

STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION: A STUDY OF SELECT DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS IN ENGLISH

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

By

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DECLARATION

I. MAHADEVA SWAMY N. N., hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “**Struggle for Emancipation: A Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies and Memoirs in English**” submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English**, is a bonafide research work carried out by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. D. Murali Manohar**, Department of English, School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled **“Struggle for Emancipation: A Study of Dalit Autobiographies and Memoirs in English”** submitted by **Mahadeva Swamy N. N.**, bearing registration number **17HEPH06**, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance and has not been submitted in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. The thesis is free from plagiarism and has not been submitted previously, either in part or in full, to this or any other University or Institution for award of any degree or diploma. Further, the student has following publication and seminar presentation before submission of the thesis in the relevant area of his research:

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Dedication

To

My Ancestors (Nanna Poorvikarige)

&

My Mother (Nanna Avvanige)

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Chapter- 1

Introduction

For the last three decades, the genre of autobiography has occupied a significant place in academia. Academicians have engaged in the critical and philosophical study of autobiographies which predominantly deal with the self, society, polity, economy, and religion. The genre ‘autobiography’ emerged in Europe and became one of the admired literary categories in the 19th century. Since then, it has gradually spread across the globe influencing numerous writers and readers. Marginalized communities the world over such as the African Americans of the United States of America, Australian aboriginals, and Dalits¹ in India have also significantly used this genre as an important tool to narrate not only their personal lives but also their community lives, focussing on the oppression they have faced, and continue to, at the hands of dominant communities owing to their caste, race, and gender positions in the societies they have lived. The majority of the personal narratives written by members of marginalized communities are narratives of suffering that question and challenge established social systems.

In the Indian context, educated Hindu upper-caste writers like Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru wrote their autobiographies. Although autobiographies of caste Hindus, mostly social reformers and politicians, written in English were given significant space in the 19th century, it is those by Dalits and women which have acquired a special place in the Indian academia as they have narrated in depth the caste and gender discrimination of everyday life in the late 20th century. Dalits of India, who had no right to education for ages, have predominantly used the medium of autobiography to portray their lived experiences. As a result, at present, Dalit literature is abundant in both Indian vernacular

¹ Dalits of India are ex-untouchables who belong to lower strata in Indian social structure. They are called Scheduled castes. However, they identify themselves as Dalits as it is their political and cultural identity.

languages as well as in English. For instance, the Dalit Panthers² Movement of the 1970s, which came into prominence along with Dalit literature, made significant changes to the Indian literary landscape with its innovative and realistic narratives. Narratives by the Dalits that mainly depicted the life world of under-privileged castes, in the mode of autobiography, poetry, novels, novella, and short stories written in the early 1970s in Maharashtra paved the way for new literary practices where the folklore, dialects, and language of peasants, Dalits and the poor are widely used. These new Dalit writings challenged the literature produced by mainstream Indian writers where Dalit lives had minimal to zero representation. Contrary to mainstream writers' works where Dalit lives and experiences could only be presented from secondary sources, Dalits began to represent themselves by narrating their own lived experiences through creative writing. Dalit autobiographical literature sketches their personal, familial, circumstantial, and professional lives, often set in a rural landscape. For instance, the autobiography *Akkarmashi* (1984) by Sharankumar Limbale has portrayed the life of Limbale who was brought up in a small village in Maharashtra where he faced brutal caste realities.

It is important to note that the majority of Dalits received vernacular/regional medium education funded by the governments of their respective states in post-Independence India. Hence, most Dalits who were first-generation learners wrote their autobiographies in their language like *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Akkarmashi* (1984) by Sharankumar Limbale, *Ooru – Keri* (1997) by Siddalingaiah, *Government Brahmana* (1994) by Aravinda Malagatti and *Karukku* (1992) by Bama. In the late 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st, due to the popularity and wide readership of these Dalit autobiographies, most of them

² Dalit Panthers is a social organization that came to fight against caste discrimination and other social issues in the state of Maharashtra in the 1970's. They were influenced by Black Panthers of the United States of America.

were translated into English and other Indian languages. Subsequently, they were subjected to much research and critical discussion both in India and abroad.

However, a few Dalit writers who were educated in English medium either formally or informally in the 20th century have written their personal narratives originally in English. Perhaps the first Dalit autobiographical narrative in English is Ambedkar's seminal text *Waiting for a Visa* (1935-36), narrating the life of a man who was considered a messiah of the depressed communities of India. The Dalit personal narratives that are currently available in English are mostly written by Dalit academicians, bureaucrats, and employees of the public and corporate sectors. These autobiographers who entered and worked in new spaces such as academia, government offices, and media experienced new caste realities which have been sketched out in their narratives. It is imperative to note that these narratives written by educated Dalits have significantly explored not only the trauma and pain they suffered due to the caste system but also their inspiration and motivation to emancipate themselves from caste discrimination and poverty. These educated Dalits' autobiographical narratives have portrayed how they have become self-made individuals, successful in their lives despite caste atrocities and humiliation by Caste Hindus.

This study is an attempt to examine select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English to study the struggle of Dalits for their emancipation and the different tools which they have used for their further liberation. It proposes to study select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English to understand how Dalit writers across several generations have attempted to emancipate themselves from the clutches of caste oppression and the means that have been identified and utilized in this mission by themselves. The thesis attempts to critically study the reflections made by the primary texts on education, English education in particular, religion with debates on conversion, and gender discrimination. Moreover, this thesis also attempts to

answer how Dalit autobiographical narratives in English have de-ghettoized Dalit literature and significantly contributed to the domain of Indian writing in English.

The Dalit autobiographies and memoirs originally written in English and published till 2020 have been chosen for the present study. These include *Waiting for a Visa*³ (1934-35) written by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by D.P. Das, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) by Prof. Shyamlal, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, *My Father Baliah* (2011) by Y.B. Satyanarayana. The current research project also studies contemporary memoirs written in English such as *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde and Dalit women's memoirs such as *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt.

These narratives, which have not been recorded in the literary history of Indian Literature in English written by upper-caste Hindu writers, seem to be tales of the success of educated Dalits which are supposed to inspire, motivate, and educate their community. Therefore, the purpose of this current project is to examine the potential of Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English to act as a struggle for the emancipation of Dalits. The research also attempts to understand how these narratives add to the project of the liberation of marginalized communities in India by turning stories of individual struggles and success into role models for younger members of the Dalit community.

³ *Waiting for a Visa* was written in 1935 but was first published in 1990 by People's Education Society and later in 1993 by the Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. However, in this thesis, the latest version published by Xpress Publishing in 2019 was used.

Who are Dalits?

Dalit communities have been called “Ati-shudras, chandalas, panchamas, antyajas, achhuts, asprushyas, Depressed Classes, harijans and the Scheduled castes in different periods in Indian history. Dalits still suffer the stigma of untouchability even after caste discrimination has been declared an offence under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution” (Kumar, “Dalit Literature” 2). Dalits are ex-untouchables who were outside the Chaturvarnya, the traditional Hindu social stratification. They are considered lower and impure by caste Hindus; thus, they have been systematically excluded from the social, economic, educational, and mainstream cultural milieu. Untouchability is being practiced against Dalits across India even today. According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, untouchability came into existence from two roots – 1) The hatred of Brahmins against the Broken Men as they were Buddhists 2) These Broken Men continued beef-eating although others stopped beef-eating (Ambedkar, “Vol 7” 242).

The term ‘Dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘dal’ which means broken, cracked, scatted, crushed, and destroyed (Kumar, “Dalit Literature” 3). And perhaps, Marathi was the first Indian language to have recorded the frequent use of the term ‘Dalit’ publicly in the beginning of the nineteenth century (Kumar, “Dalit Literature” 4). In post-independence India, many Dalit intellectuals have attempted to define the word ‘Dalit.’ Sharankumar Limbale in his well-known book *Towards An Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* attempted to define who Dalits are. In his opinion, not only Harijans and neo-Buddhists are Dalits, but also those people who live outside the village including landless workers, Adivasis, workers, landless farmers, and suffering masses (30). Dalit Panthers from Maharashtra attempted to include all economically and socially depressed communities as Dalits in the 1970-80s. On the other hand, some Dalit scholars still advocate including only ex-untouchables listed under Scheduled Castes in the Constitution of India as Dalits as these communities have been excluded and exploited because

of their culture, caste, and religion for ages. In this thesis, only ex-untouchable castes listed as Scheduled Castes in India have been considered ‘Dalits’ for the chosen study. Dalit identity is believed to be an acquired identity of oppressed ex-untouchables of our society, not imposed identity like ‘Harijans.’ The term ‘Dalit’ is a political identity of ex-untouchables of India who identified names like ‘Harijan,’ ‘Panchama,’ and ‘Antyaja’ as derogatory. Therefore, in this thesis, the word ‘Dalit’ which signifies the political and cultural identity of Dalits will be used.

What is Dalit Literature?

Many scholars have tried to define the term ‘Dalit literature’ because the question ‘What is Dalit literature?’ is often raised and discussed in academia. Sharankumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2007), opines that Dalit literature means writing about the lives of Dalits by Dalit writers themselves with a Dalit consciousness. The purpose of Dalit literature is to educate Dalit society of its sufferings and slavery, and narrate its painful experiences and suffering to caste Hindus (19). Interrogating Hindu literature and its aesthetics, Limbale, in the same book, attempted to theorize Satyam, Shivam, and Sundaram as foolish and fabricated aesthetic concepts of Hindus. Moreover, he argued that humanity, liberty, equality, and fraternity of human beings are the important aesthetics of Dalit literature (22). Dalit literature produced by Dalits has narrated both the sufferings and the resistance of Dalits against Brahmanical Hindu caste society. The literature produced by Dalits aspires for a casteless and equal society in India.

Dalit Autobiographies

Most of the currently available Dalit literature is in the form of autobiographies although writers from underprivileged castes have written and published their short stories, plays, poems, and even novels. After the 1970s, due to the influence of the radical movement started by Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, the Dalit movement and Dalit literature came hand in

hand not only in Maharashtra but also in other parts of India. During this time, though revolutionary poems were written, it was autobiography which became the most popular form for Dalits to write about their lived experiences. Some of the important Dalit autobiographies as mentioned earlier are *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Akkarmashi* (1984) by Sharankumar Limbale, *Ooru – Keri* (1997) by Siddalingaiah, *Government Brahmana* (1994) by Aravinda Malagatti and *Karukku* (1992) by Bama. By and large, these autobiographers have narrated their lived experiences of rural life as well as of small towns where they experienced caste discrimination and humiliation. Besides, the autobiographers have also reflected upon the caste discrimination they experienced in their schools, colleges, and even in their workplace. On the other hand, Dalit women's issues have predominantly been dealt with by Dalit women writers such as Bama and P. Sivakami from Tamil Nadu, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar from Maharashtra, Du. Saraswathi, and B.T. Lalitha Naik from Karnataka and Gogu Shyamala and Challapalli Swaroopa Rani from Telangana. The above-mentioned autobiographies were written originally in the regional languages of those writers and later those works were translated into English by others. Some of the Dalits have written their autobiographies and memoirs in English and they will be studied in detail in the next chapters.

Before beginning to discuss the Dalit autobiographical narratives in English, it is imperative to briefly discuss the historical development of the genre 'autobiography.'

Autobiography: A Historical Development

Autobiography has emerged as one of the important and popular literary genres of the contemporary world. Autobiographical writing is subjective in nature where an individual narrates his/her life story. Autobiographies have been written by many famous and public personalities like intellectuals, statesmen, politicians, artists, writers, and celebrities. The genre of autobiography has gradually developed and occupied a significant place and it now

comprises memoirs, testimonials, and historical and eye-witness accounts. As the genre became popular and developed, it piqued the curiosity and interest of academicians and literary critics and they attempted to trace the history of autobiography as well as to define what autobiography means.

According to Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Marcus, as quoted by Linda Anderson in her book *Autobiography*:

The term ‘autobiography’ is commonly thought to have been coined by the nineteenth-century poet Robert Southey in 1809 when he was describing the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieura; however, there is evidence of slightly earlier usage, at the end of the eighteenth century, in a review attributed to William Taylor of Isaac D’Israeli’s *Miscellanies*, where he ponders whether ‘autobiography’, though ‘pedantic’, might not have been a better term than the ‘hybrid’ word ‘self-biography; employed by D’Israeli.

(7)

As mentioned above, the word ‘autobiography’ was coined in the beginning of the 19th century. However, autobiographies of famous writers and personalities are available since the 4th century AD. It was believed that the history of autobiography began in 397 AD with the influential autobiography *Confessions* which was written by St Augustine of Hippo. “The genre of autobiography is a product of the European- Mediterranean civilization; it developed for the first time in the period when Christianity was spreading. This fully developed form of the retrospective narrative cannot be found in any earlier period or in any other civilization” (Szavai 19). The genre of autobiography emerged in the West and later spread across the globe.

Although many scholars have attempted to define the word ‘autobiography,’ there is no definite definition of it. To cite a few definitions, autobiography is, according to Philippe Lejeune as cited by Linda Anderson, “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person

concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (2). According to him “Identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist” (Anderson 2) becomes an extremely important element in autobiography. For Roy Pascal as quoted by Anderson, “Autobiography depends on the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing” (3).

According to another leading autobiography critic, Karl Weintraub, as mentioned by Linda Anderson in her book *Autobiography*, “Man’s task is, like autobiography’s, to arrive at some form of self-realization: ‘We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self’” (4). The life experiences and self-realization of a writer occupy an important place in an autobiography.

As mentioned at the beginning, autobiographies were mostly written by famous personalities and leaders. But what happened after the 19th century is that the genre of autobiography grew to include even the life narratives of those historically marginalized sections across the globe like Afro-Americans of The United States of America, and Aborigines of Australia. It was no longer limited only to the life narratives of those people who were from privileged and influential backgrounds, etc. The genre of autobiography, as discussed above, gradually became very popular.

Not only autobiographies but also the genre of ‘memoirs’ seem to be acquired an important place since the late 20th century. A memoir is a subcategory of biography or autobiography and it is unlike autobiography as it only records a few very important incidents or events from the narrator’s life. Its focus is narrow as it mainly focuses on a particular incident, event, or time of the memoirist. Even people from marginalized communities have written memoirs.

In India, educated caste Hindu writers started to write their autobiographical narratives in the end of the 19th century before the autobiographical narrative of Dalits appeared in the Indian literary sphere in the 20th century. In their personal narratives, caste Hindu writers celebrated their childhood, adulthood, and their school and college days. For instance, Nirad C Chaudhuri's autobiography *Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* (1951) celebrates the life of Chaudhuri and his intellectual development.

Autobiographies in India:

In the Indian context, autobiography writing practice came very late compared to the West. Even studies on biography and autobiographical writings were not taken seriously until the end of the 20th century in India. While explaining the reason for the neglect of life histories in South Asia, including India, Arnold, and Blackburn are of this view:

One explanation for this general reluctance might be that in South Asian scholarship a paradigm of “collectivity” has tended to prevail. In the anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s, as in many related fields of study (history, politics, and religious studies), it was frequently assumed that caste was one of the essential attributes of Indian society and that identities founded on caste and religion dominated to such a degree that individual agency and a sense of selfhood (and hence life histories and other individualistic modes of expression) were marginal to South Asian thought and behavior. (2)

Many scholars like Arnold and Blackburn thought that in South Asian countries more than individual life and personality, caste and religion are dominant structures and this gives a secondary position to individuality. McKim Marriot is also of the same view. According to him “Indians were best understood as ‘dividuals’ rather than individuals, the person in South Asia being a less discrete, less bounded and more permeable entity than a person in Europe or North America” (Arnold and Blackburn 2). Arnold and Blackburn further discussed:

A few privileged individuals might be sufficiently exceptional – or Westernized – to be deemed worthy subjects for conventional biographies by historians or political scientists; or like Gandhi, Nehru and Nirad Chaudhuri, be able to compose their own self-narratives. But nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship and colonial ethnography, as much as the post-Independence anthropology of scholars like Marriot and Louis Dumont (for all their differences of perspective), seemed to uphold the dominance of caste identities and the hierarchical ideas and practices that accompanied it. (2-3)

The above-mentioned observation highlights that due to the dominance of caste identities, the individual was not valued in India. In the history of India, it is the upper caste writers like Gandhi, Nehru, and Nirad Choudhuri who started writing their autobiographies in Indian regional languages or in the English language where they celebrated their life. But for the lower caste people or Dalits, it was not possible to write about their lived experiences until the mid-20th century as the majority of them did not have access to education before the 1950s.

While discussing life history or autobiography in India, Arnold and Blackburn opine:

Life histories in India do not necessarily conform to Western conventions and modes of expression (some do, many don't), nor should one expect to find the peculiar forms of individualism that emerged in the West replicated in India. One of the appealing possibilities opened up by examining life histories across several disciplinary fields and situating them comparatively, side by side, is not only to show the variety of forms life histories can take within a single region, but also to shed fresh light on the way we perceive and analyze Indian society. (3)

As Arnold and Blackburn observe, autobiographies written by Indians might not replicate individualism the way it was represented in the West. Indian autobiographies have their own

style and theme of writing. The differences in style and themes in the autobiographies of caste Hindu and outcaste writers tend to reveal the fact that both are distinctive and different.

In the Indian context, Raj Kumar, a Dalit scholar, has also pointed out that “Autobiographies may not have been a traditional literary genre in Indian culture, but from the nineteenth century onward we begin to find texts that narrate personal lives” (Kumar, “Dalit Personal” 1). Raj Kumar, while discussing Dalit autobiographies in the same book, further opines that “Instead of celebrating the self the Dalit narrator has to record a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system. Since Dalits in India live marginalized lives their autobiographies are bound to be different from others” (4).

Caste system and untouchability are the predominant themes in Dalit literature which are explored in depth by Dalit writers; hence, Dalit literature tends to be different and distinctive than the literature of Caste Hindu writers. Therefore, irrespective of the (different) languages and literary expressions Dalits use to write their literature in India, the question untouchability, the question of caste oppression/ violence and resistance against caste and gender discrimination occupy a central place in Dalits’ narratives.

Dalit Autobiographies in Indian Regional Languages and Translation

One of the first Dalit autobiographies in India is *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki which was first written in 1997 and was published originally in the Hindi language. This autobiography was later translated into the English language in the year 2003. In the preface of the translated text, Valmiki writes in *Joothan* that “DALIT LIFE is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalit” (XIII). Valmiki was born in the Chuhra community, a Scheduled caste, in Muzaffarnagar of Uttar Pradesh in 1950. Even though untouchability was

legally abolished on November 26, 1949, in post-independent India, the practice of untouchability has not ended, which is a reality even today. Valmiki's autobiography narrates the experiences of poverty, untouchability, and humiliation in his autobiography. His struggle to get education is also one of the predominant themes in the autobiography.

Another important autobiography is *Ooru Keri* (1997) by Siddalingaiah. The autobiography was written in Kannada originally and later in 2003, it was translated into English. This autobiography poignantly sketches out Siddalingaiah's childhood in the village and the later stage of his life in a slum in Bangalore. This autobiography explores the lives of poor peasants who live a marginal and wretched life in rural India. The text also reflects on his educational journey, his hostel life, and his activism.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *Akkarmashi* (1984) was originally written in Marathi. This autobiography was widely read and it narrates the brutal caste realities of Indian society. The autobiography was later translated into English as *Outcaste* in 2007. This autobiography explores how Dalit women like his mother were physically and sexually exploited by men from upper castes. Limbale was born to a woman from an untouchable caste and a dominant caste man who did not own him; hence, his childhood to adulthood was full of hurt and humiliation. He struggled to overcome the utter poverty and social humiliation he experienced.

The Tamil autobiography *Karukku* (1992) was written by Bama who is a Dalit Christian feminist writer from Tamil Nadu. Her autobiography was also translated into English in 2000 which received overwhelming critical appreciation. In her autobiography, Bama writes about her upbringing as a Dalit Christian girl, her schooling, and then her later stage of life as a nun in a Christian school where poor and untouchable Christians were ill-treated because of their caste identity. She later quit her job and came out of that institution. She also narrates how women from lower castes have been exploited by men and women from both dominant castes

and lower castes men in rural Tamil Nadu. It is an important text as it does not just talk about caste discrimination in general but also particularly explores caste discrimination taking place in religions like Christianity in India.

The above discussion is an attempt to shed light on a few Dalit autobiographies written originally in Indian vernacular languages that have also been translated into the English language. However, a few Dalit writers who were educated in English medium either formally or informally in the 20th century have written their personal narratives originally in English. Perhaps the first Dalit autobiographical narrative in English is Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* (1935-36).

Dalit Autobiographies and Memoirs in English

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a few Dalit writers have written their autobiographical narratives in the form of autobiographies and memoirs in English. These include Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* (1935-36), *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1950) written by Hazari, *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by D.P. Das, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) by Prof. Shyamlal, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, and *My Father Baliah* (2011) by Y.B. Satyanarayana. These are the Dalit autobiographies originally written in English by Dalits themselves which have been selected for the current study. However, Balwant Singh's autobiography *An Untouchable in the IAS* (1997) was not included in this research as the autobiography is out of print and I could not find a copy. The research project also studies contemporary memoirs written in English such as *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde and memoirs of Dalit women such as *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt. Suraj Yengde, Sujatha Gidla, and Yashica Dutt currently live and work in the USA. For the convenience of this research, terms such as

autobiography, autobiographical narratives, personal narratives, and life narratives have been synonymously used in this research as the above-mentioned texts comprise both the genre of (full-length) autobiography and memoir and also mainly because Dalit texts transgress the boundaries of fixed genres and disciplines set by mainstream writers.

In *Waiting for a Visa*, Ambedkar (1891-1956), who was from Maharashtra, narrates some of his personal experiences of caste discrimination. He recollects a few incidents to illustrate how badly he was discriminated against and humiliated by upper-caste Hindus, as well as Muslims, Christians, and Parsis, because of him being an “untouchable.” This narrative reflects on the omnipresence of caste practices and caste discrimination in India’s social, economic, and religious life which is the reality even today.

Hazari’s life story, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1950), is that of an untouchable from Uttar Pradesh, who after a series of hurdles presented by social realities and poverty, finally managed to go to France to pursue higher education. The text describes how the author, when denied a school education, went to work with his parents in the guest house of British Indian Civil Service officers who helped him learn English and sent him to France to get higher education. The story revolves around education, religion, and conversion. He eventually converted to Islam; however, he did not feel he was fully accepted by Allah.

D.P. Das’s life narrative *The Untouchable Story* (1985) sketched out the life of Das who worked in the Indian Civil Services. Hailing from West Bengal, he was a second-generation learner in his family. Das’s story has narrated how hard it was to escape the shackles of the caste profession practiced by his family, that of a Dhobi (washerman), to become a civil servant. The text has reflected on education, migration, and religious practices.

D.R. Jatava, in his story *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000), narrated how, despite poverty, he studied and completed his Ph.D. on the topic ‘Social Philosophy of Dr. B.R.

Ambedkar.’ His story not only portrayed the pains of poverty and his lower caste status, but also talked about how hard he struggled to free himself from social and economic tribulations. In the preface of this text, Jatava said that he wrote his autobiography to educate and spread awareness among Dalits about Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his philosophy. He embraced Buddhism.

Prof. Shyamlal’s autobiographical narrative titled *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) is a successful story of an untouchable man. Shyamlal struggled hard to get education in the 1950s. His effort and hard work yielded eventually and he worked as a professor and a Vice-Chancellor of J.N.V University, Jodhpur in Rajasthan. His life story follows his struggle to enter his profession, overcoming adverse socio-economic conditions. The story of Prof. Shyamlal also highlights how he helped students from depressed communities and worked untiringly for the welfare of the Dalit community.

Narendra Jadhav in his memoir *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) has narrated that his family’s future and fortune changed after they migrated from a small village in the state of Maharashtra to Mumbai, the capital city of Maharashtra where they built a new life with great aspirations. The *Outcaste* is an inter-generational tale of escape from caste oppression in the villages to build a more secure and dignified life in urban India. His parents converted to Buddhism in 1956.

My Father Baliah (2011) by Y. B. Satyanarayana is one of the important contemporary Dalit autobiographies which narrates the lived experiences of three generations of his Yelukati household, tracing their personal, educational, and professional lives. It has also discussed the social history of Telangana, particularly that of the city of Hyderabad, from the perspective of a lower-caste Madiga. Y.B. Satyanarayana eventually converted to Buddhism.

The text *Caste Matters* (2019) is an intellectual text written by Suraj Yengde. This text has been included for current research as it partly sheds light on Yengde’s personal and

professional lives. This text mainly reflects on the existence of a caste system from a village to a global level in different forms that exclude marginalized communities. Besides, this text also narrates Yengde's education journey from a small town to Harvard University. It is an inspiring text for downtrodden sections of India. He is one of the important anti-caste thinkers in contemporary society. He has even narrated his experiences of caste discrimination abroad in the book.

Ants Among Elephants (2017) by Sujatha Gidla is another important Dalit text from Telangana, tracing the family history of the author who is a third-generation educated woman. Gidla's family belongs to the Mala Christian community and was drawn to the communist ideology. The story not only narrates caste oppression, but also gender discrimination, both within the larger society as well as with the communist movement and socio-cultural history of Telangana.

Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019), also addresses themes of caste and gender discrimination as faced by the author in her family's struggle to get her a good English education and documents how such systems of oppression work together to subjugate Dalit women.

The above texts have been chosen for this current research because they primarily deal with themes such as education, English language as an empowering tool, religious conversion, and gender discrimination. The texts have been chosen with the intention of studying a diverse set of linguistic and caste communities across India, that deal with the aforementioned themes. In this project, the word 'emancipation' has been used in the broader sense of liberation of historically oppressed Dalits communities and to address issues pertaining to Dalits that have hampered the progress of this community. The word 'Emancipation,' as mentioned in the Oxford dictionary, means "The action or process of setting free or delivering from slavery; and hence, generally, from restraints imposed by superior physical force or legal obligation;

liberation” (“Emancipation”). As Dalits of India are historically marginalized communities, how these communities across generations have struggled and continue to struggle against caste discrimination to emancipate themselves and what means Dalits have used and continue to use for their further liberation are the focal points of this research project.

Review of Literature

Dalit literature particularly Dalit autobiographies has occupied an important place in academia because of their unique voice and style of language and narration. There have been many scholarly books and articles written and published on Dalits issues, especially on vernacular Dalit literature. Although there are not any particular books and thesis that deal with Dalit autobiographies in English with reference to Dalit emancipation, there are a good number of articles and books that focused on Dalits issues and Dalit literature in the Indian context.

On Dalit Literature:

Sharankumar Limbale’s well-known book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2007) is one of the key texts that theorises who Dalit is, what Dalit literature is about, and the form and styles of Dalit literature. Besides, this book also records the contribution of Dalit literature to Indian literature. The book also discusses differences between Dalit Literature and non-Dalit literature and the main purpose of Dalit literature which emerged because of oppressive social structure and the everyday struggle of lower caste people in India. This text helps to critically study the selected autobiographies in English in understanding the importance of Dalit literature and its future.

Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity (2017) and *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019) by Raj Kumar are important texts on Dalit literature and Dalit autobiographies. The scholarly text *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity* surveyed the personal narratives written in India by both caste Hindus and lower caste

people. It also particularly discusses Dalit men's and Dalit women's autobiographies in depth. Raj Kumar argues in the book that Dalit women are the marginalized among marginalized in India because of their caste, class, and gender positions in society. On the other hand, *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019) attempts to critically study Dalit literature and offers pedagogical approaches to Dalit literature.

E. V. Ramakrishnan in his chapter titled “Self and Society: The Dalit Subject and the Discourse of Autobiography” from the book *Locating Indian Literature: Texts, Traditions, Translations* (2011), argues that Dalit autobiographies contest the traditional self-narratives by writing the routinized violence of everyday existence and also by challenging the prevalent historical discourses. This chapter is important to argue how Dalit literature is different and unique than the autobiographies written by caste Hindus.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his widely-read book *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945) documented the Indian literature in English produced till 1940. This book does not include the writings of Ambedkar “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” (1916), and “Annihilation of Caste” (1936) under prose in English although they were published before the 1940s.

In the book, *A History of Indian English Literature* (1989), M. K. Naik surveyed and recorded the writings like prose, poetry, drama, novels, and criticism written and published in India from the beginning of the 19th century to 1980. This book too does not have enough details on the writings of Ambedkar who wrote extensively on Indian historical, political, and social issues in prose form from 1930's to 1956. In only a few lines, Naik mentioned Ambedkar's writings. This book hardly has information on Dalit and lower caste writers writing in English. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's important book *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945) and *A History of Indian English Literature* (1989) by M. K. Naik clearly demonstrate the lacuna in

the literary history of Indian writing in English written by famous literary historians such as Iyengar and Naik as they have not included literature produced by marginalized communities in English.

The book *Touchable Tales* (2003) edited by S. Anand sheds light on varied views on the politics of translation of Dalit literature into the English language. Anand raises a few important questions such as who decides what should be published or not? Who are those translators and editors of those translated texts? Who are the readers of these translated texts? These questions would help us think about politics in translating and publishing. Not all Dalit literature written in vernacular languages gets translated into English by upper-caste writers/translators. Translation has played a pivotal role in introducing Dalit literature in national and international space. However, it has its own limitation and the authenticity of the meanings of translated texts are questioned. The significant change in the 20th and 21st century is that English-educated Dalits are producing literature in English. Hence politics of translation and other issues do not arrive as we now can directly access the texts originally written in English by Dalits.

K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu's edited books *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2013) and *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011) are also important texts that document the struggles and lived experiences of historically oppressed Dalits from South India. These two books comprise Dalits narratives translated into the English language from Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam languages.

Chandra Bhan Prasad's theoretical book *Dalit Phobia: Why Do They Hate Us?* (2019) helps us understand the history of the Dalit community and how Dalits have been neglected in the social, educational, and cultural milieu in India for ages. The book documents attitudes and perceptions of people across sections about Dalits and how Dalits are hated by different sections of our society.

The above-mentioned intellectual texts help to study the select texts of this research and address the research questions that focus on the struggle of Dalits for their emancipation.

Dalits and Their Education:

The book *Education and Caste in India: The Dalit Question* (2020) edited by Ghanshyam Shaw, et al., reflects on the struggles of Dalits to get education from the colonial period to contemporary times. The book also points out the existing caste practices and discrimination against Dalit students in high schools and higher education institutions across the country.

Dalits and English:

The books and articles that discuss English language and English education in the Indian context are Alok K Mukherjee's scholarly text *This Gift of English: English Education and the Formation of Alternative Hegemonies in India* (2009) and an edited book by Alladi Uma, et al., *English in the Dalit Context* (2014). Whereas the first book deals with how upper caste/class communities of India have monopolized English education through which they become dominant and oppressed marginalized communities of Indian society, the latter text reflects on various perspectives of scholars from English teaching background with reference to English language and English medium education for Dalits.

In his article "Dalits and English" (2015), Kancha Ilaiah, a Dalit-Bahujan intellectual, opines that English education is indeed key to globalized India. Hence, English education must be provided to students from lower castes to reduce the existing inequality in our Indian Education system.

Similarly, Chandra Bhan Prasad strongly argues for English Language and English education for Dalits in his article "Hail English, the Dalit Goddess" (2015). According to him, English-speaking Dalits will not clean gutters and roads they rather increase their chance of getting employment in good institutions and uplift themselves. The above discussion has presented

views where Dalit scholars have argued for English education for Dalits. Against this backdrop, Dalit personal narratives with regard to English education for Dalits will be studied.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 1, Vol. 5, Vol.7, and Vol. 11 are important books. In *Volume 1*, Ambedkar writes about Castes in India and how the caste system can be annihilated. As the Caste question is the central issue in Dalit literature, *Volume 1* would be studied.

Dalits and Their Religion:

Volume 5 discusses caste and religious conversion; hence, it is an important text for this current research. Besides, *Vol 7, Buddha and His Dhamma*, is a very important text that discusses in detail Brahminism and Buddhism and how Buddhism is different than other religions in India. Ambedkar's thoughts on the dhamma of Buddhism which is pro-human, egalitarian, and liberal would help me to study the select texts as two of the Dalit writers in the select texts talk about their conversion to Buddhism.

The book *Dalits and Religion* (2009) edited by D. Murali Manohar is an account of the personal experiences of Dalits across religious faiths. For instance, D. Murali Manohar narrated his personal experience of being a Mala Dasari and he argues that Mala Dasari are Hindus. J Bheemaiah narrated his childhood experiences of poverty and humiliation and because of his Madiga caste identity he had to face problems but with his strong determination to acquire education, he managed to uplift himself. In the same book, Nagaraju Gundimeda argued that Christianity significantly contributed to educating and empowering Dalits in Andhra Pradesh.

The book *Dalits and Their Religion(s)* (2010) by D. Murali Manohar attempts to study the religious practices of Dalits across India particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Besides, the book also records news reports on the religious practices of Dalits such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Perspectives of few students of the University of Hyderabad who

follow different religious faiths have been collected in the form of questions and answers and documented in this book.

Dalit Women's Questions:

The book *Dalit Feminist Theory* (2020) edited by Sunaina Arya and Akash Singh Rathore is one of the key texts that addresses Dalit women's issues. This text comprises many scholarly articles on Indian Feminism, Dalit Feminism, Brahmanical Patriarchy, and Dalit Patriarchy. These articles are of immense support to discussing the multilayered oppression women from Dalit communities experience in their daily lives. This scholarly text also discusses caste and gender discrimination that take place in Dalit families. This book would help to explore Dalit women's questions.

Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's important scholarly book *We Also Made History: Women in Ambedkarite Movement* (2008) is one of the important texts that record the history of participation of Dalit women in socio-cultural movements. This text reflects on the active participation of Dalit women, who were influenced by Ambedkar, in the struggle for dignity and equality. It also highlights the active role Dalit women played during the conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism initiated by Ambedkar in 1956.

Gopal Guru's article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) is one of the key texts that addresses the existing patriarchal attitudes among Dalit men which he called Dalit patriarchy and argues it was indeed important for women to speak about patriarchy of their community to see gender just and equal society.

Sharmila Rege's article "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference'" (1998) explores Dalit women's agency and subjectivity. Addressing existing patriarchal attitudes among Dalit men, she argues how Brahmanical patriarchy has been imitated and practiced by

men from non-Brahman castes. She also highlights how Dalit women's problems are different than upper-caste women's problems.

Apart from the above-mentioned books and articles, I have also reviewed a few Ph.D. thesis, news articles, and online video lectures related to Dalit literature.

A thesis titled 'Writing the Self: A Thematic Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies' written by Bolleddu Siva Nagaiah and supervised by Purushotham K was submitted to Acharya Nagarjuna University in 2011. The Dalit autobiographies *The Outcaste* (2003) by Sharankumar Limbale, *Outcaste* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) by Om Prakash Valmiki and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) were chosen in this study. The thesis mainly focused on the denial of education, experiencing caste discrimination, and assertion of the Dalit self.

A thesis titled "Overcoming Dependence on the Caste Hindus: A Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies" written by Mohanrao P and supervised by Dr. D Murali Manohar was submitted to University of Hyderabad in 2012. The thesis focused mainly on how Dalits have become conscious of their lives and struggles, and how they attempted to uplift themselves leaving behind caste-based occupations focusing on their empowerment.

A Ph.D. thesis titled "Struggle and Protest in Select Dalit Autobiographies" was written by Siripuram Srinu, supervised by Dr. B. Krishnaiah was submitted to Kakatiya University, Warangal in 2019. The thesis mainly studied Dalit autobiographies such as *Growing Up Untouchable* in India by Vasant Moon, *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale, and *Changiya Rukh* by Balbir Madhopuri. The thesis focused on caste discrimination against Dalits and their struggles and protests against caste discrimination practiced by caste Hindus.

In the above review of literature, I have studied many primary and secondary sources on Dalit literature originally written in Indian vernacular languages. Some of the reviewed books and

articles have in face discussed about Dalit emancipation studying mostly vernacular Dalit literature. And there is not any much scholarly work on Dalit literature in English. The current research, hence, attempts to mainly study Dalit autobiographies and memoirs originally written in English to evaluate how these autobiographical texts put forth the issues pertaining to Dalits in contemporary society and contributed to the project of emancipation of marginalized communities like Dalits in India.

Aims and Objectives

By and large, Dalit literature is only considered as a part of the regional literature in India. Despite there being a number of Dalit autobiographies in English published in the past century, especially by the Dalit intellectual class, these have not received much critical attention compared to Dalit autobiographies in regional languages and in English translation.

The debate on regional languages versus English in India, though an old subject, has led to the important realization that different communities have different opinions on questions of language, medium of instruction, and curriculum in schools. Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit intellectual, has praised the English language, built a temple and named it ‘Dalit Goddess of English’ in Uttar Pradesh, pointing out the caste prejudices inherent in Indian languages like Hindi (Prasad: 2015). Hence, ‘English in the Dalit context’ is a topic that is always open for discussion.

In light of this, the current research project aims to study the English language and English education from the Dalit perspective, using select Dalit personal narratives in English to critically analyze how Dalit autobiographers have reflected on English education in their narratives.

This thesis’s main objective is to study Dalit autobiographical narratives in English with regard to the question of the emancipation of Dalits. In addition to this, the research project

also explores how the primary texts, written across several generations of Dalits, have examined religious practices, religious conversions of Dalits, and other methods of subjugation in addition to caste discrimination. By brining issues such as untouchability, caste discrimination, caste violence, and religious conversion and subjugation of Dalit women into narrative/ literary form and originally writing these issues in English, Dalits have significantly expanded the horizon of Indian literature particularly Indian writing in English by narrating their first-hand lived experiences.

The Objectives of the Research:

- To closely study the themes and styles of Dalit autobiographies and memoirs written in English
- To assess the role of education, particularly English education, in Dalit lives
- To study the changes colonial modernity brought to Dalit lives
- To understand multi-layered caste discrimination along with Dalit religious practices and conversion as narrated in selected literary works
- To examine the personal narratives of Dalit men and women with respect to caste and gender discrimination

Research Questions:

This research project would address the following questions:

How are the narrative style and themes of these autobiographical narratives similar or different from one another?

How have the personal narratives in English reflected on ‘education’ and ‘English education’?

Is English a language of emancipation or just an aspiration?

How have Dalit writers reflected on colonial modernity in their autobiographies and memoirs?

What are the views and motivations stated by Dalits on religious conversion as cited in select literature?

Do memoirs by Dalit women have a different voice? What have they contributed to the discussion regarding the intersections of 'caste' and 'gender'?

How have Dalit personal narratives de-ghettoized Dalit literature and contributed to the corpus of Indian Literature in English?

Relevance and Contribution of the Research:

Since current scholarship on Dalit writings/literature is the result of critical discussion available in regional languages and in English translation, this research project is particularly focused on Dalit autobiographies written in English by themselves. It attempts to explore the contribution of Dalit literature in English to Indian Writing in English. The project is aimed at critically studying the personal narratives written in English by Dalit intellectuals with emphasis on their perspectives on education, English education, and religion and conversion. Therefore, I believe this project will help understand issues relating to language and religion from the Dalit point of view while also contributing to existing scholarship on Dalits in both Indian literature and Indian English literature. This research would help us in understanding the struggles and aspirations of Dalit communities across generations in India for their empowerment and liberation from caste-based Hindu society.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study is aimed at studying the primary and secondary materials written in English. The methods mainly used in this research are qualitative and explorative. The current research project attempts to do a textual analysis of Dalit life narratives in English using both theoretical and comparative approaches. The research aims to critically analyse the question of education,

English education, religious practices, and conversion and the intersection of caste and gender in these narratives. The project will look at major texts written by Dalit writers and try to place their works in the genealogy of the Dalit autobiography. Using the tools of textual analysis, this will look at how, since the beginning of the 20th century in India, Dalit autobiographies, particularly Dalit personal narratives (in English) across generations have dealt with questions of education, English education, religious conversion, and caste and gender. The current research project also attempts to deconstruct the idea that Dalit literature is regional and argues that the contribution of Dalit literature to Indian (English) literature has been substantial.

In this project, along with textual analysis, theories on caste and Dalit by intellectuals such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar EV Ramasamy, Kancha Ilaiah, and Chandra Bhan Prasad shall be studied. In addition to these, to study the feminist discourse, theories on gender produced in India including works of Dalit women writers, along with those by the likes of Sharmila Rege, and Uma Chakravarti will be used to examine the chosen texts. Under the comparative approach, marginal discourses such as Black studies and feminist studies, and post-colonial theories will be used to conduct this research.

The articles published on Dalit issues in English journals, and English newspapers and interviews of Dalit writers will also be studied to get more information about the chosen texts and the writers.

Chapterization or Structure of the Thesis:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The chapter will aim to discuss the history of the genre ‘autobiography.’ It will also give a brief account of autobiography in the West, paying particular attention to autobiographies by members of marginalized communities. Tracing the history of the autobiography in India through the works of some prominent autobiographers, the chapter will

discuss the style and themes of some widely read Dalit autobiographies in India. This chapter would also include a review of some of the important scholarly texts on Dalits, Dalit literature, and issues related to Dalit women. The chapter will also include research questions and a chapter plan of the current research project.

Chapter 2: Education and English Education as a Means of Empowerment

The chapter will study select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English in order to understand how these narratives have reflected on education, especially English education. The chapter will aim at discussing the role of modernity, colonialism, and Christianity in Dalits' lives. It will also explore how these autobiographies refer to events like colonialism and the advent of Christianity among the Dalits of India.

The chapter will be divided into two sections where the first section deals with a) Dalit and Their Education, second with b) Dalit and English education.

The Dalit autobiographical narratives that would be examined in the chapter are *Waiting for a Visa* (1934) by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by D. P. Das, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003), *Untold story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001), *My Father Baliah* (2011), *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000), *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019).

Chapter 3: Religious Conversion as a Weapon to Fight Caste Oppression

The chapter will aim at analyzing the autobiographies with respect to the religious practices of Dalits. The chapter will analyze the selected texts in order to study how these autobiographical narratives have reflected on religion and religious conversion. The main question addressed in this chapter is about the reasons why Dalits convert to other religions

from Hinduism. The chapter would focus on whether religious conversion helps Dalits to emancipate themselves and if yes, which religion? To what extent the process of emancipation takes place in Dalit lives?

The texts that will be chosen for this chapter are *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, and *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla.

Chapter 4: Dalit Women: Caste and Gender Questions

The chapter will seek to explore multiple forms of the oppression of Dalits, particularly caste and gender discrimination, as narrated in Dalit women's personal narratives. The main argument of this chapter is that Dalit women's narratives attempt to represent not only caste discrimination but also gender discrimination in everyday life. The objective of this chapter is to study if Dalit emancipation becomes an incomplete project without the annihilation of gender inequality. The chapter will also attempt to theorize the terms such as Brahmanical Patriarchy and Dalit Patriarchy to understand how patriarchy specifically Brahmanical patriarchy has systematically excluded and exploited women from various castes including Dalit women.

The texts that are chosen for this chapter are, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The fifth and final chapter will be an analysis of the research findings in the previous chapters. It concludes with the outcomes of the research.

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Chapter- 2

Education and English Education as Means of Empowerment

There are two sections in this chapter. The first section of this chapter will examine the role of education in Dalit lives through select autobiographical narratives written in English by Dalits writers, which have received less attention in academia when compared to vernacular and translated literature. The main objective of this chapter is to study what Dalits across generations say about education in their autobiographies and memoirs and in what way education contributes to their emancipation. This chapter will also evaluate the changes colonial modernity and institutions brought to Dalit lives. The main focus of this chapter is to study the lived experience and the struggle of Dalits across generations to get formal education for their upliftment.

The second section of the chapter will specifically focus on the select Dalit autobiographical narratives and memoirs in English and it will explore how Dalits across generations reflected on English language and English education in their narratives. It will also examine what English does for Dalits' lives. The rationale behind choosing these texts is that these narratives were written at different times by Dalit writers who are from different generations. The chapter will aim to study the select texts from the Dalit point of view with respect to evaluating the role of English language and English education in the lives of different generations of Dalits.

Section – 1

Dalits and Their Education

Education plays an important role in everyone's life. The word 'education,' according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means "The process of bringing up a child, with reference to forming character, shaping manners and behaviour, etc." ("Education"). It is perceived as an emancipator for all, particularly for those who are victims of established social structures in any society. 'Man,' according to Emmanuel Kant, one of the Enlightenment thinkers, "can only become man by education. He is merely what education makes of him" (5). Kant emphasizes the significant role education plays in developing the human race. In India, many communities, including the Dalits (ex-untouchables) were not allowed to receive formal education in schools, unlike the upper-caste Hindus. Whereas traditional education was given to Brahmin and Kshatriya children in Gurukulas⁴ by saints and Vedic teachers, Dalit and other backward communities, not having education, became historically marginalized and were restricted to engage in degrading works that are considered polluted by (upper) caste Hindus. People from the oppressed communities who attempted to transgress the rules imposed by Chaturvarna⁵ were severely punished and even killed. These distinctions are evidently reflected in popular Hindu epics like the *Mahabharata*. For instance, when Ekalavya attempted to learn archery, Dronacharya asked Ekalavya to sacrifice his thumb as a guru-dakshina⁶ as Ekalavya belonged to a non-warrior lower caste. Similarly, in the epic *Ramayana*, the Shudra⁷ ascetic Shambuka was killed by Lord Rama for performing penances that were reserved for those of priestly birth.

⁴ Gurukula was a type of education system or schools in ancient India where education was given to children of Brahmin and kshatriya castes.

⁵ Varna, in the context of Hinduism, refers to a social class within a hierarchical caste system. The ideology is epitomized in texts like Manusmriti, which describes and ranks four varnas and prescribes their occupations, requirements and duties, or Dharmas.

⁶ 'Guru-Dakshina' means fee paid to a spiritual guide or teacher.

⁷ Shudra, also spelled Sudra, Sanskrit Sudra, fourth and lowest of the traditional varnas, or social classes, of India, traditionally artisans and labourers.

There were strict punishments for those who tried to transgress the traditional duties assigned to them as per the Chaturvarna system. While interpreting Chaturvarna and the strict punishments for those who do not abide by its rules, Dr. Ambedkar illustrates the rigid nature of Chaturvarna, citing the incident of killing of lower caste Shambuka by King Rama from the *Ramayana*.

Ram Raj was a Raj based on Chaturvarnya. As a king, Rama was bound to maintain Chaturvarnya. It was his duty, therefore, to kill Shambuka, the Shudra, who had transgressed his class and wanted to be a Brahmin. This is the reason why Rama killed Shambuka. But this also shows that penal sanction is necessary for the maintenance of Chaturvarnya. Not only penal sanction is necessary, but penalty of death is necessary. That is why Rama did not inflict on Shambuka a lesser punishment. That is why Manu-Smriti prescribes such heavy sentences as cutting off the tongue or pouring of molten lead in the ears of the Shudra, who recites or hears the Veda. (Ambedkar, “Vol 1” 61)

As Ambedkar explains, severe punishments were strictly observed to keep the Chaturvarna intact in ancient India. Rama killed Shambuka because it was his duty as a king to kill those who did not follow the rules of Ram Raj built based on Chaturvarna. Ekalavya and Shambuka’s tragic lives were only a few among many victims of this ancient social system, which did not allow them to learn or recite. For ages, Depressed Classes⁸ were not allowed to get a formal education in the history of India. But during the colonial period in the 19th century, due to the intervention of the British in Indian politics and social milieu, the depressed communities demanded schools and formal education in a few provincial governments, and

⁸ The term ‘Depressed Classes’ was used by British Raj prior to 1935. But it was later used and popularized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The term refers to the people who were excluded including Dalits and Women.

then, their demands for school education were accepted by the British, although Caste Hindus were opposed to untouchables being allowed to enter school and get education. Shah rightly remarks in this regard:

Till then, the social groups, known *ati-shudras* to whom the British government classified as ‘depressed classes,’ now called the Scheduled Castes (SCs) were customarily not permitted to take formal education. Caste Hindus treated them as ‘untouchables.’ Their touch, and in some places even their shadow, was treated as polluting. Their settlements were at the outskirts of a village/town. However, acceding to the demand from the lower strata of society, the British government made it mandatory for government-aided schools to admit students of all castes including the ‘untouchable’ castes. (2)

During the colonial period, due to the demand from the lower castes, some provincial governments and a few native states like Baroda, Kolhapur, and Travancore-Cochin, made some efforts to ensure that children from Scheduled castes were given admission to government schools (Shah et al. 2). When untouchable students were allowed to get admission in schools, caste Hindus vehemently opposed this move and practiced caste discrimination by not touching the lower caste students and not allowing them to sit next to upper caste students in classroom and school premises. In other words, they practiced purity and pollution⁹ even in schools and classrooms. Brahmin and other caste Hindu teachers and students continued to ill-treat students from untouchable and other lower castes. As a result, Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer and an advocate of education for lower caste people and women in colonial India, wrote in his book, *Slavery*, “Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin

⁹ Purity and pollution – In Hinduism, the ideation of purity and pollution is the major aspect in understanding the hierarchy process of the caste system. The people belong to upper caste practice caste purity against lower caste people by not touching them.

schoolmasters! The Shudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them alone and not the Brahmins that the government must ever look to tide them over their difficulties, financial as well as political” (Phuley, “Slavery” 11). He was a vehement critic of bhats-brahmins¹⁰ – he thought they enslaved shudras and atishudras without educating them for centuries (Phuley, “Slavery” 15). He also questioned the dominance of bhats-brahmins officers of British administration and court (Phuley, “Cultivator’s Whipcord” 80). “Jyotiba Phule, from traditionally lower strata of society in Maharashtra, saw modern education with liberal and ‘scientific’ values as opening of avenues to the traditionally deprived sections of society. He demanded special facilities for the depressed classes in educational institutions” (Shah et al. 2). It is noteworthy to remember the significant contribution of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule who established schools for Depressed Classes in the 19th century despite resistance by Caste Hindus. Because of their outstanding contribution to education and the upliftment of depressed communities, Savitribai Phule is famously remembered as the first teacher of India by marginalized communities. Besides, on 5th September whereas Teachers’ Day is celebrated in honour of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Indian philosopher, Savitribai Phule is admired by lower caste people who praise her as the mother of education/letters (Aksaradavva¹¹) for oppressed communities. The Phule couple was the first backward caste family to build schools for lower caste people as well as for women during colonial India.

In post-Independence India, the Constitution of India drafted by Dr. B.R Ambedkar gave educational and employment opportunities to the Depressed Communities of India, including the former untouchables as these communities did not have any representation in social, educational, cultural, and political spheres. Thus, after the 1950s, Dalits started getting

¹⁰ The term ‘bhats-brahmins’ was used by Jyotirao Phule in his seminal book *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* first published in 1873. The ‘bhats- brahmins’ caste is at top in Hindu social stratification.

¹¹ Aksradavva’ is a Kannada word. ‘Aksara’ means ‘letters’ and ‘education’, and ‘avva’ means mother.

formal education across India. Only through gaining education did a small number of Dalits manage to uplift themselves and overcome the utter poverty they have lived in for ages. Anand Teltumbde rightly said, “Despite poverty, the Dalits have made good progress in education at all levels following the role model of Ambedkar, and also as the only investible opportunity to better their lives for their future generations” (7). It is imperative to understand that Dalits of India have realized that their emancipation from the clutches of caste oppression and poverty is possible only through gaining education. Hence, they gave importance to formal education and admired education highly and thought education is one of the first and main stepping stones for their upliftment. It is also true that all Dalit writers, thinkers, and social activists, being inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, have always demanded quality education for Dalits. Different genres of literature/s, particularly Dalit autobiographies, have voiced for education for their emancipation and protested against inequality and injustice meted out to their communities by the mainstream Hindu society. For instance, the literary narratives from the dossiers titled *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011) and *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2013), edited and introduced by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, depict caste realities and discrimination, as well as day-to-day lived life experiences of Dalit communities. These narratives were written by the first-generation educated Dalits in their respective regional languages and later got translated into English by others. Most of the Dalit literature is written in the form of an autobiography. However, these autobiographies are unlike autobiographies of upper-caste people. Dalit autobiographies as M. S. S. Pandian rightly points out while analyzing the Tamil autobiographies *Karukku* (1992) by Bama and *Vadu* (1995) by K.A. Gunasekharan:

What is extraordinary about *Karukku* and *Vadu* is their ordinariness. For one thing, both the texts, contrary to the normal practice of publishing, do not employ the formal, grammatically-bound Tamil. Instead, they use the colloquial Tamil with its regional

and caste inflections. While the upper caste readers could enter this language only with a degree of effort and with a sense of unfamiliarity, these texts distance themselves from the formal and establish the ordinary as their chosen domain. (Pandian, “Writing Ordinary” 35)

The characters of most of the Dalit literary texts depict the lives of ordinary lower caste people, who mostly live outside the villages. For instance, in the novella, *Kusumabale* (2011), Devanuru Mahadeva, a well-known Kannada Dalit writer, used his Nanjanagudu dialect and magic realism in the narration. This novella cannot be completely understood by even Kannada-speaking readers. This novella has characters from untouchable communities in a small village who are both rebels as well as victims in the story. Thus Dalit writers across the country have deployed different narrative techniques and styles.

Raj Kumar, who has extensively worked on Dalit literature, is of the view:

Apart from being marginal, Dalits have been denied education for quite a long time in the Indian caste society. Now, that they are getting educated, some of them have been using writing as a weapon for their social assertion. Thus writing an autobiography is a social act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilise resistance against different forms of oppression. (Kumar, “Dalit Personal” 5)

As Raj Kumar points out, educated Dalits have used their writing as a medium to narrate their lived life experiences and for social assertion. They also produced their literature in different forms resisting caste atrocities by exploring their identity, culture, and history. If we trace the history of the beginning of the Dalit literature, as documented by Satyanarayana and Susie:

The beginnings of dalit literature are traced back to Ambedkar's struggles for Dalit emancipation in the early twentieth century. Ambedkar pioneers what we think of today as dalit writing. Marathi dalit critics cite the legacy of Buddha (sixth century BCE), Chokhamela, the fourteenth century bhakti saint, Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1828-90) and Prof S.M. Mate (1886-1957) as the originators of the anti-caste movements and literatures in the Marathi- speaking region. (Satyanarayana and Taru, "The Exercise" 12)

Other pioneering Dalit scholars and activists were Iyothee Thass, Kusuma Dharmanna, Bhagya Reddy Varma, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Yohannan (Satyanarayana and Taru, "The Exercise" 12). Although there was resistance against the caste system and other inequalities in India, due to the complex nature of the caste system, caste practices have continued to survive in India. It was only in the early 20th century the protest against the caste system rejuvenated with the entry of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a foreign-educated. In his socio-political activism, he was a strong advocate of education for the Depressed Classes like Jyotirao Phule. He worked for the upliftment of depressed communities in India by socially and politically organizing them. His famous words for his depressed brethren were 'educate, agitate and organize' told at the All India Depressed Classes Conference in July 1942 in Nagpur (Tandale). The Dalit Panthers¹² movement, which came into existence in 1970 in Maharashtra also strongly demanded education, protested against caste atrocities, and produced literature exploring caste discrimination in everyday life and poverty. They also brought to the literature the language and culture of lower caste and slum people who live in ghettos. Dalit literature exploring these themes has been written in both English and regional languages.

The currently available Dalit autobiographies in vernacular languages and Dalit autobiographies in English translation have been extensively studied, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, vis-a-vis Dalit empowerment, resistance against caste discrimination, including overcoming dependence of caste Hindus, etc. However, even though there are a significant number of Dalit autobiographies and memoirs available in English, these works have received less attention in academia. In this context, this chapter attempts to study those Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English, such as *Waiting for a Visa* (1935) by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by D.P. Das, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) by Prof. Shyamlal, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, *My Father Baliah* (2011) by Y.B. Satyanarayana. This chapter will also study contemporary memoirs written in English such as *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde and Dalit women's memoirs such as *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yaschica Dutt. The main objective of this chapter is to critically study the select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English to analyze what has educated Dalits across generations written about education in their narratives, how they received a formal education, and to what extent education helped them in their struggles for emancipation as narrated by them.

Ambedkar and Education:

The first available Dalit autobiographical (short) narrative in English is *Waiting for a Visa* (1935) by Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956) who belonged to the Mahar caste in Maharashtra. The text was written in 1935 or 1936 when he was 46. This brief autobiographical narrative has explicitly described how Ambedkar was ill-treated and discriminated against by not only Hindus but also Parsi, Muslims, and Christians in India. The text also briefly recounts his

childhood and schooling where he was discriminated against because of his lower caste status. He recalls, “I knew that in school I could not sit in the midst of my classmates according to my rank (in class performance), but that I was to sit in a corner by myself” (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 7). He was not allowed to share the classroom with other students. His education journey was unlike his contemporary, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, an upper-caste Hindu. Gandhi in his autobiography recalls his school days “I must have been about seven when my father left Porbandar for Rajkot to become a member of the Rajasthani Court. There I was put into a primary school, and I can well recollect those days, including the names and other particulars of the teachers who taught me” (20). He further recalls “From this school I went to the suburban school and thence to the high school, having already reached my twelfth year” (20). Because Gandhi belonged to a higher privileged caste family, he had easy access to the formal education system whereas lower caste persons like Ambedkar had to face challenges to receive formal education in pre-independent India. However, despite the discrimination and humiliation he experienced from caste Hindus, Ambedkar devoted his time for study all his life and became a scholar, politician, and social reformer who dedicated his life to the upliftment of the downtrodden sections of India. He has become an inspiration for millions belonging to Depressed communities. Ambedkar did not write much about his education or his thoughts on education in *Waiting for a Visa* as it is not a full-length autobiography but only a short piece of writing. Yet Ambedkar’s thoughts on education can be documented from the details written by a few of his attendants. Namdeo Nimgade, one of his attendants, recalls the advice Dr. Ambedkar gave to the group of people on 15th April 1951:

On 15th April 1951, Ambedkar spoke to the gathering about the importance of education. That day he exhorted the several thousands in the audience to seek education for themselves and their children. He advised equal education for both sexes. ‘Only

education will take our community to the pinnacle. Be truthful and bold!’ Later he would say, ‘Educate, Organize, Agitate: secure your futures by yourselves!.. (147)

Nimgade notes Ambedkar’s views on education that education has emancipatory potential and it is indeed an essential tool for oppressed communities and both males and females must get educated for their upliftment. Another attendant of Ambedkar, Nanak Chand Rattu, was also of the view that Ambedkar saw education as the strongest weapon for oppressed people. He recounts:

Dr. Ambedkar played so many important roles in the stage of his life. The popular image of Dr. Ambedkar was an iconoclast, represented only a part, his personality for he was also a constructive statesman, who regarded education as a nation-building activity, as a powerful weapon to uplift the down-trodden brethren. He was fully conscious of spreading education among his down-trodden brethren. He believed that it was only through the widest diffusion that India’s oppressed millions could be made conscious of their rights as human beings and citizens of their country and that education was the strongest weapon for fighting for their rights and privileges and that without proper education the chances of their progress were remote. (65)

From the above note, it would be understood that Ambedkar thought of education as a human right, a nation-building activity that is necessary for all, particularly for those who are oppressed. Ambedkar himself was an avid reader who appraised education to a great extent. Moreover, he had his library where he used to study hard. Devi Dayal, who looked after Ambedkar’s house as well as his library in Delhi, recalls his study habits:

When, at 1.30 past midnight I left him, he had asked me to keep copies of the required books on a side stool and retired to my room after bowing to him. This was the routine when he rose from his table at midnight or at one, or sometimes even later, and lay on

his bed. He would have me keep around eight to ten books with him, and would indulge in reading. I never knew what time he slept. If I ever knew, it was through his own revelations. (137)

The above diary entry of Devi Dayal emphasizes Ambedkar's admiration for reading and books. Ambedkar firmly believed that through education, depressed classes could look for a better life and liberation. He, who was a staunch critic of Hinduism which prohibited Dalits from getting education, strongly advocated for education and higher education for depressed communities in India. He did not see education as a mere tool for material benefits, moreover, he saw it as a human right and he thought education is important for all kinds of development of human persona and nation-building. Shailaja Paik argues that Ambedkar stressed education for Dalits for their emancipation as well as for their citizenship. She is of the view that, for Ambedkar, education had a social and political function: to provide a social continuity to Dalits' deformed lives and to prepare them for their new role as modern citizens in the democratic Indian body politic. Thus, politics was at the heart of the Dalit pedagogical question (Paik). She further writes:

Significantly, some Dalit women and men including Ambedkar emphasised in the newspaper *Prabuddha Bharat* dated 21 July 1956 that Dalits were to become *nirbhay*, that is fearless and were to inculcate *svatantra vichaar aani vrutti* (independent thoughts and temperaments). In this manner, Ambedkar interlinked the Dalit fight for education with their fight for equality, including equal rights to humanitarianism, human dignity, self-help, and most importantly citizenship. Thus Dalits did not fight merely to attend school or to obtain employment, their agenda went beyond that. Education was for dignity, empowerment, self-help, emancipation and community uplift. (Paik)

As Paik rightly pointed out, Ambedkar did not demand education only for employment but for citizenship, equality, dignity, and emancipation. In pre-independent India, untouchables did not have access to formal education. Ambedkar, however, aspired and endeavored to get education despite the hurt, humiliation, and caste discrimination by Savarna Hindus. Eventually, he has become an inspiration and a role model to crores of depressed communities in India. Undoubtedly, Dr. Ambedkar is the epitome of knowledge and inspiration to millions of depressed communities in India.

Like Ambedkar, Hazari also believed that education is emancipatory in his inspiring life story *Untouchable: Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1965). According to M.K. Naik, “Hazari is the pseudonym of Marcus Abraham Malik, the first man from the depressed classes to write an autobiography” (272). Hazari’s autobiography is said to be the first full-length autobiography in English by an untouchable man. The autobiography was first published under the title *An Indian Outcaste* in 1951 in London. Later it was published in India under the title *I was an Outcaste* in 1957 (Naik 272). Hazari belonged to an untouchable caste in the Moradabad district of Uttar Pradesh. It is a story of a self-made man who aspired to learn reading and writing but was unfortunately deprived of it in his own country because of his caste and social status. This autobiography was written when he was thirty years old. It explores the life journey of an untouchable who struggled hard to get a formal education in pre-independence India but later he left India and went abroad with the financial support of a British for higher education in search of peace and knowledge. Hazari recounts his family background: “We as a caste have no other work or profession than to keep the village clean, in fact, to do all the work of scavengers: sweeping roads, cleaning latrines, and salvaging dead animals” (5). Born in a poverty-stricken untouchable family, he realized in his childhood that only through education he could hope for a better life, so he strived hard to receive education during pre-independent India. In the introduction of this autobiography, Beatrice Pitney Lamb writes “Hazari’s struggle

to gain education is a main theme of the book” (Hazari “Untouchable” vii). His zeal for education in a pre-independence time when there was no entry for Dalits to obtain formal education made him struggle for education. His distant relative, Yogi Ananda, persuaded Hazari and his parents to educate him. Hazari recalls:

It did not matter which colloquial dialect I learned; in our region, there were two- Hindi and Urdu. When my father promised that he would do his best, I was very happy; but I was so anxious to start that, after two or three days, I asked my father if he could find someone to teach me to read right away. My father said that he could make no promises at the moment because there was no one in the community, except a few Christians, who could read or write, and the family and the community generally were against approaching them. (37)

Hazari’s parents were not educated; hence, Yogi Ananda, their distant relative, influenced the family to educate their son. It was the starting point where Hazari developed an interest in learning. But in pre-independence India, as there was no formal schooling system for untouchables to receive education, he did not get formal education. However, his keen interest and determination to study resulted in getting informal education from missionaries in the beginning and later by Muslim maulvi. He had initially attended classes conducted by Christian missionaries. But later, he stopped attending classes after realizing that the missionary’s aim was not to provide education but to convert. Hazari recalls “The missionary saw me, asked me to sit down with the other children, and gave me a book with the letters of the alphabet and a picture of Christ on the cross. He taught me just a few of the letters and asked me to come again the next day” (54). On the advice of Yogi Ananda, his parents decided to leave their village in search of a job and better life. They moved to Shimla to work as servants to Englishmen in India.

For Hazari, moving from his village to Shimla changes his life especially when he worked as a servant for British officers who encouraged him to study. Hazari narrates, “The real change for me came when both my parents were engaged by an I.C.S man in the Indian Civil Service and his young wife just out from England. These people, whom I will refer to as Mr. and Mr. Mason, took a house in a remote part of Simla” (66). While working in Shimla, he happened to meet a clerk there, who motivated him to get education and get a good job, so the clerk introduced Hazari to a Muslim maulvi. Hazari recalls, “The fee was 2 rupees a month per head, plus the books. We made our own pens from a kind of thin bamboo stick, and we carried our ink pots, the ink being made from a cheap powder” (69). He studied there and learned to read Quran and dreamt of a new life. Hazari further recalls:

To me, it was a great thing to be able to carry my books under my arm every morning, as I had watched other children do. In my great pride and self-respect, I almost forgot that I was only an untouchable. The clerk’s remarks were fresh in my memory every morning as I set off: “My boy, you would make a very good Babu clerk for the Government of India,” and I used to picture myself as a Babu going to the office every morning – the big building on the mall in Simla, where all the peons and office boys wore red coats with gold braid. (70)

Hazari was keen on learning and he tried to create a learning environment around him when he worked in Shimla, Bombay, and Aligarh. Although a Maulvi taught him for a few years in Shimla, he did not have formal education. Thus, one day Mr. Newman, an Englishman for whom he worked advised him to go to school. Hazari recounts:

He suggested that I go to school. He inquired around to see if there was a school that would take me, handicapped as I was by my lack of formal education in childhood and my advanced age for the classes at my level. He could find no such school, The only

possible solution was that I should continue to study under a private tutor. Mr. Newman gave me such books as *The Life of Napoleon*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, while Mr. Lawder contributed *Treasure Island* and *The three Musketeers*. So these were my first books. (166-167)

Mr. Newman not only advised Hazari to go to school but also gave books and encouraged him to study further. It was a piece of life-changing advice for Hazari. When Mr. Newman returned to India, Hazari recollects:

I expected him to ask me to go back into his service, but, instead, he asked me if I would like to go to Europe for three years, if he paid my expenses. There, he told me, I would not find the many difficulties that faced me in India. This was more than a surprise to me. I wanted to see Europe, but I had never thought of going there as a student and an independent man. (190-191)

When in his own country he was prohibited from learning by caste Hindus, it was Christian and Muslim teachers who informally taught him initially for a few years. His education journey was different from those that belonged to the upper caste in pre-independent India. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his autobiography he had private tutors to teach him. He recounts, “I grew up and spent my early years as a somewhat lonely child with no companions of my age. I did not even have the companionship of children at school for I was not sent to any kindergarten or primary school. Governesses or private tutors were supposed to be in charge of my education” (1). Due to their upper caste and class privilege people like Gandhi and Nehru managed to receive formal education in pre-independent India without any difficulties. But people like Hazari, from poor untouchable caste backgrounds, struggled to get education as they did not have access to formal education in the beginning of the 20th century. Hazari, hence, strived to receive formal education in India. He eventually went abroad for

higher education with the financial support of Mr. Newman. Undoubtedly it is an inspiring autobiography that sheds light on the importance of education which changes the life of oppressed people like Hazari. Hazari's life narrative is a testimony to understanding the importance of education which is a powerful weapon for upliftment.

Another autobiography *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by Daya Rama Jatava (1933), also depicts the life of Jatava who had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He belonged to the Chamar caste in Uttar Pradesh and he strived to obtain education despite poverty and caste discrimination. He was an Ambedkarite. He writes in the introduction of the text: "Once more I can tell the Ambedkarites as well as the enlightened readers that the sole aim of writing this autobiography is not to give an elaborate account of my own life and works, but to show how I came in contact with the great name of our saviour, Dr. Ambedkar; and how I tried to walk the way he himself had travelled on" (vi). Influenced by Ambedkar's thoughts, he aspired to get formal education by doing small jobs when his father died. Jatava recalls his father's vision for his son's life:

My father was an illiterate, yet he was intelligent enough to cope with the social circumstances prevailing, then. When he looked at persons, who were educated, did wear good clean clothes and served in government offices, he wished me to have education and go to a school. He never thought of me doing Mazduri, labour, for a pittance as he himself had done throughout his life. (3)

His father's strong determination to educate Jatava can be understood from the above lines. After his father's death, his mother works in the shop to financially support the family. While working in the shop, she was advised by the Baniya owner to send him to school. Jatava recounts:

My passion for education yielded good results. How did it happen? It was more a horror tale than a pleasure trip towards education. I had learnt from someone, “earn, and also learn”. No doubt, after a certain age, earning and learning can go together, which means to be independent and self-confident in life. I had the benefit of it, and I wish and earnestly suggest to the youngsters to tread the same road. (9)

As Jatava narrated, his education journey was not a pleasant one. He had to work hard to receive education. He was doing small jobs in his village while schooling to support both his family and his education. He learned to be independent in his life. When denied teaching by others, a Muslim teacher named Babu Khan taught him in Madarasa and encouraged him to study further. Jatava was taught Hindi, Urdu, and English before he joined Government school. He recalls his school:

In due course, I got myself admitted into a primary Government school where things were harsh and hostile for an untouchable boy. The majority of boys and girls belonged to the upper strata of society; most of them being well-off, regarded themselves as superior. I was always cautious of their mischievous conduct. The caste feelings were rampant in the school, and I had to sit in an outside corner of the room, almost alienated from the other schoolmates. (11)

As Ambedkar mentioned in his *Waiting for a Visa*, an autobiographical narrative, he experienced caste discrimination in his school (7), Jatava also wrote about his experiences from his school days when he was made to sit outside the classroom. *Joothan* (2003), the first Hindi Dalit autobiography by Om Prakash Valmiki also depicts similar but painful experiences Valmiki faced in his school. Valmiki recounts:

One day the headmaster, Kaliram, called me to his room and asked: “Abey, what is your name?” “Omprakash,” I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel

scares just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him. “Chuhre ka?” the headmaster threw his second question at me. “Ji.” “All right. See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. “Go—get to it. (5)

Valmiki was asked to clean the school for three consecutive days and by the third day, Valmiki was in utter sorrow and helplessness. With his father sees Valmiki cleaning the school, screaming at the schoolmaster, “Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who forces my son to sweep?” (6), his father questions the school teacher and both argue. Valmiki recounts “Pitaji took my hand and started walking toward our home. As he walked away, he said, loud enough for the headmaster to hear, “You are a teacher. So I am leaving now. But remember this much, Master: This Chuhre ka will study right here, in this school. And not just him, there will be more coming after him” (7). Later with the help of a village Pradhan his father sends Valmiki to the same school. It can be argued that not only physical (classroom) space that upper caste teachers worry about, as they normally think that with the entry of untouchables to the classroom that space gets polluted, but also intellectual (knowledge-producing) space which they are unwilling to share with lower caste students. There is a double discrimination that takes place in the classroom – one for untouchability and another for merit (knowledge) of which Dalit students are victims. The majority of the Dalit personal narratives depict the similar but varied kinds of humiliation and shame that they experience in educational institutions. The upper caste teacher instead of helping lower caste students in learning, dehumanize and demoralize them. It is worth mentioning the ‘banking model of education’ introduced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who theorizes how students are considered knowledge receivers, hence being dehumanized by the teachers who consider themselves custodians of knowledge.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. (72)

The teacher, as Freire theorizes, considers himself superior because he thinks he is the depositor of knowledge to the students, whereas students are the receiver of the knowledge given by the teacher. Freire argues 'banking model education' would not help students to know reality, it instead prevents them from decoding it. "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire, "Pedagogy of" 81). In the Indian context, the knowledge and education system was traditionally reserved and controlled by the priestly caste, Brahmin, and the castes below the Brahmin were prohibited from getting education for ages. In post-colonial India, although these depressed castes have access to educational institutions, these lower-caste students are ill-treated by upper-caste teachers, who believe in the banking model of education as they think they are superior to lower-caste people. In India, instead of providing a 'problem-solving education model,' mostly the 'baking model of education' is followed at school and college level education. Moreover, what should be studied in schools and colleges would be decided mainly by upper caste

intellectuals, in other words, power/knowledge¹³ produced by them against the lower caste students. As a result, lower caste students are made to study the syllabus designed by upper castes, which is far from their day-to-day lived experiences, and therefore, students belonging to lower castes feel alienated in the classroom, like Jatava mentioned his personal experience of alienation in his autobiography (11). Given these circumstances, lower caste students face discrimination and humiliation in classrooms by both upper caste teachers and students. Discrimination against lower-class students takes mostly based on caste, language, culture, merit, appearance, etc. Kancha Ilaiah points out the glaring cultural differences between Sanskritized Brahmin students and non-Sanskritized Dalit Bahujan¹⁴ students in his seminal book *Why I am not a Hindu*: He recounts:

Even after schools were opened to us because of independence or swaraj, a word which even today I fail to understand, the school teacher was against us, the textbook language was against us. Our homes have one culture and the schools have another culture. If our culture was Dalitbahujan, the culture of the school was Hindu. The gap between the two was enormous. There was no way in which one resembled the other. In fact these two cultures were poles apart. (14)

As Ilaiah opined there has been a noticeable cultural difference between Caste Hindus and Bahujan. In post-Independent India, the education institutions are mostly owned and controlled by upper-caste people and they promote their caste Hindu culture and values through syllabi and curriculum in their educational institutions. In other words, the Brahmanical elite education system leads to ‘othering’ the students from lower castes. The term ‘Othering’ was coined by post-colonial critic Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak for the process by which imperial

¹³ The concept ‘power/knowledge’ was introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault.

¹⁴ The term ‘Dalit Bahujan’ was coined by Kancha Ilaiah. The term refers to depressed communities such as Other Backward classes, Schedules Caste (ex-untouchables) and Tribes of India.

discourse creates its 'others' (Aschcroft et al. 156). In the Indian context, Savarna castes are colonizers/oppressors of lower castes/oppressed who create 'other' through their power, domination, and exclusion due to their caste supremacy. As a result, students from lower caste backgrounds have been unable to cope with Brahminical educational ethos which is alien to their lived experiences. Due to oppressive and systematic caste discrimination and humiliation, Dalit students experience brutal caste realities like D.R. Jatava had to face in his school.

However, what is remarkable is despite the discrimination in schools, D.R. Jatava and Om Prakash Valmiki pursued their study and showed the path for the upcoming generation of Dalit communities. In the case of Jatava, his strong determination to do higher education despite poverty and caste discrimination encouraged him to complete his higher education. He worked hard and was able to fulfill his thirst for knowledge. Jatava notes "I had learnt from the wise ones that only hard work could make a man successful. I practiced it earnestly, and got success in B.A. Examination with II division from the Agra University in June, 1955" (21). His determination to get higher education paid off and he went on to pursue both B.A. and M.A. He passed his M.A. (Philosophy) examination with a good second division in April 1958 (25). He further states, "In fact, as a result of Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's deep impression on my mind, I thought of doing Ph.D. like him to be honoured and called a 'Doctor' as people used to prefix it before his name. I had developed a liking for a doctorate" (27). Although he was enrolled in a Ph.D. course, his Ph.D. journey was not easy though his supervisor, Dr. B.G. Tiwari was supportive and kind. Jatava recalls his supervisor and notes that he was twice not recommended for a doctoral degree after the viva-voce by the upper-caste external member Dr. Diwan Chand. During this time his supervisor argued with Dr. Chand, an external member, not to discourage the young researcher. However, Dr. Chand did not agree to the award. Jatava's supervisor then suggest Jatava to prepare well for the next viva-voce and encouraged him (43-44). These kinds of discrimination take place even today in educational institutions in India.

As mentioned before, caste discrimination persists in all institutions including education; as a result, lowered-caste people like Jatava face caste discrimination for his/her caste identity. He wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the topic “A Critical Estimate of the Social Philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar”. Despite the problems created by the upper caste external member during his Ph.D. viva, Jatava succeeded in defending his Ph.D. thesis finally and achieved his goal of being Dr. Jatava (56). It is important to mention that like Jatava many Dalit students and research scholars in higher education institutions across India face caste discrimination and humiliation from Caste Hindus even today which sometimes leads to Dalit students’ suicide. There have been many instances of suicides of Dalit students even in premier higher education institutions in India. To cite a few - Rohit Vemula from the University of Hyderabad committed suicide in January 2016, Payal Tadvi from Topiwala National Medical College, Maharashtra in May 2019 died by suicide and Darshan Solanki from IIT Bombay killed himself in February 2023. These lower caste students are victims of persisting caste atrocities in Indian society. In the case of Jatava, he worked hard and submitted his Ph.D. thesis, and was awarded a doctoral degree. He then worked as a permanent lecturer and retired as a principal in 1991 (138). Jatava’s life story demonstrated the important role that education played in his life. He, like Ambedkar, firmly believed that only education can emancipate depressed communities from poverty and caste oppression. Jatava’s autobiography is another testimonial from a downtrodden section of India that highlights the significance of education and the struggles to acquire it. This autobiography is unlike autobiographies of upper caste writers who mostly celebrated their childhood and educational journey.

The autobiography *My Father Baliah* by Y.B. Satyanarayana also revolves around education that changed the future of the Yelukati family. He belonged to the Madiga caste in Telangana. His father, Baliah, who was a small employee in the railway department knew only basic Telugu. Satyanarayana recalls his father’s desire “It was Baliah’s deepest wish that his

children be educated and become high-ranking and well-respected officers in the railways. For this, he was prepared to work extremely hard. Whenever he met an official, he imagined his children holding such a position one day” (73-74). Satyanarayana’s father, Baliah, was semi-educated and he firmly believed that only education can change the lives of his children. He, therefore, worked hard to provide education to all his children. Y. B. Satyanarayana notes that his father thought that education was the strongest weapon. He recalls his father’s dream:

My father’s world was the railways, where he worked. Punctuality, discipline and the ability to work hard were his strengths. He had no great desire to make his children collectors or bureaucrats; rather, he wanted them to learn good English and become officers in the railways, an institution beyond which he could not see. His environs did not make him think further. He wanted his sons to become stationmasters, like his bosses. And for this, he chose the strongest weapon he knew – education. (xxi)

Baliah firmly believed that his sons must get a good education and learn English well so that they would be able to be station masters. He certainly knew the value of the education he even himself tried to receive at a young age but due to poverty, he could not get it formally. He, therefore, had a strong determination and vision to send his children to school. Y. B. Satyanarayana recalls in the author’s note:

Had my father not felt the importance of education, had he not been in the railways, we would probably not have seen the days and good fortune that we did. His determination was responsible for us getting education despite our poverty and social maladies like segregation and untouchability that were quite prevalent in that era. Apart from doing his regular work, he worked as a coolie to earn some extra money so he could send his children to school. (xxi)

Baliah's family was big and he had school-going children at home; thus, he worked hard to earn extra money apart from his salary which was not sufficient to educate all his children. Due to his hard work, his dream became true when his sons got formal education and when the up-coming generation of his family became an educated family with employment. After receiving a good education, Baliah's sons managed to get higher-ranking jobs in the government and private sectors. The autobiography revolves around the major role of education that changed the future of the Yelukati family.

Baliah was semi-literate but his children studied in Government schools. But their next-generation people, grandchildren, studied in private convents in English medium. The autobiography reflects the generational change that happened in the Yelukati family where education played a key role in uplifting them. This autobiography stands as a testimonial to voice for education for the depressed communities as well as acknowledges the Railway service, a part of colonial modernity, which empowers lower caste people like Baliah's family by providing them employment opportunities.

The autobiography *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by Debi Prasad Das also highlights the importance of education. Das belonged to the Dhobi caste in West Bengal and he was a second-generation educated in his family. His father and uncle were government employees in the Postal department. Das's grandmother's strong determination to give education to her children, whom she did not want to see doing Dobi (washerman) job, changed her family's future when she sent her sons to school. Das recalls, "The widow was a progressive and forward-looking woman, much ahead of her time and very different from the rest of the flock. She had decided that her two sons should not end up by beating other people's dirty lines" (3). While recalling his grandmother's strong desire to provide her children with a good education, Das further narrates, "She started to beat people's clothes with helpers, sparing her sons enough

time to attend school. She had accepted their help only when she was sure that beating clothes, arranging dry clothes in neat piles, ironing them, and later delivering them at customers' houses did not interfere with their education" (3). Das's grandmother's dream came true when her sons got government jobs in the postal department. Das recounts "In the long run grandmother had won. Her sons got openings in the Indian postal department as clerks, moving up slowly on the service ladder to retiring as postmasters in important post offices in the Barisal district. Father entered service sometime in 1899. Uncle joined him later" (4). She felt happy when her sons got the job and settled into their lives. Das recalls:

But by that time her two sons had become confirmed *bhadralok* (gentlemen) by being privileged to suffix the appellation "Babu" to their names which in those days was the *desi* (native) equivalent for a pure and genuine "Mister". She had felt very proud that her sons had become "gentlemen" and the house her husband built was no longer a *dhobi-house*. (4-5)

Das narrates that his grandmother was satisfied with her life having seen the success of her sons and family prosperity. She was content that her hard work yielded fruits. Das recounts that he joined the school in 1934 and his father took him to the school that day. He recalls that "Education in our time was not free but cheap. In primary classes, we paid fees which must have been less than four annas rising to eight. In higher classes, the tuition fees varied from one rupee to two. That was all" (50). He studied B. A and M.A. After that, he worked in Central Secretariat Service, UPSC. Das writes:

Honestly I did not suffer any extreme indignity in my association with high-caste Hindus in Barisal. Probably it is due to the Bengali middle-class background of our social environment where the tentacles of feudalism were the least in evidence. In my

life the situation did not look at all very sombre. Father and uncle also had not suffered the crass abrasive side of apartheid. (285)

As Das's father was a government employee, he had a regular job with a salary. Financially, he did not have a problem, unlike the first-generation educated Dalits who had to struggle hard to get education. His family managed to overcome their traditional job, Dhobi, and became an educated family. Das's grandmother's fore-sightedness, vision, and determination changed the life of Das's family where education played a key role in changing the family's prosperity.

Another fascinating life story is *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) by Prof. Shyamlal who belonged to the Bhangi caste which is the most marginalized among the marginalized in Rajasthan. The autobiography depicts how education has changed the life of Shyamlal. He narrates, "With the dawn of Independence, the doors of education were opened to lower castes. During this period of transition, some Bhangi parents sent their children to school. My father too thought it was wise to send his sons to school and my elder brother at the age of 7 years began his elementary studies at Bhangi School" (9-10). As he belonged to a poor Bhangi caste family which is more oppressed, he fought all difficulties in his life to get education. Shyamlal recalls his school days:

Although school was a government institution, the atmosphere in the school was not free from casteism. There were some prejudices and feelings. All such insulting refusals and ill treatment engendered in me a burning hatred for Hinduism. In my childhood days, this was the treatment I met with at the hands of my co-religionists- the galling humiliation and the inhuman treatment under which my whole community had been labouring for untold ages. (17-18)

Shyamlal performed well in studies to overcome the problems they experienced for the ages. He further recalls, “Harassment, humiliations, untouchabilities, hunger and what not, inspired us for receiving higher education for emancipation of our low social status” (22). As discussed earlier, caste practices exist even in educational institutions where upper-class/caste teachers and students humiliate and discriminate against lower-caste students. Hence, Shyamlal’s determination to get higher education became a reality and he eventually became a professor despite poverty. He even worked as Vice-chancellor of J.N.V University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan. The life story of Shyamlal is inspiring and emphasizes the importance of education for marginalized communities.

Narendra Jadhav’s memoir, which narrates the life story of three generations of his family, also mainly reflects on how education has empowered his family. He belonged to the Mahar caste in Maharashtra. His parents were involved in the social movement led by Dr. Ambedkar were aware of the value of education and were influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Jadhav’s father’s dream to give good education to his children came true when they moved to Mumbai from a small village. Damu could not get education because of his caste lower caste identity and poverty. He once told his wife, Soney, that when they have children, they would send their children to school and make them read and write (104). This autobiographical narrative sheds light on the importance of education. Jadhav further recounts, “The most profound way in which Babasaheb Ambedkar influenced my father’s generation was to teach them the importance of education. ‘Educate, Unite, and Agitate’ did not remain a mere slogan; it became the vow of the entire Dalit community. So Dada was always watchful about our studies” (237).

Jadhav recalls his father’s determination to educate his children has changed their family’s future. His father, a follower of Ambedkar, strived hard to work, earn and give

education to his children. Jadhav was born in 1953. He studied in a Marathi medium school in Mumbai. He recounts his education:

We went to a Marathi medium school. The English language was offered only in middle school. But I knew some English even when I was in primary school as my elder siblings used to practice their English at home. On summer Janu taught me the English alphabet and made me practice scribbling them over and over again. (235)

As Jadhav's father, being influenced by Ambedkar, was aware of the crucial role of education in life, he sent his children to school who gradually excelled in their studies, got jobs, and became self-made individuals. Jadhav, in the book *Touchable Tales* in an interview with S. Anand, says that Dalits are well-aware and have understood that "Education is the only means to transform their fate, and they are doing it in a big way" (34). He further opines about his Marathi autobiography *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi* (1993) (*Outcaste* in English (2003)) that his memoir is different than Marathi Dalit literature which focused mainly on caste violence, atrocities, and revolt against the system. He writes "I think my Marathi book broke that impasse and narrated a positive story which, while highlighting atrocities committed by others, focused more on the possibility of somebody refusing to be defined by circumstances and achieving their aspirations by fighting within the system. I believe that it was this positive message that touched a large number of people" (32). From the words of Jadhav, it can be known that his memoir narrates not only caste oppression but also his success story and how he became a self-made person with education. This autobiographical narrative is one of the best testimonials to understand the indispensable role of education that uplifts Dalits.

The family story *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla also emphasizes the essential role of education, which changed the lives of generations of her Kambham family. Gidla belongs to the Mala Christian family in Telangana. She was born an untouchable in

Andhra Pradesh, India. She currently lives in New York and works as a conductor on the subway. In *Ants Among Elephants*, she narrated how Christian missionaries have helped her community, particularly her family, to get education. She recounts:

My great-grandparents had six sons. The youngest was my grandfather, Prasanna Rao Kambham. (The surname Kambham was taken by the clan from the Khammam region they had left behind). When Prasanna Rao's family converted to Christianity, his three eldest brothers were already too old to overcome their fear of reading and writing. They did not dare attempt something so far outside their place. They lived out their lives as coolies, while their three younger brothers, including Prasanna Rao, went to the mission school, where they were trained as teachers. (16)

Gidla's grandfather, Prasanna Rao, was given education by Christian missionaries. He was also trained as a teacher by them. He worked as a teacher. His son Satya Murthy, who became a communist leader, was later sent to school and college. But poverty did not escape this family. Satya Murthy struggled against poverty while he was doing his college education. Gidla recounts her uncle:

Poverty was nothing new to him. All his life he had been poor. In Slatter Peta the difference between his family and the rest of the malas was small. They were all ants. It mattered little if one was a bit bigger than the others. But here at A.C. College, Satyam was an ant among elephants. No other student was in his situation. He suffered from hunger, but even more from loneliness and shame. (33)

Due to financial problems, Satya Murthy had to face loneliness and shame in his college. There he studied many books and magazines and became conscious of inequality and determined to fight for equality. Gidla's mother, Manjula's educational journey was not an easy one; she like her brother had to struggle to receive education. Although she had all the

necessary qualifications to be a lecturer, due to a lack of government jobs she worked in private colleges where she experienced both caste and gender discrimination. Gidla recalls:

After seven years of temporary positions, night jobs, and outings, while still waiting for a government job, Manjula responded to a job advertisement. It was a full-time position at Padmavathi Women's College in Tirupati. She attended an interview and received posting orders from the Sri Venkateswara University board to report to the Women's College. (242)

Though Manjula managed to get a job in the college, she was not allowed to report to duty on the ground of her caste. Finally, she got a lecturing job in a government college. Gidla's mother and father were both lecturers in a Government college. She is the third generation educated in her family. This narrative mainly depicts the lives of four generations of Gidla's family who due to the influence of Christianity got benefitted and received education. In this long story, Gidla is one of the small characters who received a good education in a private convent, unlike her parents who had to face many challenges to get higher education. Gidla narrates her schooling that her mother "Manjula enrolled Suja in the American Baptist Mission School, a pleasant, spacious, peaceful school. In missionary schools, where the staff are all untouchables, the untouchable children are not made to feel out of place. Manjula paid the fees, had Suja's uniform tailored, and hired a rickshaw man to take her daughter to school" (277).

At the beginning of this narrative, Gidla recounts: "I was born in south India, in a town called Khazipet in the state of Andhra Pradesh. I was born into a lower middle class family. My parents were college lecturers. I was born an untouchable" (1). Since she is a third-generation educated and belongs to a middle-class family, she did not have to struggle financially to get formal education, unlike her uncle and parents. She did her schooling in a private Christian convent. She studied physics at Regional Engineering College, Warangal, and

was later a researcher in applied physics at Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. She currently lives in New York and works as a conductor on the subway. Gidla's family story has reflected on education given by Christian missionaries and how it has changed and empowered three generations of Gidla's family.

Like Sujatha Gidla, Yashica Dutt is also the third generation educated but belonged to the Bhangi caste in Rajasthan. She currently works as a journalist in the US. She too recalls how her grandfather got education. She recalls in her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* that her great-grandfather worked as a professional photographer of foreign tourists outside the Jaipur Amber's port and he defied the caste-based occupation and challenged the system. Gidla recounts that her great-grandfather's hard work and determination yielded his son became a graduate of English literature (9). She further narrates:

His protest against the caste system allowed my grandfather to graduate with a degree in English literature. He taught at a high school as he prepared for the CSE. His father and, later, his older brother-Dad uncle-supported him through the years he studied. He was also supported by his wife. My grandfather's first wife worked as a manual scavenger, cleaning dry excrement from people's homes. (9)

Dutt narrates that her great-grandfather tried to learn by challenging caste rules when he was denied teaching. His fight against the caste system and his strong determination to educate his son came true so his son became a civil service officer. Dutt's father did not have to struggle to get education as he had support from his father so he too became a Civil service officer. Dutt's mother is also a post-graduate in History but her educational journey was not easy, not because of the financial problem but because of her gender. Her mother's choice of subject and university was not accepted by her parents (4). As Dutt's parents were educated,

she was able to receive a convent education. She recalls her mother's desire to enroll her daughter in a good school and they succeeded in their attempt finally. Dutt recounts:

From the time I was very young, I was in training to join Sophia, which was then considered one of the top convent schools in Ajmer. Mum and I would rehearse for the interview every chance we got-when she was pulling on my shocks, feeding me dinner or when we were standing in line at the grocery store. She did not even want to wait for me to reach the eligible age of four, so went for an interview when I was three. (23)

Although Dutt did not clear the interview on her first attempt, she did it on the second attempt the following year. She recounts "When I appeared for the interview a year later, it was with a different principal. But nothing would have made a difference since I decided that, no matter what, I was going to clear the interview this time, and I did. Sophia school's convent education impacted my life in all the ways Mum had imagined it would" (23). For Dutt, studying in a private convent changed her life. She studied rigorously on her mother's suggestion. She recounts that "Mum believed that good schooling was our only ticket into upper-caste. Even a few years at an expensive boarding school in Mussoorie could be just what was needed" (34). Dutt's family members tried to pass the upper caste by imitating the lifestyle and culture of the upper caste people. As Frantz Fanon argues in his *Black Skin White Mask* educated black people to imitate and assimilate Whites culture because White colonizers created a sense of inferiority in Blacks and Blacks are made to think that their culture is inferior. Even if Blacks assimilate themselves with White culture, Fanon explains that "No matter how assimilated a black person may become, whites will always exercise a sense of 'inferiority.' This way of thinking was designed to keep 'Black' stuck in an "inferior status within a colonial order" ("Black Skin"). In the Indian context, brahmanical Sanskritized culture is accepted as superior whereas the culture of Dalits and other backward castes is considered inferior. Hence,

the majority of (educated) Dalits/lower castes disown and distance themselves from their native culture and imitate the rituals and practices of dominant Savarna castes which sociologist M. N. Srinivas termed ‘Sanskritization’¹⁵. Dutt parents used upper caste sir name, copied the lifestyle of Savarna castes. It took Dutt many years to come out as Dalit to her friends and colleagues. In her memoir, she narrated how she passed the upper caste by imitating Savarna culture and hiding her Dalit identity. Though Dutt’s father was a government employee, they had to face financial problems when he was suspended from his job.

Dutt recalls:

Even though our family barely counted as lower middle class, I spent my first five years living the life of a coddled, upper-middle-class kid. In those years when it was just the three of us, Mum tried her best, and more or less succeeded in keeping up appearances. Dad’s government salary barely covered the basics. His constant benders cut his small pay cheque even smaller. Initially, we survived on a near steady stream of help from mum’s father. When that became less frequent, Mum began pawning her wedding jewellery, hoping that once we had more money, she would be able to recover it. By the time my sister was born, we relied on the remittance from Mum’s jewellery as an alternative source of income. (24)

Dutt’s educational journey was not an easy one due to financial problems. However, she studied well and managed to get admission to BSc at Saint Stephen College, Delhi. She eventually went to Columbia University for her master's with the financial support of her friends and colleagues. The memoir of Dutt also highlights the significant role of education and how it changed her family’s life, bringing them out of traditional caste occupation. This

¹⁵ The concept ‘Sanskritization’ was introduced by M.N. Srinivas, a well-known sociologist.

narrative by a young Dalit woman highlights the importance of education and challenges both caste and gender discrimination.

Suraj Yengde is a first-generation educated Dalit from Maharashtra. He belongs to the Mahar caste in Maharashtra. He was a post-Doctoral fellow at Harvard University in the US and is currently doing D. Phil at Oxford University. He has written his personal life experiences in his book *Caste Matters* (2019). He narrates “I grew up in relative poverty in the early part of my life, until I reached sixth grade. After that my family was downgraded to a level below poverty, officially known as Below Poverty Line (BPL)” (2). He was born and brought up in a poverty-stricken Dalit family. Though this text is an intellectual book – neither autobiography nor memoir – it sheds light on Yengde’s life. Yengde narrates his childhood experiences, poverty, caste discrimination, and humiliation he experienced in his life. He recounts his father who “Worked long hours and was a social person, often demonstrating interest in matters of the intellectual kind. He was polite and could win people’s hearts. On one such occasion, he endeared himself to one of his clients, who was a Muslim banker. The banker offered this floor-cleaning staffer a job of a peon, equivalent to his educational qualifications” (12). Yengde’s father Milind was an active member of the Dalit Panther movement and also worked for BAMCEF/BSP (the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation/ Bahujan Samaj Party) (13). Milind was aware of the Ambedkarite movement and he knew the value of education. He, therefore, enrolled his son in a private school. However, due to poverty, Yengde had to face humiliation in school for not being able to pay school fees on time. Yengde recalls:

In school I was humiliated for not paying fees on time. The clerk, Tony, would visit the classroom every quarter and call out my name, asking me to stand up. Once I did, he would read out how many months of fees were pending. The higher the number, the

more the embarrassment. My classmates added shame to that embarrassment by quietly staring at me in disgust. This was a regular occurrence. (2)

Yengde is the first-generation person in his family who received higher education despite poverty and managed to go abroad for higher education. He is an Ambedkarite so he followed the path of Ambedkar. Education has played an important role in Yengde's life as it did in the lives of other Dalit writers discussed above.

To conclude, from the above discussion, it can be deduced that all the narrators have given more importance to education and they have effectively used education for their upliftment. The role of education has been one of the main and important themes in these texts. By writing their life stories, these writers have highlighted that education plays an important role in Dalit lives. Most of these Dalit writers struggled hard to get formal education despite poverty and caste discrimination and eventually became self-made individuals. For Dalits, getting education means fighting against the caste system which doomed them to darkness and poverty for ages. To emancipate themselves from the clutches of the caste system and uplift themselves socially and economically, Dalits across generations have used education as a powerful weapon for their economic and social upliftment. The select texts under study have strongly emphasized that education played a pivotal role in changing and shaping the lives and future of their family members and communities. The personal narratives of the above-mentioned self-made writers have mainly reflected on struggles for education. They describe how getting formal education has significantly helped in their personal life to get jobs in the either private or public sector and overcome the poverty they have lived in for ages. But for Ambedkar, as his attendants' record, education is not only for getting a job and gaining wealth but also a tool in the nation-building process and particularly to get citizenship by depressed communities like untouchables in this modern society. Ambedkar's lifelong struggle itself is a testimonial to

understanding his commitment to the upliftment of depressed communities by educating and organizing in India.

In light of this, it is important to study the family background of these self-made Dalit writers in detail as narrated by them, to understand how they could access education with the influence and assistance of colonial modern institutions like the Railways, industries, the military, Christianity and missionary education in the 19th and 20th century.

Colonial Modernity and Upliftment of Dalits:

As mentioned before, modern institutions such as railways, industries, and missionary education introduced by the British played a key role in India. Particularly the educational policies introduced by the British from time to time to provide universal education in India have made significant changes in the realm of education. “The Charter Act of 1813 laid down the condition that the British Government shall set apart a total amount of 1 lakh rupees for the education of Indians. This was the first time in India that a formal educational policy was put in place for directing the course of education in the country” (“History of Education” 00:8:51-60).

Most importantly Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Indian Education’ proposed in 1835 by Thomas Babington Macaulay occupied an important place that promoted education in English medium in India. Macaulay’s Minute had a major impact on the existing traditional and religious education system which was mostly available to a few dominant sections in India. The educational policies introduced by the British decentralized the education system; therefore, even lower caste people, who were deprived of education for centuries, attempted to demand education since the end of the 19th century.

Although the British colonial system had economically and politically exploited India in many ways against whom people from all communities and castes across India waged war during the Freedom movement, a few educational policies like Macaulay's Minute, industries and railways and missionary education have particularly uplifted historically subjugated and under-privileged castes people in India. Therefore, Dalit scholars attempted to reread and rethink colonialism from a different view highlighting how colonial modernity has empowered at least some sections of Dalits in India. For example, a well-known Dalit intellectual Baburao Bagul thinks:

The British came and conquered India, defeating the Hindu and the Muslim saints. With them came new knowledge and science, new machines and technologies, new occupations and business. The transformation of the social system of production began, and with it the social framework was reduced to a wreck. There was sufficient scope for a new intellectual system to take root. The new awakening of the Western Enlightenment began illuminating minds and as a result critical thinking became possible. The new self-critical attitude, along with the study of imaginative literature, gave rise to new literary expression. For the first time, literature tried to express social themes rather than metaphysical, transcendental or religious ones. (282)

As Bagul pointed out arrival and intervention of the British in the Indian social and political system gave birth to new ideas, perspectives, and development in India, although the colonial regime was quite exploitative. Due to colonialism, new avenues of knowledge began. Discussing how the issues related to Dalits were either ignored or neglected during the national freedom struggle, Satyanarayana opines "In mainstream nationalist thought, only the exploitative and oppressive aspect of colonialism, and the fact that it involved foreign rule, were considered significant. This nationalism interpreted colonialism only as economic and

political domination. But colonialism was also a context in which a great deal of social and cultural change took place” (Satyanarayana and Taru, “The Exercise” 10). Critically looking at Colonial rule in India, Satyanarayana further argues that colonialism was not restricted to merely the British administration and army. It also entailed missionary activity, establishing educational institutions and hospitals, conversions to Christianity, reform of many reformations of social practices, access to public places to all, and introduction of modern life and the rule of law. Colonial rule brought all these new changes in India (Satyanarayana and Taru, “The Exercise” 10).

Dalit issues were sidelined during the freedom struggle in India. From the above discussion, it can be understood that Dalits, who have been crushed by the caste system, have viewed colonialism differently unlike mainstream Savarna Hindus historians. Due to the influence of colonial modern institutions, some sections of Dalits managed to get education and uplift them. Teltumbde also critically analyzed the colonial rule in his book *Past, Present, and Future* and opined:

The British colonial rule, which lasted for more than two centuries, had great impact on the caste system mainly in two ways: one, it brought in a Western institutional framework of governance with its army, police, rule of law, judiciary, modern education and new ideals of human rights, democracy and human dignity and two, capitalism with new technologies and scientific knowledge. (37)

Teltumbde points out that colonial modern institutions have tremendously empowered the under-privileged castes with their modern thought and technologies. He further opines that due to colonial rule, Dalits got employment opportunities in the army, industries, colonial establishments, and even in their households. These opportunities helped Dalits to escape their caste bondage (37). British colonialism brought employment opportunities for Dalits in

railways and the military. The people from lower castes managed to overcome degrading caste-based occupations and looked for new life. Thus, British colonialism significantly empowered lower caste people like Dalits, who have been socially and economically exploited by mainstream Hindu society, by opening education and employment opportunities. Against this backdrop, the select autobiographies and memoirs will be analyzed to understand how these Dalit writers across generations have depicted British colonial rule and its modern institutions in their narratives.

Dalits did not have access to formal education until the mid-20th century. But during the colonial period, the modernity brought by the British to India significantly helped some sections of Dalits. The railway, military system, and education institutions/policies introduced by the British in India brought changes in the lives of marginalized communities including Dalits. Some of the families of these writers are beneficiaries of these modern institutions. Studying the family background of these writers as narrated by them would be useful to understand if colonial modernity has empowered them, if yes, how it contributed to their emancipation. Firstly, it is crucial to learn about Ambedkar's family background to know better how he managed to get formal education. Ambedkar recounts that his family was originally from Dapoli Taluka of the Ratnagiri District of the Bombay Presidency. From the very beginning of the rule of the East India Company, his forefathers had left their caste-based hereditary occupation for service in the Army of the Company. His father also followed the family tradition and sought service in the army. He rose to the rank of an officer and was a Subhedar when he retired (Ambedkar, "Waiting for" 1). For Ambedkar's family, working for the British army made their escape from traditional occupations they were supposed to do under Hindu customs. His family did not depend on Hindus for their livelihood as they worked for the British. Because of his military job, Ramji Sakpal managed to send his children to school. He knew the importance of education which would change the future of his family. Ambedkar's

family was one of the beneficiaries of the British military system as they were introduced to education and employment by the British. Ambedkar all his life rigorously studied and wrote extensively on Indian history, politics, economics, and other important topics. It was the word 'educate' the first of three slogans he advised to his depressed communities in his socio-political movements. Hence, it can be said that education played a key role in Ambedkar's life, which he admired and recommended to all depressed communities throughout his life. If Ambedkar's father did not work for the British army, perhaps Ambedkar would not be studying given the rigid social restrictions and economical problems in pre-independent India. Hence it can be interpreted that the military, modern, and liberal education system by the British significantly empowered Ambedkar. Even Jyotiba Phule who was influenced by the book *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine and his wife Savitribai Phule admired the liberal education introduced by the British and advocated for English education for lower caste people and women during the colonial period.

Like Ambedkar's family, Hazari's family also benefitted from British rule. He was born into a very poor untouchable family in Uttar Pradesh. When he was prohibited from schooling by Hindu society, Mr. Newman, a British, motivated Hazari to do well in his studies. Mr. Newman financially helped him to go to France for higher studies. Hazari recalls the help of Mr. Newman:

It was late July when I received a letter from Mr. Newman, saying that he had arranged for me to go to Paris and stay there with friends of his who would make the necessary arrangements for my studies in France. He thought that France was the cheapest country in Europe for students, and he thought that I should more easily become accustomed to the people and the climate. He said also that he had arranged with the bank to let me

have 15 pounds per month for the next three years, and that he himself would see me off from Bombay. (192)

The life story of Hazari revolves around a series of struggles in the pursuit of education which became reality when a foreigner helps him. Though he was a first-generation educated, he managed to go abroad to study with the help of his British master which was impossible for any untouchable to even imagine at that time. He writes “In the service of the Europeans, we would be treated not as untouchables but as servants” (50). He recalls how he and his parents were ill-treated when they worked for Hindu Civil Service officers who treated untouchables worse than animals. As untouchables were treated as servants but not as untouchables by the British, Hazari had high regard for Englishmen for their liberal attitude and lifestyle. Hence Hazari was fond of their lifestyle and sometimes imitates them. During the colonial period, Dalits “Began to imitate the lifestyle of the Europeans in their dress and behaviour. They started wearing trousers, a hat and holding a walking stick like their European patrons. Yet this was the trend of change among Dalit communities” (Jayakumar 75). Like Baka, the protagonist of the novel *Untouchable* who was fond of the British lifestyle, Hazari too admired the European lifestyle. Baka called “‘fashun’ by which he understood the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc., as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India” (10), Hazari “ordered a coat and trousers in European style, and bought a cheap tie” (86). Hazari imitated the European lifestyle as he regarded it with great esteem.

The personal narrative of Y.B. Satyanarayana also reflects on how lower caste people got benefitted from low-grade Railway jobs that Savarna Hindus refused to do. Baliah’s family managed to get education because of Baliah’s permanent job in the railway and urban settlement. Y. B. Satyanarayana recalls that his family felt at ease living while working in the Railway. He narrates:

The family, unlike other untouchable families, actually lived a comfortable life, though not in luxury. There was no struggle for food, shelter and clothing as the wages from the railways took care of these necessities. This was the case with most untouchable families working in the railways. They could even think of educating their children. For these very reasons, these families were also alienated from their own communities in the villages. (29)

The above lines of the author point out how Railway jobs and education have changed the life of the Yelukati family. As the writer pointed out, because his father worked for the railway, he managed to provide education to his children. Like Y. B. Satyanarayana's family, Narendra Jadhav's family benefitted from British colonialism as his father Damu also worked for the railway. Damu left his village and moved to Mumbai when he was 12. He did small jobs for survival before he permanently settled in Mumbai. Finally, after a series of struggles and hard work, he managed to get a job in the Railways where he hoped for a better future for his family. Damu narrates:

I landed a regular job with the Mumbai Port Trust Railways. I could not believe my good fortune. I still remember the day. It was May 1937. After much snooping and cajoling, Sonu admitted it was due to the efforts of my ailing mother who had bribed an official to get me in. I was outraged, but under pressure from Sonu, kept quiet about the 'secret'. With the new job, I not only had a steady income, but also a small apartment in the official quarters. We were excited to move out of our old and dilapidated chawl in the congested Kurla area to a much better place in Wadala. It seemed as if life was finally looking up. (166)

Jadhav's family also benefitted from colonial modernity, which changed the future of their families. Jadhav's family moved from a small village to Mumbai and worked in Railways

where there were no rigid caste practices. They managed to get education because of their urban settlement and employment in Railway. D.P. Das's father and uncle were also able to get employment in the postal department which was introduced by the British.

Gidla also narrates about education given to lower caste people by Christian missionaries who empowered them. She recalls:

Untouchables had long been forbidden from learning to read and write. But when the missionaries arrived, they opened schools that, to the horror of the Hindus, welcomed even the untouchables. Although these schools were the only institutions offering modern education, caste Hindus often refused to send their children, unwilling to let them sit side by side with untouchable students. (15)

Gidla's grandfather was given modern education and trained as a teacher by Christian missionaries. Because of missionary education, three or four generations of her family have received a modern education and managed to escape from traditional occupations and became independent.

The above discussion emphasizes that some sections of Dalits, like family members of these Dalit writers, have received modern education and employment during the colonial period. Perhaps the British might not have thought that the reformation they brought would significantly change at least some sections of Dalits in India. However, analysis of the texts under study sheds light on the positive aspects of the British colonial period which empowered them by providing education and employment. Hence it is perceived that the colonial modernity brought by the British also played a key role in empowering them/ Dalits.

As discussed above, Dalits benefited from colonial modern education and employment which massively empowered these lower-caste people. Because of modern (English) education, some sections of Dalits have been able to uplift themselves socially and economically. Another

important point to be mentioned is due to the expansion of education and employment awareness, a small section of Dalits have been able to go abroad for higher education and employment. A small section of Dalits has even migrated and settled in countries like the USA, the UK, and Canada and they are now called Dalit Diaspora. Therefore, it is imperative to study about educated Dalit Diaspora as they are also beneficiaries of education and colonial modernity.

Crossing the Oceans: Dalit Diaspora

Crossing the oceans or going abroad may be inauspicious and taboo for Dwija castes according to Hindu Dharmashastras as they might lose their caste and rituals in a foreign land. But for historically marginalized Shudra and atishudras crossing the oceans is a state of prestige and liberation as it frees them from caste clutches and opens new avenues in foreign land. While tracing the Dharma-sutra that prohibits Hindus from crossing the oceans Devdutt Pattanaik writes:

Baudhayana Dharma-sutra, composed about 2,000 years ago, maybe earlier, lists this "Samudrolanghana" or "Sagarollanghana" as the first of many reasons for loss of castes. This especially applied to Brahmins, as there was fear that travel abroad prevented a Brahmin from performing various rites and rituals in the prescribed manner at the prescribed time. The belief was that movement away from the sacred Vedic fire, made one vulnerable to pollution. (Pattanaik)

Although crossing the oceans is strictly prohibited for Brahmins in Dharmashastras, a sizable number of Brahmins and other upper castes have migrated abroad in search of better jobs and education. Two or three generations of them have settled in many developed countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia, unlike Dalits whose migration to developed countries

took place only a few decades ago. Those who have migrated and settled abroad are called 'Diaspora.'

The word 'Diaspora' has its origin in the ancient Greek word 'speiro' meaning 'to sow' or 'to disperse.' While the earliest occurrence of the word 'diaspora' has been traced back to its use by Sophocles, Herodotus, and Thucydides in the 5th century B.C. its modern interpretation is more closely linked to its use in the Jewish tradition. ("Emergence and Evolution" 00:01:23-60)

But today the term 'diaspora' has a wider application. It is used to describe several groups, situations, and processes that are implicated in cross-border migrations. While the term 'diaspora' has a long history, its use is more recent. Besides, the use of the term 'Dalit Diaspora' is much more recent in the field of Social Science and Humanities. Dalit Diaspora refers to ex-untouchables of Indian origin who have migrated abroad for jobs and settled there.

In contemporary society, a sizable Dalit diaspora who live in developed countries like the USA, the UK, Canada, and other foreign countries can be seen.

The dalit diaspora can be divided into two major streams - the 'old' and the 'new'. The 'old' comprises indentured labourers and assisted labourers who were taken by the colonial powers and the contractors to different countries. This diaspora is confined to South Asian and African countries. The other stream of 'new' dalit diaspora includes semi-literate and professionally trained dalits who have emigrated especially to London and the US as industrial labourers, technicians, other professionals and students. (Kumar, "Dalit Diaspora" 114)

Undoubtedly it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who was the first person from an untouchable community to go abroad for higher education which was a distant dream for any untouchable to even think in the beginning of the 20th century. Jayakumar rightly points out:

Participation in a global economy has been the heritage of the Dalits. For example, an ancient Sangam literature proverb was ' thirai kadal odi thiraviam thedu' that is, 'run across the seven seas and make money'. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the earliest Indian scholars in economics, the champion of social democracy and a pioneer of the modern Dalit liberation movement, preferred an open economy over against the closed economy advocated by the upper-caste. (77-78)

Over the last three decades, the number of new Dalit diaspora increasing as Dalits moved to developed countries in search of higher education and employment and settled there. They are mostly professionals and technicians who have acquired modern and English education and professional skills in their respective fields. For historically oppressed communities like Dalits, perhaps 'crossing the river (going abroad)' can be a liberating and life-changing experience as most foreign countries are casteless. However, a few Dalit diasporas have recently raised caste discrimination practiced by caste Hindus abroad. Seattle is the first city in the United States to pass a bill to ban caste discrimination despite opposition from some Hindu Americans (Matza). This historical event in the USA shows that caste discrimination is not only practiced in South Asia but also across the globe by caste Hindus who have migrated to different parts of the world. However, as the caste system and caste discrimination are not so rampant and day-to-day reality in foreign countries unlike India, marginalized sections of India still feel free and safe in foreign countries, and educated young Dalits aspire to go to the developed countries to pursue their careers.

Few of the texts under study have highlighted that 'crossing the oceans' is a new experience and a kind of liberation from caste oppression for historically marginalized communities like Dalits. Ambedkar expressed a similar experience when he traveled to Europe and America for his education. Ambedkar recalls, "My five years of staying in Europe and America had

completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was untouchable, and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and to others” (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 9). Ambedkar was free from untouchability and caste discrimination in a foreign land which is caste-free. But when he returned to India after higher education, he struggled to find a lodge to stay in Baroda due to him being an untouchable. His autobiographical narrative *Waiting for a Visa* mainly revolves around the caste discrimination he experienced in India. His education from foreign universities significantly empowered him and nurtured in him rational qualities and critical thinking. On returning to India, he worked for the upliftment of downtrodden sections by educating and organizing them to agitate against inequality and injustice. He was able to work for the upliftment of depressed communities and he even drafted the Constitution of India and established educational institutions – all these were possible because of the quality education that Ambedkar gained. Without education, Ambedkar would not be Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who changed the future of millions of depressed communities in India. His journey abroad, staying in foreign countries, and the foreign education system have all shaped his personality.

As mentioned earlier, crossing the ocean to go to a foreign land is a kind of liberating experience for untouchables. Hazari also felt free when he left India for France. At the end of his autobiography, he narrates “Already I felt that I was part of a new world, encircled by the mighty ocean, which knew no creed or caste, and, as I gazed toward the wide horizon, I prayed that one day I might find the peace of soul I had never known but had always sought” (193). From these words of Hazari, it can be understood that crossing the oceans/going abroad is a kind of new experience for depressed communities who are doomed in their own country in the name of caste and religion. Hazari feels free when he escapes from a caste-ridden society. He, like any Dalit, thinks that education is a means of empowerment for which he struggled in his life and he even left his homeland. Hence, for Dalits, going abroad is like an achievement,

prestige, and life-changing movement too. Y.B. Sathyanarayana writes about his brother, Abbasayulu, traveling abroad to present a paper at a seminar in Australia. He recalls:

When, in the mid-1970s, he went on to present a paper at an international seminar held in Australia, my father was in tears: the son for whom he had envisioned the role of stationmaster had moved to present a paper! I was greatly excited too- my brother's journey had not been smooth; it had been an uphill task, in which he had remained strong and resolute. The airport itself was a new experience for all of us: in those days, one could view flights taking off or landing from the terrace of the airport, and I watched my brother leave. (190)

It was an achievement for the Yelukati family in its history when Abbasayulu went abroad to present a paper. As mentioned earlier, for Dalits, crossing the oceans is a new experience and an achievement because of their hard work and effort. Going abroad shows that Dalits are also capable of doing things better than caste Hindus and Dalits can feel and realise their self-worth and self-confidence with their achievement. Y. B. Satyanarayana narrates in his autobiography how education has helped his family to move upward socially and economically. He also studied well and worked as a lecturer in Hyderabad. For the Yelukati family, moving from the village to the city of Hyderabad also changed their lives. Overall, the text highlights how education empowers Dalits like how the Yelukati family benefitted from education.

The memoir by Narendra Jadhav mainly narrates Jadhav's parents' stories. In this story, Jadhav is one of the small characters only. In post-independence India, Dalits are allowed to get a formal education, so Jadhav studied in school despite caste discrimination. He did Ph.D. in the United States. He worked for International Monetary Fund in Washington D.C. He also

crossed seven oceans which is an achievement in his life. He recounts the day he first time travelled abroad:

The airport buzzed with routine activity. Amid a sea of loved ones gathered to bid adieu, countless waves of fleeting emotions erupted. I sensed that a part of me had already taken off, and was on my way to Washington, D.C. to join the International Monetary Fund. I turned from group to group, a smile glued to my face, going through the motions of small talk that failed to register my mind. (204)

Jadhav worked abroad for some years. His children also studied abroad and settled there. Damu's vision to provide education to his children became a reality which changed the future of his family. The role of education in Dalit lives can be known from this text.

On the other hand, Gidla, who works and lives in the United States also recounts:

At twenty-six, I came to America, where people know only skin color, not birth status. Some here love Indians and some hate them, but their feelings are not affected by caste. One time in a bar in Atlanta I told a guy I was untouchable, and he said, "oh, but you are so touchable." Only in talking to some friends I met here did I realize that my stories, my family's stories, are not stories of shame. (3)

Though some Dalit diaspora accuses the Indian Hindu diaspora of practicing caste discrimination in foreign countries, arguably, the foreign countries are more liberal and free and progressive societies than India where caste practices are an everyday reality. For Gidla, living in a foreign country like the US made her realise how free a foreign society is which does not have any caste influences. Dutt also crossed the oceans to go to the US where she currently lives. The memoir has demonstrated how education changed the future of Dutt's family. Due to education, three generations of her family managed to work in the government

sector. On the other hand, Yengde's experiences abroad are slightly different as he claims that caste discrimination is still practiced in foreign countries and recalls:

One day, I was invited to spend an evening at the house of an Indian friend. As I entered, I sensed hostility in the air. No one wanted to engage with me. They looked away when I spoke, and when they did respond to anything I said it was loud and forceful. I was mobbed with virile attacks on my dignity and community. The community backgrounds of these students ranged from Hindu Bania and Sindhi to Sikh, Brahmin and Jain. None of them could bear my Dalit assertion. They started calling my names, degrading Ambedkar. (43)

Yengde, narrating his experiences of caste discrimination recounts that wherever Dalit goes to any part of this world, he or she has to negotiate with his identity because of the caste system. He further recounts:

My experience with non-Hindu friends echoed the experience of Ambedkar. This incident proved that a Dalit, anywhere in the world, has to negotiate their identity to the satisfaction of privileged caste friends and colleagues. Anything else is unwelcome. The mob will ensure that the person dare not expose his or her suffering. (44-45)

Despite poverty and social and economic problems, Yengde studied in India and then moved to the USA. He is now one of the important young Dalit intellectuals who wrote the award-winning book *Caste Matters* (2019). Yengde's experience of caste discrimination abroad by caste Hindus is also the experience of many South Asian diaspora and Dalits abroad. Many diaspora people have recently shared their experiences of caste discrimination in foreign countries. Speaking about the bill passed against caste discrimination in Seattle City of the USA, Kshama Sawant, a socialist, said about prevailing caste discrimination in the USA and opined that "It is faced by South Asian American, other immigrant working people in their

work places, including in the tech sector, in Seattle and in cities around the country” (Matza). This reveals the reality of the caste system in foreign countries. However, educated Dalits and other marginalized community people wish and aspire to migrate to foreign countries for higher education and jobs as foreign countries are not basically caste-based societies. In foreign countries, any individual is not judged by his caste identity like people do in India, but based on his skills, knowledge, character, and personality people are judged and respected in foreign countries. Dalits have migrated and continue to migrate to foreign countries in search of better jobs and higher educational opportunities; therefore, it can be opined that education and English language/education have significantly empowered Dalits across generations. Within a span of 75 years after Independence, Dalits have spectacularly achieved a lot in terms of their education and professions.

Conclusion

To conclude, from the above analysis of the select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English, it is evidently understood that education plays an indispensable role in Dalit lives. Through education, Dalits can hope for their upliftment by overcoming all their traditional occupations and empowering themselves. Dalit is a heterogeneous category whose culture, food habits, lifestyle, and occupations vary from place to place and region to region across India. However, Dalits across India have collectively realised that acquiring education is a primary step for their emancipation mostly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar.

It has been noticed that Dalits, since the pre-independence era, have attempted to get formal education to emancipate themselves from the clutches of caste oppression and to improve their standard of living. Particularly first-generation educated from the Dalit community strived hard to gain education that was prohibited since time immemorial. In post-Independent India, Dalits have been given formal education provisions; therefore, after the

1950s, Dalits started getting formal education despite the persisting caste discrimination and harassment in educational institutes.

The above study is an example to understand that irrespective of different castes, regions, states, religious faith, and languages, Dalits have given importance to education across generations. What is evident is that the effort and hard work of first-generation Dalits, either semi-literate or literate, have become a guiding force to their upcoming generations in particular, and their community in general. As a result, there is a progression in such educated Dalit families from generation to generation. For example, in these select autobiographies and memoirs, first-generation educated had to struggle hard for education in the pre-independence period as they did not have access to formal education in schools. Therefore, people like Hazari, D.R. Jatava, Baliah, Shyamlal, and Damu, who were first-generation learners, who had the zeal to learn reading and writing, struggled. They also got benefitted from colonial modernity brought by the British in the form of railways, missionaries, schools, industry, Christianity, etc. Besides, their children who are second-generation learners like Debi Prasad Das, Y. B. Satyanarayana, Narendra Jadhav, and others who studied in post-independent India where the Constitution of India provided educational opportunities for all received formal education despite the existence of caste discrimination. Moreover, second and third-generation educated Dalits like Sujatha Gidla, Yashica Dutt, and Suraj Yendge did not have to struggle much to take entry to school, which was easily accessible for them, although they faced caste discrimination and financial crisis. Another important point to be noticed is that some Dalits like Ambedkar, Hazari, Gidla, Dutt, and Yengde, who are second and third-generation managed to cross the oceans to go abroad for higher education and employment. All these have been possible for Dalits because of their modern education which was possible owing to colonial modernity.

Education has played a key role in the lives of Dalits across generations. The autobiographical narratives of Dalits have explored the crucial role of education which helps Dalits to move forward in their lives. Education is not only for getting a job and financial benefits but also for knowing about oneself and society. It is not an exaggeration to say that, for Dalits, writing their life stories is also an act of protest against unequal society and the system that suppressed them for ages. In all these Dalit personal narratives, education is one of the main themes and these writers have managed to move upward in their lives by accessing educational and employment opportunities available since the colonial period. The hard work and struggle of first-generation educated to educate themselves not only helped those individuals but also the upcoming generation. Therefore, it can be said that education is one of the main means of empowerment for Dalits who have been struggling for their emancipation as well as self-respect and dignity. Thus Education has empowered educated Dalits in getting employment opportunities and improving their financial status. Not only formal education that Dalit across generations struggle/d for but also for English medium education that empowers Dalits. Hence Dalit across generations have struggled and continue to struggle hard to learn English language and receive English medium education for their emancipation. In the next section, under the title “English Education as a Tool of Empowerment,” how English empowers historically marginalized Dalits and how the select texts under study reflected on English language and English medium education will be discussed in detail.

Section – B

English Education as a Tool of Empowerment

This section will aim to study the select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English to study how Dalit writers across generations reflected upon the English language and English education in their narratives, as well as to evaluate these texts to understand what English signifies in the lives of Dalits. The rationale behind choosing these texts is that these narratives were written at different times by Dalit writers who are from different generations. This section aims to study the select texts from the Dalit point of view with respect to evaluating the role of English language and English education in the lives of different generations of Dalits.

The debate around the issue of language is not new in India, as the discussion frequently surfaces in Indian society which is linguistically and culturally diverse. For instance, it is generally believed that Hindi has been imposed on South Indian states by the North. It is also believed that English is a colonizer's language imposed on colonized countries like India by the British. Moreover, it is also argued that dominant communities always attempt to impose their linguistic and cultural practices on marginalized communities without considering the opinion and needs of these historically oppressed communities. For example, in the Indian context, upper caste/class communities send their children to English medium schools and colleges and they argue that backward and lower caste students studying in government schools must be provided regional medium education that will lead to effective learning as well as preservation of tradition and culture of the society. However, those communities deprived of education for centuries, in fact, demand English medium education to regional medium education for their children. In this light, studying Dalit personal stories would help us understand how Dalits have perceived English language across generations. It also examines whether the English language contributes to the emancipation of Dalits. The select texts -

Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste (1969) by Hazari, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by Jatava, *My Father Baliah* (2011) by Y.B. Satyanarayana, *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt and *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde - are chosen for the current study. These autobiographers themselves Dalit (former untouchables) belong to different generations and they have studied in English medium either informally or formally, despite financial constraints, and have written their life narratives in English. Since life narratives are authentic sources to study the personal as well as community life of the writer, these above-mentioned texts have been selected for this study.

Dalit and English:

In the Indian context, people from upper castes/classes background could see English as a language of status and achievement or these elite people have a choice between languages. But historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities like Dalits, mastering English would mean liberation (Uma et al. 2). "They do not have a choice because mainstream languages, being the medium of instruction in education, are equally oppressive and prejudicial. English affects them as language, culture and politics" (Uma et al. 2). For instance, in the state of Karnataka, Kannada is an official language and standardized Kannada is used and taught in schools and colleges. Like any other State in India, there are also cultural and linguistic, and regional varieties in Karnataka. Mainly three varieties of Kannada can be identified.

The southern variety is associated with the cities of Mysore and Bangalore, the northern with Hubli-Dharwad, and the coastal with Mangalore. The prestige varieties are based on the Mysore-Bangalore variety. Social varieties are currently characterized by education and class or caste, resulting in at least three distinct social dialects: Brahman, non-Brahman, and Dalit (formerly untouchable). A diglossia or dichotomy also exists between formal literary varieties and spoken varieties. (Krishnamurti)

The local Kannada dialect spoken by Dalits varies from standard Kannada used in school texts that are spoken by Brahmins and other forward castes. Hence, students from lower castes feel alien in school as they are taught (in) standardized and Sanskritized Kannada which is different from the local Kannada they speak at home. This politics of language helps us understand the existing linguistic and cultural variants within the sphere of Kannada-speaking regions. Besides the standard Kannada, the syllabi include excerpts from Hindu classical texts and stories like the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata as well as texts related to the culture of Savarna castes. Therefore, lower caste students feel further alienated in school and college and hardly connect with the teaching which does not reflect their life world and experiences but rather makes them consume the culture of Savarna castes. This existing cultural divide between Sanskritized Brahminism and non-Sanskritized lower caste culture has been well-argued by Kancha Ilaiah with reference to the Telugu region. He recounts:

As we are growing up, stepping into higher classes, the textbook taught us stories which we had never heard in our families. The stories of Rama and Krishna, poems from the Puranas, the names of two epics called Ramayana and Mahabharata occurred repeatedly right from early school up to college, our Telugu textbooks were packed with these Hindu stories. For Brahmin-Baniya students these were their childhood stories, very familiar not only in the story form but in the form of Gods they worshipped. (Ilaiah Shepherd, “Why I am not” 12)

The above statement by Ilaiah points out the cultural divide that exists within the Telugu-speaking people as they belong to different castes. Further, he argues that “The name of Kalisada was as alien to us as the name of Shakespeare. The only difference was that one appeared in Telugu textbooks while the other appeared in English textbooks. Perhaps for the Brahmin-Baniya students, the situation was different. The language of textbooks was not the

one that our communities spoke. Even the basic words were different" (Ilaiah Shepherd, "Why I am not" 13). This discussion on cultural and linguistic variations within the same language-speaking region not only exists among the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana but also across India. In this light, it is imperative to study what role can English play in a diverse country like India with reference to the emancipation of Dalits.

Before beginning to analyze select texts under study it is indeed important to mention Macaulay's Minute on Education as this minute paved the way for the teaching of English to Indians. If we trace the history of the English language in India, it goes back to the colonial period. In this minute, Macaulay defends his stance on why English should be taught over to Sanskrit and Arabic language to natives. He was of the view that Sanskrit and Arabic literature did not have a standard that meet the English language and literature. He writes "[10] I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education. ("Minute by"). As mentioned above Macaulay viewed that Arabic and Sanskrit did not have the standard equal to European literature. Hence, he argued for English teaching to the natives. Had he not argued in support of English teaching to natives in India, probably we would not have had access to English learning. This could have possibly prevented the natives from learning liberal and scientific knowledge.

In 1835, Macaulay's famous minutes made the English language the medium for higher education. His intention was to create an official class who could be the intermediaries between the ruling British and the India. The Englishmen wanted this class to be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect." Thus, a

new hierarchy was established where competence in English would be a crucial factor for economic security and social status. (Kumar, “Dalit Personal” 129)

During colonial times, English was introduced to India. Christian missionaries played a key role in teaching English in India. Arguably introduction of English in India made a significant impact on the social, cultural, and political life of Indians by bringing new knowledge and awareness, etc. “The seeds of modernity were implanted with Macaulay’s victory that ordained English as the medium and Western science-based syllabus. This marked the biggest assault on the Vedic culture and the system of graded inequality the Indo-Aryan system had imposed” (Prasad, “Dalit Phobia” 95-96). Due to the influence of the English language and colonial modernity certain communities of India, particularly depressed communities managed to hope for a better future.

The history of India demonstrates that Dalits were kept out of the mainstream Indian Hindu society and they have been historically excluded from social, cultural, and political spheres by Savarna Hindus. Only in post-Independent India, they were given educational and employment opportunities as per the Constitution of India written by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The condition of Dalits before the Independence of India, was degrading and deplorable as they did not have access to get even basic education. Both traditional and English education were predominantly controlled by Dwija¹⁶ and other Savarna castes; hence, Education was a distant dream for the majority of depressed communities including Dalits. During the colonial period, Brahmins and other Caste Hindus who were working for the British in India learnt the English language and increased their job opportunities under British rule. Caste Hindus particularly Brahmins, who worked for British administrations and departments, benefited under British rule and used the English language not only to gain knowledge but also to gain power in India

¹⁶ Dwija means ‘twice-born’. The term refers to members of the three varnas in the traditional Hindu social system – the Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors), and Vaishyas (merchants).

after the British left India. Alok K Mukherjee, discussing the role and reception of English in India, opines:

English literary education reinforced rather than challenged their essentially conservative social and political ideas. But they did not submit to the hegemony of English only because of this conjuncture of conservative ideas, they did so also because English was a tool of power and domination – individually for them and collectively for the groups to which they belonged. It provided them and other members of their groups the social, cultural and economic capitals with which they maintained that domination. (22)

Mukherjee further notes, “The absence of students from marginalized communities in English classrooms in the 1960s as it was predominantly occupied by upper caste and upper-class Hindus. This trend changed in time, as a result of which lower caste participants were able to enter English classrooms by the end of the 1990s” (22). From this statement, it can be understood that the upper castes of India have used the English language, not only as a symbol of status but also to gain power and domination in society. M.S.S. Pandian critiquing the duality of the spiritual and material domain of upper caste elites during the freedom struggle opines:

First of all, courting the west in the material domain by means of accessing English education, falling in line with certain time discipline, participating in the language of law, and so on, provided Indian elite with the means to take part in the colonial structures of authority (through indisputably as subordinates to the colonisers). Often such authority, working itself through the language of English and disciplinary institutions like the court of law meant a compelling moment of exclusion and disempowerment for the subordinate social groups within the ‘national community’. (Pandian, “One Step” 1736)

As Pandian points out Indian elites who were working in British administration during the colonial period got benefitted in terms of education and socio-economical condition whereas ordinary people like lower caste people and women were excluded as they did not have access. Thus, national elites became dominant people. As a result, the untouchables of India, who have been denied education for ages, are also prevented from getting an English education. However, in post-Independent India, despite poverty small section of Dalits have managed to get education, unlike in pre-independent India, where education was a distant dream for Dalits. Chandra Bhan Prasad, one of the Dalit thinkers, is of the view:

English makes it much easier for all Dalits to leave caste-based occupations. Will English-speaking Dalits, for instance, be asked to skin dead cows? Will English-speaking Dalits be expected to clean gutters and roads? Will English-speaking Dalits be content to work as menials at landlords' farms? The Goddess English can empower Dalits, giving them a chance to break free from centuries of oppression. (Prasad, "Hail English")

Prasad believes that English education, being devoid of caste influences, will certainly empower Dalits and opens up new opportunities and knowledge for a section of people who have historically been denied a chance at learning. What is significant to be noted is Chandra Bhan Prasad, on the birth anniversary of Lord Babington Macaulay, who introduced English education in India, built a temple named "Dalit Goddesses of English" modeled after 'the Statue of Liberty' in Banka village, Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh in 2010. Prasad says, "It's not possible to get by in today's world without English. Even to communicate with people in other Indian states, you need to know either the local language or English. Since you cannot learn multiple Indian languages, English has to be used as the link language" (Pandey). Prasad further says "English, he believes, will increase the Dalit youths' chances of getting into institutes of higher education and improve their employment prospects (Pandey).

Kancha Ilaiah, a Bahujan scholar, too has strongly argued for the English language and English medium education for Dalits. Ilaiah argued:

English education is key to the modernist approach suitable to globalised India. The upper castes have handled the contradiction between English and their native culture quite carefully with respect to their own education, but when it comes to teaching English to the lower castes the theory that English will destroy the ‘culture of the soil’ is evoked. (Ilaiah Shepherd, “Dalit and English”)

Ilaiah strongly argues for English education for Dalits and other marginalized communities, lessening inequality in the education system and widening the communities’ professional aspirations. He also questions the hypocrisy of public intellectuals who are either opposed or silent on English education for marginalized communities. He is of the view that Public intellectuals play a key role in a democratic system. A public intellectual must challenge the policies that will go against the people’s interests. India needs more honest and sincere public intellectuals who work for the welfare and empowerment of SC/ST/Shudra communities, and women. He also urges public intellectuals not to take a hypocritical stance and advises them to speak in support of English medium education for marginalized communities in India (Ilaiah Shepherd, “Public Intellectuals”).

S Anand, while comparing the role of Sanskrit and English languages in the lives of Dalits and other marginalized sections, argues that both languages have been monopolized by Dwija and other upper castes denying the learning of English to depressed communities who aspire to learn English. In this context, he argues that English is a language that Dalit Bahujan can aspire to learn in contemporary society, unlike classical Sanskrit which prevented them from learning (Anand, “Sanskrit, English” 2053).

Critically reflecting on how caste Hindus have managed to control Sanskrit in the past and now English language for their benefits and power, he strongly argues that the English language empowers Dalits, unlike Indian vernacular languages which are Sanskritised as well as casteist in nature. He further opines, discussing Ambedkar's writing in English that “had he not written in English, he would certainly not have become a pan-Indian figure” (Anand, “Sanskrit, English” 2056). He also remembers his conversation with Gail Omvedt, recalling “Social scientist Gail Omvedt recently told me that Ambedkar’s decision to write in English was a conscious and deliberate one (Anand, “Sanskrit, English” 2056).” It can be understood that Ambedkar thought of English as a connecting language in India and abroad so that his writing is accessible to all. If Ambedkar had written his writings in the Marathi language, his mother tongue, none of the non-Marathi language speakers would understand his writing and Ambedkar would not be a global intellectual. While discussing the Constitution of India written in English by Dr. Ambedkar, S. Anand opines:

An ‘avarana’ who has no place in the Sanskritic order of things playing a crucial role in shaping the laws that govern modern civil society – goes against the very essence of Sanskritic diktats. And we may also be glad that our Constitution has been written in English. Such a work could not have been written in Sanskrit. (Anand, “Sanskrit and English” 2054)

The above statement would be more appropriate to understand the importance of the English language which has brought modern and liberal values, unlike Sanskrit which was exclusive and limited to a particular section. Moreover, “Dalits in India speak different languages, and so asserting one language would yield neither a territory nor a representation of all forms of Dalit identities. English helps redefine identity and imagine a pan-Indian dalit unity, while also allowing a vocabulary of human rights” (Kothari 67). Another important intellectual, Gail Omvedt, reflecting on why English for Dalits, writes that “Not because it is sacred or somehow

holy, but because it is a language of access and power, a key to the world stock of knowledge and the wealth and success that depends on this (Omvedt). Not only Dalit and progressive thinkers but also Dalit movements in India have also demanded English education for Dalits. While discussing the Dalit movement in Karnataka, Tharakeshwar V.B. writes that “Only when state jobs started shrinking and the number of educated Dalits began increasing – a situation that pushed Dalits to seek jobs in the private sector/ service sector, which was expanding rapidly – did the question of English become important to the Dalit movement” (170). Even Basavalingappa who called Kannada Literature written by Brahmin and Savarna Kannada writers as ‘busa’ (rice husk) considered English language as a tool for the emancipation of Dalits in this global competitive world. In the introduction to the book *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*, Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi notes, addressing Dalit students at a seminar conducted by the University of Mysore on 19 November 1973, Basavalingappa advised his audience “to study English to improve their status in the contemporary world. Basavalingappa regarded English as an instrument of emancipation. This conscious positioning of English located Kannada as the repository of a culture which promoted inequality and denied opportunities for Shudras and Dalits to articulate their aspirations” (8). These opinions of Dalits, progressive thinkers, and activists evidently point out that English is not just a language of aspirations for Dalits but it is also a powerful tool for their emancipation that leads to overcoming their oppressive and humiliating experiences of caste discrimination and caste-based occupation.

From the above discussion, it can be surmised that Dalit writers and (progressive) thinkers have strongly argued for English education which is an essential tool for the marginalized to move upward in this globalized and competitive world. Having discussed the existing scholarship on ‘English in Dalit context’ let me analyze how the select Dalit autobiographical narratives reflected on English language and English (medium) education.

The autobiography *Untouchable* by Hazari is an exemplary text representing the life of Hazari, an untouchable man, from a small village of Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, during pre-Independence India. The story narrates the struggles of Hazari, a dreamer, who longed to learn reading and writing but he was denied, due to social restrictions by Caste Hindus for his low caste identity. However, with the help of Muslim Maula and British Indian Civil Service officers for whom he worked as a servant, he learned to read and improved his English. Later, he went abroad (France) for higher education which was unusual and impossible for any untouchable in the beginning of the 20th century. The text narrates not only his personal life but also the social, economic, and cultural condition of the untouchables in pre-independent India. Sweeping and cleaning were the customs of his community. His community, including his parents, worked as servants in landlords and upper-caste Hindus and Muslim households.

However, what is significant in the text is the growth of the life of Hazari who was raised from his lower social status to become the person to go to the Western country (France) for his higher education with the help of Mr. Newman, for whom Hazari worked for in Aligarh, India. Hazari was not allowed in the school which was made for upper-caste Hindu children. However, his strong determination and thirst for knowledge became a reality when he worked with his parents for British Indian Civil Service officers in India. What is fascinating to know is the way he learned English hoping that he would have a better life in the future. He started learning English when he was working for the British. He had to learn English words to speak with his non-Hindi employers in different parts of India. He recalls, “There was an ayah, a very nice old person, who could not speak my language but knew English. So this meant I must now learn English as well as the Bombay dialect” (82). He further records, “After Yusuf had gone, I took up reading seriously, and made my first real effort at learning English. I began by mastering such words as soda water, tea, coffee, soap, and all the objects I saw either in the house or on street advertisements (87).” He narrates not only his life journey but also his

journey of learning where he learns Urdu from a Muslim Maula in the beginning, and gradually learns to read the Quran. Also, he learns English letters and words while working.

Hazari says that when he was asked to speak in English by a Nawab, he spoke English, and later he got a job working for Mr. Newman, a British, who helped him to learn English and eventually financially supported him and sent him abroad for higher education. This was a life-changing experience for Hazari. The important point to be noticed is that while Hazari's society, where he was born and brought up, denied him formal education, the outsider Mr. Newman (British) assisted him in all the possible ways to make him educated. The text also represents how lower-caste untouchables got benefited from foreign people in India who showed courtesy and treated untouchables who worked as domestic for them as humans. Hazari also narrates how modern institutions like the railway and new technology helped untouchables. He recalls working for Mr. Newman as a servant: "He wished me to have some time in which to improve my English, and the waiting was to be left to the other servants. After a friendly talk, Mr. Newman gave me an English Reader to study and a copybook for handwriting. I left him feeling more than contented with my new position" (160). He further writes, "By virtue of my work, I was placed higher than the other servants, but, by the caste, I was the lower – a peculiar situation. This did not worry me for a while because I was kept fully occupied with my work and my English studies" (160).

Hazari was keen on improving his English language to get more respect in his community and from his employer and earn more money. This testimonial points out that the English language boosted Hazari's confidence and made him independent to live a dignified life. It can be evidently understood that English is not merely a language for Dalits, it becomes a ladder for their social and economic mobility. Hazari's attempts to learn English must be seen as his attempt to liberate himself from the clutches of caste oppression and poverty and to live

a dignified life. English helped him to fulfill his dream of becoming an educated and successful person.

D. R. Jatava also recalls how he attempted to learn English. He recounts:

I was very punctual to reach the classes and always listened to class lectures in all the subjects – Civics, Economics, History, Hindi and English. I was very fond of learning English language. For that, I purchased an English to Hindi dictionary. It was a great help to me. I made a habit to learn some new meanings daily. It increased my vocabulary. I started reading the Hindustan Times English daily in the college library.

(14)

He received a Hindi medium education at school. But he realized he could gain more knowledge if he knew English, so he tried to improve his English. Also, learning English language motivated him to improve his knowledge. He recalls that his continues effort to learning English has enriched his vocabulary and encouraged him tremendously. English language created in him an urge for knowledge (14).

Y.B. Satyanarayana, too, has recalled his father's desire that his son must speak good English to become an officer in the railway. "He had no great desire to make his children collectors or bureaucrats; rather, he wanted them to learn good English and become officers in the railways, an institution beyond which he could not see" (xxi). As his father worked for the railway, he developed a desire to make his sons employees in the railway. The autobiography also reflects on the influence of the English language on the youths of the family who attempted to learn it.

Y. B. Satyanarayana recalls his father encouraging his brother, Yallaih, to learn English.

Having seen the lifestyle of higher-level and upper-caste staff, he wanted to ensure that his brother learnt English. He knew that this could fetch him a better job, a higher post. He took Yellaih to the stationmaster, who liked Ramaswamy. Yellaih would sit in the

veranda with a slate, learning to write the English alphabet. He was keen to learn, and this made it easy for the stationmaster to teach him. Within a few months, the boy began to read and write simple words and phrases in English. It was the first attempt in the Yelukati family to learn English, another attempt to achieve a better life. (55-56)

Baliah motivates all his children to learn English as he knew learning English help them to obtain good jobs on the railway. This autobiography sheds light on the significance of education and the English language as well.

Yashica Dutt, who currently lives in the United States of America, narrates in her memoir how she became a self-made and independent working woman despite poverty and caste, and gender discrimination. Dutt belongs to the Bhangi community, whose traditional occupation was cleaning and scavenging in the state of Rajasthan. Her narrative also spreads light on how the English language and education helped her to move upward socially and economically in her life. She is a third-generation educated in her family and she narrates her life experiences where she does not just talk about caste discrimination but also gender discrimination, patriarchy, and that too Dalit patriarchy. This narrative is personal as well as political in nature because it traces the history of the caste system which is the source of oppression for Dalits in India. Also, this narrative reflects upon contemporary Indian politics as well as the Dalits' condition in contemporary society. Dutt narrates her personal as well as educational journey in her memoir and she says she managed to get admission at St. Stephen College in Delhi as she was good at English and she studied in English medium before moving to the USA.

She accounts in her memoir that her great-grandfather challenged the caste system and attempted to learn. He did send his son (Dutt's grandfather) to school and college who received graduation in English and became a government employee. She recalls, "His protest against

the caste system allowed my grandfather to graduate with a degree in English literature. He taught at a high school as he prepared for the CSE. His father and, later, his older brother – Dad’s uncle – supported him through the years he studied (9).” Dutt also narrates that, despite poverty, she studied in an English medium school and started learning English in her childhood. She writes that:

When my parents gifted me a copy of *Oliver Twist* for my sixth birthday (it was too advanced for me and I quickly abandoned it) like most of their peers, they were hoping to inculcate healthy habits in me early, but their impetus was different. Only if I excelled in English- reading, writing, speaking- could I compensate for our Dalitness. I needed to become fluent. So I read magazines like *India Today* and *Famina*, which we subscribed to, paid extra attention in English class and diligently practiced writing in cursive script. (22)

Dutt, though she does not link English with merit, says there is a colonial hangover in developing countries with respect to the English language (22) and argues that English language skills are necessary to compete in this global economy. Her view is that in the majority of oppressed communities across the globe who do not have access to English as well as who cannot speak English confidently, their self-worth is hurt as everywhere fluent English is expected (22).

When writing about her mother, Dutt says that her mother always wanted Dutt to speak English fluently. She writes:

Mum shared that veneration for English with the rest of the country, and with good reason. Despite her Bachelor’s degree in English literature, Dad and members of his family continually attacked her for not ‘knowing how to speak English’. She also knew that anyone-even a Dalit- who spoke ‘good’ English would be treated with instant

respect. So she decided that I would speak the language fluently- it would gain me the respect and acceptance that she had not. (22)

The above lines of the memoir point out why Dutt's mother wanted her daughter to speak English fluently. It is undoubtedly a fact that people who speak good English are respected in our society well. Also, people with good English communication get good jobs and are well-paid.

In her memoir, Dutt notes that even in call centers, caste matter is not ignored. She says, "At the call center, caste found its way into pre-shift conversations. When I refused to disclose mine, saying that my parents were progressive and did not discuss these things at home, most of my colleagues assumed I was upper caste because of my English" (65). As she said there is a general belief in India that lower caste people do not speak English well, but upper caste people speak fluent English. Hence, it is generally perceived that whoever speaks English must be from the upper castes. Dutt says that speaking English well is like a passing upper caste in India. That is the reason why her mother wanted Dutt to speak English fluently so that others do not identify her as Dalit.

The memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* discusses the importance of the English language and education in this contemporary society. Yashica Dutt's narrative reflects how English helped her to be a successful person in her life. She now works as a journalist in the US and socially and economically moved upward by breaking all the caste and gender barriers. English helped Dutt in her personal, professional, and social life as it does to anyone.

Not only the above-mentioned autobiographies of Dalits written in English create new discourse and dialogue on human rights, social inequality, and subjugation of the marginalized in contemporary society. But also a few death letters of Dalits written in English. For instance, Rohit Vemula, a Dalit research scholar from the University of Hyderabad wrote his death note

in January 2016. His death note written in English with powerful words made people across the globe think about what a Dalit life is like in a casteist society like India which does not treat Dalits as humans. Vemula writes “The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living” (Pavan). These powerful words of Rohit shook people and intellectuals across the globe to think about the pathetic condition of Dalits in India. It is important to mention that after reading Vemula’s death note, Yashica Dutt came out as Dalit which identity she hid for many years. Here it can be argued how English language being an international language helps marginalized people like Dalits to connect across the globe. If Rohit had not written his death note in English, his tragic death would not have reached across the world. It might have been his conscious choice to write in English so that people across communities, states, and countries would read and understand his tragic life and death.

Suraj Yengde, too, has reflected on English medium education in his narrative *Caste Matters*. He studied in an English medium school despite poverty. He opines that there is a huge gap between students who study in regional medium and English medium. He argues:

The state governments enamoured with sub-nationalism put in place ghettoized education models and imparted learning only in regional languages. The poor rural class was exposed to this quality-less education where exposure to the English language was severely restricted, with many beginning to learn it only from eighth grade. This created what commentators have called a ‘dual-track education system’ where subaltern classes were fed with vernaculars and the middle and upwardly mobile classes with English. (197-198)

He strongly argues for English medium education for depressed communities in India which would help them to receive a quality education. His education in English significantly helped him in his personal and professional life. As it has been well-known, he is one of the leading Dalit scholars who is the first Dalit to get a Ph.D. from an African University. Hence it can be said that English language and English medium education have empowered Yengde and other Dalit writers discussed above.

Not only the above-mentioned Dalit writers but also Dalit and Bahujan thinkers and scholars have strongly argued for English medium education for Dalits and depressed communities in India. “Dalits across generations have seen English as a tool for their empowerment. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Dalits have been attempting to learn English and get an English education to escape from their poverty, caste discrimination, social and economic problems” (Swamy N.N., “English as a Tool” 130). These autobiographical narratives of Dalits are testimonials that articulate the aspirations of crores of people from depressed communities emphasizing the importance of English education.

Conclusion

The study of these select Dalit personal narratives in English mirrors how the English language and English education benefit the Dalits across generations in India in this globalized society. Hazari, being an untouchable who did not get a formal education in India, managed to learn English and travel abroad for higher education. He could go abroad because he knew the language, English. Like Hazari, D. R. Jatava, and Y.B. Satyanarayana have also reflected on the essential role of English in their narratives. Yashica Dutt was also so keen to learn English and became fluent and she also moved to the US to work as a journalist. These testimonials are mirroring the significance of the English language and the vital role that English plays in the lives of marginalized like Dalits. This study also helps us understand like Hazari, Yashica Dutt, and Suraj Yengde, many Dalit scholars such as Chandra Bhan Prasad and Ilaiah have also

strongly argued for English and English education for Dalits in India. These texts under study are testimonials as they represent the aspirations of millions of Dalits in India. Overall, English helps Dalits in their personal, professional, and social life. Though the scholars, as mentioned above, did not completely reject regional medium education for Dalits and other marginalized communities and they argue that regional languages are hugely influenced by caste culture and the education given in those languages instead of liberating Dalits, imposing certain codes, and controlling the minds. Dalits writers and intellectuals' argument is the English language and English medium would significantly empower Dalits and other depressed communities in India. English language attempts to bridge the gap between rural-urban, rich-poor, and upper and lower caste and class, providing equal opportunities and quality English education to all. From the above-discussed Dalit autobiographical narratives, it can be recognized that Dalit writers across generations attempted to learn the English language for various reasons, particularly for their upward mobility.

These narratives written by Dalits in English themselves distinctly indicate that through writing their personal experiences of humiliation, and caste discrimination, Dalits are fearlessly fighting against injustice and they hope for a better future. Also narrating the issues related to Dalits in literary forms, Dalits have expanded the scope of Indian Writing in English with their new styles and themes of writing. Moreover, through writing in English, they are reaching out across the globe. Hence it can be undoubtedly said that English has played a significant role in Dalit lives. As discussed in detail in the last two sections, formal education, and English medium education definitely contribute to the empowerment of Dalits and the texts under study have represented the views and aspirations of Dalits across generations. For Dalits English, is not just a language of aspiration but also emancipation as it makes them go beyond their caste boundary to live a dignified life in society.

Dalits with their effort and hard work, as discussed above in detail, might access formal and English education to improve their economic and social status in society despite poverty and caste discrimination. However, when it comes to their religious emancipation, there are no immediate solutions to this historically oppressed community. For Dalits exercising their religious freedom is not as easy. Dalits across generations struggle towards overall emancipation of their communities particularly in the realm of the religious sphere as they have been deprived of their religious freedom by Caste Hindus. Though educated and politically conscious Dalits embrace other religious faiths to Hinduism as a mark of protest against caste discrimination, the heterogeneous Dalit communities across India still struggle for their religious liberation. In the next chapter, why Dalits embrace/d other religions to Hinduism and how educated Dalits reflected on religious conversion in their autobiographies and memoirs will be discussed in detail.

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Chapter 3

Religious Conversion as a Weapon to Fight Caste Oppression

This chapter is aimed at analyzing the select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English with respect to understanding religious practices and conversion of Dalits as they use conversion as a tool to uplift their religious status. The chapter will analyze the texts such as *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, and *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla to study how these autobiographical narratives by Dalits writers have reflected on religion¹⁷ and religious conversion of Dalits in India. The main objective of this chapter is to document the quest and struggles of Dalits for their religious¹⁸ emancipation as narrated in these selected autobiographical texts. The chapter will further focus on whether the religious conversion of Dalits from Hinduism contribute/d to their emancipation. If yes, to what extent and how the process of emancipation takes place in Dalits' lives? The chapter also studies how these narratives written in English deconstructed the rubric of Indian autobiographical narratives in English that were earlier mostly written by upper-caste writers and contributed to the corpus of Indian writing in English by producing narratives on caste discrimination and religious conversion.

Dalits have been fighting for their religious liberation for ages. They are a heterogenous community spread across the Indian subcontinent and follow different religious faiths. They have been identified and called Hindus for political and other reasons in contemporary society. Nevertheless, due to the caste atrocities and practice of untouchability by caste Hindus, a significant number of educated as well as socially and politically conscious Dalits have

¹⁷ Religion is a specific set of organized beliefs and practices, usually shared by a community or group.

¹⁸ Religious refers to relating to or believing in a religion

embraced different religious faiths, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc., in India. It is, therefore, necessary to study their religious faiths and practices to examine what circumstances have led them to embrace¹⁹ other religious beliefs.

To explore the select autobiographical narratives with regard to the religious conversion²⁰ of Dalits, it is imperative to discuss Ambedkar's works and thoughts as he extensively researched Hinduism, the Caste system, religious conversion, and Buddhism. His theories provide background to discuss the religious conversion of Dalits and also how can, according to Ambedkar, historically oppressed Dalits be emancipated in contemporary society.

Ambedkar on Hinduism:

Before beginning to embark on the question of the conversion of Dalits to other religions, it is important to discuss Ambedkar's thoughts on Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in India.

Ambedkar in his speech "Annihilation of Caste," prepared for Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936, criticizes Hindu dharma-shastras²¹ and sacred texts. According to him, those dharma-shastras are the source of the existence of the caste system and untouchability in India. In this written presidential speech, Ambedkar attacked the morality and reasonableness of the Vedas and other religious books of the Hindus and declared he decided to walk out of the fold of Hinduism and it was his last address as a Hindu (Ambedkar, "Vol 1" 31). When he was asked by the organizers of Jat-Pat Todak Mandal to remove those lines from the speech that directly questioned the validity and authenticity of the Vedas and other Hindu sacred texts, he

¹⁹ 'Embrace' means an act of accepting something willingly or enthusiastically.

²⁰ Conversion' means the process of changing or causing something to change from one form to another. The fact of changing one's religion or belief or the action of persuading someone else to change theirs.

²¹ Dharmashastra' is a genre of Sanskrit texts on law and conduct, and refers to the treatises on dharma. They were composed in poetic verses and are part of Hindu Smritis.

declined to make any changes. Later the talk was postponed and it was cancelled eventually. Ambedkar then published the speech in the form of a book and titled it “Annihilation of Caste”. According to him, Hinduism is nothing but a graded unequal system whereas Brahmins are at the top and are superior, castes below the Brahmins are inferior. He believes that Hinduism is based on the caste system and the caste system is supported by Hindu scriptures; thus, unless Hindu scriptures which are considered infallible by caste Hindus be renounced, no reformation is possible in Hinduism. He highlighted the need for the reform of Hinduism in his speeches and writings. He stressed that the caste system of Hinduism is a harmful institution as it does not just divide the labour but labourers as well (Ambedkar, “Vol 1” 47). He was a staunch critic of the caste system of Hinduism which oppresses and excludes the majority of the population in India. He also said that the word ‘Hindu’ does not exist in the Vedas and religious scriptures.

It is essential to understand the origin of the word ‘Hindu.’ Ambedkar writes:

The first and foremost thing that must be recognised is that Hindu Society is a myth. The name Hindu is itself a foreign name. It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mohammedan invasion. They did not feel the necessity of a common name because they had no conception of their having constituted a community. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. (Ambedkar “Vol 1” 50)

Ambedkar argues that as Hinduism is only a collection of various castes, each caste struggles for its survival and existence. As castes have no feelings of affiliation and unity, they do not even form a federation. When there is a Hindu-Muslim riot, people from various castes of Hinduism unite but the rest of the time all castes segregate and distance themselves from other castes (Ambedkar “Vol 1” 50). As a result of divisions among the various castes in Hinduism, Hindus do not have a feeling of unity, fraternity, and equality. The caste system of Hinduism

merely segregates people into different compartments based on their birth, occupation, and caste status. The victims of Hinduism are lowered caste people who have been kept out of the social, cultural, educational, and religious milieu for ages. Ambedkar, speaking in the interest of the untouchables/lowered castes, raises some fundamental questions about Hinduism. They are as follows:

Does Hinduism recognise their worth as human beings? Does it stand for their equality? Does it extend to them the benefit of liberty? Does it at least help to forge the bond of fraternity between them and the Hindus? Does it teach the Hindus that the Untouchables are their kindred? Does it say to the Hindus it is a sin to treat the Untouchables as being neither man nor beast? Does it tell the Hindus to be righteous to the Untouchables? Does it preach to the Hindus to be just and humane to them? (Ambedkar, “Vol 5” 411-412)

Raising these pertinent questions against Hinduism, Ambedkar exposed the undemocratic and anti-social nature of casteism in Hinduism which prohibits Dalits’ mobility in all spheres of their lives. Because of the discriminatory nature of the caste system which is the backbone of Hinduism, Ambedkar was highly critical of the caste system as it divides people into different castes and sub-castes. Criticising Hindu religious faiths, dogmas, and myths, he believed that until the sanctity of the shastras was destroyed, the caste system would not be annihilated. He elucidates the nature of the caste system and why caste Hindus observe caste practices. According to Ambedkar:

They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy, you must grapple with, is

not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste. (Ambedkar “Vol 1” 68)

Ambedkar, as mentioned above, reckons that practicing untouchability and casteism is man’s inhumanity to another man. He also argues that Hindus practice caste and untouchability as they are deeply religious. In other words, Shastras and scriptures of Hinduism control the lives and duties of caste Hindus. He further argues that Hinduism does not have universal values and principles and it is just about commands and prohibitions. Ambedkar thought “The Hindu Religion, as contained in the Vedas and the Smritis, is nothing but a mass of sacrificial, social, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up. What is called Religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions” (Ambedkar “Vol 1” 75). For Ambedkar, religion is very important for any society but the principles of this religion should be truly universal, applicable to all races, all the countries, and all the time (Ambedkar “Vol 1” 75). In his opinion, the principles of Hinduism are neither universal nor applicable all the time as it is a fixed and rigid system.

Ambedkar not only worked for the social and political liberation of depressed communities but also their religious liberation as they have been deprived of it for ages. According to him, “Religion is for man and not man for religion” (Rattu, “Dr. Ambedkar Important” 110). His perspective on religion is “Religion is not an opium as it is held by some. What good things I have in me or whatever have been the benefits of my education to society, I owe them to the religious feelings in me. I want religion but I don’t want hypocrisy in the name of religion” (Rattu, “Dr. Ambedkar Important” 101). He was of the view that the Hindu social order has to be changed otherwise bringing any kind of significant changes in the society is not possible. He also believed that the caste system is a stumbling block to any progress in society. Stressing why should caste system be annihilated, Ambedkar writes:

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilise the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole. (Ambedkar, “Vol 1” 66)

Critically reflecting on the divisive nature of the caste system, Ambedkar strongly argues for the annihilation of caste which is anti-human and anti-society. His autobiographical narrative *Waiting for a Visa* (1934) is a seminal text that deeply explores how he was discriminated against by caste Hindus and people from other faiths in India. To cite a few examples, Ambedkar recounts the incident that took place in 1901 when he was nine and he said that this incident had a very lasting effect on his life (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 7). The incident took place when he and his brothers were going to Koregaon to see his father. In the beginning, Hindu tongawalla²² refused to drive tonga²³ after knowing the caste status of Ambedkar. He later agreed to drive on the condition that they should not touch him and that he is paid more money. Ambedkar and his brothers agreed to pay more. Another incident took place on the night of the same day that Hindu toll collector refused to give water, although Ambedkar told him that he was Musalman. He recalls, “There was plenty of food with us. There was hunger burning within us; with all this, we were to sleep without food; that was because we could get no water, and we could get no water because we were untouchables” (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 6). The nine-year-old Ambedkar was deeply impacted by this incident which had a long-lasting effect on him. He recounts this incident to draw the attention of readers to the existing

²³ Tonga means a light horse-drawn two-wheeled vehicle used in India. Tongawalla means someone driving the two-wheeled vehicle in India.

inhuman ill-treatment against untouchables by caste Hindus. His first-hand lived experience is a testimonial to show how discriminatory Hinduism is. As a result, he strived to remove both untouchability and the caste system within Hinduism. However, despite his relentless fight against the caste system, he could not successfully annihilate the caste system due to the non-cooperation of caste Hindus to eradicate it from the root.

Ambedkar, therefore, became a staunch critic of Hinduism and advised Dalits to convert to other religions where they find the brotherhood and fraternity that Hinduism fails to provide them. He embraced Buddhism in 1956 as an act against Hinduism in search of human dignity, self-respect, equality, and fraternity. His main argument is that by religious conversion, Dalits will not lose anything but gain social and political acceptance in the religion they convert to.

As discussed above Ambedkar thought Hinduism was built based on caste, hence; there is no equality and fraternity among Hindus. Narayana Guru from Kerala, a social reformer and educationist, was also against the caste system and Brahmanism. He was against the social and religious inequality practiced against Ezhava and other lowered caste people by Brahmins in Kerala society. He advocated that “‘There is Only One Caste, One Religion and One God for Man.’ It was the first line of his poem ‘Jaati Nirnayam.’ Just like the quality of ‘cowness’ remains in all cows, ‘humanness’ only is the common attribute among all humans (not Brahmin, etc.)” (Sanoo 178). He claimed religious rights for lowered caste people by consecrating Shiva idols and making them worship Hindu gods in the 19th century.

In 1888, when Narayana Guru visited Aruvippuram, a village located in the southern district of Thiruvananthapuram, he picked up a rock from the Neyyar River and consecrated it as Lord Shiva. People also started worshipping it with flowers, camphor, and incense sticks. As word spread, a group of agitated Brahmins reached the spot the

next day and shouted at Narayana Guru. He replied, “This is not a Brahmin Shiva, but an Ezhava Shiva.” The Brahmins were left stunned and tongue-tied. (Muralidharan)

Narayana Guru said the essence of all religions is the same and he advised people to study all the religions to understand it which he called ‘One Religion’ (Eka Matam)” (Sanoo 178). He revolted against caste discrimination that divides people. Similarly, Periyar Ramasamy, the precursor of the Anti-Brahmin movement in the state of Tamil Nadu, was also against casteism and Brahmanism. His Self-Respect Movement started in the year 1925 to achieve equal human rights for oppressed people and is a milestone in the history of India. In his conversation with Gandhi about Hinduism, Periyar says:

Other religions are not like that. It is only in Hinduism that an exclusive group like the Brahmins form the intelligentsia. Among the rest, 90/100 are illiterate and innocent. In a society, when only one section of people can belong to the intelligentsia, isn't that religion detrimental for all other castes except that privileged caste? Thus, I say that such a religion is false, harmful to others, and must go. (Ram Manoharan)

As mentioned above, Periyar Ramasamy, a rationalist, was against the caste system, Hinduism, and Brahmanism against which he fought relentlessly all his life. Similarly in contemporary India Kancha Ilaiah theorizes how undemocratic Hinduism is as it does not treat all Hindus equally. He criticizes Hinduism and Hindutva forces for preventing Dalit-Bahujans from exercising their religious duties and failing to reform Hinduism. Kancha Ilaiah, in his famous book *Buffalo Nationalism* opines that although in the modern period Gandhi and Ambedkar tried to reform Hinduism they could not succeed. Therefore, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, having realised that it was impossible to reform Hinduism. Neither Nehru's modernization of India did reform Hinduism (114).

Ilaiah explains how Dalit-Bahujans have been prevented from practicing their right to religion by Hindu organizations such as RSS²⁴. He has been highly critical of Brahminism and Hindutva ideology as the supporters of Hinduism merely dividing people in the name of caste and religion instead of reforming it for accommodating all Hindus equally.

The above discussion on Hinduism by anti-caste thinkers such as Ambedkar, Narayana Guru, Periyar Ramasamy, and Kancha Ilaiah guides in understanding why Dalits and other lower caste people are against the Hindu caste system which oppresses and excludes them in all spheres of their lives. These types of suppression and social discrimination in the name of caste and religion have mostly forced lower caste people such as Dalits to convert to other religions, as Ambedkar did, as an act of rebellion against the untouchability, caste system/Hinduism which deny their basic human rights and dignity.

Ambedkar on Conversion:

Religious conversions have taken place across the world either forcefully or voluntarily. In the Indian context, because of the untouchability and caste system of Hinduism which are discriminatory in nature mostly lower caste people converted to religions such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism. Dalits who have been humiliated and hurt by caste violence became conscious of their enslavement in Hinduism; hence, they have started asserting their religious freedom by voluntarily converting to other religions to live a dignified life.

In response to the questions raised by critics against the conversion of Dalits to other religions, Ambedkar writes:

The Untouchables, it is true will not gain wealth by conversion. This is however, no loss because while they remain as Hindus they are doomed to be poor. Politically the Untouchables will lose the political rights that are given to the Untouchables. This is, however, no real loss. Because they will be entitled to the benefit of the political rights reserved for the community which they would join through conversion. Politically there is neither gain nor loss. Socially, the Untouchables will gain absolutely and immensely because by conversion, the Untouchables will be members of a community whose religion has universalised and equalised all values of life. Such a blessing is unthinkable for them while they are in the Hindu fold. (Ambedkar, “Vol 5” 413)

The above-mentioned statement by Ambedkar is indeed significant to be noted as it points out that conversion from Hinduism is not a loss but a gain for depressed communities such as Dalits in India. Another argument to be noted is that Dalits’ conversion from Hinduism is not for wealth or economic gains but for the betterment of their personal, social, and spiritual life, which is impossible for them as long as they live as Dalit Hindus depending on Savarna Hindus for their survival in Hinduism.

Ambedkar, debunking the false propaganda created by those who are against Dalit conversion, argues:

Today religion has become a piece of ancestral property. It passes from father to son so does inheritance. What genuineness is there in such cases of conversion? The conversion of the Untouchables if it did take place would take after full deliberation of the value of religion and the virtue of the different religions. How can such a conversion be said to be not a genuine conversion? (Ambedkar, “Vol 5” 404-405)

Discussing further the conversion of untouchables to other religions, Ambedkar argued and termed this conversion as the first case in the history of genuine conversion. He believed that

untouchables convert to other religions from Hinduism after their thoughtful deliberations. He, therefore, raised the question of why the genuineness of the conversion of the Untouchables should be doubted by anybody. (Ambedkar, “Vol 5” 404-405)

Ambedkar’s point of view with regard to the question of conversion is perspicuous that he was in support of the religious conversion of Dalits. He embraced Buddhism before his death in the year 1956 is a piece of evidence that he encouraged the religious conversion of Dalits from Hinduism as an act against the Hindu caste hierarchy that prohibits their mobility.

In contemporary society, Kancha Ilaiah has also talked and written about Hinduism and conversion. He is of the view that having not allowed people to embrace the religion of their choice, Hindutva forces are pushing Dalit-Bahujans to religious darkness that he calls ‘Religious Fascism’. Ilaiah argues in his book *Buffalo Nationalism*, “Resisting the reform of Hinduism and not allowing the right to embrace any other religion by characterizing such an act as 'conversion' as the Hindutva forces do today amounts to asking the vast majority of the people to remain in 'religious darkness'. This is nothing but religious fascism” (105). He opines that Christianity allows its followers the right to priesthood and the right to use the mother tongue as lingua franca as a matter of spiritual pragmatism. The Christian religion in India granted these basic rights to whoever embraced Christianity, though it could not annihilate the caste system from within (105). Ilaiah writes that although Christianity did not eradicate the caste system within, it has given Dalit-Bahujans convert the right to priesthood and use their mother tongue to pray for god, unlike Brahmanism which neither gave the right to the priesthood to Dalit-Bahujans nor allowed them to use their mother tongues in spiritual realms. Ilaiah further argues in the same book:

The concept of religious conversion is based on the assumption that one is already within a particular religion, which one decides to leave and adopt a different one by

conversion. But what the tribals in Gujarat or Orissa were doing was embracing Christianity, not converting to it. What right have the dwijas, who see themselves as different, to define the embracing of any religion by the non-dwijas, who also consider themselves different, as conversion? If dwija-hood is rebirth, according to the Hindu religion, as least all SCs, STs and all Sudras should have been given that dwijahood a long time back. (105-106)

Ilaiah does not call Dalit-Bahujans' converting to other religions 'conversion', instead he calls it 'embrace/ing'. As he rightly argued non-dwija's or Dalit-Bahujans' culture and practices are different from the Hindu dwija castes. Dalits converting to other religions, therefore, should not be called 'religious conversion' but 'embracing of religion' as they are already outside the Hindu varna system. Ilaiah's use of 'embracing' for the process of Dalit-Bahujan converting to other religions is an important observation because it suggests they are accepting the religion of their choice voluntarily. It also negates the accusation of caste Hindus that Dalits are forcefully converted to other religions by Christian missionaries and mullas enticing and offering monetary benefits to them. As 'embracing' refers to the voluntary acceptance of other religious faiths, it can be said that Dalits' acceptance of other religions is a conscious decision and it is an act of resistance against the caste system of Hinduism for their upliftment.

It is also important to understand that uplifting the religious status of Dalits is essential for their empowerment. Hence, Ambedkar relentlessly fought for the religious freedom of the untouchables. He talked about religious conversion during the colonial and early Independent periods when there were no strict laws against religious conversion and the socio-political scenario was different than now. But in post-independent India there have been strict anti-conversion laws implemented by various state governments to curb religious conversion which

either directly or indirectly affects the empowerment of lower caste people as they are forced to live in the fold of Hinduism that curtails the religious freedom of Dalits.

Anti-conversion laws in post-independent India:

Indian constitution has given the right to follow any religion to all the citizens of India. Articles 25 to 28 of the Constitution of India read as follows: “25. Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.—(1) Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion” (*The Constitution* 29). The Constitution has also stated that “(2) Nothing in this article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law” (*The Constitution* 229). As States are allowed to make their laws regarding freedom of religion, in post-independent India States such as Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Karnataka have passed the anti-conversion bills which are believed to be made to prevent conversion of lower castes people from Hinduism. For instance, the anti-conversion bill of Karnataka state titled “The Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021” (LA Bill No. 50 of 2021)²⁵ states that the person who desires to convert to another religion and the person who is religious converter must declare about conversion before thirty days of the conversion in advance and thirty days after conversion to the District Magistrate or the Additional District Magistrate. The rules in the bills are as follows:

- 1) The converted person shall send a declaration in the Form-III within thirty days of the date of conversion, to the District Magistrate of the District or the Additional District

²⁵ The bill ‘The Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2011’ was introduced and passed in the 15th legislative assembly in the state of Karnataka by Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) amid the protest by opposition parties.

Magistrate specially authorized by the District Magistrate in this regard in which he is residing prior to the date of conversion. (2) The District Magistrate shall notify religious conversion on the notice board of the office of the District Magistrate and in the office of the Tahsildar and will call for objections in such cases where no objections were called earlier under section 8. (3) The said declaration shall contain the requisite details, i.e; the particulars of the converted person such as date of birth, permanent address, the present place of residence, Father's/husband's name, the religion to which the converted person originally belonged and the religion to which he has converted, the date and place of conversion and nature of process gone through for conversion along with a copy of the identity card or the Aadhar card. (4) The converted person shall appear before the District Magistrate within twenty one days from the date of sending/filing the declaration to establish his identity and confirm the contents of the declaration. (*The Karnataka Protection 4*)

These types of strict rules for conversion point out that this law has been brought to prevent conversion rather than the protection of any religion. Any person who wishes to convert to another religion has to declare his name, address, and other personal details which might attract threats from people of his current religion. For instance, if a lower caste Hindu wishes to convert to Christianity, as per this new law, the person to be converted and the person who converts to Christianity, have to go to District Magistrate and fill in the form with personal details which will be put up on the notice board. If they do so, perhaps members of Hindu organizations such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad or Bajarang Dal might come and attack both people. Anticipating this trouble/ threat to life, naturally, those who wish to be converted may not publicly dare to go for conversion putting their lives at risk. Hence, it can be said that it is a systematic attempt of ruling regimes across India that in the guise of protection of freedom of religion, they threaten people who wish to embrace other religion/s. The government which

is expected to follow the law of the land, in fact, violates it by preventing people from following the religion of their choice.

Besides, the bill also clearly mentions that strict punishment would be given to citizens who violate the rules. The punishments are “a term of three years but which may extend to five years and shall also be liable to fine of rupees twenty five thousand” (*The Karnataka Protection* 2) in case of forced conversion. Besides, the bill particularly mentions that strict punishment is imposed on those who convert a person belonging to a Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. It reads as follows “Provided that whoever contravenes the provisions of section 3 in respect of a minor or a person of unsound mind or a woman or a person belonging to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term of three years but which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine of rupees fifty thousand” (*The Karnataka Protection* 2) It can, therefore, be said that in the guise of protection of freedom of religion, the government is trying to prevent the conversion of SC and ST people to other religion by bringing strict laws against those who convert them. Devanuru Mahadeva a famous Kannada Dalit writer, in his book *RSS: Depth and Breadth* (2022) criticizes the Government of Karnataka for passing the bill ‘Karnataka Religious Freedom Protection Bill 2021’ in a rush and got the approval of the cabinet to implement it. He, pointing out to mention of the names Dalits and women in the bill, opines:

The irony is that if women and Dalits seek to convert, their very dignity is under threat by this act of the government. Women, Dalits, people of unsound mind who cannot make decisions, people with disabilities and children are treated the same in the Act. This is evident in the heavy punishment meted out to those who facilitate conversion of women and Dalit people. So, women and Dalit have an unsound mind? Are they to be considered to be disabled? (Mahadeva)

This is the current status of anti-conversion laws in post-independent India. Many states have already passed and implemented these bills. As discussed above, these bills seem to be brought to prevent the conversion of lower caste people from Hinduism.

As mentioned earlier, during pre-independent India there were no strict laws against conversion. But in post-independent India, anti-conversion laws have been a major threat to Dalits and other lower caste people who wish to embrace the religion of their choice. Given this condition, it can be argued that ruling regimes are attempting to keep Dalits in the Hindu fold because of the maintenance of the majority Hindu population in the Indian socio-political realm to meet their project of majoritarian politics/ Hindu Rashtra. For ruling regimes in India, Dalits are just numbers and vote/s banks; hence, it has failed to work for the welfare of the Dalit community. Even the reluctance to effectively implement affirmative actions such as reservation for SCs/ STs shows casteist and anti-Dalit sentiments of Brahmanical hegemony of Indian ruling elites. Even today the majority of Dalits do follow Hindu customs and culture along with their indigenous culture. Their lack of education, resources, lack of unity, and overdependence on Savarna Hindus for their livelihood are the main reasons why Dalits remain in the fold of Hinduism. Preventing Dalits' conversion means stopping their upliftment and right to religion and pushing them to live in servitude under Savarna caste Hindus which denies Dalits basic human rights. Thus Dalits are struggling for their religious liberation as they have been maltreated in Hinduism.

Ambedkar, after studying all the religions of the world, finally preferred Buddhism to Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism, for conversion as a mark of resistance against the caste system of Hinduism which he, as I discussed earlier, found oppressive and undemocratic. With his lakhs and lakhs of followers, he converted to Buddhism in Nagpur in 1956 which is a historic moment in the history of India. It is also worth mentioning Ambedkar's conversion to Buddha-

Dhamma, the Indic religion of India, which he found to be potential and suitable religion to provide solutions to Dalits' problems.

Ambedkar on Buddhism:

Ambedkar narrates in his seminal autobiographical text *Waiting for a Visa* that he was discriminated against by Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Parsis because of his lower caste status. After many years of study, he thought that he should find a permanent solution to Dalits' problems, particularly in the realm of their social and religious lives.

Ambedkar thought Buddha's dhamma has a solution for Dalits who have been seeking religious emancipation for ages. After thoroughly studying Buddha's dhamma, Ambedkar accepted the panchasheelas of Buddha dhamma and the three principles taught by Sakyamuni Gautama Buddha in the 5th century BCE - Prajna (Understanding), Karuna (Compassion), and Samatha (equality), where Prajna and Karuna are two cornerstones of Buddha's dhamma. While theorizing the Buddhist terms Prajna and Karuna, Ambedkar notes:

According to the Buddha, Dhamma consists of Prajna and Karuna. 22. What is Prajna? And why Prajna? Prajna is understanding. The Buddha made Prajna one of the two cornerstones of His Dhamma because he did not wish to leave any room for superstition. 23. What is Karuna? And why Karuna? Karuna is love. Because, without it Society can neither live nor grow, that is why the Buddha made it the second cornerstone of His Dhamma. (Ambedkar, "Vol 11" 317)

As Buddha's dhamma is against superstitions and preaches humanity, equality, fraternity, and compassion, Ambedkar thought that Buddha's principles are pro-human, democratic, and scientific which are necessary for any society. Therefore, after many years of study and activism, Ambedkar thought only Buddhism can liberate Dalits, not other religions which are obsessed with god and soul. While talking about other religions and Buddha's

dhamma, Ambedkar writes “The Buddha never claimed that he was a prophet or a messenger of God. He repudiated any such description. A more important point than this is that his religion is a discovery. As such it must be sharply distinguished from a religion which is called Revelation” (Ambedkar, “Vol 11” 217). He further argues that “All prophets have promised salvation. The Buddha is the one teacher who did not make any such promise. He made a sharp distinction between moksha data and marga data, one who gives salvation and one who only shows the way. He was only a marga data. Salvation must be sought by each for himself by his own effort” (Ambedkar, “Vol 11” 218).

On May 12, 1956, in his talk to the British Broadcasting Corporation, London, Ambedkar explained why he embraced Buddhism and how Buddhism is useful to the world. Ambedkar says:

All other religions are bothering themselves either about god and soul and life after death. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism). It teaches Karuna (love). It teaches Samata (equality). This is what man want for a good and happy life on earth. These three principles of Buddhism make their appeal to me. These three principles should also make an appeal to the world. Neither god nor soul can save society. (Rattu, “Last Few” 88)

Ambedkar, as documented by Rattu, believed that Depressed classes must leave the Hindu religion and that is the only way to do away with untouchability. Ambedkar thought Depressed communities need not convert to already existing religions in India but start a new religion or revive the ancient one that was practiced among the Adi-Dravidas, before the Aryans brought Hinduism with its various customs into India. (Rattu, “Dr. Ambedkar Important” 60). As a result, Ambedkar finally embraced Buddha dhamma which is the ancient religion practiced by the majority of people in ancient India.

It is indeed important to know that Ambedkar's attempt to revive Buddhism and later, conversion to Buddhism is a conscious decision as this was a native religion that was hugely spread and practiced in ancient India. He believes that religion is important in human society because that connects people in their socio-cultural life. He, therefore, looked for a possible alternative for the religious emancipation of Dalits. He did not find permanent solutions for Dalits in Christianity and Islam. Ambedkar, as noted by Rattu, was of the view:

We are fully conscious of the fact that go anywhere we will, we would have to fight for our welfare; if we took to Christianity, Islam or Sikhism. It is foolish to suppose that in the event of our conversion to Islam, everybody from amongst would be Nawab or become the pope if we went to Christianity. Go we may anywhere fight is inevitable in store for us. (Rattu, "Dr. Ambedkar Important" 59).

He thought embracing Christianity, and Islam cannot bring the solution for the religious emancipation of Dalits. He thought that Buddhism which is the Indic religion, one of the ancient religions which first opposed Brahminism, has a solution for untouchable's problems. It is worth noting Ambedkar's thoughts on the liberation of Dalits as recorded by Ambedkar's attendant, Nanak Chand Rattu:

For the last thirty five years, I have carried on political struggle and during this period, I had occasions to cross sword with big and prominent Hindu leaders. I have also studied deeply all religions of the world in the intervening years. I have now come to the unshakable conclusion, and that decision is irrevocable. That is that the untouchables have no other way of liberation than the Buddha's dhamma. It is only in the Buddhist dhamma that the untouchables have a permanent answer (Rattu, "Dr. Ambedkar Important" 59)

The scientific and humanistic approach that Buddhism has had an impact on Ambedkar. Hence, with lakhs and lakhs of his followers, he converted to Buddhism before his death in the year 1956. However, it was in Yeola of Nashik District of Maharashtra, in October 1935 that he first time declared that he would not die as a Hindu. Ambedkar's acceptance of Buddha-Dhamma in 1956 is a historical event in the history of modern India.

For Babasaheb Ambedkar, Buddhism is in accord with science, is fundamentally grounded in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and does not sanctify and ennoble poverty. He held a firm conviction that the buddha-dhamma-sangha will guide, firstly his own historically oppressed peoples, and secondly all civil beings at large to a Buddhist way of life, a life of self-respect and dignity in which individual freedom, public morality and social mobility will be embodied, realized and practiced. (Darokar)

Ambedkar while reviving the Buddha-dhamma of ancient India made a few changes to the original and he called it Navayana Buddhism/ the New Vehicle. He did not bring the concept of rebirth, soul, and suffering as central to human life in Navayana Buddhism.

The notion of Navayāna is fundamentally grounded on the twenty two (22) vows administered by Dr. Ambedkar to his followers on October 14, 1956. In the Indian context these vows/principles constitutes the *new* paradigm of fundamental transformation and resurgence of a new theory and practice of emancipation based on right view. Through these vows a new path has been cleared for people to begin walking again and free themselves both physically and mentally. (Darokar)

This Navayana Buddhism gave new life to both Buddhism and its followers in the 20th century. Buddha-Dhamma has brought radical changes in the lives of those who follow it because it liberates them from centuries of caste oppression and mental slavery. Thus, as a mark of protest against the casteism of Hinduism for its ill-treatment, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism by

paving the path for lower caste people to accept Buddhism for their emancipation. It must be noted that Ambedkar writes that Broken Man/untouchables were Buddhists; hence, untouchability was practiced against them by Brahmins. According to Ambedkar, untouchability came into practice from two roots: 1) The hatred of Brahmins against the Broken Men as they were Buddhists 2) These Broken Men continued beef-eating although others stopped beef-eating (Ambedkar, “Vol 7” 242). Ambedkar claiming untouchables were erstwhile Buddhists refers to the glorious and rich cultural and religious heritage of Dalits who have been deprived of it by Brahmanical Hinduism for ages. Undoubtedly it was Ambedkar who gave rebirth to Buddhism.

Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned discussion, the selected autobiographical narratives would be studied to understand how these Dalit writers reflected on the caste system, their religion, and religious conversion in their narratives.

Renouncing untouchability, caste, and Hindu religion

Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste (1969) by Hazari is the first Dalit autobiographical narrative in English that explores Hazari’s struggles for religious liberation in pre-independent India. Hazari, who was almost contemporaneous with Ambedkar, longs for a religion that accepts and treats him equally to all.

Since childhood, he was aware of the fact that though they worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses, they were not treated as Hindus in society. In his childhood, he was humiliated because of his lower caste status. He recounts the incident that took place in his childhood. One day he was going through a very narrow street and happened to see a few upper-caste Hindu children walking toward him on the same street. But as soon as they saw Hazari, one of them shouted to others to avoid contact with the untouchables. This made Hazari feel distressed and sick for the first time and this incident also made him realise the real anger within himself (91).

Although his family believed in ideals of Hinduism, such as ‘Karma’²⁶ they were still treated as untouchables. However, his parents believed in Hinduism and practiced it. For instance, Hazari, while recalling why his father got married a second time, narrates, “When his children from first wife did not survive due to lack of medical care, he got married the second time and they were all living under the same roof” (4). He further says that “of course, behind his action lay the idea of Karma - the “salvation” of the Hindu religion - for every Hindu must have a male child leave in this world” (4). Even though the family practiced Hinduism, they were not treated as Hindus but rather discriminated against because of their lower caste status in Hinduism. Hazari also mentions his family deity and the local gods of their community. When he was sick in his childhood, he recalls:

My father and grandmother thought that the goddess who was one of our patron goddesses, and whose temple was about 12 miles away, must be displeased with us because my people had been so busy, first with my grandfather’s death, then with my birth, as well as other household affairs, that they had not offered their usual sacrifice, which consisted of a young pig. As soon as this thought came to them, they were mortally afraid because they had been guilty of such a gross error. (16)

He further writes “Our gods and goddesses are the same as the gods and goddesses of the high-caste Hindus, the only difference being that we have their images among our community. Our offerings to them of sweetmeats, grain, flowers, and blood sacrifices are the same” (16). Across India, even today Dalits are not allowed to enter temples particularly those run by Brahmins; hence, they just worship the images of the gods of Hindus. Despite worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses like Savarna Hindus, Hazari’s community was not

²⁶ (In Hinduism and Buddhism) the sum of a person’s actions in this and previous states of existence, viewed as deciding their fate in future existences.

considered Hindus but only untouchables. He reflects on his grandmother's religious practices and recalls "My grandmother believed everything written in the Hindu scriptures, as did most of the untouchables and the other low-caste Hindus at that time. On this belief hangs the whole fabric of the Hindu caste system" (34). As Hazari narrates, although untouchable Hindus worship Hindu gods and practice Hindu ideals, they are still kept away from mainstream Hinduism and discriminated against in the name of caste and religion. Chandra Bhan Prasad in his book *Dalit Phobia: Why Do They Hate Us?* (2019) opines:

A large number of Dalits follow Hindu rituals, customs, and worship Hindu gods and goddess. But this can only be partially true. In most parts of India, Dalits have their own deities who they worship and revere. The same deities are not worshipped or revered by Hindus. As we already know, in most parts of India, Dalits are not entitled to enter Hindu places of worship. (86)

The above view of Prasad is true that Dalits have their deities. Though more Dalits worship Hindu gods and goddesses, they are prohibited from entering temples which is the reality even today. Hazari was conscious of the discrimination his community faced by caste Hindus. When he grew up, after coming in contact with Christians in his workplace, he thought of converting to Christianity, but he gradually realized that there was also a noticeable inequality between original Christians and converted Christians as they go to separate churches for prayers. He, reflecting on lower castes Christian converts, recounts:

Although they called themselves Christians and went to church on such occasions as Easter and Christmas, their social outlook, position, and marriage customs remained the same. Family feuds were carried on as before. They only drank more, and their women wore high-heeled shoes and cheap European dresses. There were no sign of any real uplift, and the high castes still treated them with scorn and contempt. The only

outward sign of change that one could see was that they were working as waiters, cooks, and bearers, instead of as sweepers. (124)

As Hazari recounts, lowered-caste Christians are still treated like untouchables despite embracing Christianity. Bama, a Tamil Dalit feminist writer, also narrates caste discrimination practiced in Christian convents and churches in her autobiography *Karukku*. She narrates how poor and Dalit children are ignored by elite upper-caste teachers and students who negatively comment on Dalits. Bama recalls the comments made about Dalits in the Christian convent she worked in: “How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place.” “There is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we should not do anything for them. Because to do so would be like helping cobras” (99). Having seen existing inequality and discrimination against Dalits and poor children in the convent, she felt disappointed. As a result, she quit her nun job and came out of the Christian convent. It can be argued that conversion from Hinduism to Christianity perhaps helped lower caste people to get a good education and better jobs; however, they are still seen as untouchable/ lower caste Christians by Hindus even today in India as Sujatha Gidla also mentions in her memoir *Ants Among Elephants*. Therefore, privileged caste and under-privileged caste Christians go to separate churches. Moreover, social gatherings and marriages hardly take place between upper-caste Christians and lowered-caste Christians. The caste system exists in different forms across various religions including Christianity as most of them still strictly follow the caste practices. Ambedkar recounts one of the incidents in his autobiographical narrative that took place when he was threatened to vacate the Parsi Inn in Baroda. He tried to take shelter with a Hindu friend and a Christian friend, but both of his friends gave some excuses and did not give an accommodation (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 13-14). Ambedkar writes the reason why his Christian friend refused to accommodate him, “He and his wife came originally from a family

which was Brahmin by caste, and although on conversion to Christianity, the husband had become liberal in thought, the wife had remained orthodox in her ways, and would not have consented to harbour an untouchable in her house” (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 14). From this, it can be known that even after conversion to other religions, caste Hindus carry their caste supremacy to maintain the status quo. Even today, caste practices are taking place in some Churches and Christian schools across India. The victims of this system are lower caste converts who are looking for religious and social acceptance in other religions. Yet they are discriminated and their dual or mixed identity because of their caste makes their attempt for religious liberation arduous. Hazari was particularly aware of the then-existing caste system which he experienced in his childhood and later stage. Hence, for him, the freedom of India from the British cannot be the freedom of the untouchables. He narrates the dilemma he went through that “The latest news of the new movement against British rule and for the acquisition of Home Rule for India. I could not make up my mind which side to take, whether to fight for the freedom of India or to fight for the freedom of untouchables from the degradation of the caste system” (92). Hazari’s narrative evidently points out the visible divide between caste Hindus and Dalits. From Hazari’s observation, it can also be argued that a narrative like Hazari’s has the potential to question the very post-colonial idea/theory that talks against the dominance and colonization of foreigners whereas national elites of India are new colonizers of subaltern lower castes. Thus, a person like Hazari is confused about whether to fight for Free India or a caste-free India. Hazari was conscious of the pernicious caste system which led to graded inequality and marginalization of lower castes in Hinduism. He suffered the ills of caste violence and discrimination. He, as a result, wished to embrace a religion that treats him equally unlike Hinduism. Hazari narrates the religious conflict he suffered:

I realised that education without religion meant nothing to me; my studies must be related to my spiritual life. It seemed I would have to turn to Islam, where the

community is a true brotherhood and not merely formal system. So the conflict continued, and, when I looked around me, I found that modern education tended to free the individual from his responsibilities to society. (181)

The above-mentioned opinion of Hazari indicates the dilemma he was going through as his education does not resonate with his current religious life. He then realizes that his education should help him for his spiritual liberation. Otherwise, education is nothing for him without liberation. He, therefore, after moving to Allahabad and befriending Muslim friends, thought that he must convert to Islam. He recounts, “One day, after I had recovered from my illness, a few friends asked why I did not become a Muslim and be one of them, instead of just a friend. I consented. There was great rejoicing among my friends, and the ceremony was immediately arranged for the following Friday morning” (181). He decides to convert to Islam after reading about Quran. Hazari converted to Islam; however, he gradually felt he could not be an orthodox disciple of Islam. He narrates:

Much as I admired the Muslim religion, I could not become reconciled to the belief that I was one of the chosen people of Allah, while all non-Muslims were condemned to hell. Although I belonged to Islam, I could never bring myself in my prayers to thank God that I had a part in the community of the saved and was not one of the millions whom he had condemned eternally. Later, as I discussed religion with other Muslims and came to know more about the life and teachings of Muhamaad, I became still more convinced that I could never be a devout and orthodox disciple of Islam. This knowledge only increased a consciousness of guilt, from which there seemed no escape. (189)

Although Hazari’s religious journey started first from Hinduism to Christianity, then from Christianity to Islam, his quest for spiritual fulfillment was futile. He says that though he

liked Islam as it spreads brotherhood, he did not like the belief that non-Muslims go to hell (180). Like most of the conscious Dalits experience a dilemma with respect to their own religion as no existing religion in India such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism treats them as first-class citizens. Hazari also experienced it after converting to Islam that he could not be a devotee of Islam. He was not happy with Hinduism, neither Christianity or Islam. Hazari did not mention the practice of untouchability and caste discrimination practiced by Muslims against Dalits in his autobiography. But from Ambedkar's personal narrative, it can be known. Ambedkar himself experienced untouchability and caste discrimination when he went to the fort of Daulatabad, Maharashtra in 1934, which he narrates in his autobiographical narrative *Waiting for a Visa*. He and his colleagues went to see a fort in Daulatabad. They touched and used the tank water on the premise of the fort. Ambedkar recollects the incident:

In the meantime an old Mohammedan with a white flowing beard was coming from behind shouting: The Dheds (meaning untouchables) have polluted the tank! Soon all the young and old Mohammedans who were nearabout joined him and all started abusing us. "The Dheds have become arrogant. The Dheds have forgotten their religion (i.e. to remain low and degraded). The Dheds must be taught a lesson." Later the Mohammedans started abusing local untouchables that "Why did you not tell these outsiders that this tank could not be used by untouchables? Was the question they kept on asking them. (Ambedkar, "Waiting for" 20)

The above incident recollected by Ambedkar evidently refers to the caste discrimination and untouchability practiced even by Muslims in India. Even among the Muslims, converted Muslims are seen as lower, whereas Ashraf and Syed communities are seen as upper class or original Muslims in India. Ambedkar, recalling the Daulatabad incident, says that "I gave one instance to show that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a

Parsi. This will show that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan” (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 21). It can be said that Dalits are treated as outsiders across existing popular religions in India against whom untouchability and caste system are practiced by the elite class and original followers of those religions.

Hazari’s autobiography explores his quest for religious and spiritual thirst during pre-independence India where the majority of the lower caste Dalits did not have even basic formal education; hence they remained under Hinduism and worshipped their local deities and Hindu gods despite they were not allowed to temples. In central India, particularly in the state of Maharashtra, because of the social and political activism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, lower-caste people from Maharashtra became conscious of their social condition. Although there were few social reformers in North India where Hazari hailed from, they did not have a leader like Ambedkar in the beginning of the 20th century. As a result, Hazari did not have a community of people to share brotherhood and he felt alienation. His autobiography indicates his futile attempt in search of religious emancipation in pre-independent India.

Another important Dalit autobiography in English *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav also narrates about the religious conversion of Dalits. Jadhav’s father, Damu’s narrative on his association with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his participation in social movements led by Ambedkar indicate that Damu was an Ambedkarite and like Ambedkar, he embraced Buddhism having been influenced by ideas and thoughts of Ambedkar.

The reasons for his conversion to Buddhism are because of untouchability, caste discrimination, and caste-based occupation. At a young age, Damu was asked to bring the dead body out of the well, but he refused and was beaten by a police official. Damu, comes home with severe pain and says to his family “What kind of a tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs?” Damu yelled. ‘I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am not going to abide

by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for Baluta”²⁷ (10). Having seen the inhuman ill-treatment because he was a Mahar he resisted and refused to do caste duties imposed on his community. He further argues that he does not do Baluta and says to his wife –“We must have self-respect. We must have dignity as human beings. How can I take to begging from door to door? Baluta is our right, they proudly claim! My foot! Have you seen how they throw the food? I don’t want rights as a dog. I want my human rights” (18-19). Since his young age, he was conscious of existing caste discrimination which impose degraded jobs on lowered caste people.

He then moves to Mumbai from his village to escape from the village customs and traditions. Damu was twelve then. He worked in Mumbai for several years and the city brought changes in his life, along with an awareness of his rights as a human being. As a participant in Babasaheb Ambedkar’s social movement, he was reluctant to perform yeskar duties (6). He recounts Ambedkar’s words, “ Lost rights are never regained by begging, but by relentless struggle. Goats are used for sacrificial offerings, not lions” (20). He further narrates “I knew at once it was the spirit inculcated in me by Babasaheb that prompted me to act” (20). Having been deeply influenced by the works and thoughts of Ambedkar, Damu even participated in the Mahad movement on 19th March 1927 (22). He recalls, “Looking back, I realise that the symbolic march to the Chavdar tank had kindled in us untouchables the flame of dignity and self-respect. It was the beginning of our awakening” (24). Thus, Damu participated in a few historical social and political movements organized by Ambedkar which enlightened and influenced him.

²⁷ Baluta is a Marathi word which means giving a share of agricultural produce to the artisans and servants for their work/service.

He then decided to convert to Buddhism on the day Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956. Despite his wife Sony's opposition to converting to Buddhism, Damu persuades her to convert. Sony recalls "What had begun as a mere declaration by my man that we would convert to Buddhism had turned into a raging fight. By tacit understanding, he would make all the decisions about anything in our lives, and I would follow them unquestioningly. This time, it was different. It was he who had taught me to think and reason and that is what I was going to do" (174). Sony tries to defend herself and questions him on conversion to Buddhism. But Damu did not agree with her and said "You will do as I say," he said with finality" (174). Damu's family continues to follow Buddhism. It is worth mentioning the opinions of Jafferlot as stated by Braj Ranjan Mani that "devoid of dignity for centuries, they finally broke free of the 'untouchable' prison-house of Hinduism and reclaimed their own 'Dhamma' the egalitarian Buddhism. It was an epiphanic moment of psychological freedom for an illiterate woman who suddenly felt 'beaming with a new identity' – an emancipatory identity" (3). It was a historical as well as life-changing experience for Dalits who were historically oppressed in Hinduism. Jadhav's autobiography portrays that his father Damu wanted to escape from Hinduism which is an oppressive and unequal system. Also, Damu had a quest for religious emancipation; hence, he converted to Buddhism as Ambedkar did. It is clear from the context that he converted to Buddhism as a means of resistance against untouchability and casteism.

D.R. Jatava, like Damu, was an Ambedkarite; hence his autobiography *A Silent Soldier* also deals with the question of casteism and religious conversion from Hinduism. Jatava was born and brought up in Hathras, UP, but he worked and settled in Jaipur, Rajasthan. In his school days, he experienced untouchability and caste discrimination (11). Since then, he has worked hard to get education despite poverty and caste discrimination. After knowing about Ambedkar and his ideas on Buddhism, he followed and walked on the path of Ambedkar converting to Buddhism, coming out of the Hindu fold. He embraced Buddhism and identified

himself as Ambedkarite and Buddhist. Jatava himself wrote his doctoral thesis on the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. According to him:

The pivotal point of Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy of life was a radical transformation of the human mind in consonance with Buddha's ideas and teachings. He stressed the need of education and knowledge for liberating human mind from centuries of degenerated social life. It would strengthen man's quality, capacity and value for regeneration. For Dr. Ambedkar, religion was a unifying force, and he felt religion was the only factor that would unite our people. (235)

Jatava also expresses his thoughts on Buddhism. He writes, "The philosophy of Baba means the rejection of the Vedic authority as infallible, the non-acceptance of the existence of God like Bramha, Vishnu, and Mahesh, and also the total rejection of the Varnashrama Dharma" (172). Jatava further writes, "The Baba has brought me very close to Buddha, for the philosophies of both, have been a reasoned source of enlightened humanism to me, and as an Ambedkarite, I could not have jumped beyond what the Baba and Buddha have taught us to be a righteous man to live up to the ideals of their humanism. It is the greatest gift that I have ever got in my life as a result of my studies" (173). Jatava's words on Ambedkar and Buddha describe why Ambedkar embraced Buddhism and how Buddhism, which is against superstition and supernaturalism, stands for humanity and equality. Buddhism can be a source of inspiration and liberation for downtrodden sections of India.

Jatava points out that an untouchable remains untouchable even if he or she improves their social, economic, and educational status because of their caste status (251). In his autobiography, Jatava narrates the social and psychological alienation that he experienced due to the caste system. Having known the discriminatory nature of the caste system and Hinduism,

he accepted Buddhism as he found universal values in Buddha's philosophy. Jatava opines that Buddha gave untouchables humanistic spiritualism.

Without Ambedkar's effort and rigorous study of Buddhism, the Buddha dhamma would not have come to the limelight in the 20th century. Moreover, Ambedkar rejuvenated ancient Buddhism in the 20th century and named it Navayana Buddhism by emphasizing its democratic and scientific temperament and principles. Jatava views Buddhism as pro-human and pro-democratic. However, due to the pernicious caste system, even after conversion to Buddhism, Dalit Buddhists face caste discrimination and the label of their caste does not escape. In the context of Maharashtra, there is a sizable Dalit-Buddhists who converted along with Ambedkar in 1956. Now second-generation and third-generation of educated Dalit Buddhists can be found in Maharashtra. Yet, they are identified as Mahar-Buddhists or Mang-Buddhists by caste Hindus. Therefore, there are mixed opinions in India on whether Dalits can completely liberate themselves after converting to other religions. The conversion of Dalits from Hinduism to another religion might not completely emancipate them given that all religions have caste influence and practice except Buddhism. Nevertheless, their conversion from Hinduism to non-Hinduism, to some extent, liberates them from clutches of caste discrimination and untouchability as non-Hindu religions are not built on the foundation of a caste-based system like Hinduism. At least in religions like Christianity and Islam followers of those religions were not only preached but were also taught to read and recite. But in Hinduism, historically, except for priestly castes, people of non-Brahmin castes and women particularly Dalits were not allowed to learn reading and writing. Although most of the Dalits write their religion as Hindus, they hardly know anything about the history of Hinduism and its sacred texts and rituals as they were not permitted to read and understand. As Brahminism has been a closed system for centuries, it failed to include non-Brahmin castes and create a sense of brotherhood, community, and society among Indians even in this 21st century. Hinduism

imposes certain rules and codes of conduct and forces its followers to follow them. But Buddhism is unlike Hinduism as it teaches basic tenets of humanity and equality and mainly allows people to explore and understand themselves. Hence, Buddhism is a better option for Dalits as it helps them to discover themselves, unlike other religions that force them to follow their beliefs. Also, followers of Buddhism do not blindly follow Buddha's dhamma. In Buddhism, followers of dhamma read and understand and then follow it. But in Hinduism, the majority of the Hindus blindly follow the rituals and customs of Hinduism and these followers of Hinduism particularly non-brahmin castes people do not even read sacred texts of Hinduism. It is because historically Hinduism did not allow all community people to learn except Brahmins. Thus, as Ambedkar thought and visioned, Buddhism can liberate Dalits and other marginalized communities who were denied even basic human rights and the right to dignity in Hinduism.

Whereas Narendra Jadhav's and D.R. Jatava's autobiographies narrate their journey into Buddhism as that they have embraced Buddhism as did Ambedkar, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* sheds light on her great-grandparents converting to Christianity during colonial India.

Gidla narrates that her great-grandparents were from an indigenous and casteless community who worshipped their village deities (13). She also recalls "They called their new settlement Sankarapadu, after one of their gods" (14). It was the story of her forefathers before they embrace Christianity during the colonial period. By tracing her family roots Gidla goes back to the 19th century and writes that her forefathers were not Hindus but were from nomadic clans who worshipped their family deities. She further narrates:

When the people of Sankarapadu entered Hindu society with no caste of their own and the most impure occupation of all, that of landless laborers, there was no question where

their place would be: at the bottom, as despised outcastes. Outcastes are also called untouchables because they are supposed to be so ritually unclean that the slightest contact with them will defile even low-caste Hindus. (14-15)

Gidla is of the view that after her forefathers came in touch with Hindus, they were given lower caste status as they were doing unclean jobs. When the villagers of her great-grandparents gave shelter to a tribal man and when they the police came in search of this tribal him the villagers attacked the police, she recounts:

The villagers did not know what to do. They did not know about jails, bail, courts, or lawyers. By luck, some Canadian missionaries active in a nearby town learned what had happened. They sent a white lawyer to defend the villagers and win their release. In gratitude, the villagers started to give up their old goddesses and accept baptism. They began sending their children to attend the schools set up by the missionaries. (15)

Her grandparents were given education in the school run by Christian missionaries. Her forefathers embraced Christianity and their progenies continued to follow it. Christianity and education go hand in hand as entry to Christianity brings entry to learning and education. Therefore, in some parts of India, those lower castes people who were denied education for ages in Hinduism embraced Christianity for a better future. Gidla is the 4th generation-educated Christian. However, she writes that they are still seen as lower caste/untouchables by Caste Hindus although they accepted Christianity four generations ago. She recounts: “Christians, untouchables – it came to the same thing. All Christians in India were untouchable, as far as I knew (though only a small minority of all untouchables are Christian)” (3). She also recounts “I knew no Hindu who did not look right through a Christian man standing in front of him as if he did not exist” (3). She further recalls “I saw the grown-ups in my family scrambling to their feet, straightening their clothes, and wringing their hands when a certain bowlegged,

cross-eyes, drooly-mouthed Hindu man passed in front of us” (3). She writes about what she experienced during her childhood in India. As she narrated, although her family members are practicing Christians, they are still treated like lower caste people/untouchable by caste Hindus. The recent diary written by Sumeet Samos also narrates about the condition of Dalit- converts particularly about the Dom Dalit Christians community he belongs to in the state of Odisha. He is currently a graduate student at Oxford University, England, who despite difficulties in his life made it to Oxford. Sumit Samos writes:

In the caste-ridden, Hindu-majority small towns and villages, Dalit converts are subjugated to stigma, mockery, and suspicion. The caste Hindus look at Dalit-converts as traitors, a crazy bunch of people who sing songs loudly and chant ‘Halleluiah Halleluiah.’ They often ask questions like ‘How much funding did you get from outside?’ alluding to demeaning speculations of collaborations with foreign influences. When you do well or acquire mobility, they pass condescending remarks attributing it to missionary connections. This is quite prevalent in North and Central India. (132)

As Samos mentioned Dalit converts are ill-treated across India because of their faith in Christianity which might support them to acquire mobility in their life. These kinds of discrimination and harassment against (Dalit) Christians by Hindus take place in the form of attacks on Churches and accusing missionaries of forced conversion. Discrimination against lower caste Christians does not just happen within the religious milieu but also in the socio-political sphere. Gidla records that even among communists, who claim to be progressive, caste exists and the practice of casteism takes place. She points out that when her uncle takes charge as general secretary of the PWG, many lower caste young people come and complain that caste practices exist there. She recalls when her uncle Satyamurthy became general secretary of the PWG,

Seizing the opportunity, a group of young untouchable members approached him and complained of casteist practices in the underground functioning of the party. They pointed out that when members were recruited, they were assigned duties according to their caste. Barber-caste members were told to shave their comrades' chins, and washer-caste members to wash their comrades' clothes. Untouchables, of course, were made to sweep and mop the floors and clean the lavatories. (300)

Gidla's narration of caste practice in Marxist groups reveals the fact that even privileged caste Marxists are casteists who instead of fighting against the caste system, merely aim to work for a classless society in a caste-based society. She also narrates even her uncle Satya Murthy, who joined the communist group to fight against inequality in society, also experiences caste discrimination among communists.

SM himself had received his share of casteist insults from upper caste members who were close to him. They were known to leave small amounts of money in the bathroom to see if he would pocket it. He had brushed this behavior aside as the product of backward social attitudes that had inevitably seeped into the party from outside and would surely wither away as it grew in strength. But he could no longer close his eyes. (300-301)

The above narration of Gidla reiterates the fact that lower-caste Christians are still treated like untouchables by caste Hindus. Caste practices exist even among communists who are working for equality and they are blind when it comes to the question of caste although.

Gidla's family story mainly sheds light on her forefather's conversion to Christianity as a protest against Hinduism which ill-treated them. The opportunities given by Christian missionaries helped them to better their life. However, caste Hindus still treat lower-caste Christians as untouchables.

Even today, after 75 years of Independence, Dalits across the country still face untouchability and caste discrimination in all spheres of their life including in the big institution such as RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) which is an Indian right-wing Hindu national volunteer organization. Bhanwar Meghawanshi, a Dalit man from Rajasthan, was a devout swayamsevak of RSS. He writes in his memoir *I Could Not Be Hindu: The Story of a Dalit In The RSS* that even swayamsevaks of the RSS still believe and practice untouchability and the caste system. When Meghawanshi invited his RSS swayamsevaks to his place for food some of them agreed to come though initially they were reluctant to accept his invitation. But later he was told to pack the food that they would eat later while going on the way. The next day Meghawanshi was told by his friend, Purushottam Shrotyiya, that the food was thrown on the way. He recounts:

The story he told me was inconceivable and beyond belief. It came like hammer blows to my skull. Purushottam said that the food I had sent was thrown out on the road just before Bhagwanpura, and the night's meal was provided from the home of a Brahmin, Ramswaroop Sharma, very late at night. Purushottam had been told not to tell me, but he couldn't bring himself to lie. 'Your food was not eaten, it was thrown away,' he said. I just couldn't believe it. I said to him you must be joking, our people in the Sangh can't possibly be so casteist and cruel. (84)

But after having seen the food that was thrown that lay there, he felt pained and realized that RSS is a casteist organization (84). This memoir exposes the duplicity and hypocrisy of the RSS which talks about 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One Family) but discriminates against his countrymen based on caste and religion. This again brings to the notice of the public how prevalent caste and untouchability are across India. As Ilaiah rightly pointed out in his book *Buffalo Nationalism* "The seventy to eighty years' work of the RSS did

not do anything to resolve this contradiction. The RSS did not address the basic question of untouchability, leave alone the right to religion. It worked very hard to politicize Hinduism but never to democratize it” (112). The question of untouchability and caste was deliberately ignored by not only caste Hindus as it benefits them immensely but also organizations like RSS which profess to work for the development of Indian society. Devanuru Mahadeva, an important Kannada Dalit writer, also exposes the hypocrisy of RSS in his recent book *RSS: Depth and Breadth* (2022). Mahadeva writes that

The RSS which believes that the Chaturvarna system is its God, tries to wipe out other religions that originated in India such as Jainism, Buddhism, Lingayat, whose very origins are out of contempt for the Chaturvarna system; they incapacitate these religions to protect and preserve the Chaturvarna system. They do this by claiming these (religions) as their own thus expropriating these too into the Chaturvarna system. (Mahadeva 2022)

Ambedkar wanted to annihilate the caste system and see a caste-less and equal society. It is a pity that in contemporary society, the system of caste is strengthening day by day which is leading to caste violence and an unjust society where human rights violation is reality. Atrocities and violence against Dalits and Dalit women have been increasing. Dalits are victims of this graded unequal system that perpetually pushes them to the margins.

The above discussion about the religious practices of Dalits clearly shows the religious diversity of Dalits across India. Where a small section of Dalits converted to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam in India, the majority of Dalits still live as Hindus despite discrimination and caste humiliation. Those who live as Dalit Hindus continue to face threats and discrimination and humiliation. Untouchability and caste violence have been increasing day by day in the ugliest form. To cite a few instances, in July 2016, in Una, Gujarat, seven members

of a Dalit family were brutally assaulted by upper-caste cow vigilantes for skinning the carcasses of a dead cow. This video of the assault went viral and received nationwide attention. “The four Dalits who were flogged in 2016 for skinning a dead cow today converted to Buddhism along with about 300 others, to protest caste-based atrocities and discrimination” (Prabhune 2018). One of the victims of Sarvaiya, after the conversion to Buddhism, said that “Other Dalits too, who are silently suffering tortures, will also have to embrace Buddhism sooner or later” (Prabhune 2018). Attacks on Dalits by cow vigilantes are day-to-day phenomena across India. In another incident, in Jalore District of Rajasthan, on 20th July 2022, a 9-year Dalit student, Inder Meghwal was killed by his upper-caste teacher Chhail Singh for drinking water in the earthen pot reserved for the teacher. Meghwal’s father alleged that Mr. Singh severely beat his son and threw casteist slurs at him and “the boy sustained serious injuries on the face and ears” (Saini) and the boy succumbed to injuries. Reacting to the heinous incident, Meira Kumar, former speaker of Lok Sabha, tweeted saying “100 years ago my father Babu Jagjivan Ram was prohibited from drinking water in school from the pitcher meant for Savarna Hindus. It was a miracle his life was saved. Today, a nine year old #Dalit boy has been killed for the same reason. 75 long years after Independence, the caste system remains our greatest enemy” (@meira_kumar). This horrific incident of a killing of a schoolboy reveals the cruel face of caste brutalities of the 21st century. Another horrific incident took place at Singhu Border, where a Dalit Sikh man was brutally murdered by Nihang Sikhs on 15th October 2021. On the site of this historical year-long Farmers' protest Lakhbir Singh, 35-year-old, was killed for touching sacred scripture Sarbloh Granth. The reason for the killing was reported as “he removed the cloth to cover the holy scripture and insulted the Pothe Sahib” (Negi). It reminds us what Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that a person who is untouchable to a Hindu is also untouchable to a Parsi. This will show that a person who is untouchable to a Hindu is also untouchable to a Mohammedan (Ambedkar, “Waiting for” 21). It can also be said that a person

who is untouchable to Hindus/Christians, and Muslims is untouchable to Sikhs as well. From this discussion, it can be argued that across religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism an untouchable/ Dalit is treated as untouchable because of his (former) caste status. Even after conversion to religious such as Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism, Dalits are still treated as outsiders and untouchables. Atrocities against Dalits across religions take place. These are a few incidents among many that stand as testimonials of caste violence. They are many such incidents of caste oppression and violence that go unreported by upper-caste media houses.

Conclusion

To sum up, although these Dalit writers have embraced non-Hindu religions in the case of Hazari 'Islam,' Jadhav and Jatava 'Buddhism' and Gidla 'Christianity' as resistance against untouchability and caste system of Hinduism, as discussed above, they have not completely uplifted their religious status because of the caste system. They continue to face the stigma of untouchability and caste by caste Hindus even after they embraced other religions. These selected autobiographical narratives in English are the best examples to understand the different religious faiths of Dalits and these personal narratives also mirror different socio, cultural, and geographical spheres of Dalits. Besides, these narratives reflect why, when, and how these writers have embraced other religions to Hinduism to fight the caste system for their improvement.

The above-discussed personal narratives by Dalits clearly show that Dalits are heterogeneous communities in terms of regional, geographical, cultural, and religious practices; however, they have embraced other religions against Hinduism which ill-treat them. Whereas Damu and his family, and D.R. Jatava accepted Buddhism following the path of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who thought only Buddhism can spiritually liberate historically oppressed

untouchables, Hazari embraced Islam for his spiritual freedom in pre-independent India. Gidla's family embraced Christianity for their spiritual emancipation. However, what is significant to note is even today caste discrimination is still practiced against Dalit Hindus, Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, Dalit Sikhs, and even against Dalit Buddhists in India. It also points out that educated Dalits have not walked on the path paved by Dr. Ambedkar who accepted Buddhism for the liberation of oppressed people. Thus entire Dalit communities across India are split and follow different religions than Buddhism; hence, the question of their religious upliftment is unending and open-ended. Dalits must go back to their own ancient religion Buddha dhamma/ Navayana Buddhism which taught consciousness (prajna), equality (samatha), and compassion (karuna). If not, they will remain untouchables/outside to the people who practice Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. This compels us to think and ask whether religious emancipation possible for Dalits who have been fighting it for centuries?

Not only the question of the religious emancipation of Dalits is an open-ended topic given the kind of exclusion from the religious milieu Dalit communities have experienced and continue to experience under caste-based Hinduism, but also the issues pertaining to Dalit women who comprise half of the Dalit population in India. Is the emancipation of Dalits possible without addressing the problems of Dalit women who face discrimination because of their caste and gender position in our society? In the next chapter, Dalit women's memoirs in English will be studied to understand issues of Dalit women and what they have written about caste and gender discrimination in their memoirs.

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Chapter 4

Dalit Women: Caste and Gender Questions

The chapter seeks to explore multiple forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women as narrated in their personal narratives in English. Dalit women are of the view that fighting against Brahmanical patriarchy is not enough for their emancipation but it is also important for them to fight the patriarchy that exists within their community. Through the means of addressing gender inequality and resisting patriarchy/s which have been a stumbling block, they hope for their emancipation. The main argument in this chapter is that Dalit women talk differently²⁸ than Dalit men by narrating their lived life experiences of caste, class, and gender discrimination which were minimally addressed by Dalit men earlier. The chapter further argues that Dalit emancipation is an incomplete project without annihilating not only the caste system but also gender inequality/ discrimination.

The texts that are chosen for this chapter are *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt.

In the context of Dalit women in India, they are not just victims of their caste status but also their gender status. The ‘intersectionality’²⁹ of caste and gender identity of Dalit women including their class status makes them doubly or triply marginalized in Indian society.

Intersection denotes a junctional point where two or more elements meet. In the context of the First World, race, gender and class constitute the crucial intersection for Black feminism; in the Indian context, caste, gender and class would seem to constitute the crucial intersection for Dalit feminism. In both contexts, intersectionality operates as a

²⁸ The concept ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’ was first used and popularized by Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege who even wrote articles by the same title.

²⁹ The term ‘Intersectionality’ was coined and introduced to the field of legal studies by black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw.

tool to observe and address the patriarchal injustices faced by the most marginalised and vulnerable women of the world. (Arya, “Dalit Feminist” 171)

Dalit women, who were ex-untouchables in Indian society, like any lower caste community historically been oppressed and neglected community in India. Only after the 1980s did a small section of Dalit women start writing about their lived life experiences. Before that, their voice was not either heard or recorded. There has been hardly any written account available about them in pre-independent India except a few colonial records. The main reason for the unavailability of their literature is due to “Their lack of education. Despite nearly five decades of literary programmes and formal education facilities available in independent India, the number of literates among Dalit women is abysmally low” (Kumar 210). If we trace the history of when and how women were denied education, it goes back to the Chaturvarna system. According to Ambedkar, “The pattern of Chaturvarna gave the right to education to the first three classes, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. The Shudras were denied the right to education. This rule of Chaturvarna did not deny the right to education to the Shudras only. It denied the right to education to all women including those belonging to the class of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas” (Ambedkar, “Vol:11” 88). Women of all castes were denied education. However, the victims of the denial of education were lower caste women such as untouchable/ Dalit women because of their lower social and poorest economic conditions. Since then, they have been systematically oppressed by not only upper-caste males and females but also by the male members of their own families because of their economic dependence upon the men of their families. This indicates the vicious circle of poverty and oppression; thus, it can be said that Dalit women are marginalized among the marginalized communities in Indian society.

By and large, only after Independence, a small number of women started getting education due to which they were at least able to produce literature in their respective Indian Languages. To cite a few, Baby Kamble wrote *The Prison We Broke* in Marathi and Bama wrote *Karukku* in the Tamil language. As mentioned earlier, before 1950 Dalit women could not write about them owing to the lack of their education. However, through the literature produced by a few Indian male writers, the condition of women particularly Dalit women could be known since the middle of the 20th century. Despite a few progressive male writers depicting issues of lower caste women in the literature, their representations can be questioned.

Even in the novels of the progressive writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Sivarama Karanth, Gopinath Mohanty and U.R. Anantha Murthy- to name a few – Dalit women are either molested or raped by the upper caste men. By portraying such pictures in their novels, these writers have definitely gained sympathy for the victims but such routinely kind completely ignored the fact that even Dalit women can fight back like any other victims of social oppression to guard their dignity and self-respect. Thus, in Indian literature there is portrayal of a Dalit woman she is never a fighter but always a victim. (Kumar 219)

Given this one-way or biased representation of Dalit women, upper-caste male progressive writers, they mostly remained sympathizers of marginalized communities of the society. After 1960, the first-generation educated male Dalits, in the literature of their languages attempted to deconstruct the biased representation of Dalit communities including Dalit women by representing them in a positive light. However,

They also glorified the tradition of motherhood of Dalit women as the upper caste writers often do while portraying the gender roles of their own women. This shows that like the so-called mainstream Indian society there exists a patriarchal social order in

Dalit communities as well. But later, Dalit writers, perhaps, realising their flaws have attempted to portray Dalit women as real: valiant, courageous and self-respecting. (Kumar 219)

Not only upper caste male writers, even Dalit male writers as mentioned above have initially failed to represent Dalit women's issues in a nuanced manner. These Dalit male writers have mainly addressed the issue of untouchability and caste discrimination, ignoring gender discrimination and domestic violence that Dalit women experience within their families and community. It is only after Dalit women started writing about their own lived life experiences through autobiographical narratives in the 1980's those issues pertaining to Dalit women came into the limelight.

Sharmila Rege opines:

In the 1980s, Dalit women's testimonios agitated their way into a public sphere in which the narratives of the Dalit movement and the women's movement were already in circulation. Lokhande has observed that in Dalit men's testimonios Dalit women were only selectively remembered as sacrificing wives and mothers, or victims of caste-based practices. Further, she argues, the reproduction of patriarchal practices within the community and those idealised by brahmanical patriarchy were only inadequately remembered. At best, Dalit women were written into these testimonies of Dalit struggles as supporters of a 'larger cause', which is men assumed to be a male cause. (134)

Pointing out the secondary roles given to women not only in literature but also in the Dalit movement for Dalit women by Dalit men, Rege writes the existing male dominance in the Dalit movement. As a result of this, politically conscious Dalit women have started writing not only

about the patriarchy of upper caste men but also the patriarchal attitudes of Dalit men – this is what Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege called “Dalit Women Talked Differently³⁰.”

Dalit Women in the Autobiographies by Dalit Men:

In the autobiographies written by Dalit men, though Dalit women's issues were not given primary focus, Dalit women's presence can be seen in the narratives. In his autobiography, Hazari recounts his stepmother who was working hard to manage the household things. He fondly recalls “My step mother was loving and gentle and made me feel that she was as fond of me as of my father. She was a remarkable woman; she never had a thought for herself but only for her husband and his family, and she tried to please everyone in the family and to avoid giving rise to the feeling that there was any difference between her and my mother” (26). His stepmother, without thinking about herself, sacrifices herself for the welfare of the family by working hard like any Indian woman. She has been represented as a loving, caring, and very sacrificing woman. He also recalls that his stepmother not only looked after her husband and children but also the entire family members as it was a joint family. As she was:

Being the youngest of the family, and the wife of the youngest son, her duties were never finished. Living under the joint family roof she had to be at the beck and call not only my grandmother and grandfather but also my father's older brother and his wife and children. Besides doing the housework, she had to work in the village- sweeping the streets and lanes and cleaning the course yards of high-caste Hindus and Muslims.

(4)

Hazari's stepmother had to work both at home as well as outside the village to earn money for their livelihood. Hazari also admiringly recalls his grandmother who was good at storytelling.

³⁰ Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege individually wrote an essay titled “Dalit Women Talk Differently.”

He writes: “My grandmother believed everything written in the Hindu scriptures, as did most of the untouchables and the other low-caste Hindus at that time. On this belief hangs the whole fabric of the Hindu caste system” (34). His grandmother was a devotional as well as a very articulate woman who believed in Hinduism. Like Hazari, D.R. Jatava also recounts his mother in his autobiography. After Jatava’s father passes away, the entire family’s responsibility falls on his mother’s shoulders. She works hard to meet day-to-day ends. Jatava recalls “My mother felt it quite often, and the burden of the family, then, fell on her shoulders, entirely. How she managed the family of four members to sustain was really an act of courage and self-confidence of a woman who, too, showed an intelligent handling of the unfavorable situation in the life that we all faced together” (4). Jatava writes that his mother was a courageous and hard-working woman who took care of family responsibility along with supporting him to get education. D.P. Das too proudly remembers his grandmother for her hard work and sacrifice for the family after her husband’s death. He recalls “She was the widow of a washer-man who had bequeathed her some primitive wash-basins and a few wooden platforms for beating customers’ clothes” (3). He further recalls “The widow was a progressive and forward-looking woman, much ahead of her time and very different from the rest of the flock. She had decided that her two sons should not end up by beating other people’s dirty lines” (3). To overcome poverty as well as the traditional occupation of washerman, she works hard hoping for a better future for her family. Because of her work, the future of their family changes, and thus her sons become Babus of the Bengali middle class (Bhadralok). Das recounts “But by that time her two sons had become confirmed bhadralok (gentlemen) by being privileged to suffix the appellation “Babu” to their names which in those days was the desi (native) equivalent for a pure and genuine “Mister”. She had felt very proud that her sons had become “gentlemen” and the house her husband built was no longer a dhobi-house” (4-5). Das’s grandmother played an important

role in their life without her the family's future would be different. In Das's autobiography, his grandmother can be seen as a hard-working woman who cares more for her family than herself.

Even Prof. Shyamlal narrates about his mother in his autobiography. He recalls:

Born in a poor family, struggling throughout her life and passing her life for more than five decades as widow, my mother was the first Bhangi woman who, by her boldness, matured brain, intelligence, sincerity, honesty, loyalty and with a wonderful memory, made a profound impression on her coming generations. She was a family reformer and was regarded by all men and women as a family builder of four generations that followed her. (12)

In Shyamlal's autobiography, his mother has been a sincere and honest woman who like any other lower caste woman works hard to lead the family.

In Narendra Jadhav's story, his mother can be seen as an honest and dutiful woman who like her husband aspires to provide education to their children. However, her opinion did not matter when it comes to conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism. She had to argue with her husband stating there is no point in changing their religion. She recounts what her husband said: "You will do as I say,' he said with finality" (174). With this, she did not have her say but had to do according to what she was told by her husband, Damu.

The above-mentioned Dalit male autobiographies in English have portrayed Dalit women as hardworking, sincere, dutiful mothers who care for their families. Through these secondary accounts of Dalit men on Dalit women, we get to know the domestic life of Dalit women. And these narratives did not much focus on Dalit women's emotional, economic, and social conditions. Thus, I believe reading the narrative written by Dalit women on their problems would help us understand the real challenges they are facing in their day-to-day life and then compare and contrast their writings with Dalit male writers.

Resisting Caste, Class, and Gender Oppression:

In contemporary India, English-educated Dalit women, in their life narratives, reflect on the social, political, and cultural conditions of Dalits as well as the gender discrimination they experience/d. *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) by Yashica Dutt are the latest among these, attempting to unearth not only their family history but also exploring caste and gender discrimination that take place in day-to-day life. This chapter attempts to evaluate narrative themes employed in these works by upcoming Dalit women writers. These works demand analysis due to the unique voices they present and the less-explored themes they address: that of patriarchy, especially patriarchal attitudes of Dalit men that exist across Dalit communities. The texts represent the various identities that come together in Dalit women of contemporary India and attempt to deconstruct those sources of oppression which made them doubly or triply marginalized. This chapter attempts to critically study the question of caste and patriarchy as they are being questioned by Dalit women.

Dalit women argue that they are doubly or triply marginalized because of their caste, class, and gender identity. Commenting about this gender disparity in producing works of literature, Dalit scholar Raj Kumar is of the view:

While Dalit men are the victims of caste and class oppression, Dalit women find themselves as the victims of double oppression – by the upper-caste men as well as by the men of their own community. Their struggle is, on the one hand, for existence and on the other, to protect themselves against the hostile social environment. This hostility pervades all spheres – at home and as well as outside. And hence, their struggle is continuous. The biggest handicap of Dalit women is their lack of education. In spite of nearly six decades of literacy programs and formal education facilities in the aftermath

of India's independence, the number of literates among Dalit women is still abysmally low. (6)

The above statement points out that due to a lack of access to formal education, the majority of Dalit women are uneducated even today. Thus, they have been unable to produce written literature except a few. In contemporary India, few Dalit women who managed to get education have started writing their life experiences not only in regional languages but in English as well. Among the few Dalit women authors of our times, it is the English-educated ones who are also mostly second and third-generation educated, who have been widely recognized.

One among them is Sujatha Gidla, who wrote her family story *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) in English. Gidla is a third-generation-educated "untouchable" Christian from the Mala caste in Andhra Pradesh and currently works as a conductor on the New York City Subway. The text is a multi-generational saga that narrates the lives of four generations of her family. The narrative largely focuses on the lives of her uncle Satyamurthy (Satyam), a member of the Communist Party, as well as her mother, Manjula. The author is but a small character in the tale. The text narrativizes caste and gender discrimination that exists even today in our society, particularly exploring the patriarchal attitudes of male members of her untouchable Christian family.

Like Gidla, Yashica Dutt also wrote her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) in English. Dutt is a third-generation-educated Dalit who belongs to the Bhangi caste from Rajasthan and currently works as a journalist in the United States. Her memoir is political, mirroring not only the contemporary socio-political condition of Dalits in India but also attempting to trace the origin of caste and gender discrimination. It deconstructs the traditional style of a memoir by interweaving her personal and professional life with the history and politics of India. The book

is dedicated to her mother and to Rohith Vemula, an Ambedkarite Ph.D. scholar who died by suicide in January 2016 after facing acute caste discrimination at the University of Hyderabad. Dutt says that Rohith's suicide made her think about her caste which she had hidden from her friends and colleagues for many years, assuming that she would be looked down upon and discriminated against by caste Hindus because of her lower caste status. Eventually, she realised that she wanted to reclaim her identity and "come out" as Dalit. She recollects how her family always tried to pass off as upper caste by imitating their food habits and culture, hiding their actual caste, and speaking fluent English. She also writes about her family's – especially her mother's – struggle to ensure that she and her siblings received English education. Written in a journalistic style that is reflective of her vocation, Dutt engages in extensive discussions on caste and gender in everyday life, supplemented by secondary material on these topics.

Both personal narratives, *Ants Among Elephants* and *Coming Out as Dalit*, explore caste and gender discrimination that prevail in our society. The narratives also reflect on domestic violence and abuse that Dalit women experience in their homes as well as workplaces. These personal narratives shed light on patriarchal attitudes and behaviour that exist even among Dalit communities. In view of this, this chapter first attempts to conceptualize popular terms such as Brahmanical patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy before applying these to the texts under study to understanding how patriarchy along with caste discrimination subjugate Dalit women.

Brahmanical Patriarchy:

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, patriarchy means "a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men ("patriarchy" 1114)." From time immemorial, almost all societies across the world have mostly been dominated and ruled by men whereas women have been given secondary and inferior positions. Even today, the

conditions of women have not changed significantly. The condition of women, in particular, the lives of Dalit women in India is no better compared with women from upper-castes. The jati/-caste system, which is a male-dominated as well as religiously supported society, has systematically oppressed women in the name of caste and religion for ages.

If we attempt to trace the origin of the oppression of women in the history of India, it goes back to ancient India where orthodox Hindu society not only gave birth to the caste system but at the same time also to women's oppression. The caste system which is an ancient institution does not exist without endogamy and endogamy does not survive without controlling members of the caste, particularly women. Preventing women from getting married out of caste (inter-caste) was especially necessary for the patriarchal system as women were required for patrilineal succession and caste purity. As a result, inhumane practices like *Sati*, child marriage, ostracization of widows, and ex-communication came into action to control women's sexuality. B. R. Ambedkar, who extensively studied the caste system, was of the view:

From time immemorial man as compared with woman has had the upper hand. He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic. But man as a maker of injunctions is most often above them all. (Ambedkar, "Vol:1" 11)

As Ambedkar theorised, women of India have been oppressed in the name of custom, culture, and religion by male members who presume they are superior to females. He attempted to critically study about caste system where suppression of women also exists due to endogamy. He further theorized about endogamy stating:

Endogamy or the closed-door system, was a fashion in the Hindu society, and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who, in their turn, became endogamous castes. It is “the infection of imitation” that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes. The propensity to imitate is a deep seated one in the human mind and need not be deemed an inadequate explanation for the formation of the various castes in India. (Ambedkar, “Vol:1” 18)

From the above statement, it can be understood that the priestly caste, Brahmins, introduced the caste system where endogamy is the main characteristic feature. It should also be noted that the priestly class, to maintain endogamy strictly, came with new practices like *Sati* (self-immolation of the widow on her husband’s pyre), enforced widowhood - mostly practiced among upper castes and child marriage to control surplus men and surplus women of their caste. Thus, Brahmins become an enclosed caste, superior to women and other non-Brahmin castes. According to Gabriel Tadre, as quoted by Ambedkar, “one of the three laws of imitation is that imitation flows from the higher one to lower” (Ambedkar, “Vol 1” 19). Consequently, the non-Brahmin communities became different castes by imitating the cultures and practices of Brahmin castes. Hence, it can be noted that non-Brahmin castes defined not only themselves and their position in the caste system by imitating Brahmins, but also their religious rituals, customs, and cultures where women were given an inferior position in the social hierarchy. Therefore, imitating the Brahmin caste is not only imitating caste but also imitating their patriarchal social structure, termed “Brahmanical patriarchy” by Uma Chakravarti. Chakravarti opines:

The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social

practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the brahmanical social order. (579)

Chakravarti is of the view that Hindu society with its religious traditions has exploited women and people from lower castes. She says brahmanical social order is oppressive. Further, she writes about the central factor for the subordination of upper-caste women:

The need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession (a requirement of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, the institution unique to Hindu society. The purity of women has a centrality in Brahmanical patriarchy, as we shall see, because the purity of caste is contingent upon it. (579)

Chakravarti in her essay attempts to theorise how the purity of (upper-caste) women and purity of caste are interconnected, wherein lies the Brahmanical patriarchy that oppresses women as well as members of the lower castes. The essay sheds light on the Brahmanical social and patriarchal order that strives to control the sexuality of upper-caste women. Also, the essay points out the exclusion of members of lower castes by the Brahmanical structure. Feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege have also argued against Brahmanical patriarchy and questioned mainstream feminist scholars, who coined terms like “plural patriarchies” and “Dalit patriarchy,” for not discussing Brahmanical patriarchy which is the main source for the oppression of women and lower-caste people in India. She believes that the “Dalit feminist standpoint” can be an authentic one to move towards a gender-just society (45). Rege’s idea of the Dalit feminist standpoint will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dalit Patriarchy:

Since 1990, the concept of “Dalit patriarchy” has been widely discussed in academia. The main reason for this discussion was the belief that like upper-caste men dominate the women of their community, Dalit men also dominate and suppress Dalit women. The word was used by Gopal Guru in his essay titled “Why Dalit Women Talk Differently.” Guru writes:

Besides these external factors, there are certain internal factors that have prompted dalit women to organise separately vis-a-vis the dalit men. In the post-Ambedkar period, dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed, an independent political expression of dalit women. This political marginalisation has been openly condemned by dalit women at the regional conferences of dalit women and at the Delhi meet. (2549)

Guru further argues that Dalit men have neglected Dalit women’s voices in the social, political, and cultural milieu and the reason why Dalit women needed to talk differently:

(1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (3) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently. (2549)

Guru was of the view that since Dalit men and activists failed to address the issues of Dalit women, the women were forced to organize independently. He was critical of patriarchal norms that exist among Dalit communities; therefore, he theorises that Dalits need to solve their internal problems such as patriarchy which would then help both Dalit men and women to unite in the fight against external factors such as caste and Brahminical patriarchy. Like

Guru, Sunaina Arya also critiques Brahmanical patriarchy and she further questions mainstream feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarty and V. Geetha for employing the terms “graded patriarchies” and “Dalit patriarchy,” which, instead of uniting, further divide the women of India. Arya asserts that there is no such thing as Dalit patriarchy but only a manifestation of Brahminical patriarchy as imitated by Dalit men. She argues:

What we have is the brahmanical oppression as the underlying reason for dalit men’s behaving in a patriarchal manner; if proven, that dalit men behave ‘in specifically gendered ways,’ the underlying reason (as argued by both writers hitherto) is their caste-based exploitation by the savarna. Clearly, it is brahmanical patriarchy which women face. And, thinking ‘through caste and gender’ evidences ‘brahmanical patriarchy’ as unmasked by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, not any dalit patriarchy. (Arya, “Dalit or Brahmanical” 220)

As mentioned above Brahmanical patriarchy has been imitated by men from non-Brahmin castes including Dalit men who are positioned as inferior in Hindu social stratification. Not only one's caste and class position but also gender position must be seen to understand their position and how one interacts with others in this caste-based society. Though patriarchal attitudes exist among Dalit men that oppress Dalit women, it is not very exploitative and oppressive as Brahmanical patriarchy that is supported by Hindu religious rituals and practices in India. Kancha Ilaiah opines that the Dalit Bahujan patriarchy is different than Brahmanical patriarchy. According to him “Dalitbahujan patriarchy is completely antithetical to brahminical patriarchy. Here too the notion of man being superior and woman being inferior does exist. But when compared to brahminical patriarchy there is a great difference. Within Dalitbahujan patriarchy, woman is agent of both production and reproduction” (45-46). He argues that there are no bifurcations and fixed boundaries in works in Dalit Bahujan communities because men's

work are done by women in both home and field and vice-versa. There are also no gender restrictions in practice and belief in Bahujan communities unlike Brahman families (45-46).

Ilaiah further argues:

The patriarchy that operates among the Dalitbahujans operates between two political beings and hence it still retains an element of democracy in contrast to the authoritarian patriarchy of Brahminism. In other words, Dalitbahujan patriarchy is a loose structure which can be demolished with counter-cultural movements more easily than brahminical patriarchy, which is rooted in a spiritually underwritten authoritarianism and which can therefore easily be turned into fascism. (47)

The above observation of Ilaiah indicates that there are noticeable differences between Brahmanical patriarchy and DalitBahujan patriarchy whereas the former is fixed and more authoritative, the latter is a loose structure that can be either reorganized or demolished. Whether male domination against women is more oppressive (Brahmanical) or less oppressive (DalitBahujan) patriarchy must and should be eradicated and addressed as they give a secondary position to women who comprise 50 percent of India. In a society where there is a huge gender inequality that society cannot be an equal society as the emancipation of women is at stake in such a society. Patriarchy is a threat to women's empowerment; therefore it has to be annihilated to see a gender just and equal society. If not, the emancipation of women and Dalit women is mere imagination and slogan only so that emancipation of Dalit/women can never be achieved with the existence of brahmanical/patriarchy.

Even Periyar who was highly critical of Brahminism and caste discrimination thought that the root of women's enslavement can be traced back to Indo-Aryan language Sanskrit. Periyar, in his book *Why Were Women Enslaved*, was of the view that:

In the Indo-Aryan language Sanskrit alone, chastity is defined as pativrata (loyal wifeness). I think that only here the concept of slavery was introduced into the word chastity. The term pativrata clearly denotes slavery not only because it has been given the meanings “she who considers her pati (husband) as god, she who considers it a vrata (vow) to be her husband’s slave, she who does not take into account anyone other than her husband”; but also because the word pati means authority, master and leader. (Ramasamy 2)

Periyar attempted to explain how the words ‘pati’ and ‘sati’ stand for hierarchy among men and women whereas ‘pati’ means leader and authority. He was also against the dominance of masculinity against femininity. He advised women to destroy masculinity to overcome their oppression. Periyar says that “Women should not forget the fact that the word ‘masculinity’ is itself internationally used in a manner demeaning to women. Women should remember that as long as ‘masculinity’ exists in the world, ‘femininity’ would not be respected. As long as ‘masculinity’ exists in the world, the enslavement of women will keep increasing” (Ramasamy 62). Hence he urged women to destroy masculinity for their liberation. Periyar, a rationalist, strived to see a gender-equal society that was not only against caste discrimination but also against gender discrimination.

The caste system and Brahmanical patriarchy not only oppress and suppress women and non-Brahmin caste men but also queer/LGBTQIA+ community. Caste matters even among queer communities where same-sex couples even look for partners within their caste/class. Dalit queer person Dhrubo Jyoti exposes how caste still matters among the same-sex, trans, and queer communities. According to Dhrubo Jyoti, as quoted by Suraj Yengde: “Caste broke our hearts and love cannot put them back together” (51). Yengde further writes “This construction of love puts the locus on the receiver and giver of love, who are not caste blind.

Hence, the imposition of caste features prominently even in queer and trans circles in India” (51). Thus, caste becomes deciding factor almost in all spheres of the lives of Indians. The victims of this Brahmanical patriarchy are Dalit women and Dalit trans and queer community. Caste and gender inequality which are two faces of the same coin must be eradicated to see an equal society. While critiquing Brahminical patriarchy, Sowjanya Tamalapaluka too argues that the annihilation of caste and the annihilation of patriarchy must go hand-in-hand. She thinks that even the Dalit movement has neglected the issues of Dalit women. She emphasized the importance of annihilating both caste and gender discrimination that hamper the overall growth of society. (Tamalapaluka)

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that patriarchal attitudes exist across castes in India including Dalits. However, the main source of women's oppression arises from Brahmanical social structure and Brahmanical patriarchy. In the light of this discussion on Brahmanical and Dalit patriarchy, the texts *Ants Among Elephants* and *Coming Out as Dalit* will be studied to understand what these writers talked about patriarchy and how patriarchy contributes to their subjugation in everyday life.

***Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla:**

Gidla begins her story by narrating, “I was born into a lower-middle-class family. My parents were college lecturers. I was born an untouchable” (1). She notes that because they are untouchable Christians, they were looked down upon by both caste Hindus and upper-caste Christians. Though the text does not reflect much on contemporary issues, it shows how caste and gender discrimination take place in the lives of “untouchables.” Gidla is Christian as well as Communist, so she has not used the term “Dalit Christian” which most Ambedkarites might use, instead calling herself an “untouchable Christian.” She writes about her mother, Manjula, who became a lecturer despite poverty, caste, and gender discrimination. Gidla narrates that

her grandfather, Prasanna Rao, used to protect his daughter, Manjula, at home when she was a student. Gidla recounts:

Yet Prasanna Rao's greatest concern was his daughter's chastity. He believed that girls are born to debauchery. And boys, he thought, are naturally predatory. When he taught private classes in composite maths at home, the front room of the new family house was full of boys. Papa was never under any circumstances allowed to enter the front room while a class was going on. So she sat alone in the second room and studied general maths, which did not require special tutoring. (95)

The above lines refer to how women's bodies are perceived by the patriarchal society. Though Manjula was taken care of by her father and brothers, a feminist analysis would prove that their concern was not about her safety, but about holding a patronizing control over her actions and body. In this context, it can be surmised that patriarchal dominance exists across the communities including untouchable Christians.

This family story also reflects on domestic violence and the abuse that women face in both private and public spaces. Gidla talks about how her mother was mistreated and abused by Gilda's father and her grandmother:

Rathnamma harassed Manjula day and night. She was a mere skeleton, yet her pregnant belly was huge. Prabhakar Rao asked her to make tea. She said, "Do you have to have two teas a day?" As she brought out the cup, she could see he was seething with anger. His mother was saying, "What a fuss just to make one cup of tea." Prabhakar Rao refused the tea. Manjula tried to pacify him. He got up from the chair, flew at her, and slapped her so hard that a big clot of blood fell on the floor. (235)

The above narration of Gidla refers to her father's dominance as well as domestic abuse that occurred in her family by her father as well as her grandmother. Gidla not only narrates

the domestic violence that her mother experienced at home but also the discrimination that she faced in the working environment when she went to take a permanent job in Tipurati. Gidla recounts:

Tirupati was far away. But beggars cannot be choosers. Manjula resigned her job in Anantpur and took a train to Tirupati. The principal there, a Brahmin woman named Rajeswari, took one look at Manjula and said, “You have no job here. I won’t let you report.” Manjula could not believe what she was hearing. In tears, she left the principal’s office. (242)

The incident is a good example to understand how Dalit women are oppressed even by upper-caste women. The Brahmin principal refused to hire untouchable Manjula because of her lower caste status – here, more than gender, caste matters. However, after a series of struggles due to her caste and gender identity, she finds a job in another college. The story sheds light on both the personal and professional life of Gidla’s mother, which should be seen in contrast to Gidla herself, who may not have faced such harsh ill-treatment because of her more elevated educational status. In the text, most of the female characters, like Manjula, are victims of patriarchy, but due to Christian missionary education, they were able to study and find work in private schools. Unlike Manjula, Sathyamurthy’s wife Maniamma was dependent on her husband as the breadwinner, when, “supporters of the dissident faction-thousands of Communists all over India - were rounded up and jailed without trial on charges of sedition, [the] events shattered Maniamma’s dream of a peaceful life” (212). Maniamma was worried about the future of the family as it was dependent on and taken care of by her husband.

Thus, it is clear that due to the patriarchal attitudes of men, Dalit women like Manjula, Maniamma, and others, dependent on men of their families for survival, suffer. Despite her college education, Manjula struggled to get a job because of her caste and gender identity. She

and other characters in the text are victims of caste and patriarchy, both derived from the Brahmin caste. As discussed earlier, patriarchal attitudes exist among Dalit communities, a manifestation of Brahmanical patriarchy.

Although Chinnaiah Jangam is of the view that the book has factual errors and misrepresentation of Dalits and non-Dalits including her family members in the book (Jangam), undoubtedly *Ants Among Elephants* a powerful narrative that reflects on colonialism and missionary education and how Christianity empowered Dalits providing free education and employment. Being an untouchable Christian woman, she also narrated how patriarchy operates within untouchable Christian families recounting the life experiences of female members of her family.

Coming Out as Dalit (2019) by Yashica Dutt:

Dutt notes that “I AM a Dalit and a woman, and am therefore doubly disadvantaged so far as the casteist and patriarchal attitudes of Indian society continue to prevail” (142). Speaking about her mother as a young woman, she notes that patriarchy dictates what women must do and must not do in their life from birth to death, describing instances of ill-treatment by Dutt’s father and grandparents. She particularly mentions some incidents from her mother’s life in this memoir. Dutt recounts how her mother’s choice of university, Allahabad University, to study was unacceptable by Dutt’s grandfather after he was told by their distant relative not to send her to that university. Dutt recalls that incident:

Allahabad, which was farther from home, was unacceptable, especially after a distant relative, who was neither a fan of women’s autonomy nor quality education, had informed her father that girls at Allahabad University smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. He suggested that keeping Mum closer to home would make it easier to keep

a check on her; unsurprisingly, that idea appealed to her father. This was not the first time Mum had settled for something that was not her first choice. (4)

Here, Dutt recounts how her mother's choice of course and university were not accepted by her grandfather. Further, she writes about the domestic violence and abuses her mother faced from her husband:

When she returned to studying after he had passed out, Dad interpreted this as a taunt against his relatively low rank in the exam. She testified that he would drag her from the makeshift kitchen at the back of the house to their room, beating her all the while. One evening when he slapped her, the impact punctured her eardrum. When she told her father about this abuse, he came to see her. But by the time her father came to visit, she had softened her stance, especially after Dad's father 'advised' her to be a good daughter-in-law by not reporting her husband's abuse to her family. (6)

The above narration points out that Dutt's mother experienced domestic abuse. When she complains to her father-in-law about this incident, she was told to be a good daughter-in-law that what patriarchal society expects. There are many instances in this memoir that directly refer to patriarchy, particularly the patriarchal attitudes of Dutt's father and grandfathers. Discussing how Dalit women are ill-treated by both upper-caste and Dalit men at the workplace and home, Dutt says:

Domestic violence against women is not limited to Dalit families. Women across the country face immense physical and emotional brutality from their families. But Dalit women – especially those from rural areas and those who are economically vulnerable, from urban or rural areas – are at the bottom of caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Their lower class, female gender, and lower caste make them more vulnerable to violence from their families and society at large. Caste Hindu men in many regions

consider Dalit women as sexual property. ‘Access to a Dalit’s man land comes with access to his Dalit wife’ is a familiar sentiment across the country. (6-7)

Dutt’s narration refers to multiple subjugations that women, particularly Dalit women who live in rural areas, experience in both private and public spaces. Dutt has written about everyday gender discrimination that exists across communities. She also argues that Dalit women are victims of patriarchy because they are socially, economically, and educationally backward because of their caste and gender. It is also important to mention that Dutt does not only narrate the domestic violence and abuse that her mother experienced in her home but also recounts how her mother’s strong determination and far-sightedness have protected the lives of her children. Dutt narrates, “[i]t was only Mum’s hopeful, uplifting spirit and backbreaking work that made my brother, sister and me feel that things could change some day – that Dad would find another job and things could change some day – that Dad could find another job and things would instantly turn around” (53). Dutt’s mother, a postgraduate, was well aware of the value of education and considered the struggle to equip her children with a good education worthwhile, despite the demons of poverty and domestic violence that showed up at her door regularly.

Dutt writes about the difficulties, financial and cultural that she had to face to get English education. She studied B.Sc. at St. Stephen’s College, University of Delhi, before starting work as a journalist. She has also written about how journalists in India are anti-Dalits and casteists who have excluded Dalits from the field of journalism. Yashica Dutt’s life story is an inspiration for Dalit/women who are struggling to emancipate themselves from the clutches of caste and gender discrimination. Her political narrative has exposed both internal and external patriarchal domination that Dalit women experience in a caste-based society. It is worth mentioning here the opinion of political theorist Gopal Guru on the patriarchal

domination that Dalit women face, and their increasing resistance to it: “The issue of representing dalit women, both at the level of theory and politics, has erupted time and again in the discourse on dalit women. Dalit women justify the case for talking differently based on external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits)” (2548). Dutt’s memoir uncovers what Guru calls internal and external factors that neglect and oppress Dalit women. The text has questioned Brahminical patriarchy as well as the patriarchal behaviors of Dalit men which are a threat to the independent and autonomous agency of Dalit women.

Thus, Dalit women have talked differently exploring not only caste but also issues like class and gender discrimination, etc., which subjugate them. The texts *Ants Among Elephant* and *Coming Out as Dalit* mirror the life world of Dalit women who have been oppressed by both upper-caste men and women as well as Dalit men. While it is true that upper-caste women face patriarchal dominance, the sufferings of Dalit women are so severe they have to struggle hard against both caste and patriarchy because of their caste, class, and gender identity, what can be called ‘intersectionality’ coined by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw.

Bama in her autobiography *Karukku* also narrates that Dalit women in rural areas face multiple forms of oppression because of their lower status in society. She particularly narrates how her Paraya caste women are exploited by men from both upper and lower castes and upper caste women in Tamil Nadu. Bama specifically narrates how her grandmothers who worked for the Naicker family, upper caste, were called by their name by children from the Naicker family (14). Because these women belonged to the lower caste, the upper caste children call them by their name indicates that upper caste people are proud and feel superior irrespective of their age because of their caste privilege. Bama also recalls how Naicker women ill-treated her grandmothers. Bama narrates:

The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupper hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, then bring home the left over rice and curry from the previous evening. (14)

Despite working hard and doing all the work in the Naicker family, Bama's grandmothers were not respected and treated well because of their lower caste status. Naicker women because of their superior caste status do not treat lower caste women equally. Caste segregates women: hence, there is no unity among women in India. Therefore the majority of upper caste women do not participate and support in Dalit women's movement even today. Dalit women still face inhuman ill-treatment because of their caste and gender identities. They are still dependent on male members of their families for their livelihood and survival. "The positions of women was like that of the Shudras, one of service to others. The upholders of the varna system held that the shudras were to serve the higher castes who were in turn to act as guardians of the shudras, so that the shudras had no need for any other source of income; and the same applied to women" (Pawar et al, "We Also" 53). Women in India were made as dependents and made to serve upper caste people as the Shudras of the Chaturvarna system. However, Dalit women's condition even after 75 years of Independence, has not significantly changed. They still suffer and are ill-treated in India. The atrocities against Dalit women in the form of rape and violence are very common even today. Therefore working towards the empowerment of Dalit women and annihilating caste and gender inequality is very important.

At this juncture, Sharmila Rege's belief in the usefulness of the Dalit feminist standpoint can be an authentic one to move towards a gender-just society becomes relevant:

A dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. (45)

As Rege theorised, the Dalit feminist standpoint can be an emancipatory tool for women which gives importance to the personal/lived experiences of women. In this view, it can be argued that both Dutt's and Gilda's texts have also contributed to Dalit feminist scholarship in its quest for a gender-just society

It is also important to understand that though these personal narratives by Dalit women have explored caste and gender discrimination in their day-to-day life, the main sources of their oppression are the caste system and Brahminical patriarchy. This chapter has attempted to show that patriarchal behaviour exists among Dalit communities and that Dalit men harass and oppress Dalit women due to the influence of Brahminical patriarchy.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the personal narratives of Dalit women and intellectual discussion on patriarchy in the Indian context by scholars, it can be evidently understood that Dalit women are ill-treated and abused by Dalit men who imitate Brahminical patriarchy. Due to the lack of economic resources, and lack of access to education and awareness, there is an internal conflict in Dalit communities that affects the lives of Dalit women. But there are no such ritual-based and religiously supported gender discrimination and exploitation of women exist among Dalit

communities. The religiously supported system can be seen only among the Brahmin community which is the creator of both caste and gender discrimination. Hence, to progress towards a gender-just and egalitarian society, it is important to eradicate both caste and gender discrimination by educating and sensitizing all people. *Ants Among Elephants* and *Coming Out as Dalit* explore caste and gender discrimination by questioning patriarchy, helping the reader understand prevailing caste and gender norms across generations in India, and contributing to the burgeoning scholarship by Dalit women.

Ants Among Elephants by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutt attempt to explore not only caste but also gender discrimination that Dalit women face daily, both in their personal and public life. The texts are also authentic representations of gender discrimination, being insider perspectives written by Dalit women who have experienced what they write about. These texts attempt to explore gender discrimination that takes place not only in the home but also in workspaces, ideas that were ignored by male Dalit authors. The way these texts discuss gender discrimination that Dalit women face shows that, like caste discrimination, gender discrimination also hinders social growth and unity.

To conclude, it can be said that Dalit women writers, unlike their male counterparts who mainly ignored gender issues and gender discrimination in their narratives, have attempted to explore gender disparities and subjugation in the Dalit community. It is also understood that due to the influence of Brahminical patriarchy, Dalit men also practice patriarchal behavior. These Dalit women's narratives are inspirational for later generations of Dalits to understand the value of education as a tool of emancipation. Another important point to be considered is that Dutt and Gidla, despite their English education, middle-class status, and urban life have seen and experienced both caste and gender discrimination. This leaves us with the pertinent

question: Then, how much worse is the condition of non-educated Dalit women who live in rural India and whose stories are yet to be told?

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

Dalit literature has occupied a significant place in the world of literature and it has become an indispensable part of Indian literature in contemporary society. As Dalit literature deeply unearths and portrays the existing inequality that takes place in the form of untouchability, poverty, caste, gender discrimination, etc. in Indian society, it plays a pivotal role in addressing the issues pertaining to not only Dalits but also other marginalized sections of India.

Dalit autobiographies written in both Indian vernacular languages and English have played a crucial role in the world of literature as they have uncovered prevailing inequalities and discriminations that the majority Dalit-Bahujans suffer daily due to their underprivileged background and lack of resources. Dalit autobiographical narratives bring the first-hand experiences of lower caste people into literary form/world, and these texts act as an agent of defenders of human rights and protectors of the Indian Constitution that gives equal rights to all citizens of India irrespective of their caste, class, gender and ethnic identity. It evidently points out why literature especially literature of the marginalized is necessary for any society on the earth.

The present research entitled “Struggle for Emancipation: A Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies and Memoirs in English” examined select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English namely *Waiting for a Visa* (1935-36) by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of An Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari, *The Untouchable Story* (1985) by D.P. Das, *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography* (2000) by D.R. Jatava, *Untold Story of A Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001) by Prof. Shyamlal, *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) by Narendra Jadhav, and *My Father Baliah* (2011) by Y.B. Satyanarayana and memoirs such as *Caste Matters* (2019)

by Suraj Yengde, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt.

The research findings of this thesis, as discussed in the core chapters, are presented as follows.

The second chapter has two sections. The first section highlights the struggle of Dalits across generations to get formal education for their emancipation and empowerment. In this mission, they continue to face difficulties and challenges because of caste discrimination and poverty/lack of resources. The select personal narratives of Dalits clearly emphasized that education has played a significant role in their lives and it empowered them in their personal and professional lives. In pre-independent India, Dalits did not have opportunities to avail formal education when caste practices were rampant everywhere including schools run by upper castes. However, in the case of Ambedkar, he managed to access formal education despite caste humiliation and untouchability in the state of Maharashtra as he narrated in his autobiographical narrative *Waiting for a Visa*. But in the case of Hazari who hailed from Uttar Pradesh, he struggled to receive the education that he always dreamt of. Because of his lower caste status and poverty, he could not get formal education; therefore, he received informal education by Moulvi and learnt to read Urdu and Quran and also began learning English after he started working for the British Indian Civil Service officers in Shimla. With the support of Mr. New Man, he eventually went abroad (to France) for higher education. Hazari's educational journey is an inspiring one that even unpacks the sad reality that when he was not allowed to get a formal education in his own country by his own people, foreigners helped him to study further. D.P. Das who was from West Bengal also narrated his education journey that how his grandmother struggled to provide formal education to his father and his uncle and made their family overcome their traditional Dhobi occupation. Because of education, the

prospect of the family changed, and D.P. Das did not have to suffer to get formal education as he was a second generation educated in his family. D.R. Jatava's autobiography also recounted the challenges he had to face to receive formal education. Being influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, he worked hard to get education and financially support himself. He wrote his autobiography to motivate Dalits to get education, learn and earn, to overcome problems evidently pointing out the importance of education. Similarly, Prof. Shyamlal attempted to receive formal education in the early independence period where he faced caste abuse and humiliation. His determination to get education eventually came true and he then worked as a lecturer and even Vice-chancellor of J.N.V University, Jodhpur in the state of Rajasthan. Narendra Jadhav's autobiography too mainly sheds light on his father's determination to provide good education to his children. Damu, Jadhav's father, was hugely influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Another autobiography that mainly highlights how education has changed the future of their Yelukati family is *My Father Baliah*. Baliah working in the railways had the deepest regard for education and he worked hard to provide education to his children. Baliah's sons became professionals in the future. The family story of Gilda also reflected on her grandparents' education journey given by Christian missionaries during the colonial period. As a result, her parents too got education. Gilda could study in a reputed private convent. This story of Gilda traces the educational journey of three generations of her family. Similarly, Dutt also sketches out the struggle of his great-grandfather to get education, later her grandfather. Her father too got education and she could study in a reputed convent in Rajasthan. Even Suraj Yendge's text also recalled how with education he got empowered and even managed to go abroad for higher education. In brief, Dalits across generations are obsessed with education as it is the first stepping stone for their upliftment. They have identified 'education' as a potential tool for their empowerment which was denied to them for ages.

It is also important to emphasize that although colonialism was economically and politically exploitative in India, the colonial modernity brought by the British in India in the form of the Railways, Military, postal service, industries, liberal educational policies and missionaries some extent empowered Dalits by providing jobs in the Railways, Military, and Industries. The select personal narratives of Dalit writers have written about how these new Railways, Military, and postal departments, and missionary education introduced under colonial rule have significantly empowered their families and marginalized communities in India. For instance, Ambedkar's father and grandfather worked for British Military in India which made them leave behind their caste-based occupations. Like Ambedkar's father, Hazari's parents worked as servants for British Indian Civil service officers in Shilma which was a life-changing experience for Hazari as he was encouraged and financially supported by Mr. Newman to study further and Y.B. Satyanarayana's father, Baliah, worked for Indian Railway. Working for Railway changed the future of the Yelukati family as they could access education and live in a better place in the city. Gidla's great grandfathers embracing Christianity changed the future of their family as they were allowed to learn and teach in schools. Despite poverty and caste discrimination as discussed in the chapters these select Dalit writers managed to receive formal education and got jobs in private and public sectors. With education, a small section of Dalits like Ambedkar, Gidla, Dutt, and Yengde managed to cross the ocean/go abroad for higher education and professional jobs. The first part of the second chapter covers all these important points and documents the struggles to receive formal education across generations despite facing the stigma of untouchability and caste discrimination. In brief, Education and colonial modernity played pivotal roles in the upliftment and empowerment of Dalits who were crushed in the name of caste, religion and culture for ages under Hindu caste system.

The second part of the second chapter highlights the importance of English education in Dalit lives. Along with accessing formal education, Dalits have also demanded English education as they think that the English language and education liberate them, not the vernacular medium which has deep-rooted caste influences. Hazari, during pre-independent India, attempted to learn English language. He even went abroad for higher education. Ambedkar would not be Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and pan-national leader if he did not study and written in English language. Even Suraj Yengde, Sujatha Gidla, and Yashica Dutt have emphasized that English is casteless language that is important for Dalits as it is a connecting language, language of knowledge, and language of opportunities in the competitive world. With English education, they hope for a better future not only in terms of material benefits and jobs but also to build a network with other oppressed communities across the globe for solidarity where English becomes a link language. Besides, studying casteless language like English helps Dalits to understand existing scholarship in the world which they can use for their anti-caste movement and liberation. Undoubtedly English plays a crucial role in Dalit lives. Learning English language changed the future of their individual and community life as discussed in the first chapter. English language even helped Dalits to migrate to foreign countries as professionals. English is not just a language of aspiration but also the language of emancipation for Dalits as it helps them come out of their caste boundary and live a dignified life in this globally competitive world. The second chapter concluded by discussing the role of formal education and English education in Dalit lives and their struggle to get them across generations for their upward social mobility.

In the third chapter it can be observed that though with formal education and English education, Dalits better their financial condition, their religious emancipation seems to be a big question. Educated and politically conscious Dalits, as a revolt against the caste system of Hinduism, embraced other religions. Most of the Dalits even today follow the rituals and

practices of Hinduism along with their indigenous culture. A few people like these select Dalit writers have embraced different religions such as Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism. In the case of Hazari, he accepted Islam but gradually left alienated. Jatava and Narendra Jadhav's parents embraced Buddhism following the path of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. And Gidla's great-grandparents and grandparents embraced Christianity. They have narrated that even after conversion they still face caste prejudice and they are identified as Dalit/untouchable Christians, Dalit/untouchable Muslims, Dalit/untouchable Sikhs, and Dalit/untouchable Buddhists. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 and paved the way for Dalits to embrace Buddhism for their liberation. However, the majority of the Dalits did not follow him; hence, even today Dalits could not achieve their religious liberation as they follow different religious practices. There is no unity among Dalits in India as they spread across India. This is also a major setback for uniting all Dalits although Dalit movements across India unite and express solidarity on common issues. From the discussion of the above autobiographical narratives it can be said unless Dalits across India accept Buddhism, there is no possibility of achieving their religious emancipation. They are currently following religious faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity; however, they are still not completely accepted and not treated equally by the elites of those religions. Therefore, Dalits must go back to their own religion, Buddhism, which teaches prajna (consciousness), karuna (compassion), and equality (samatha) as Buddha taught them. This third chapter documents the struggles of Dalits for religious emancipation discussing the personal narratives of select Dalit writers and argues why and how Buddhism can emancipate Dalits, not the existing popular religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism which still have caste influences.

In the fourth chapter, it can be found that resisting caste inequality is not enough for Dalit emancipation. Existing gender inequality should also be addressed to see a casteless and gender-just society. As Dalit women comprise 50 percent Dalit population, their issues should

also be addressed for their emancipation from their caste and gender inequality. As the Dalit movement and Dalit men writers mainly focused on untouchability, caste discrimination, and inequality meted out to Dalits by caste Hindus and they have failed to consider issues faced by Dalit women. Hence, in the fourth chapter, how Dalit women are triply marginalized because of their caste, class, and gender identities which intersect to suppress Dalit women was discussed. Reflecting on narratives written by Dalit women writers such as Sujatha Gidla and Yashica Dutt that focus on domestic violence Dalit women face in their families, the chapter attempted to trace the root cause for gender discrimination and women's enslavement in India that is Brahmanical patriarchy which is the main source of/ for oppression. Brahmanical patriarchy manifests in different forms and men from non-Brahman castes including Dalit men imitate them. Therefore in Dalit families, Dalit women are ill-treated and suppressed because of a lack of resources and financial problems. As Brahmanical patriarchy is supported by a religious system it is more oppressive than the Dalit patriarchy. Unlike Dalit men's writings, Dalit women's autobiographical narratives deeply reflect on gender discrimination both outside and inside their community which doubly and triply oppress Dalit women. Thus, eradicating/ annihilating caste and gender inequality is indeed essential for the overall development of the Dalit community.

The fifth chapter is the concluding chapter. After having researched Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English with respect to the emancipation of Dalits, it can be argued that Dalit emancipation is a process that needs a lot of effort and commitment by both upper and lowered caste people to annihilate the caste system which is a threat to society and nation. Education and English education could uplift Dalits in terms of their financial condition. But Dalits' religious emancipation and annihilation of gender inequality have not been successful because of the caste system and without addressing these issues liberation of Dalits is not possible. Therefore, it is argued that the Dalit struggle for emancipation is a long-term

project and it needs a lot of commitment. These personal narratives written in English by Dalits definitely contributed to Indian writing in English by bringing real issues and themes such as caste violence, gender inequality, untouchability, and the language of human rights to discourse and it enriched the horizon of Indian Writing in English. By narrating their experiences of caste discrimination on foreign land, these Dalit texts in English have documented the existing caste discrimination which takes place in different forms across the world. Thus Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English de-ghettoized and contributed to Indian writing in English by bringing their vivid life experiences from different parts of the world.

The select texts under study have deeply narrated issues pertaining to Dalits in contemporary India such as untouchability, caste discrimination, education, religious conversion, and gender inequality, etc. But these English-educated Dalits barely mentioned that political power is also essential for Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar called political power is Master Key with which the Depressed communities of India can open all the doors of progress. These texts mainly focused on social, economic, and religious issues against which Dalits across generations continue to struggle. But Dalits across India should realize that political power is also mainly and equally need for their emancipation along with social, economic, and religious emancipation. However, these Dalit personal narratives in English have the potential to act as a project of emancipation which have highlighted the real issues that Dalit across India experience in day-to-day life. These autobiographical narratives of Dalits across generations definitely educate both Dalits and non-Dalits in India and abroad and they are a huge contribution to the domain of Dalit literature/ Dalit Studies.

Scope and Limitation of the research: The researcher confined to study only select Dalit autobiographies and memoirs originally written in English until 2020. Although Balwant Singh's autobiography *An Untouchable in the IAS* (1997) was published before 2000, the text

was not included in this study as the copy is out of print and the research scholar could not find the copy. The study also did not include Dalit memoirs published after 2020. The researcher focused mainly on Dalit autobiographies and memoirs in English; hence, this research also did not include Dalit autobiographies written in vernacular languages and in English translation except few references. The research mainly depended on qualitative and critical and textual analysis, not any fieldwork or questionnaires. This research mainly studied from a marginalized point of view; therefore, ideas from Ambedkar, Kancha Ilaiah, and some postcolonial thinkers would be mainly used. I believe as Dalit studies has emerged as a main discipline, its scope is wide and these texts can also be studied from other literary theories and interdisciplinary points of view. Also, this research did not extensively focus on the regional and cultural specificities of these authors, it rather studied only common issues that matter more to Dalits of India despite differences. The researcher has limited his research only to literary texts particularly autobiographies and memoirs. So, there are plenty of opportunities for future researchers to delve deep into the subject.

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English as a Tool of Empowerment in Untouchable and Coming Out as Dalit : A Comparative Study

- **Mahadeva Swamy N. N.**, Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Hyderabad.

The paper attempts to study the texts *Untouchable: The autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1969) by Hazari and *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt. The main objective of this article is to study how have Dalit writers across generations reflected upon the English language in their personal narratives as well as to evaluate these texts to understand what English signifies in the lives of Dalits. The rationale behind choosing these two texts is these two narratives were written at different times by Dalit writers who are from different generations - *Outcaste* was first published in 1951 which narrates the life of an untouchable man from Uttar Pradesh in pre-independence India whereas *Coming Out as Dalit* is a latest Dalit woman memoir published in 2019 that reflects on the life of Yashica Dutt. This study aims to do a comparative study of the select texts from the Dalit point of view with respect to evaluating the role of the English language in the lives of different generations of Dalits.

Keywords : Dalits, English, empowerment, dignity

Introduction:

The Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s, which came into prominence along with Dalit literature, made significant changes in the Indian literary landscape with its innovative and realistic narratives. Narratives by the Dalits, in the form of poetry, short stories, and autobiography, written in the early 1970s in Maharashtra paved the way for new literary practices where

folklore, dialects, and language of the poor, peasants, and Dalits are widely used. These new Dalit writings challenged the literature produced by mainstream Indian writers where Dalit lives had minimal to zero representation. Contrary to mainstream writers' works where Dalit lives and experiences could only be presented from secondary sources, Dalits began to represent themselves by narrating their own lived experiences through creative writing. Dalit autobiographical literature sketches their personal, familial, circumstantial, and professional lives, often set in a rural landscape. For instance, the autobiography *The Outcaste* by Sharan Kumar Limbale has portrayed the life of Limbale who was born and brought up in a small village in Maharashtra where he faced brutal caste realities.

The Dalit personal narratives that are currently available in English are mostly written by Dalit academicians, bureaucrats, and employees of the public and corporate sectors. These auto-biographers who entered and worked in new spaces such as academia, government offices, and media experienced new caste realities which have been sketched out in their narratives. It is imperative to note that these narratives written by educated Dalits have significantly explored not only the trauma and pain they suffered due to the caste system but also the inspiration and motivation that they took in their lives to emancipate themselves from caste discrimination and poverty. These educated



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Department of English

This is to certify that **Mr. Mahadeva Swamy NN**,
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has presented a paper titled **Writing Gender Discrimination: A Study of Dalit Women's Personal Narratives in English at**

the virtual National Conference on

The Story: Life Narratives of Experience, Memory, Identity and Agency

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This is to certify that

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R. S. Reddy

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This is to certify that **Mr. Mahadeva Swamy N N**,
Research Scholar of University of Hyderabad has presented a paper titled
Struggles for Emancipation: A Study of Dalit Women's Autobiographical Narratives
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Struggle for Emancipation: A Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies and Memoirs in English

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