangle. For detailed study see Arjun Dangle. Ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009.

views against the unjust and inhuman practices of the upper caste people. Among them were Gopalbaba Valangkar, Pandit Kondiram, Ghanshyam Talwatkar and Kisan Phagoji Bansod. Gopalbaba Valangkar, who wrote in English, was in the Indian army and tried to organize public opinion when the British stopped the military recruitment of untouchable youths. Kisan Phagoji Bansod's poetry fiercely attacked Hinduism. Due to efforts of these writers Dalit literature made its presence felt in a very small way before Ambedkar's movement.

Around 1950, when the first batch of Dalit youths graduated from college, Ghanshyam Talwatkar and others set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh. The Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was formed in 1958 from this body. In spite of the Dalit name, the literature by these people continued to show the influence of white-collar values. The major questions addressed by them were regarding Dalit life and problems which are different from those of others. They asked whether these could be formulated into literature and whether such literature would be accepted? Dalit organizations of the period such as RPI initially did some good work and tried to get the problems of Dalits resolved. However, its influence was limited. Sudha Pai has pointed out, "Unfortunately, the tempo and the revolutionary zeal of the party leaders got lost in mutual conflicts as every leader was posing as a junior Ambedkar" (76). These circumstances led to the birth of the Dalit Panther movement in 1972.

The literature up to 1960 appeared chiefly in *Prabuddha Bharat*, the mouthpiece of the RPI and in the Dalit magazines brought out at the time of Ambedkar's birth anniversary. Brahminical writers like V. S. Khandekar and N. S. Phaske dominated the Marathi literary scene during this period. Dalit literature did present problems or stories concerning Dalits, but this literature was set in the mould of Khandekar and Phaske. In other words, some Dalits had 'Brahminized' themselves and attempted to speak, read and write like Brahmins. The Dalit

literature before 1960 fell victim to the so-called cultural values of the time. A salient feature of this period was the honest desire of some writers to have a separate Dalit literature. They tried to shape this literature as much as they could.

After 1960 Annabhau Sathe, Baburao Bagul, Uttam Tupe and others brought a decisive change in prose. Sada Karhase, Daya Pawar, Waman Kardak and Narayan Surve initiated similar changes in poetry. A prominent and prolific Dalit fiction writer Annabhau Sathe wrote under the influence of Marxism. His novels *Fakira* (1959) presented sensitive portraits of individual Dalit heroism within confrontational and complex social realities of their village communities.

Shankarrao Kharat's first book, *Bara Balutedar* (1959), took all 12-village servants as subjects for stories. He continued to deal with characters from many different communities, generally from the lower orders.

Alongside untouchability, Dalits faced a variety of other equally demeaning situations like poverty and misery, hunger and starvation, homelessness and economic exploitation, and sexual abuse and physical torture. Dalit writers concerned with the issues of identity were not oblivious to these realities. Eleanor Zelliot underscored this point with sensitivity, "There is, of course, a focus on the life of the lowly in Dalit literature. The style and content vary, however, from the suffering tinged with hope of the village Mahar in Shankarrao Kharat's stories to the gaunt, stark brutality of life in the Bombay slums described by Baburao Bagul in prose and Namdeo Dhasal in poetry" (1992 b, 275-76).

Narayan Surve's poetry, which portrayed the problems of the workers, came into being during this period. Besides Narayan Surve's poetry which was highly influenced by Marxism, a third stream of thought in the sixties was the movement by the Angry Young Men to publish Little Magazines. The role of magazines and journals is very significant as far as Dalit literary

movement is concerned. Magazines such as *Prabuddha Bharata*, *Asmitadarsh*, *Magova*, *Amhi*, *Satyakatha* and *Vidroha* has played a vital role in the publication and dissemination of Dalit writing in Maharashtra.

The Dalit poetry was a powerful means of Dalit expressions, but to spread the propaganda of Dalit sensibility in the remote area and amidst the illiterate section of the Dalits, folk poetry was used. Waman Dada Kardak, Bhimrao Kardak, Vitthal Umap and so on were the prominent Dalit folk poets. The folk poetry included ballads that enthralled the common people of Dalit community. It too created awareness about the Dalit movement among the Dalits.

The Little magazine movement did not become successful but it certainly; it did have some literary advantages. Writers expressed themselves boldly. The equation that the elitist critics have the last word was challenged. Some stories which came into being with the Little Magazine Movement, gave great momentum to Dalit literature. They represented a new, direct, angry, accusatory and analytic voice in the literature and Baburao Bagul was the most prominent Dalit author.

Baburao Ramchandra Bagul (1930-2008), the father of modern Dalit literature, touched people's mind through his revolutionary literature. As an architect of Dalit literature, he made a valuable contribution to Indian literature. Baburao Bagul was the main exponent of Dalit (low caste) literature in Maharashtra. Bagul's writings started an era of revolutionary writing in Marathi literature. Writers like Marx, Lenin, Gorki and Chekov influenced his writings. Apart from these writers, he was influenced by the thoughts and writings of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. The extreme poverty, misery and oppression that he experienced in his childhood found expression in his works. His stories expressed rebellion against the social system and gave it a jolt. His first collection of short stories *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (1963) (When I Have

Concealed My Caste) took the entire Marathi literary world by storm. It was hailed by Marathi periodicals and reviewers. Some thought it resembled the jazz music of the Blacks, for some others it was the epic of the Dalits. Some regarded the ten stories in the collection as ten electric shocks. The collection of stories has not only the power to disturb but also raises several new questions in Marathi literature. It challenged the status quo and brought new sensibilities to fore.

Baburao Bagul was the first writer who associated Dalit literature with African American literature and initiated the internationalization of Dalit literature. As M. N. Wankhede has highlighted in his article that : “Baburao Bagul was the Dalit angry young man, considering the revolutionary culture that he imbibed into Marathi literature and his image in literature and contemplation” (2001, 15). The 1960s saw Bagul’s name synonymous with Marathi Dalit literature. His writings were far superior to other Dalit literary writers in the treatment and presentation of the Dalit life.

The collection of short stories by Bagul gave strength to other Dalits, inspired them to pen down their scorching experiences, and led them to shape these experiences creatively as expressed by Anna Bhau Sathe in *Fakira* (1959) and Shankarrao Kharat in *Bara Balutedar* (1959).

Drama, though it is not as popular genre of literature as poetry and autobiographies, is an effective source of expression of Dalit sensibility. The Dalit plays are very popular. Significant Dalit plays include are M.B. Chitnis’s *Yugyatra* (1955), Gangadhar Pantawane’s *Mritushala* and *Mask*, Datta Bhagat’s *Wata Palwata*, B.C. Shinde’s *Udvast* (Destroyed), and Ramnath Chavan’s *Bamanwada* (Brahmin lane).

The year 1967 was a watershed moment in the development of the Dalit literary movement. The Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Parishad held its conference in Bhusawal on 30

April 1967. Dr. M. N. Wankhede raised some fundamental questions regarding mainstream literature in his presidential speech. Referring to Wankhede's questions Arjun Dangle states that: "Reviewing the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the literature of the saints, and modern Marathi literature, he noted that Dalits and their literature has no place in it. Like the Blacks, Dalit writers should revolt and produce their own literature through which they could present their problems" (xxxiii).

The students and the staff of Milind College, Aurangabad were inspired by Wankhede's speech. They established the Milind Sahitya Parishad. They also raised a fund and launched a new quarterly *Asmita* (now *Asmitadarsha*). In the very first issue, it included a discussion on the topic "Cultural Conflict in Maharashtra and Literary Problems" that showed the direction in which Dalit literature was going. The magazine broke the feeling of suffocation, which the Dalit writers felt. It encouraged the new generation of creative Dalit writers. The self-confidence, which the Dalit writers gained, helped them to take the movement still further. While established and socially conscious writers contributed regularly, a number of newcomers also joined them. The literary awe inspired by *Asmitadarsha* right from the beginning was not only because of Dalit writers and intellectuals but also because of the presence progressive Marxist critics such as Sharatchandra Muktibodh, Waman Ingale, P. S. Nerurkar, S. B. Karhase and Narayan Surve.

Yet another significant event in 1967 was the literary meet held in Bombay on behalf of the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. This meet brought together people from various places like Bombay, Aurangabad, Solapur and Nasik who were involved in the literary movement. The discussion held during the course of the conference helped to answer questions related to the movement and many commonalities were discovered. The first representative collection of poems by the Dalits, *Akar*, was published in this conference. *Akar* included poems by the

Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Professor Yadavrao Gangurde, Bandhumadhav, Chokha Kamble, Hira Bansode, etc.

After 1968, critics from Dalit society started to put forth their views about Dalit literature and its role. A number of younger writers appeared in periodicals such as *Asmitadarsha*. The effective and sharp standpoint of Dalit literature was seen in a discussion in the Diwali issue of 1969 of the *Marathwada*. In their articles, Wankhade, Chitnis, Daya Pawar and Baburao Bagul rejected the mainstream literary tradition and revolted so strongly that even thinkers and reviewers who were proud of their tradition were shocked.

It will be wrong to state that all white-collar or upper-caste reviewers rejected the idea of Dalit literature. In fact, critics like W. L. Kulkarni, D. K. Bedekar, R. G. Jadhav and Sharatchandra Muktibodh upheld it and, though their approval had different shades, it was honest. However, the proceedings of the various meetings, seminars and discussions showed that the treatment of the upper caste critics to Dalit literature was step motherly. Even some educated people amongst the Dalits too viewed Dalit literature very negatively.

Dalit literature was proliferating rapidly and a quarterly like *Asmitadarsha* could not accommodate it all. Realizing the necessity for periodicals, which would give Dalit writers, their due place, Baburao Bagul launched *Amhi* with the help of his friends from all strata of society. Arjun Dangle described the life of *Amhi*, “*Amhi* was well received all over Maharashtra because of its rich theoretical and ideological position. The publication however wound up within a year as Baburao Bagul could not manage the practical business of running a periodical” (xxxviii).

Magova – published first in April 1972 from Shahda (Dhule, Maharashtra) that got its strength from the Adivasi movement was an attempt to fill the vacuum created by untimely deaths of the periodicals. In Arjun Dangle’s views, “Of all the periodicals run by non-Dalits,

Magova took the most balanced view. The Dalits also felt a feeling of oneness with *Magova* as its views were based on sound sociological principles” (xxxviii). Later *Magova* took an extreme leftist approach and was riddled with separatism. A number of friends including Dalit workers drifted away from the magazine owing to this separatism.

By the early 1970s, the stage was set for the rise of the Dalit Panther initiatives. On November 25, 1973, the *Times of India* (Bombay Edition) published a special issue entirely to Dalit poetry and stories, translated into English. In his introduction to the issue, Dileep Padgaonkar remarked, “Despite [its] limitations, Dalit Literature remains an authentic breakthrough in the otherwise dreary literary scene in the country. Its immense merit is to have effectively rebelled in life as in letters, against the middle class Hindu who have monopolized cultural expression” (1992 a, 14).

The revolt of which Padgaonkar wrote was that of the Dalit Panther. The leaders of the Dalit Panther were all writers. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active and led a movement. A wave of literature expressing one's experience in provocative language swept over Marathi literature. Maharashtra was again charged with discussions on Dalit literature and language.

The programmes of the Dalit Panther Movement were incorporated into the manifesto published in 1974 nearly one year after the formation of the Dalit Panther Movement. Their Manifesto stated as mentioned by Sanjay Paswan and Paramanshi Jaideva: “All those who are victims of political, social, and economic suppression are our allies; power, money, and prestige are our enemies” (Vol.1, 320). The Dalit Panther Movement was based on the ideology of B. R. Ambedkar. However, in later stages, as P. G. Jogdand observed in his book “at least a faction of the Panther was found inclined to the leftist, especially the Marxist ideology” (65). It led the

Dalit Panther Movement to split and it was divided into two groups – Raja Dhale group and Namdeo Dhasal group. Further, no serious efforts were made by either of the two factions to follow the significance of issues mentioned in their manifesto and programmes.

Dalits and in particular the Dalit youth were fed up with the politics of factionalism and horse-trading among the leadership of the RPI. They were worried about alienation and disunity among the Dalit masses. In cities and towns, the numbers of unemployed youth were increasing in droves because of the capitalist system developed by the Marathas – a dominant caste in Maharashtra. They had tightened their grip on important economic centers in rural agriculture – such as land development banks, marketing federations, district banks, sugar-factories – in the name of the co-operative movement, which was controlled almost in a capitalist-monopolist manner with help of the State.

With the spread of education in the rural areas, there began to develop a class of educated Dalit youth, who had hitherto been kept away from the local economic or political system. Baburao Bagul, who had personally participated in the movement of Dalit laborers and who expressed himself clearly and logically, influenced the young generation. The pre-Panther Dalit writings and their association with workers of the leftist movements in rural areas gave them the ability to understand the entire system. The Dalit youth took up the task of bringing all the Dalits on a single platform and mobilized them for the struggle for their civil rights and justice. This gave rise to the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra in 1970. Finally, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Raja Dhale and J. V. Pawar took the initiative and established Dalit Panther in Bombay on 9 July 1972. T. Tripathi Rao and Y.B. Abbasayulu have pointed out that, “The most fundamental factor responsible for the rise of Dalit Panther Movement was the repression and terror under which the oppressed Dalits continued to live in the rural area” (266).

The Panthers observed the Independence Day that year, which incidentally was the silver jubilee of Independence, as Black Day and black-flag demonstrations were held at various places in Bombay. In the storm following Raja Dhale's article in special issue of *Sadhana* in which he made strong comments about the Indian national flag, the Panther supported *Sadhana* and Raja Dhale. The Dalits of Maharashtra got acquainted with the Panther and the discontent of several years began to explode.

Another event occurred around the same time that is in 1972, which shook the world of Marathi poetry and its traditional values: the publication of Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha*. Narayan Athwale, a journalist, published *Golpitha* with an introduction by Vijay Tendulkar. In this collection of poems, the young poet Namdeo Dhasal aggressively expressed his experiences. While the critics were discussing another collection of Dalit poems, *Gaokusabheril Kavita* by Waman Nimbalkar, *Golpitha*, which portrayed the explosive expression of the acute pain of the Dalits, raised a number of questions about values in Marathi literature and language. *Golpitha* contained a language unfamiliar to Marathi literature. The readers as well as critics also needed different norms to appreciate and criticize Dalit literature. They also needed a new dictionary to understand its language. Though Dalit literature as a whole worked as shock treatment to the readers of the upper castes, one of the fiercest and massive jolts they received was by *Golpitha*.

Gifted with imaginative flair, Dhasal stretched the social realities to the startling effects. For Dhasal, revolt against the established social system and an irrepressible craving for subverting the social order were of main concern in this book. Dhasal dealt with such themes which were hitherto unexplored and therefore, shocking to the white-collar reading public. Dhasal unreservedly laid bare the naked realities of the time when the social evils like injustice and exploitation were at their zenith. Dhasal articulated the sensibilities of the unemployed,

frustrated, disgruntled, and wavering Dalit youth in the metropolis in particular and the wretched, abject state of the Dalit masses in general. Especially, his encounters with the sex workers in the *Golpitha*, a red-light area in south Mumbai pertinently revealed the physical and mental perplexities of the Dalit youths. As Rangrao Bhongale has rightly observed, “This poetry has deep sensitivity about the Dalit life, a desire to repudiate and shake off the old cultural slavery...” (32-33).

Being the founder member of the Dalit Panther, the most vibrant organization of Dalit youths, Dhasal’s poetry can be recognized as a perfect idiom of Dalit militancy and aggressiveness. He said, “I have to prepare ideological ground for my political commitment to Dalit Panther. We would have nothing to do with the so-called progressive and left parties as long as the problem of untouchability was not their topmost political priority. Around 1968-69, I gradually came to believe that untouchability would be our prime target” (Chitre, 167-68).

Laurie Hovell writes,

Dhasal is both poet and Panther, and his poetry and that of the larger Dalit movement cannot be separated from its historical, political and social context. The poetry of this movement has a purpose; the poet speaks about and for a community. Some of these poets say that if their political and social goals were met tomorrow, they could stop shouting and writing. (78)

In the introduction to *Golpitha*, Vijay Tendulkar remarked that,

The world of Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry – the world known as ‘Golpitha’ in the city of Mumbai – begins where the frontier of Mumbai’s white-collar world ends and a no-man’s land opens up. This is the world where the night is reversed into the day, where stomachs are empty or half-empty; of desperation against death; of the next day’s anxieties; of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages, of diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighborhood tough guys and pimps... (10)

Dilip Chitre is right when he says “.... Namdeo’s universe is untouchable too. It is loathsome and nauseating universe, a journey into it is a journey from the sacred into the profane. Or, if we were to see it in purely secular and material terms, it is a journey from the clean to the dirty, from the sanitized to the unsanitary, from the healthy to the diseased” (11-12).

Dilip Chitre introduced Dhasal to the English speaking literary world (though a few others like Vijay Dharwadkar who has also translated few poems of Dhasal for his anthology *Modern Indian Poetry in English* with A. K. Ramanujan) from the very beginning of his poetical career. In the interview with Kenneth Lobo, Dilip Chitre has pointed out:

I have been translating Dhasal’s work for the past 40 years. When I read a piece of poetry or prose in Marathi, and if it’s something that bugs or haunts me, I share it with others, to take it beyond the Marathi speaking identity. Over the years, I’ve taken this task on myself. Translating the works of Namdeo Dhasal became part of my general agenda. (3)

Dhasal was poet as well as a political activist and he was equally known for his poetry and his protest movement that he raised under the banner of Dalit Panther. He felt that he would have to target untouchability first, as it was the core problem of his community.

The poems of Namdeo Dhasal collected in the volume *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld* is the result of Dilip Chitre’s forty years’ arduous labor of translation. The first section of the collection deals with *Golpitha*. In the first poem of the collection, Dhasal poured out the agony of a Dalit thus:

Man, you should explode
Yourself to bits to start with
Jive to a savage drum beat
Smoke hash, smoke ganja
Chew opium, bite lalpari
Guzzle country booze- if too broke,

Down a pint of the cheapest dalda. (34)

Further, he said:

Launch a Campaign for not growing food kill people all

And sundry by starving them to death

Kill oneself too, lest disease thrive, make all trees leafless. (36)

The predicament of a Dalit woman and her exploitation is mirrored in a sarcastic way in a poem “Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage”,

Women are merely printed whores of men.

Men are just pimps of women.

The relationship of men and women is just like-

Take a few whores; take a few pimps; take a few chewing stick to clean the teeth;

And throw them away after use; and then gargle with the holy water of a river. (58)

Another long poem “The Tree of Violence,” exhibited Dhasal’s concern for Dalits predicament and mature understanding of the social system. In this poem he talked about a plantation of a tree of violence which is watered with blood with great devotion like a Tulsi plant. The poem described the responsible factors for the pathetic situation of the Dalits quite aptly:

Finally, they found the roots of the tree

In the Havelis of the Zamindars and in their mehfilis

Finally, the roots of the trees were found

In the safety-vaults of the capitalists and monopolists

Finally, the roots of the tree were found

Under the throne of the Empress

Hellhounds and hit-men on red alert were summoned in the end

The tree was cut down. (70)

In addition, later on the same tree of violence turned into the tree of love and became the Kalptaru. The poet described the growth,

Really, tree cannot die
 But multiply it will – by the hundreds, by the thousands,
 by the millions and by the billions
 The public will kill it in broad daylight,
 It will overflow into rice-fields, and foul up the Parliament, it will run
 Over the ghettos of the untouchables, the mangs and the mehetars,
 The mahars and the chambhars, into the fields and into the factories:
 They will all weave and wave streamers and pennants for the Gate of a new nation
 And the tree of violence will perform the role of the tree of wish-fulfillment
 Yet, it will be cornucopia for the newborn nation. (71)

Dhasal's raw imagery described the lives of the Dalit who were victim of exploitation and savagery of the higher castes. Dhasal lashed out against the system with the armory of altogether new words and symbols. Commenting on the way of Dhasal's writing, Robert Bohm, a critic states, "Dhasal of course makes no apologies for his writing. Instead, he is relentless in his insistence the reader knows why he writes the way he does. Therefore, he regales us with the real, detailing a claustrophobic world filled with extraordinary deprivation and garbage that is both literal and spiritual." (2011, n.pag.)

Critics have criticized the poetry of the poet Dhasal severely but he took delight in shaking the staid and stirring up controversies. Sudhanva Deshpande observes that "The more his (Dhasal's) critics are exasperated, the more he enjoys being outrageous." Dhasal has supported him and said:

I have been criticized by many. Whenever I find the time, I read what my critics write. However, it does not affect me. I understand from the criticism that the literary establishment, such as it is, finds unacceptable any poetry that deals with the political and social processes of our life. Our times are such that we have to move on, leaving the establishment in its own fix. (170)

Ambedkar wielded a tremendous influence on Dhasal. Ambedkar's teachings sharpened his sensitivities and made him outward looking, articulate and assertive in his expression.

Namdeo Dhasal presented Ambedkar as a *Fakir*, in his poem "Atta" in *Golpitha*

After a thousand years we were blessed
with a sunflower-giving Fakir;
Now, now, we must like sunflowers
turn our face to the sun. (30)

His poem "Ode to Ambedkar" in *Golpitha* is his poetic offering to Ambedkar. He paid homage to Ambedkar thus:

You are that sun, our only charioteer,
Who descends into us from a vision of sovereign victory,
And accompanies us in fields, in crowds, in processions, and in struggles,
And saves us from being exploited.
You are that sun
You are that one – who belongs to us. (30)

Thus, *Golpitha* represented Dhasal's consistent struggle against established classes, his deep concern with the bottom-layer of the society and his uncompromising fight for the cause of equality and justice are the paramount strengths of his poetry. In the interview given to Rahul Chandawarkar, Dilip Chitre has observed, "He (Dhasal) has a militant, angry style, which he uses effectively to espouse the cause of marginalized people. He has consistently depicted the bottom of Indian society" (8).

The period between 1978 and 1986 in Marathi Dalit Literature is popularly known as the 'Period of Autobiographies'. A number of Dalit writers received State awards. Dalit literature came to be included in school as well as university level textbooks. It was being translated into various Indian and foreign languages. New writers scattered all over cities, districts and villages

shot into prominence and publishers became interested in the literary works of Dalits. The Dalit literary movement reached to other states and languages of India as well. A number of Dalit literary works became well known during this period, particularly the genre of Dalit autobiography.

These autobiographies became famous especially because it provided ample space for the delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice and exploitation of the Dalits. Written without glossing over any facts, these autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature but also exposed the many facets of the Indian social system and the social and economic injustice nurtured by it. *Baluta* (1978, Daya Pawar), *Athvaninche Pakshi* (1978, Professor P. E. Sonkamble) and *Upa* (1984, Laxman Mane) are some remarkable autobiographies.

During this period, Dalit literature gained respectability. Several books, periodicals, and special issues on Dalit literature were published. However, at the collective level the movement appeared stagnant. There were two reasons for this. One, the initial team spirit and action eroded and internal conflicts emerged. Secondly, only few Dalit writers got recognition which ultimately demoralized the whole strata of Dalit writers.

Autobiography as a genre and effective mode of self-narration and expression gave momentum to Dalit literature on its path of progress. Till date, many rich and substantial Dalit autobiographies have been published. Prominent among these are of P. E. Sonkamble (*Athavaninche Pakshi*, 1978), Daya Pawar (*Baluta*, 1978), Laxman Mane (*Upa*, 1984), Laxman Gaikwad (*Uchalya*), Sharankumar Limbale (*Akkarmashi*), Baby Kamble (*Jina Amucha*), Madhav Kondilkar (*Mukkam Post Devache Gothane*), Shankarrao Kharat (*Taral Antral*), Uttam Bandu Tupe (*Katyavarchi Pote*), Nanasaheb Zanje (*Phanjar*), Keshav Meshram (*Hakikat Ani Jatayu*), Rustum Achalkhamb (*Gavki*) to name a few.

Interestingly though *Athavaninche Pakshi* (*The Birds of Memories*) and *Baluta* (*Untouchable*) both are not translated into English, their Gujarati translations are available. Muljibhai Khuman has translated *Athavaninche Pakshi* (*The Birds of Memories*) as *Smriti ni Pankhe* 1994. Surendra Doshi translated *Baluta* (*Untouchable*) as *Achhut* in 2003.

Athvaninche Pakshi by P. E. Sonkamble is representative example of the Marathi Dalit autobiography of the period. In the autobiography, Sonkamble has narrated a number of poignant memories and critical events of his life, using the original language of the Mahars. He has effectively portrayed how shameful and difficult the childhood of an untouchable is. Sonkamble published some of his memories in 1978 under the title *Athavaninche Pakshi* in the *Asmitadarsh*. Afterwards he published the autobiography in 1979 as the readers received his memoirs very well. Some consider P.E. Sonkamble's *Athavaninche Pakshi* to be the first Dalit autobiography as it started to appear in the *Asmitadarsh* before Daya Pawar published his autobiography *Baluta* in 1978.

Autobiographical narratives are a significant means of self-expression of the present realities. Suffering and pain, fever and intensity, vigor, and zeal come from experience and are expressed in an autobiography. There is no better form to express authenticity of experience than autobiography as every thought takes birth in the real life situation of the author. This is precisely the reason behind it becoming the most popular genre of self-expression for Dalits. Dalit autobiographies depict varying facets of Dalit wheels of village life, the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities – at times, abject submission and at other times, rebellion. They express the inescapable hierarchy imposed by caste. Many Dalit autobiographies focus on the community rather than the individual.

Athvaninche Pakshi contains the memories of young ‘Pallya’ who after the death of his parents, for sustenance and shelter, lived his life with the support of his elder sister ‘Akka’. Sonkamble has not let his mature, adult, and civilized personality interfere with the simple innocent and childish personality of Pallya or Prahlad. He wrote these memories with great detachment, patience and spontaneous ease. The injustice suffered by him was inhuman and irritating, yet Sonkamble has maintained his composure and narrated his memories without any melodrama or over statement.

It depicted before the readers a heart-rending, benumbing picture of the plight of tender “Pallya” due to the evils of casteism. The following incidents clearly show Sonkamble’s horrendous situation as described by the author:

I started to collect bones of dead animals from wherever I could find them. Whenever there was holiday or half-day at school, collecting bones became my sole profession (67).

...

Somehow, I controlled my mind and held the tail of the dead dog. As it was completely decomposed, that part of the tail gave way and came into my hand. Though it has a stinking smell, I continued with the job as I have a craving for a small piece of bread that I hoped to get after finishing it. (87)

The above paragraphs aptly present young Prahlad’s physical and mental conditions. He had to drag the decomposed body of a dead animal for a quarter of stale bhakar; clean cowsheds, break firewood and do odd jobs till he was completely exhausted. His life made the reader not only restless but also kept the protest alive and aroused a strong dislike for this unjust society.

Sonkamble has painted a terrible but accurate picture of casteism in *Athavaninche Pakshi*. Casteism created a desert in the social life of Prahlad and Prof. Sonkamble successfully rendered its severity in his autobiography. He effectively overcame the difficult and terrible conditions in his life. The village did not value Prahlad. It did not treat him as a human being. There was no

love, warmth, or affection for him. Yet Prahlad forged ahead for education barefooted and on an empty stomach. He confronted all hardships, bore thorn-pricks on his way, and endured whatever came in his way to seek education, with a desire to improve his lot and position. Circumstances taught him that the way of hardship was the only way out for young Prahlad. Hence, he became a highly qualified man. He adorned the post of the Vice-Principal of a renowned college. This faith in human life, this love for life was a gift bestowed upon him, along with many other Dalits, by the philosophy of Ambedkar.

Athavaninche Pakshi is a story of a man who has realized the importance of education at a very early stage in his life. Education is regarded so important that the narrator begins his autobiography with a chapter entitled “A Story of Slate and Book.” In this chapter, Prahlad rendered to the readers how his sister bought a slate and a revision book from the weekly market and admitted him to a government-run school. “Following other villagers, my sister bought a writing slate and a small revision book costing four annas from the Tuesday-market and got me admitted in a government-run school of the village” (43). For Prahlad entering in school was so remarkable because in those days thousands of Dalit children were deprived of education due to apathy, poverty and ignorance of their parents. He narrates his educational journey:

I was pleased, as I have passed in aggregate. The students of Chere, who were regularly attending the school since the sowing in rainy season, has all failed in the examination, except Prabhakar, a Brahmin. All were surprised for my reading the lesson from English textbook without knowing its alphabet and passing the examination by getting at least 187 marks. I also passed the annual examination and my life-wagon came back on the right track from where it has derailed for some time. (59-60)

Further, he talks about the change which he saw amongst the upper caste people also.

Look at the following two narratives:

As I was brought up in Chere and was an outsider, and behaved respectfully with all and sundry, whenever I used to visit my village, all villagers enquire about my well-being. It was true that all the villagers were amazed as there was nobody except me who has been to college at Aurangabad. (140)

....Without making any distinction I was served all the items of the meal. Putalabai was serving me plentifully as she wanted me to eat to my full satisfaction as (she might have thought), I was studying at college though I was poor and has accompanied her brother to take her to her parents' home. Therefore, there was nothing wrong if she served a little more food to the poor fellow like me. (143-44)

Though the government funded the boarding, majority of the trustees and other office bearers used to be caste Hindus. Therefore, in many cases, they did not take proper care of the essential facilities provided in the boarding. The living conditions used to be far below the expected standards. The students of the boarding were not allowed to voice their displeasure. In addition, if somebody tried to protest, he was punished. Caste Hindus thought that the government unnecessarily entertained the backward students and so they were spoilt. This is evident in the upper caste taunt: "Hey! All of you are the favourites of the government! Instead of eating whatever is served to you, why you are making fuss of it. The government has provided everything to you free of cost....still you are expecting more" (177).

Sonkamble's style is that of a small village person in Osmanabad district of Marathwada. This style is not strained or wrought diligently. He could not have narrated his memories in any standard language. If he had narrated them in such language, perhaps *Athavaninche Pakshi* would not have scaled this height. The memories have come alive due to the language. Rural and colloquial language is the key linguistic feature of the autobiography. It has its own style and rhythm that echoes its regional flavour. It has also depicted the simplicity, silliness and innocence of the period in which it was written.

Finally, I turn to Dalit women's autobiography. Dalit women presented their experiences rather more subtly than Dalit male writers did because a Dalit woman suffered from triple discriminations i.e. sex, class and caste and thus their consciousness is more comprehensive than the Dalit male. The autobiographies of Shantabai Kamble, Babytai Kamble, Kumud Pawde and Urmila Pawar revealed the infernal living conditions and exploitation of the Dalit women in the contemporary situation. They have recorded grim sense of human existence and sexual harassment of the Dalit women. Among the published women's autobiographies the most acclaimed and prominent are: *Majya Jalmachi Chittarakatha (Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)* by Shantabai Kamble, *Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke)* by Baby Kamble, *Antasphot (Thoughtful Outburst)* by Kumud Pawde, *Marankala (Deathly Pains)* by Janabai Girhe and *Ayadan (The Weave of My Life)* by Urmila Pawar. These autobiographies have carved a new image of Dalit woman far different from the elite class woman. They are the downtrodden beings who are always in search of self-respect, identity and esteem. They exposed the evils of how Dalit women and Adivasis are the objects of double exploitation. In this regard, M.N. Wankhede writes in his article "Literature of Marginality," "Theirs is a double jeopardy. They face degradation and even dehumanization. Gender is at the base of their marginality. Husbands and wives are unequal partners in family life.... They move under the dark phallic shadows of man's lust" (2001, 13).

Babytai Kamble's *Jina Amucha* registered a big protest against the rigid and established social order. It rejected the entire hegemonic tradition imposed by the upper caste people both covertly and overtly. It echoed the Ambedkarite discourse. Maya Pandit, the translator has remarked in her introduction to *The Prisons We Broke*: "Baby Kamble's narration reflects her love for her people without seeming to glorify their terrible condition. Outrage against the

inhuman conditions of existence and love for her suffering people originally fused to evolve a self-critical and yet humane and mature tone” (xiv).

The work gives an account of the deep-rooted superstitions, strange faith, and beliefs among the Dalits. Here the author seems to be disinterested about the hardships of her own life. She seems more concerned with the age old perils of exploitation and oppression of the entire Dalit community at upper caste hands. Further Maya Pandit has observed, “Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women... she shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community” (xv). In her interview with Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble said, “I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering” (136).

The work delved deep into the psyche of exploiters and oppressors. The author is very aware of the fact that gender is a critical base for her subversion and marginality. She is also conscious of the sexism and casteism under which Dalit women have to find a way to survive. In *The Prisons We Broke*, the author aptly presents the condition of the Dalit in so-called secular India. The work also emphasizes the integrity of Dalit woman with her own community. Many awesome experiences and instances of domestic violence were also recorded in the book. In an interview with Maya Pandit, the writer remarked, “Women are still slaves. And it is not just Dalit women; I see around many women from both upper and lower castes” (154).

In his “Afterword” to *The Prisons We Broke*, Gopal Guru writes,

Dalit women’s testimonies could be seen as the political imitative to engage with the Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. Dalit women’s personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation by the state on one hand and market on the other. Dalit women's autobiographies are also the statement of protest against their exclusion from the Dalit public sphere – literary

gatherings, academic gatherings, publishing sphere, and other spheres of recognition, like political parties. (2009, 160)

Baby Kamble also talked about the influence of Ambedkar. She and her relatives actively participated in the revolutionary activities of Ambedkar. According to her Ambedkar is God for Dalits. Baby Kamble criticizes the current generation of educated Dalits that has rejected its roots and has driven Ambedkar out of their lives.

In the last part of her book, Baby Kamble has discussed the responsibility of the present society. She shows that discrimination has not been completely wiped out from our society and that many villages are yet to be brought into the mainstream. The educated people should work for them just as Ambedkar has worked for the community earlier. She says – “Education, prosperity, and comforts should not make me to forget the problems of society” (123).

The Prisons We Broke is significant because it traces the evolution of the Mahar community from pre-Ambedkar days to its rapid transformation through education and mass conversion to Buddhism. It presents the seeds of revolution through the speeches and bold entries into temples, poems in praise of the man who rescued them from the mire of Hindus.

There are several reasons why the autobiography is a significant one. First, *The Prisons We Broke* gives us an insight into the possibility of understanding the tension between tradition and modernity. Secondly, it shows that it is through the everyday response to this tension between modernity and tradition that the Dalits are determined to chart out their journey to modernity, which, according to Kamble, is epitomized in Ambedkar. Third, Baby Kamble informs us about some of the important social practices that indicate an affinity to modernity and its sphere of influence. Kamble’s story offers an important clue to argue that Ambedkar's attempt to delink Dalits culturally from Hinduism through conversion was an attempt to consolidate the hold of modernity and reason among the Mahars. The Mahars were possessed by the fear of the

upper caste that kept scaring them even when the latter was not physically present in the public sphere. Finally, the life story of Baby Kamble and other Dalit women writers decisively destroys the myth that generally asserted that Dalit patriarchy is democratic.

In conclusion, it may be said that *The Prisons We Broke* emerged as epitome of protest and rebellion. It received acclaim for its proactive writing. Moreover, it foregrounded a feminist position with its existential search for identity that was denied by society. Thus, Kamble's autobiography sensitized many Dalit women writers to raise their voice against the social evil emanating from class and caste based discrimination. The prime aim of Kamble and other Dalit female writers were to initiate a new feminist movement of Dalit consciousness and to bring social transformation. It also aimed at building a homogenized and casteless society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

From this point of view, *Athavaninche Pakshi*, and *The Prisons We Broke* are important autobiographies as they attempt to imprint Dalit consciousness in the text as well as on the readers' mind. Based on the readings of these autobiographies, I certainly agree with the characteristics features of a Dalit autobiography that were highlighted by S. P. Punalekar,

- (i) Deeply entrenched notions of caste hierarchies within the members of his own community. (ii) Relative autonomy and robust independence of the women of his caste, coupled with their physical and emotional over-exploitation. (iii) Subtle and overt manifestations of caste disabilities even in the modern urban industrial milieu. (iv) Acceptance by the dalit masses (both rural and urban) of unequal social status. (v) Militancy of the educated but unemployed dalit youth who are agitated about discriminatory socio-cultural and political practices. (vi) Indifference of mainstream power elites, including the Dalit and non-Dalit middle classes, towards the social and economic disadvantages of the dalit community. (1997, 391)

Thus, based on this analysis I could say that, in its initial phases, Marathi Dalit literature began with the agenda for upliftment of Dalits and as a crusade against untouchability. However,

that frontier is now expanding and now more voiceless groups are entering the arena of Dalit with their own complex set of social, economic and cultural questions, including the question of identity and humanism. P. E. Sonkamble, and Baby Kamble through their self-narratives and Namdeo Dhasal through his poetry, conveys such a possibility and prospect.

2.2: Hindi Dalit Writing

In this section, I present a historical account of the Hindi Dalit writing. The Marathi Dalit literary movement and Dalit Panther movement influenced the Dalit writers across India and Hindi literature was a part of it. In 1975, *Sarika*, a literary magazine, published a special issue on Indian Dalit literature in Hindi. Hindi Dalit writers were inspired and started to analyze Indian society and culture, which proudly talked about “unity in diversity” and *vasudev kutumbakam* in the world. Subsequently, Dalit literature in Hindi raised key issues regarding the social, political, cultural, and economic exploitation of the Dalits. Among the early writers, Hira Dom can be mentioned. He was born in a Dalit caste in Varanasi and lived and wrote from there. He had a keen insight as a writer; he was sensitive and felt intensely, but was illiterate. He expressed his experiences in Bhojpuri language, which is a dialect of Hindi. *Achhoot Ki Shikayat* (The Complaint of the Untouchable) is his first and a very famous poem dealing with Dalit sensibility, which was published, in *Sarasvati* in September 1914 (Namishray, 29).

Hindi Dalit literature, which can be said to begin with Hira Dom’s poem, now is a powerful stream of writing with many Dalit contributors. They have used almost all genres, poetry, fiction, short story, autobiography and drama as a vehicle for self-expression. As I am presenting an overview of Hindi Dalit literature, I have given only bibliographical details.²

² For the whole list of books published till today in Hindi Dalit literature refer Namishray, Mohandas. *Hindi Dalit Sahitya*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011. 333-357.

Poetry: Biharilal Harit’s *Achhoot ka Paigambar* (1946), Mata Prasad’s *Harijan Gram-Geet* (1949), *Eklavya* (1981), and *Hindi Kavya main Dalit Dhara* (1993), Swami Bhagat Singh’s *Achhoot ka Bigul* (1952), Dr. Manoj

The spectrum of the Hindi Dalit autobiographies is varied and rich. Bhagwan Das' *Main Bhangi Hun* (1976) is the first Dalit autobiography in Hindi. Mohan Das Namishrai's *Apne Apne Pinjare* (1995), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Kailash Nath's *Jati-Apradh* (2000), D. R. Jatav's *Mera Safar, Meri Manjil* (2000), Suraj Pal Chauhan's *Tiraskrut* (2002), Mata Prasad's *Zopdise Rajbhavan* (2002), Shyam Lal Jediya's *Ek Bhangi Kulpati ki Ankahi Kahani* (2008), Dr. Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (2009), Dr. Dharmveer's *Meri Patni aur Bhediyeen* (2011), and Sushila Takbhaure's *Shinkaje Ka Dard* (2011) are the most fascinating examples of Dalit autobiography.

The Dalit writers have also explored the field of drama. There are only few plays but they are representative of Dalit ideology and the Dalit movement. Some of the Drama are Mohan Das Namishrai's *Adalatnama* (1989), Mata Prasad's *Tadap Mukti ki* (1999), and *Ant Heen Bediyan*

Sonkar's *Shoshitnama* (1983), Kanwal Bharti's *Nai Chetna Naye Rag* (1971), *Tab Tumhari Nishtha Kya Hoti?* (1996) Sohanlal Sumanakshar's *Andha Samaj Aur Behre Log* (1984), Dr. Sukhbir Singh's *Bayan Bahar* (1985), Dr. Dayanand Batohi's *Yatna ki Aankhen* (1986), Malkhan Singh's *Suno Brahmin* (1996), Dr. N. Singh's *Satah se Uthate Huye* (1991), *Dard Ke Dastavej* (1992), *Chetna Ke Swar* (1998), Mohan Das Namishray's *Safdar: Ek Bayan* (1989), Jai Prakash Kardam's *Goonga Nahi Tha Mein* (2006), Omprakash Valmiki's *Sadiyo ka Santap* (1989) and *Bas Bahut Ho Chuka* (1997), Surajpal Chauhan's *Mera Gaon* (2004), *Kyon Vishvas Karu* (2004), and Dr. Sushila Takbhaure's *Hamare Hisse Ka Suraj* (2005) are prominent.

Short Story: Hindi Dalit short story is also a very rich genre. Hindi Dalit short story writers have presented the Indian society and how its caste structure govern this nation and populace. Dalits are willing to lead a life without any bondages but the caste structure does not allow them. Dayanand Batohi's *Kafankhor* (1986), *Surang* (1995), Dr. Kusum Viyogi's *Char Inch Ki Kalam* (1996), *Dalit Mahila Kathakaro Ki Charchit Kahaniyan* (1997), Dr. N. Singh's *Yatna Ki Parchhaiyan* and *Kale Hashiye Par* both in 1998, Satya Prakash's *Chandramauli Ka Rakt Bij* (1997), *Biradari Bhoj* and *Sairan* both in 2004, Mohandas Namishrai's *Aawajen* (1998), *Hamara Jawab* (2005), Suraj Pal Chauhan's *Hairy Kab Aayega* (1999), *Naya Brahman* (2009), Omprakash Valmiki's *Salaam* (2000), *Ghuspaithiye* (2003), Ajay Navariya's *Patkatha aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006), Kusum Meghwal's *Judte Dayitva* (1996), *Angara* (2006), Dr. Sushila Takbhaure's *Sangharsh* (2006) and Shyoraj Singh Bechain's *Bharose Ki Bahan* (2011) are notable.

The field of fiction is also quite rich. Devi Dayal Sain's *Manav Ki Parakh* (1954), Ramjilal Sahayak's *Bandhanmukt* (1954), C.B. Bharti's *Kranti Ke Pujari* (1973), Jai Prakash Kardam's *Karuna* (1986), *Chhappar* (1994), *Mukti Parv* (1999), *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* (2003), and *Aaj Bazar Band Hai* (2004), Mohandas Namishray's *Kya Mujhe Kharidoge* (1990), and *Jhakm Hamare* (2011), Dr. Dharmveer's *Pahla Khat* (1991), Satya Prakash's *Jas Tas Bhai Saver* (1995), Priyadarshi's *Kamalkant (I.A.S)* and *Depti Saheb* both in 2003, Raghuvir Singh's *Akrosh* (2004), Ajay Navariya's *Udhar Ke log* (2005), and Roop Narayan Sonkar's *Soordaan* (2010) are notable examples of Hindi Dalit novel.

(2000), Suraj Pal Chauhan's *Chhoo Nahi Sakta* (2001), Raghuvir Arvind's *Pratishodh* (2000), N. Singh's *Kathauti Mein Ganga* (2003), and Sushila Takbhaure's *Nanga Satya* (2007).

Dr. Dharmveer, Dr. N. Singh, Dr. Suresh Chandra, Purushottam Satyapremi, Dr. Tulsiram, Rajat Rami Meenu are eminent critics of Hindi Dalit literature.

To sum up, Dalits have started to raise their voices against social, economic, cultural and political oppression. The literature written by them has gone a long way in propagating the principles of equality, liberty, fraternity, and compassion for the Dalits. These principles inspired the new generation of the Dalit writers. They have depicted in their works the untold miseries of human atrocities. From Hira Dom to Namishray, Kardam and Om Prakash Valmiki a vast body of literature marked by a new consciousness, a new diction, a new idiom and tone. Contemporary Dalit literature has presented a true understanding of the positions of the Dalits in Hindi speaking areas and its deep desire to change the state of cultural subordination and systematic oppression.

In the following section, I have discussed a Dalit autobiography, which has not only shocked the readers but also played an important role in the spread of Dalit Movement in Hindi belt of North India. It has startled not only the Dalits but also the upper caste people of India when they came across the lives of the Dalits caught in a rigid, hypocritical, and orthodox Indian society. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1996) has become a saga of Dalit consciousness representing the annals of suffering, humiliation, mental anguish, self-realization, rebellion, retaliation, and rehabilitation that are the life spirit of Dalit literature.

Joothan is the first and only Hindi Dalit autobiography which has been translated into English. Arun Prabha Mukherjee has translated it into English in 2003. It is not only the story of his life but his entire community. Valmiki has described how an entire community totally depends on the leftover food of the upper castes in return for their humiliating work of removing

night soil, carrying it on their heads to dump outside the village. They are not paid in cash for this work but they have to depend on the mercy of the upper caste people. The protagonist of this autobiography is the author himself but his personal experiences instead of being the story of self-glorification or self-confession represents the predicament of the whole community of Dalits. The story is a reconstruction of writer's own account of personal success from the state of darkness to the state of respect. Despite the pressures exercised by family and friends, Valmiki is able to assert his own choices to reconstruct his identity beyond the one imposed by his community.

Joothan is an argument of Om Prakash Valmiki to justify how far caste identity dominates all other identities. He expresses his resentment regarding the rigidity of caste conventions that have resulted in the socio-economic oppression of thousands of Dalits across the country. He has narrated the incidents related to schooling: how teachers forced him to do menial jobs, traditionally associated with his caste. As a Dalit student at every stage, Valmiki was forced to leave his education. In *Joothan* Valmiki has not only presented his painful ordeals but he has also reflected on inter-caste conflict among the Chamars and Bhangis. In *Joothan* the chain of painful memories helped him to express suppressed fury and rage buried in his consciousness. However, Valmiki's exposure to new fields of knowledge and education mustered his confidence to break the barriers of caste-dominated identity and to register his protest against the convention and customs that are responsible for the wretchedness of Dalits. Valmiki says, "It is caste pride that is behind this centuries old custom. The deep chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom. It is a conspiracy to trap us in the whirlpool of inferiority" (33).

In *Joothan*, Valmiki tries to assert the reasons behind the helplessness of Dalits in resisting exploitation. The lack of financial resources and education has made them weak and nervous. In this text, the focus of the author has been on the reconstruction of the issue, “Why is my caste my only identity.” In the analysis of this identity, he has painfully unfolded his real self layer by layer. Instead of guilt and shame, he has made a candid confession, “Why should one feel awkward in telling the truth? Those who say that these things don’t happen here, those who want to claim a superior civilization status, I beg to submit only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting” (viii).

Om Prakash Valmiki has revealed two objectives in his autobiography. One is to contest the basis of caste discrimination. For example, in *Joothan*, Valmiki writes,

Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one’s control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country’s great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom. (133-34)

The other clear narrative agenda of this Dalit autobiography is to expose the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India.

During a wedding, when the guests and the *baratis* – the bridegroom’s party – ate their meal, the *Chuhra*s (the caste that the author belongs to) would sit outside with huge baskets. After the *baratis* have eaten, the dirty *pattals* or leaf-plates were put in the *Chuhra*s baskets, which they took home, to save the *joothan* sticking to them. The little pieces of *pooris*, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The *joothan* was eaten with a lot of relish. The bridegroom’s guests who did not leave enough scraps on their

pattals were denounced as gluttons. Valmiki gives a detailed description of preserving and eating the joothan after reprocessing it, during the “hard days of the rainy season” (9). The memories of his childhood associated with joothan, often come back to haunt him and cause him renewed pain and humiliation. At the first blush, the passage seems to be giving a glimpse of the scale of poverty and suffering due to hunger in Valmiki’s community. The passage also highlights the association of the Dalits with the notion of pollution.

As mentioned earlier, joothan or leftover food carries the connotation of ritual pollution, when used in relation to anyone other than the original eater. It is this association with ritual pollution, and the stigma and discrimination resulting thereof, that sets apart the Dalits from the other deprived groups or ‘have-nots’ in the Indian society. And it is this association with ritual pollution that is invoked to explain and justify the infra-human status assigned to the Dalits by the caste system. “You are taking a basketful of joothan. On top of that, you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place *Chuhri*. Pick up your basket and get going” (11). This dialogue proves my argument that the very act of giving joothan or leftover food to the Dalits is an exercise of power by the upper castes.

Another aspect of this association with pollution is the Dalit’s engagement with the so-called ‘unclean’ occupations. Certain occupations – mostly associated with death and human bodily waste – are regarded as unclean and degraded. Therefore, they are assigned to those considered to be outside the pale of humanity. In fact, the link between the Dalit as embodying pollution and the polluting occupations follows a circular logic: Why are the jobs polluting? Because the Dalits performed the polluting jobs. Why are the Dalits polluting? As they perform polluting jobs.

Valmiki decided quite early in his childhood that he would not go into the line of work that his ancestors had been doing for thousands of years, “I had written to Pitaji, informing him of my decision to leave college and learn this technical work in a government factory. He was delighted. He kept saying repeatedly, “At last you have escaped ‘caste’”. But what he didn’t know till the date he died is that ‘caste’ follows one right up to one’s death” (77-8).

The result is that although Valmiki tried to forget his caste, it was impossible for him to do so. Here I would like to refer Kumud Pawde’s who has mentioned, “What comes by birth, but can’t be cast off by dying – that is caste.” (112). Valmiki also shares same views on caste as Pawde has:

I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door. (16)

In the above excerpt, Om Prakash Valmiki, the author talks about his experience of exclusion in school, where all the teachers and the majority of the students were from the Upper Caste Tyagi community. Even though expressed in plain and simple language, the passage generates a sense of disturbance in the reader. I agree with R. Niruphama and others who have highlighted the attitude of the mainstream society, “Why is it that the representations of injustice and exclusion in the mainstream literature on justice remain confined to figures and statistical enumeration” (17)?

I was unable to conduct experiments during that whole year. Not only did I do very poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiner’s questions quite correctly. When the results were announced, I was among the failures. I had good marks in all other subjects except chemistry. I had failed the lab tests. This turn of

events had put a barrier in my path. I no longer felt interested in studying. I felt surrounded by darkness. (65-6)

Here the protagonist Valmiki is an individual, and yet those who see him only as a faceless member of his community often stifle his individuality – to them he is nothing more than a ‘Dalit’, ‘Chuhra’, ‘Bhangi’. In other words, the protagonist continually faces a clash between the negative identity imposed on him by the upper castes and his own positive self-ascribed identity. The protagonist’s own subjective autonomy is also bound up in a close relationship with his caste community. He faces personal discrimination and is deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits, with whom he identified largely and he seemed to experience their pain himself.

Valmiki wrote, “Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government school had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor” (2). Here one can easily see how the upper caste people smother the constitutional rights of the Dalits. The upper caste teachers, students and other members of the village laugh at the concept of equality. This is true in every part of India. Whenever a Dalit reads an autobiography of a Dalit in any part of India he feels it is the story of his own life. Thus, the Dalit autobiographer plays an important role of a leader who unites all the Dalits to work to regain their dignity and self-respect. Thus, he paves the way for the Dalit Movement.

R. Niruphama and others have mentioned that how the Dalit writers raise questions on upper caste myth of caste in modern India.

Besides the feeling of demotivation and helplessness suffered by the author, the reader is made to confront the systemic and institutionalized nature of exclusion practiced in education in modern India. The passages above (on lab test) pose a significant counter-point to the idea of ‘meritocracy’,

which is based on the premise that students are evaluated strictly based on ‘merit’; irrespective of their caste identity and that, caste-discrimination in education is a myth. The passages, which I have presented, are live testimonies of continuing caste discrimination in the secular public sphere, which also help in positing caste as the central fault line in modern India. (22)

Having escaped the confines of the village, availed of reservation, and having experienced a rise in their class status, these writers continue to experience caste-based discrimination despite their many ‘successes’. The continual resistance of caste-based discriminations led me to agree with Iris Young who points out that “it is a mistake to reduce the idea of justice to distribution of resources alone” (34).

Raj Kumar has pointed out,

It is quite important to note that Valmiki consciously divides his readers into two camps: ‘we’ the ‘Dalits’ and ‘they’, the non-Dalits. This he does deliberately. By doing so the author clearly draws a line between the oppressors and the oppressed. He mentions names of all the perpetrators and condemns their evil acts. He believes that the sole motive of the non-Dalits is to exploit the downtrodden for their personal gains. Many Dalit writers believe that as long as the caste system continues, India cannot truly be a nation-state because caste generally divides people. (198)

Arun Prabha Mukherjee, the English translator of *Joothan* comments, “Valmiki does not, cannot, claim the authority to address a national collectivity. On the contrary, he aims to point out the exclusion of people like him from the imagined community of the nation” (xxxviii).

Shobha Shinde has remarked, “*Joothan* is one among a body of Dalit writings that is unified by an ideology, an agenda and a literary aesthetic. The text becomes a part of a social movement for equality and justice” (97-8).

It is through the politics of identity that Dalits have successfully re-negotiated narrative authority since the nature of autobiography itself means that Dalit identity confers on the autobiographer a kind of uncontestable authority to speak. Paul Gilroy has claimed that “for

African American autobiographies, that is, a process of ‘self-emancipation’ in the creation of a ‘dissident space’ within the public sphere” (11). At the same time, as Gilroy claimed, they are also, a process of ‘self-creation’ through the narration of a public persona. Thus, autobiography also serves as means for Dalit writers to reclaim narrative authority over the construction of the Dalit self.

2.3: Tamil Dalit Writing

The caste system is a pan-Indian scenario and the Dalits of Tamil Nadu too are victims of this devilish system. In the arduous past, the Dalits in Tamil Nadu lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice, and atrocities - practiced totally against humanity. Their wretchedness forced them to forget their own existence. They could hardly dream of freedom or independence. The arrival of the British, the industrialization and the British education system led the Dalits to fight against the restrictions imposed on them. One of such fighters was Iyotha Thass . He was a Siddha doctor of medicine who became the most powerful spokesman of the oppressed for their liberation and before Ambedkar, the reviver of the Buddhism. The Siddha tradition –an indigenous system of medicine– survived as a subaltern vision among the marginalized sections in Tamil Nadu in spite of the powerful Brahminic hegemony. He was born into an untouchable family, and from his own studies concluded that untouchables had originally been Buddhist. He was an outstanding figure in the role to emancipate the Depressed Classes and women in Tamil Nadu. He initiated socio-cultural awakening which preceded the spectacular rise of the Dravidian Movement in the second decade of the twentieth century Tamil Nadu. Iyotha Thass started the journals, *Tamilan* and *Parayan* to ventilate novel ideas. His print and press activities opened a new ground in the subaltern struggle for identity, human dignity, equality, justice and above all social emancipation. Iyotha Thass also spearheaded a campaign

of press media for the liberation of women from the age old superstitious customs of the Hindu Society. Another revolutionary figure in Tamil Nadu who ran campaigns for the upliftment of the Dalit was E.V.R. Periyar (1879-1973). Periyar's "temple entry" movement in 1950s was vital in that it infused self-respect among the untouchables. The ideological war started by Periyar in Tamil Nadu against caste discrimination and superstitions so as to restore social justice and economic freedom created in the 1960s the congenial environment for the birth of Dalit politics and literature in Tamil Nadu. Most significantly, the birth centenary celebrations of Ambedkar, in 1991, gave an ambience to the Dalits to express their painful journey of life. The Marxist ideology, Periyar's radical thinking and Ambedkar's progressive thoughts gave impetus to the writers to write on Dalit problems. In this section, I present a historical account of the Tamil Dalit writing.³

Though Dalit literature in Tamil as a movement was strongly influenced by Marathi Dalit literature, the Dalit themes were already found in the early decades of the 20th century. In the beginning of the 20th century an anonymous short story, presumably written by Matavayya, (a non-Dalit) *Kannan Peruntutu* (Kannan's Message) (1925) unraveled the miseries of the Dalits. In 1927, Kalki's *Vica Mantiram* (The Poisonous Mantra) satirized and ridiculed the old beliefs and their practitioners.

Dalit literature in Tamil until 1980s was regarded as a literature written by the Dalits for the Dalits. Later, it developed itself into a genre that spoke for all the oppressed including women and protested against all traditional social establishments. While doing so, Dalit literature

³ For detailed study refer David C. Buck and Kannan M. edited and translated "Introduction to *Tamil Dalit Literature: My Own Experience*," (2011). *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012) edited by Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan, and *No Alphabet in Sight: Anthology of New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011), edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu.

consciously created a counter-culture and politics. Dalit writers had used literature and its varied genres to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation, and their political positioning.⁴

Bama is one of the most powerful voices in Dalit fiction and short stories. She made a tremendous impact on Tamil fiction with the publication of her first novel *Karukku* in 1992. It is a semi-autobiographical fiction portraying the struggles and experiences of a Dalit girl, using a technique that was largely unpremeditated and a narrative style which is racy and colloquial. In her second novel *Sangati* (1994), she used a larger social canvas within the world of Dalit

⁴ Daniel Selvaraj's *Malarum Sarugum* (Flower and Dead Leaf) published in 1966, marked the beginning of Dalit novels in Tamil. His second novel *Theneer* (Tea) came out in 1973. It dealt with the appalling living and working conditions of the tea estate workers. *Mooladhanam* (Capital) and *Agnikuntam* (Fire pit) were published in 1977 and 1980 respectively. Of these, *Mooladhanam* highlighted issues such as collapse of the joint family system and authoritarianism while *Agnikuntam* is about problems in the judiciary.

Vili. Pa Itaya Ventan, born in a scavenger family at Villuppuram, is a postgraduate in commerce and working in the municipal office at Vilupuram. He published seven collections of short stories and two collections of poems. His maiden venture *Nantanar Teru* (Nantanar Street) (1991) disturbed the caste fanatics and it was considered as a milestone in Dalit literature and politics as well.

Dalit Theatre is Street Theatre in nature and it is often found to be propagandist. The dramatists like K. A. Gunasekaran and Amaithi Arasu and their cultural politics are conspicuous. K. A. Gunasekaran is a professor of Theatre Arts in Pondicherry University. His play *Bali Aadukal* (*Scapegoats*, 2003) is considered to be a pioneering work in Dalit theatre.

Raj Gauthaman, a lecturer by profession, is well known among the literary circles in Tamil Nadu. As a journalist, renowned critic and columnist, he strives hard for the Dalit upliftment in Tamil Nadu. His *Dalit Panpaadu* (Dalit culture) (1994) and *Dalit Parvaiyil Tamil Panpaadu* (Tamil culture: A Dalit perspective) (1995) are the most celebrated books on the historiography of Dalit culture. His semi autobiographical writing *Siluvairaj Carithiram* (2003) is remarkable for its attack on Christianity.

Ravikumar is a poet, short-story writer, translator, biographer, and theorist of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. He has edited more than 30 books. A collection of his writings appeared in English as *Venomous Touch* in 2009. Some of his significant works include *Kankaanippin Arasiyal*, *Kothippu Uyarthu Varum*, *Kadakka Mudiyyatha Nizhal* and *Malcolm X*.

Abimani alias E. Mani is a short story writer, whose stories appeared as *Nookkadu* (1993) (The Pain), *Paaram Sumappavarkal* (1994), *Panai Muni* (1998) (The Imp), *Thettam* (2001), *Uoorsoru* (2003) (The Alms), *Matravarkal* (2005), and *Ethiraga* (2004) are collections of short stories in which he had unearthed the sad plight of the Dalits in the Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu.

Imayam in his novels *Koveru Kaluthakal* (1994) (The Mule) and *Aarumugam* (1999) had exposed the inner divisions and politics among the Dalits. *Sedal* (2006) is the third novel of Imayam. His two short story collections are titled as *Manparam* (2004) and *Video Mariamman* (2008). The English translation of his novel *Koveru Kaluthakal* appeared as *Beasts of Burden* in 2001.

P. Sivakami's literary career started with the publication of the first short story collection *Ippadiku Ungal Yadharamulla* in 1986. After becoming an IAS officer, she published her first novel *Pazhayani Kazhidalum* in 1988. It depicted the communal imbalances and the sub standardization of Dalits. She published her second novel *Anandayee* in 1993 and it extensively unraveled the miseries of the peasant woman. Her third novel, *Pa. Ka. Aa. Ku-Sila Kurippukal* (1995), a Dalit metafiction, authenticated her objectives of writing the novel *Pazhayani Kazhidalum*. Later she translated it into English as *The Grip of Change* in 2006. Her fourth novel, in 1999, *Kurukku Vettu* (Cross Section) is a psychological enquiry into the hypocrisy of Indian marriages. Her collections of short stories were published in three volumes namely *Nalum Thodarum* (1989) (Continues Still), *Kadaisi Mandhar* (1995) (The last folks), and *Kadaigal* (2004) (The Stories).

experience. In *Vanmam* (2002) she extended the range of her theme by focusing on the clash between two subdivisions of Dalits. Her collections of short stories *Kisumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Thathavum Erumayum* (2004) represent a distinctive contribution to modern Tamil short stories.

Besides these novelists, the Dalit poets like N.D. Rajkumar, S. Thenmozhi, Azhakiya Periyavan, Prathiba Jeyachandran, Bharathi Nivedan alias Selvakumar and Yakkan wrote to bring out changes both in the social and literary arena. The magical realism of the Dalit poets and the oral tradition of their poetry are regarded highly among the contemporary literature.

In the following section, I have talked about two texts of Bama *Karukku* and *Sangati*. For Dalits, the past has been one of violence, dispossession, and death. Their writings reflect these trials of invasion with passion and persuasiveness and provide an unparalleled view of their histories as lived experiences. Hence, the flesh and blood genre of historical and family realism is very strong in their writings. We find this is the case in the writings of Bama also.

Bama's *Karukku* was first published in Tamil in 1992. Its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom appeared in 2000. *Karukku* is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function. It is also the first such writing to appear in Tamil. *Karukku* is an unusual autobiography in the sense that it grew out of a particular moment – a personal crisis that drove the writer to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, a Dalit. The focus of the book is on the narrator's spiritual development through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic and her gradual relationship of herself as a Dalit. Bama has given a full picture of the way the Church controlled and influenced the lives of Dalit Catholics. Each day is ordered by religious ritual. Religious festivals mark the year. Every child's life is imbued with the Christian religion. At the same time, there is a socio-political as well as self-education, that

began and grew from the moment she had realized what untouchability meant as she stated in *Karukku*, “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is” (2000, 11). She also described the Dalits’ position outside the village thus, “I don’t know how it came about the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts” (2000, 7).

Most of the land in Bama’s village belonged to the upper-caste Naicker community. Her people's lives were marked by abject poverty, shameful humiliation, and endless toil from dawn to dusk. Both her grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. They were mostly paid with the unwanted food of the previous day. Yet her grandmother behaved “as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods” (2000, 14). It is however, the attitude of the Church and the religious authorities that pained her most. She mentioned experiences of her childhood and high school days. She recollected how the bishops and the mother superiors expected and accepted as their due the unaffordable offerings of apples and other fruits that their poor Dalit flocks brought on feast days, fruit that they had never been able to buy for themselves. In her high school hostel, the warden-sister commented on low-caste or poor children, “Look at the Cheri Children! When they stay here, they eat their full and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home – just skin and bone!” (2000, 17-8).

Unlike earlier generations, Bama’s education empowered her and encouraged her to speak up for herself. Thus at her first place of work, when a nun had asked her “Are you a Nadar?” she replies, “No, we are Parayar” (2000, 20). Bama writes, “When I recall the

expression that came over her face, I want to laugh, even now” (2000, 20). When she was convinced that she could fight for her people more effectively by becoming a nun herself, she despaired when she learnt from a nun that in certain orders Dalit women are not accepted as prospective nuns. In the school attached to the convent she was being sent to, she observed that Dalits did all the menial jobs, “And in the convent as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings” (2000, 22).

If the humiliation of caste-based discrimination on the part of society was hard to bear, the attitude of the church was intolerable to Bama. Didn't the Church claim to treat all people alike and to uphold justice? Instead, she realized,

They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business and only profited their own castes. It is one the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the church. Even among the priests and nuns, it is the upper-castes who hold all the high positions.... even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there. (2000, 69)

As Frantz Fanon found the church in the colonies to be the white people church which did not treat the natives as per the God's ways but as per the ways of the white man, the master, and the oppressor, Bama also found the Catholic Church to be an upper-caste church that called the Dalit to the ways of the upper-castes. She revolted against the lack of humanity of the church and denounced exploitation in the name of the religion thus, “They (Dalits) have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honor, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind” (2000, 94).

In order to work for the cause of Dalit liberation – Bama left the convent. In her preface to *Karukku*, Bama writes, “There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life. Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them; but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book” (2000, xiii).

Karukku is a part of the body of Dalit writing that has exposed the dominant versions of history and society that has been invoked through the centuries of legitimizing the caste system. *Karukku* also exposes the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which while claiming to care for the Dalit convert, exploits them, as much as the rest of society. It asserts the Dalit's selfhood, history, and agency. Through literature like this, Dalits are no longer a people without history. They are the central figures of their own history that has attained the position of speaking subjects and not listening objects. They are no longer objects of pity as they have derived the confidence and right to assert their humanity.

In *Sangati*, Bama celebrates her identity of being a Dalit, who has overthrown the caste subjugation. Her identity reflects indomitable spirit and pride and set for a new trend in Dalit writing. In *Sangati*, Bama represents a chain of interrelated events, which she observed in her village. It expresses the inward turmoil of the Dalit women who were considered Dalit in the hands of religion, upper caste men, the rich, the politician and educational institutions as well as among the Dalit community and the Dalit men. The voice of Bama sets up is a collective voice under subjugation, which echoes the anti-caste struggle, and the agitation for reserved places in the interest of social justice and political protest for economic equality. *Sangati* celebrated a vibrant community of Dalit women.

Bama's struggle to uplift herself and her community through education led her to criticize the church. When she realized that, there was a sea of divide between what the church preached and practiced, Bama quit the convent. S. K. Paul pointed out the failure of the egalitarian institutions,

The experiences of Dalit woman in a variety of social institutions like the village, the family, the education system, the church and clergy. The caste system has been so deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche that institutions that ought to promote egalitarianism or awareness end up propagating the same distinctions. The stories of individuals such as these function as voices of entire communities of people who have undergone similar experiences of discrimination. (2007 b, 66-7)

Sangati is the second novel of Bama published in 1994. It was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and was published in 2005. *Sangati* consists of the narration and reflection on individual stories of Dalit women, anecdotes, memories of personal experiences presented from a feminist perspective in first person narration that bridges experiences. Bama depicts the narrator's life from the twelfth year until she reaches womanhood by end of the novel. The narration does not have a standard plot as Bama acknowledges in the *Introduction* to *Sangati* that,

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrow and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories. (2005, xvi)

The events related in a chain breaks the western concept of form. The novel urges a break from the oppressive Brahminic culture, which talks of Gods and glorified life and their literature, which had no representation of the lower caste Dalit. *Sangati* is neither an idealized

representation of life nor an individual commitment but rather it reflects a social commitment.

The events exposed the evils of caste system and injustice done to the Dalits by the higher caste.

In the preface to the novel, Bama writes:

In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel them upwards, to road (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanching their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt. (2005, vii)

The narrator is a spokesperson of her community, and she is a representative voice of all the young girls who lose their right of equality in games, toys, food, and treatment due to caste. She represents the voice of young women who experienced the pain of maturing late in life due to poverty, who are exploited by the upper caste men. As an adult, she represents her grandmother, mother and all the women in her neighborhood. She also highlights their management ability, hard work and strong minds that are able to face turmoil. In the narration, the past as flashback has been told as stories either heard or told by someone. It led to the present with incidents that re-experienced, observed, and explicated in the life of Mariamma and Maikanni. The future is left unexplained. Bama as a Dalit talked about the struggle of the Dalit in renting a house, finding lodgings and employment. She remarked, "Being a Dalit creates a problem; on top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult" (2005, 119-20). Therefore, Bama felt that as women they must somehow dare to take control of their lives. Instead of becoming meek, Bama proclaims, "I am paraichi: Yes I am a paraichi" (2005, 121). Bama understands very well that Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. For her, Dalitness is a source of confrontation as observed by S. K. Paul, "Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one's total being. Thus, individual, culture, social burden,

and Dalitness cannot be isolated.... For this new Dalit individual, social and cultural freedom has come because of his self-elevation and self-identification” (2007 a, 35).

Bama’s mind is filled with thought of the struggle, which leads her to investigate why she and her people are punished constantly for the simple fact of having been born Dalits. She questions in *Sangati*, “Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle especially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have also to bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!” (2005, 121-22). Bama has not only questioned the system but also suggested a solution: by treating boys and girls equally and educating both and providing the girl child enough freedom would eradicate the evils of injustice, violence, and inequalities.

Bama’s use of Dalit language opened a Dalit’s life from all the angles. The variety of songs and dances of the Dalits from birth to death are intricately represented by Bama. Dalit women sang them and danced on the tune of the folk songs. B. Kathiresan highlighted, “In *Sangati* we find a record of these folk songs sung at the girl’s coming-of-age ceremony. The stanza patterns in the songs are marked by the choric ululation at the end of every four lines. Bama through several instances of versification highlights the Dalit women’s presence of mind and wit to create songs instantly” (186).

The strong narrative of Bama is revealed in sentences relating to the successive duties of a woman and in Madurai dialect, which is rich in proverbs, colloquial usage, slangs, nicknames, and folk language. In an interview given to R. Azhagarasan, Bama points out, “Before 1993, I was unknown. Today when I say ‘I’ it includes people like me. All these things together form our collective identity. I cannot claim for myself the identity of an individual, a Dalit woman, I am part of a collective awareness. I carry their voices” (2005, 151). Further, she elaborates her

ideas on writing in this interview, “Writing, she claims, is a release for her feelings, an opportunity to expose the “nature of this casteist society” (2005, 153).

Dalit literature derives its strength from the depiction of hard reality of the Dalits. For the first time in the history of literature, the positive aspects of the Dalit community have been described by Dalits. Based on the depiction of the Dalit life the reader could have a composite picture of the Indian society that was until now not available. Thus, Dalit literature has played an important role in enriching Indian literature. It has exposed the hollow claims of formal legal quality.

The analysis of texts drawn from various languages and areas show certain common characteristics.

Anguish is the chief characteristic of Dalit writing. All texts which I have studied present the pain and agony of the writer. Pain and agony has assumed a social character as it represents not only an individual but the entire community of Dalits.

The second characteristic is rejection and revolt. Both have been born from the womb of Dalits pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. There are many poems of *Golpitha* and many experiences shared by Sonkamble, Omprakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble and Bama that focused on the unequal social order which exploits Dalits. On the one hand, all these texts reject the unequal order while on the other they demand equality, liberty and fraternity.

The third significant characteristic of Dalit literature is the centrality of experience. The experiences, which are articulated in Dalit literature, have not been expressed in any other literature. They are the experiences of a particular community. These experiences lead the writer towards self-search and raises the crucial question of identity and self-respect. The experiences

lead Dalit writers to critique religion and its traditions and expose the hypocrisy of the Hindu social order as well as Indian democracy. These texts set up a narrative of the structural violence of religion, caste and tradition.

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the particular structure of feeling connected with struggle. It generates belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature, it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of mainstream writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. As my analysis has shown, all the Dalit writers I have analyzed have made their personal experience the basis of their writing and it has a certain purpose, that is awakening the Dalit masses. Thus, it is purposive. They have written out of social responsibility. Their writing has represented the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problem – their writing has intensely articulated this impatience. Dalit writers are activist-artist. They regard their literature to be a movement.

For their writing, Dalit writers have used the language of the untouchable quarters rather than the standard language. They have used the “uncouth-impolite” language of Dalits. It is the lived language of Dalits. This language does not recognize standardized gestures and grammar. It is said that language changes after every twenty miles, but it is wrong with respect to Dalits. In the same village, differences are evident between the language of the village and language of the untouchable quarters. The so-called cultured people in society consider standard language to be the proper language for writing. Dalit writers have rejected this validation of standard language by the cultured classes. In fact, standard

language does not include all the words of Dalit dialects. In *Golpitha* and *Athavaninche Pakshi* reader will find numerous words which are typically used in a Dalit locale. Besides, the ability to voice one's experience in one's intimate dialect gives greater sharpness to the expression.

Thus, the microcosm of Dalit literature as presented through three sections – Marathi Dalit writing, Hindi Dalit writing and Tamil Dalit writing – gives a glimpse of macrocosm of Dalit literature in India. Dalit literature represents oppression, struggles, assertion and quest for identity of the Dalits. It raises questions about Hindu social discrimination and caste system through various literary genres like poetry, short story, fiction, autobiography, drama and many others. The motives for Dalit literature are the denunciation of an inhuman past. It also consolidates the Dalit movement inspired by Ambedkar in every corner of the country.