

**CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DALIT WOMEN AND
HIJRA AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: A
STUDY OF SUBALTERN IDENTITY**

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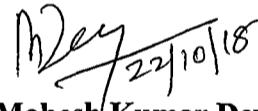
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CERTIFICATE

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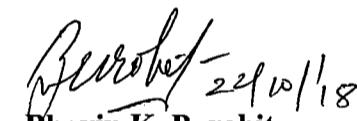
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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this doctoral thesis entitled **CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DALIT WOMEN AND HIJRA AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: A STUDY OF SUBALTERN IDENTITY**, submitted for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.), in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, is my original work and no part of this thesis has been previously submitted to any other university for any other degree or diploma. Further, I shall be solely responsible for plagiarism or any other kind of irregularity, if found, in this doctoral dissertation.

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PREFACE

I, at the outset, very humbly accept the fact that my understanding and observations expressed and theorized in my thesis entitled “Contemporary Indian Dalit Women and Hijra Autobiographical Narratives: A Study of Subaltern Identity” may not cover the entire Dalit and hijra experience as I do not have any ‘lived experience’ of Dalit or hijra life. I am taking an external stance, an outsider’s socio-cultural and historical point of observation, yet with all modesty and moral authenticity, I can say that the present study has given me an immense opportunity to understand and be a part of Dalit- primarily Dalit women’s- and hijra experience. I have closely lived a Dalit life and experienced a hijra life struggle during the course of my study. In a broader sense my position is a little ambiguous - a colonizer speaking as a colonized for the colonized. For many there may not be a place for theoretical outsider especially in the case of subaltern Dalit women and hijras. But I humbly feel that when we empathize with a suffering person we are able to feel and project something of the other’s experience into ourselves, although we do not in any sense have a lived experience of the suffering person.

As far as my understanding of Dalit epistemology and aesthetics is concerned, I am indebted to the entire subaltern tradition beginning with Gautama-the Buddha covering the subaltern bhakti movement of the medieval period, extending up to Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra, Iyothee Thass, Narayan Guru, and E. V. Ramasamy Periyar in the southern region of India, and in the post-Ambedkar era, the Dalit Panthers and in the post-Pantherite era, the Dalit autobiographers, especially women autobiographers as in my case. I am also extremely grateful to the emerging hijra writers of India who have come up with ‘transgenre’

and added new dimension to Indian literary scene and also provided new insight into the idea of third gender and marginalized hijra world. The study helps to develop an understanding that there has always remained an important parallel subaltern literary and socio-cultural tradition with democratic and egalitarian values in opposition to the elitist, Brahmanic, hegemonic one. Unfortunately that tradition as it developed as a protest tradition for its subaltern concerns since its inception was subordinated, marginalized, and inferiorized by the hegemonic one in history.

Literature is both a language text and a culture text. It is a language text in a sense that it needs some language in order to be articulated. It is a culture text in a sense that it imbibes socio-cultural ramifications of human relations. Culture and politics are forever connected to each other. The idea of ‘culture’ generally invites a feeling of awe, respect, veneration, and ultimate appropriation of glorified, homogenized past. What we call culture is often governed by patriarchal practices, economic and sexual interests, and social domination of the empowered people, namely the whites in the West, upper castes in India and heterosexuals in gender relationship. The idea of culture is very much ‘hegemonic’, to use Antonio Gramsci’s term. The idea of ‘hegemonic culture’ shows that the ruling class can manipulate the value system and patterns of behaviour of a society, so that their views become the world view and their social or cultural dominance is maintained in such a way that with the consent of the subjugated the governing power exercises its rule. The idea of hegemony also involves the point that the governing power uses different coercive devices to control and subjugate the people which are under rule. Culture is in a way ‘aestheticized’ politics, and politics on the other hand always expresses itself through the complex socio-cultural morphology. Any literary text is both cultural and political in this sense.

The present study makes an attempt to show how contemporary Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives offer a critique of the Brahmanic, and other religious hegemonic

structures in which the identities of Dalit women and hijras are constructed and disseminated. In the case of the Dalit women autobiographers, it is the Brahmanic epistemological structure of Hinduism and Christianity with their own politics of caste appears as a hegemonic power structure in which the Dalit identity is constructed as an impure, untouchable identity in relation to the upper caste identities. In the case of the hijra autobiographers, it is the essentialization and internalization of heteronormative modes of human sexuality that serves as a hegemonic power structure in which hijra identity is thwarted to be realized.

The contemporary autobiographical narratives written by Dalit women and hijra writers highlight the above-mentioned broader themes concerning caste, culture, sexuality, identity, historiography, epistemology and aesthetics of the subaltern people. The title of the thesis- “Contemporary Indian Dalit Women and Hijra Autobiographical Narratives: A Study of Subaltern Identity”- in itself tries to imbibe the central concerns of the thesis with its focus on contested categories of our time - ‘Dalit’, ‘Dalit women’, ‘hijra’, ‘autobiographical narratives’, and ‘subaltern identity’. To understand Dalit women and hijra identities in relation to the issues of caste and gender, and to fix the cultural location of the texts, a broader historical, socio-cultural perspective is taken in the initial chapters of the thesis. The process of ‘Dalitization of self’ or ‘pariahization of self’ or ‘casteization of self’ has its own historical beginning, and epistemological structure, while the transgender identity has both historical, and mythological moorings. Hence, the issues of caste and gender have been addressed in the thesis taking a holistic view of them. 

An attempt, here, is made to understand some selected Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives as subaltern narratives highlighting the issue of identity formed within caste and gendered experience of subalternity in Indian society. The use of the genre of autobiography by the subaltern Dalit women and hijra writers to unravel their selves has relevance

of its own because, the genre of autobiography has always been hailed as a literary genre that implicitly foregrounds masculine and middle-class values. The conventional understanding of the genre of autobiography puts stress on gradual formation of autobiographical self attaining some closure. Since in all patriarchal societies, the idea of formation of self has remained associated with male narrator-protagonist's self, the idea of woman's self has always been neglected, and understood to be marginal. By making use of the genre that has been mainly exploited by male writers for ages, women and hijra writers under study deconstruct the entire autobiographical tradition and its objectives.

A special chapter is spared to understand the genre of autobiography and its contemporary relevance in the study of Dalit women and hijra identities. The genre of autobiography is studied as a formal and cultural quest. Dalit feminism in India has modified, restructured, and expanded the scope of Indian feminism with its subaltern stance. The transgenre of hijra autobiographies also accelerates the debate over sex and gender essentialization in our society. They not only offer a possibility of a parallel literary tradition, but also assert the role of the subaltern subjectivities in history and foreground the fact that there have always been subaltern narratives and subjectivities in Indian cultural past, but they have never been allowed to open up for their location in a particular socio-political structure that prioritizes caste and heteronormativity over equal and egalitarian world view.

The selected Dalit women and hijra autobiographical texts include: *The Prisons We Broke*: Baby Kamble, *The Weave of My Life*: Urmila Pawar, *Karukku*: Bama, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*: Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*: A. Revathi, and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*: Laxminarayan Tripathi. Among these, the first four texts are Dalit

women's autobiographical narratives concerning the lives of Dalit women hailing from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, and the last two are hijra autobiographical narratives.

Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar in their autobiographical narratives present a strong foundational voice of Dalit women of Maharashtra, while Bama and Viramma et al. in their narratives deal with the complexities that the Tamil Dalit women face in their lives and present a very distinct cultural voice in their own manner. The autobiographical self of the narrator-protagonist in each text begins a search for identity in coterminous with the collective identity of the community.

The thesis is an attempt to understand the historical and political dimensions of subalternity in the case of Indian Dalit women and hijras in the light of some critical, theoretical reflections with special focus on the selected Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives of our time.

Chapter One

Dalit and Hijra Identities: A Sociocultural Perspective

This chapter broadly analyses two major subaltern categories of our time— Dalit and hijra- in terms of their socialization within Indian caste and gender structures. These two categories are perhaps the most contested categories of our time which offer enough complexity to revisit the epistemological structures that produce them. An attempt is made, here, to read the entire process of Dalitization of self of certain groups which have always remained subaltern groups in Indian socio-cultural setting. The attempt of locating these subaltern identities in history helps us to build up a historiography of Dalit-hijra subalternity, and to propound the idea that they, too, have parallel traditions and distinct voices in Indian culture, despite attempts made within hegemonic culture to silence them. The Dalit-subaltern voice has always operated through revolt and protest in Indian socio-cultural and literary traditions which must be saved from cultural amnesia in order to be heard. The chapter is broadly divided into three parts: 1.1 Dalitization of Self and Resistance: A Historical Overview 1.2: Hijra Selfhood: A Sociocultural Overview 1.3: Dalit Women and Hijra: The Subaltern Identities

1.1 Dalitization of Self and Resistance: A Historical Overview

This part of the chapter makes an attempt to understand the emergence of Dalit self- both male and female- in our time. The Dalit self of our time seems to be emerging from the historic ‘Untouchable self’. The chapter broadly deals with the idea of the emergence of *varna* or caste indoctrination in Indian society, especially Hindu society, within which the ‘Untouchable self’ is born. It also tries to locate the developing Dalit self and the subaltern

Dalit movement which has always played an important role in Indian socio-cultural, and literary spheres.

This chapter broadly deals with the idea of the emergence of *varna* or caste indoctrination in Indian Hindu culture. It largely takes care of what has been sparsely discussed in academia before the rise of the Dalit movement in India- the power and hegemony of caste in India. Only a few social researchers of India and other countries have worked on Indian social system, and have addressed the issue of caste and Untouchability. It is the domain of Dalit studies including Dalit women's autobiographies that gives an opportunity to deal with the question of caste in its totality. The present chapter tries to build up a narrative about Dalit history, which stresses about histories of people who have no histories. The idea of building up Dalit historiography also means altering or discussing the facts or aspects of the past not known or studied before in relation to caste; it also means understanding them in the light of new approaches or modes of analysis. It is also an attempt to interrogate the mythical or semi-mythical narration of the Dalit community and the mythologization of caste in the texts written by our ancestors. Here, it is presumed that though, India has entered into the twenty-first century, our social and political relationships are still governed by caste-based concerns and the traditions of purity and pollution, of inferiority and superiority. This particular aspect makes caste study or Dalit study an essential part of our understanding of Indian culture.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017) defines caste as:

1. one of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restrict the occupational of their members and their association with the members of other castes
2. a: a division of society based on differences of wealth, inherited rank or privilege: profession, occupation, or race

b: the position conferred by caste standing: prestige

3. a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2017).

The dictionary definition of caste takes into account the importance of heredity, choice of occupation, privileged position of certain groups, endogamy and social stratification as sanctioned by custom or religion in the making of caste.

The word ‘caste’ is derived from the Latin *castus*. The word *castus* is a Latin adjective meaning "morally pure, guiltless, pure, chaste, pious..." (Teltumbde 2014: 12). The word caste is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word *casta* which means "race", "breed", or "lineage". Thus, the word ‘caste’ was primarily applied to the Indian social system which was intended to preserve purity of blood at different hierarchical levels.

In the words of Braj Ranjan Mani:

“Caste is an institutionalized hegemonic system in which a minority is enabled to live off the labour of the producing majority. This hegemony is sustained through the brahmanical socio-religious structure, which is, to use Gramsci’s expression, ‘a permanently organized force’. Caste ideology has been made ‘an interiorized force’ or an ‘external law taken into psyche’ so that ‘culture becomes nature and individual learns to affirm and to reproduce the reality principle from within himself through his instinct’. Each person is born into a caste and is thereby either superior or inferior to someone else. The brahman is by birth endowed with all the great qualities, but the shudra is by birth unfit to come to the level of humanity” (Mani: 2013: 52).

Mani, here, uses Gramscian term ‘hegemony’ to understand the relationship between the upper castes and lower castes in India.

Maurice Godlier, the French anthropologist, uses the Marxist terminology to say that the caste system exists at the level of the infrastructure, and not that of the superstructure (Gupta 2000:183). Though, Godlier, here, uses the Marxist terms like ‘infrastructure’ and ‘superstructure’, he affirms the culturologist belief that castes constitute a primary reality in India. On the other hand, a critic like Max Weber finds nothing unique or uniquely Indian about caste. For Weber, caste divisions were status-based divisions found in almost all societies. Weber says:

“The ‘caste’ is, indeed, the normal form in which ethnic communities usually live side by side in a ‘societalized’ manner. These ethnic communities believe in blood relationship and exclude exogamous marriage and social intercourse. Such a caste situation is part of the phenomenon of ‘pariah’ peoples and is found all over the world. These people form communities, acquire specific occupational traditions... They live in a ‘diaspora’ strictly segregated from all personal intercourse, except that of an unavoidable sort, and their situation is legally precarious. Yet, by virtue of their economic indispensability, they are tolerated” (Weber 1946: 188-89).

Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1916-1999) introduces the concepts of ‘Sanskritization’ and ‘dominant caste’ to understand the attributes of caste and hegemony of the upper caste people over the subaltern communities in a village. Caste identity within Srinivas’ understanding remains dynamic. Sanskritization, for Srinivas, is a process whereby one caste tries to adopt the practice, attributes of the caste or castes above it, and thereby its rank and status within the caste hierarchy. Here, ‘low’ attributes are dropped and the ‘high’

attributes of the castes above them in hierarchy are imitated and accepted. Srinivasian concept of the ‘dominant caste’ involves the idea of sizeable numerical presence, the ownership of land and the political power of one caste over the other.

The British rulers by the late nineteenth century came to believe ‘that caste was the foundational fact of Indian society, fundamental both to Hinduism (as Hinduism was to it) and to the Indian subcontinent as a civilizational region’ (Dirks 2001: 41). Louis Dumont in his well-known book *Homo Hierarchicus* (1971) presented orientalist view of caste and argued that caste represented the cultural ‘difference’ between India and the West (Jodhka 2017: 6). Dumont’s notion of caste centres on the idea of inequality, hierarchy, and purity. The caste system is one of the most ancient and significant features of the Indian society. It denotes a system of rigid stratification into ranked hierarchies defining descent and occupation of the subject born within.

Bourdieu suggests that the dominant forms of knowledge and ideologies inscribe themselves through the process of socialization what he calls the *habitus*. It is the *habitus* in the form of economic, social and symbolic capital that each individual or group possesses in different quantities that ensures domination. Bourdieu outlines the meaning of *habitus* as following:

“In short, the *habitus*, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history. The system of dispositions—a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate conjectural constraints)—is the principle of the continuity and

regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis" (1990: 82).

Caste and casteism in Indian context can be understood as a form of cultural, social and symbolic capital that survives through naturalized and unconscious state. The Brahmanic/Aryan social order forms the *habitus* for an average Hindu in the Indian context. As Mumtaz Ali Khan puts it, "Though the caste system as such has undergone significant changes for the last several decades, the role of the caste system is still prominent. In spite of modernization, urbanization and Westernization, caste system is still a governing principle of the Hindu social order" (Ali 2002: 210-11).

Indian caste system has its roots in the Vedic system called *varnashrama* and the term *varna*. This system earlier may have divided society into four natural groups depending on individual characteristics and dispositions, but over a period of time, the fourfold *varnasystem* (*chaturvarna*) degenerated into hundreds and thousands of other *varnas*, castes or *jatis*. The Indian term for caste is *jati*. Indian culture imbibes hundreds and thousands of such *jatis*, and each *jati* has its own unique customs, rites and rituals, rules and modes of operation. The caste system in India since the Vedic period has become a form of social and economic governance. It involves the division of people into different social groups (castes and sub-castes). In the words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "The Caste System is not a division of labour, but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar 2014: 259). The most conspicuous trait of the system is that it is hierarchical and is based on individual's birth.

The term *varna* ideally refers to the ancient fourfold division of Hindu/Brahmanic society: (i) the Brahmans, the priestly and learned class; (ii) the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers; (iii) the Vaishyas, farmers and merchants; and (iv) the *Shudras*, peasants and labourers. Below the category of *Shudras* were the Untouchables, or Panchamas (literally

‘fifth division’) or *atishudra*. Doniger and Smith examine Indian caste system with a metaphor of the eater and the eaten as exemplified in the Shatapatha Brahman. The difference between the ‘eater’ and the ‘food’ in the natural world also describes the hierarchized social world. Doniger and Smith argue:

“Eating and killing were regarded as two sides of the same coin. But eating was also frankly envisioned as the perpetual re-enactment of the defeat and subjugation of one’s rival... Eating was the triumphant overcoming of the natural and social enemy, of those one hates and is hated by... Consumption was, in sum, the ultimate victory of the consumer over the consumed, of the victor over the vanquished, and of the self over the mind”. (Doniger and Smith 1991: XXV-VI)

This understanding of the natural order is important to understand the social order in which the society is divided into classes according to the eater and the eaten—the lower orders are the edibles for the higher orders.

Meera Nanda understands caste, gender and untouchability and other hierarchical positions within Brahmanism in the following manner:

“Whether one is born a female or a male, a Dalit or a Brahmin, is not an accident at all, but a working out of the natural laws of karma and rebirth that regulate the embodiment of Spirit. Castes, genders, animals, plants and inanimate objects are simply different forms of the same spirit, arranged in a chain of being, depending upon their karma or moral deeds. In this non-dualistic, inter-connected world, objects of nature take on moral significance (e.g. diseases are goddesses, animals and plants are auspicious for human life

and purposes) while human morals have consequences for the natural order (e.g. women's sins can bring about death of her husband)" (Nanda 2002: 55).

In the Upanishads, *Atma-Brahma-chaturvarna-karma-punarjanma* and *moksha* developed links in a chain and the entire chain became an unbreakable monolithic structure, and sanctity of its own. Later to institutionalize the ideology of human hierarchy or caste and inject it into the human behavior and people's psyche, new rituals and sacrifices got prominent place in human life. Narratives of about gods abandoned and passed off as history, and above all, the path to knowledge and education was closed off for majority of people in society so that no rebel could take place. The caste order, within Indian cultural fold, gets religious and spiritual sanctity. In this structure, a brahman may fall from his superhuman status, but the shudra is subhuman all the way. The shudra is passivity/servility. He does not act but is acted upon.

The roots of shudra's subhuman status and servility lie in the *Purusha-sukta* or the Creation Hymn, in the Rigveda. The oft-quoted *Purusha-suktavertein* the *Rigveda* provides a supernatural origin of the castes:

"When they divided the Man,
into how many parts did they divide him?

What was his mouth, what were his arms,
what were his thighs and his feet called?

The brahman was his mouth,
of his arms were made the warrior,
his thighs became the vaishya
of his feet the shudra was born". (Basham 1991:243)

Etymologically, the word ‘varna’ means colour, and as per one popular, though debated, theory of caste, the first two varnas or castes, especially the Aryan-brahmans, were fairer than the non-Aryans and Dravidians, the dark-skinned original inhabitants, who were branded and stigmatized as shudras. The top two castes, for this reason, are called as *savarna* (literally, with colour) and the rest are despised as *avarana*(without colour).

Varna in the Indian society created a world in which the brahmans became the controllers of society and the custodians of religion and religious rites and rituals-the intellectual pursuit in general; kshatriyas were warriors and ruler; vaishyas were the producers of wealth as cattle-rearers, agriculturists, and traders; and shudras (some of them were later relegated as ati-shudra and labelled as Untouchables) were the servants of all the three higher classes, especially the first two-brhamans and Kshatriyas. The shudra was given the name ‘padaja’- ‘born form the feet’ to be an eternal slave. The later Vedic period, during which various Arayankas and Brahmans were composed, witnessed the systematic segregation of all productive communities-peasants, artisans and labourers- as shudras. In the words of Braj Ranjan Mani, brahmanical order, both at material and ideological levels, gradually consolidated its position, and eventually emerged as the dominant social philosophy after a prolonged process of conflict, hierarchisation and exploitation (Mani 2013: 53).

One can discern an emerging linguistic hegemony among the users of Sanskrit. Language has its own episteme in which some are empowered, and others are disempowered. As far as language and its connection with power in society is concerned, we can see that the shudras could not develop a powerful language like Sanskrit which the brahmins used in literary-religious texts to demean, destroy and subordinate the shudras. The whole range of metaphysical, metaphoric, symbolic world was created in which the shudras had no place to exist as humans with equal rights. The linguistic superiority of Sanskrit over other languages

existing at that time played a major role in hierarchizing the varna relationship. With their linguistic/literary superiority the brahmans could uphold brahmanical superiority and glorify the brahmanical worldview, thereby denigrating the shudra in social relationship. Words like *brahmajnani*, *bhudeva*, *vedagya*, *acharya*, *upadhyaya*, *devavani*, *shastragya*, *pandit*, *manushyadeva* etc. were in use that glorified brahman existence, and thereby the brahmanic worldview.

On the other hand, a number of derogatory words were coined to abuse the shudras: *danav*, *daitya*, *rakshas*, *pishacha*, *chandala*, *mleccha*, *kshudra*, *nikrishta*, *dwijadasa*, etc. The Manusmriti (II, 31), instructs the shudras to have names which should breed disgust, repulsion, and hatred. They were debarred from acquiring education, collecting wealth and carrying weapons in olden days. The Shanti Parva in the Mahabharata stipulates that the shudra can have no absolute property because his wealth can be appropriated by his master at will. The Manusmriti (IV.210-15) considered goldsmiths, blacksmiths, washermen, carpenters, physicians, singers, dancers, and actors Untouchables.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his book *Who were the Shudras?* (1990) raises some pertinent questions on the identity of the Shudras and their designation as the fourth varna of Indo-Aryan society. His understanding is clarified as follows:

- The Shudras were one of the Aryan communities.
- There was a time when the Aryans recognized only three varnas: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishayas.
- The Shudras did not form a separate varna. They were a part of the Kshatriya varna in Indo-Aryan society.
- There was a continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins in which the Brahmins were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities.

- Later the Brahmins refused to perform the *upanayana* ceremony for the Shudras.
- As a result, the Shudras, who were actually Kshatriyas, were degraded socially and fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and thus came to form the fourth varna.

Historically a section of shudras for being considered ritually impure came to be known as *ati-shudras* or *antyaja* and regarded as a source of pollution. This understanding of shudra body later gave birth to the practice of untouchability. This happened because Brahmanical pursuit for intellectual ideas developed contempt for physical work and caused segregation of large number of people from the main stream. The deification of the upper caste people, especially the brahmins in scriptures, also played a major role in creating imbalance in society. According to the *Shatapatha Brahmana* there are two kinds of gods; the gods themselves who are absolute gods, and the priests who have studied Vedic lore (Walker 1983, vol. 1:167). The *Manusmriti* makes the body and the property of a brahman inviolable (*Manusmriti*: XI.72-82). Their evolved a correlation between the Upanishadic term ‘brahma’ (the supreme spirit in metaphysical world) and ‘brahman’(the supreme being in this physical world). Thus, one can discern that the religious ideology and the caste ideology in a way complement and supplement each other.

The glorification of caste became a major objective of brahmanical religious philosophy in the past. It created concepts such as bodily pollution and purity, food pollution and purity. The twin religious doctrines of *karma* and *dharma* played an important role in giving the shape to the caste ideology. According to the doctrine of karma one’s present caste status is the consequences of actions performed in previous life. Such a belief treats the birth in high caste as a reward, and in a low caste a curse or punishment. This association of caste with birth reinforces one’s caste-duty within the caste system.

Many Sanskrit religious texts include the caste-duties as ‘dharma’ and any action contrary to one’s prescribed caste-duty is declared ‘*adharma*’. The *Smritis* and *Dharmashastras* in the post-Upanishadic times (roughly around 500 BC to AD 600) develop a clear link between *karma*, *dharma*, and *punarjanma*. The important thing is that all these principles favour the upper caste people as against the lower caste people.

Manusmriti, the best known *Dharmashastra* after the Vedas codified the laws of caste between 200 BCE and the second century CE. It helped institutionalizing caste system patriarchy and accorded it the status of a creation of God and the brahmins were treated the living embodiments of God on earth. The shudras and women have no emancipation in this birth but in the next birth if they follow the dictates of the caste in this birth. Manu places all women, irrespective of caste, in the category of the lowly shudra and expects them to surrender body and soul to men. The emergence and consolidation of caste in ancient India ingeniously created a *dwija*, the twice born class, comprising of the three upper varnas and very cleverly excluded the fourth varna including women from taking formal education. The pancham varna- the Untouchables- were given tasks such as the removal of waste, butchery, the flaying of animal carcasses for their hides, the making of footwear and the tending of funeral pyres and other works related with death and the ‘unclean’. Caste demarcated pure land of the village and kept it segregated from the impure land of the village. The people living in this impure territory were kept segregated from ‘pure’ public environments such as schools or temples or places of drinking water.

Like *Manusmriti*, many verses of the Gita directly refer to the varna-karma tie-up as the natural duty of people. The ‘natural duty of the brahman is acquiring religious and intellectual perfection (XVIII. 42), while the Kshatriya is obliged to rule the masses (XVIII.43); agriculture, tending to cattle and trade are duties of the vishya (XVIII. 44); and service to brahmans, Kshatriyaand Vaishyas is the natural duty of the shudra (XVIII. 44). In

other verses of the text (III. 35, XVIII.45, XVIII.47) the observance of one's caste duties is considered to be noble and the breach of it heinous. Thus many verses of the Gita couched in grand conversation at epic level eulogize the varna-jati ideology like many earlier texts. Kosambi in relation to varna-jati and women issues in the *Gita* comes out in a quite radical way:

“That the song divine is sung for the upper classes by the brahmins, and only through them for others, is clear. We hear from the mouth of Krishna himself (9.32): ‘For those who take refuge in Me, be they even of the sinful breeds such as women, vaishyas and shudras...’ That is, all women and all men of the working and producing classes are defiled by their very birth, though they may in after-life be freed by their faith in the god who degrades them so casually in this one. Not only that, the god himself had created such differences (4.13): ‘The four-caste (-class) division has been created by Me’; this is proclaimed in the list of great achievements” (Kosambi 2000: 15).

The famous doctrine of the *nishkama-karma* expressed in the verse *Karmanyevaadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kadachan* (II. 47)-‘your business is only with the work, not the fruit’- has greater implications in relation to the marginalized labour class. The karma ideology and the theory of avatara offered social stagnation and no release from the varna-jati ideology present at that time. According to Braj Ranjan Mani, the pre-Gita period, with a strong Buddhist presence in the land, was marked by a vigorous social, cultural, and economic life when the Indian civilization flowered, the post-Gita period saw a stagnant and decadent society characterized by a closed economy, insular outlook, excessive caste conservatism, and growing tentacles of feudalism (Mani 2013: 63).

It is to be noted that in the brahmanical religious order and literature, the idea of broader social utility or individual justice and the egalitarian principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood seem to be missing. Though the dictum ‘*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*’ (The entire earth is the family.) lies in the Mahabharata, its true application in everyday life seemed to be neglected in all spheres of life.

The caste system in India has shown amazing resilience since its inception. It has survived all through different periods and different political, ideological, religious eras. Anand Teltumbde studies the ActionAid report conducted in 2001-02 about the condition of Dalit in contemporary capitalist, industrialized, republican India and states that in 73 percent of the villages surveyed, Dalits could not enter nonDalit homes; in 70 percent, they could not eat with nonDalits; in 64 percent, they could not enter places of worship; in 53 percent, Dalit women suffered ill-treatment from nonDalit women; in 38 percent, Dalit children had to eat separately at school; in 33 percent, nonDalit health workers did not visit Dalit homes, in 32 percent, Dalits could not enter police stations (Teltumbde 2014: 17).

Caste as cultural category has always been contested in Indian history. An attempt is made here to understand this process of contestation and revolt in different periods of Indian history.

Shramanic Counter-Tradition & the Anti-Caste Movement:

According to Kancha Ilaiah caste is a cultural category that has fragmented the Indian society for centuries. Right from the days of Buddha, moving on to Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the struggle against castes and caste discrimination has been a major problem in Indian civil society and state (Karade: 2015: 13). The first and the foremost resistance to the varna-jati ideology and caste based social structure arose in the form of the shramanic tradition. The shramans were mostly the practitioners of Buddhism and Jainism

who opposed the Vedic religion and its traditions. According to Uma Chakravarti and Romila Thapar, the shramanic tradition was the tradition of resistance and equity... a long line of differentiated heterodoxy...non-Vedic and antagonistic to the brahmanical religion and politics (Chakravarti 1996; Thapar 2001). The shramans rejected the scriptural and brahmanic authority, *karmakanda*, and varnashrama-dharma. The Lokayatikas or Charvakas who were materialists too challenged the Vedic rituals and ceremonies which according to them were devised by the priests for their livelihood. Sardesai (1994) has correctly stressed that the driving principle of the Lokayata was more social than philosophical. The Dalit historians have seen the Indian past as a battle ground between the brahmanic ideology and hegemony and the emerging protest by the others who were popularly known as the non-Aryans, Asuras, and Dasa-Dasyus.

The entire shramanic tradition in itself was the first protest movement against the Aryанизation and homogenization of culture existing at that time. The institutionalized subjugation and enslavement of the marginalized, laboring people into lowered castes, and the latter's struggle to liberate themselves from the oppressive order, are the social contexts of Indian history, culture and philosophy. Understanding the idea of caste, Gail Omvedt acutely observes:

“When the Sanskrit literature, whether the dharmashastras, the epics, or any other, refers to varna or caste, the attempt is not to realistically describe the society but to prescribe it. The references represent projections; the Brahmanic texts are an attempt to delineate an ideal model and impose it on the society. They are a manifesto for a particular form of social inequality”(Omvedt 2003: 133).

All shramanic systems were casteless and against *karmakanda* (religious rituals). The shramanic tradition preached a system of universal ethics which embraced all without the distinction of caste and communities. The ancient India witnessed two religious categories mainly: the brahmans and the shramans (Thapar 2001: 58). The shramanic tradition though **outlived** with the onslaught of Brahmanism after the seventh century later paved a way for a more liberal and unorthodox faith in the form of the egalitarian Bhakti movement which covered the period from the eighth century to the seventeenth century India.

The Buddhist India: A Site of Anti-Caste Struggle

The text of ancient India can only be understood within the context of social stratification, political economy and cultural establishment. Any attempt to understand the ancient India without taking into account the non-brahmanical intellectual articulations will only offer decontextualized understanding, hence not plural, but hegemonic, hence brahmanical. The first historic challenge to caste and the Vedic socio-religious structure came in the form of Gautam Buddha and his call to develop understanding and compassion for suffering humanity. To counter the Vedic religion, the Upanishadic absolutistic metaphysics and the brahmanical social order, according to Kancha Iliah, “a more balanced and effective philosophy was needed-a philosophy which grasped the contemporary consciousness of the masses, could appeal to the average human psyche, and also give an impetus to social development. Buddhism was a product of these socio-economic and ideological conditions” (Iliah 2000: 43).

In the ancient Indian history Buddha achieves a prominent place as a cultural thinker as no one before Buddha blamed oppressive socio-economic conditions for man’s misery in life. For Buddha individual and society are interdependent, and hence, to be happy, one must create happiness around oneself. Buddha’s *dhamma* (a term that replaces brahmanic *dharma*)

inculcated the values of morality which are humanist, universal and transparent, as against the brahmanic religion of sacrificial rites and caste rules. While the Vedic religion was chiefly concerned with the relation between man and God, Buddhism was primarily concerned with relation between man and man. Buddha in his discourses relentlessly attacked the caste system, social inequality, oppression of women and the underprivileged and brahmanical supremacy. Buddha became the first saint-philosopher to realize and propound that caste system was a cultural construct and there was a single species ‘man’ in nature. He maintained that social hierarchies and divisions based on occupation developed at a certain stage in history in social evolution. Hence, there is no divinely ordered or designed social structure, but conceived and nurtured by a particular class. The equality and purity of all castes is asserted in Buddhist dictum-*chatuvai suddhi* and *chattaro vanna samsama*. Though not a social or political philosopher in the contemporary terms, Buddha’s social and political philosophy clearly stood against Brahmanism during his lifetime and even after that. Buddhism recognized and gave importance to dignity and equality of human beings, especially it incorporated the subordinated communities including women.

Having been influenced by the Buddhist philosophy, during the first half of twentieth century, Ambedkar posed a historic resistance against Brahmanism and initiated neo-Buddhist socio-ideological quest for a civil religion of equality, liberty and fraternity. Before Ambedkar it was Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) of Tamil Nadu who had identified the emancipatory potential of Buddhism. The persona of the Buddha in Ambedkar and Thass emerges as a compassionate hero who is engaged with the suffering of the marginalized, and not as a mystic who meditates all alone under a banyan tree. The new Buddhist movement spearheaded by Thass and Ambedkar provided an alternative to the oppressed and the marginalized people an escape from subjugation and oppressed life and a new hope for better life. It also provides a new scope for democratic, egalitarian, rationalistic society and religion.

Medieval Subaltern Saint-Poets: A Challenge to Brahmanic Linguistic Hegemony

After the Buddhist period in India, the medieval period with the rise of the subaltern saint-poets who are alternatively known as Bhakti poets played a major role in forecasting the issues related to the marginalized people including Dalits and women within the Vedic-brahmanical fold. The period, roughly beginning with the eighth century and extending up to the seventeenth century, is popularly known as the Bhakti literature period which includes voices from the subaltern poets covering almost the entire India, especially the northern, southern and western India. The Buddhist struggle against the conservative-exclusivist and monolithic Brahmanic tradition once again got momentum during the Bhakti period of the medieval age.

The medieval Bhakti movement which in the words of Aloysius is *mukti* movement (Mani 2013: 135) can be seen operative in the deep south in the sixth century, gradually covering the regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra and also engulfing north India and Bengal from the fifteenth century onward. The radicalism and iconoclasticism of the movement was shaped and initiated by artisans, cultivators, labourers and other people representing the subaltern groups of society. The top leaders of the movement included people representing different people- the outcaste brahman Basava, the leather-worker Haralayya, the proto-feminist Akka Mahadevi (Karnataka); the tailor Namdev, the village servant Chokhamela, the grocer Tukaram, the vegetable-grower Savata Mali (Maharashtra); the weaver Kabir, the cobbler Ravidas, the cotton comber Dadu Dayal, the rebellious princess Mira, the khatri Nanak, the potter Gora, the barber Sena (the North). The entire movement witnessed the tightening of socio-religious restrictions for the caste people, an excessive multiplication of gods and goddesses in the field of religion, an unprecedented proliferation of castes, a growing insistence on purity-pollution rules and an increasing feudalization of land and land-relations. The Bhakti movement can be seen in the light of the basic ethos of

Buddhism alive at that time and other heterodox traditions like Jainism a few others. Caste remained the main target of all these movements. The most important aspect of the Bhakti movement was that during this period cultural-religious leadership shifted from the brahman priests who used Sanskrit to these saint-poets who composed their verses in vernaculars. The movement can also be seen as the sub-conscious attempt of the lowered castes people against the aggressive Brahmanism in the form of the revival of the *varnashramadharma* and other tenets of Vedic-Brahmanism which was reflected in the writings of Kumaril Bhatta and Adi Shankaracharya . According to M. G. Rande the Bhakti movement had historic importance:

“...like the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, there was a Religious, Social and Literary Revival and Reformation in India. This ... was not Brahmanical in its orthodoxy, it was heterodox in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works. This was the work of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. At its head were Saints and Prophets, Poets and Philosophers, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society-tailors, carpenters, potters, gardeners, shop-keepers, barbers, and even mahars”

(Zelliot 2001:8-9).

In Tamil Nadu, the *Siddha marg* poets inspired by Tirumular (c. AD 300-400) challenged the very foundations of medieval Hinduism: the authority of the shastras, the validity of rituals and the basis of the caste system were often questioned by the Siddhas (Kailasapthy 1987: 389). The unorthodox Siddhas carried the torch of humanist radicalism in Tamil Nadu and like Kabir and many other Bhakti poets abhorred Sanskritised idiom and used popular epigrams, witticism, earthy adages and colloquial expressions of the common people.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a socialist movement called Virashaiva emerged under the leadership of Basava in Karnataka. Basava , a Brahmin by birth, who refused to undergo the upanayan ceremony and thus declassed and decaste himself. The Virashaiva- popularly known as Lingayatas raised a voice against Brahmin domination and also created their own sacred literature in the form of *vachanas* which included short lyrical exhortations and devotional hymns as a counterpart of Sanskrit religious texts. Their anti-casteism was supported by their egalitarianism and social service with strong emphasis on the spiritual value of every kind of labour. In addition to Basava, the list of major figures of the movement included Haralayya, Allama, and strong women like Akka Mahadevi and Muktayakka. The strong presence of women is a significant aspect of the Bhakti movement.

The heterodox Varakari movement played a great role in transforming the Maharashtrian society and culture. In the words of Sardar, though they employed some traditional religious symbols and acts, rather than launching a direct attack on or hostility with the privileged and the powerful, there is little doubt that their concern for the poor and the caste-oppressed implied a strong disapproval of the vested interests of the power groups (Sardar 1978: 102).

Like the North Indian and South Indian Bhakti movements, this religious upheaval in Maharashtra produced a strong social undercurrents which later gave birth to the popular non-brahmin movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led by Mahatma Phule and B. R. Ambedkar respectively. In the words of M. G. Rande the Bhakti movement of Maharashtra was ‘unbrahmanical’ and basically ‘heterodox protest movement’ of the masses and not of the classes’ (Mani 2013: 169). In Maharashtra the sudra-saints led the movement and explored different religious idioms to challenge the power structure based on the brahmanic caste ideology. The major subaltern saint poets of the Varkari movement were

Namdev , Chokhamela (both later half of the fourteenth century) and Tukaram (first half of the seventeenth century).

The Varkari Bhakti movement in Maharashtra produced a strong tradition of vernacular language and literature. Through their writing the leaders of the movement played an important role in generating progressive broad-mindedness and social consciousness among the people. The democratic nature of the movement interrogated the caste distinctions and accorded equal status and respect to the shudras and women.

Summarizing the Bhakti movement, it can be said that the defining feature of the movement was radicalism in religious understanding with the spirit of protest aiming at socio-cultural change in Indian society. The movement employed people's language in order to protest the dominant idiom of the Sanskritic tradition. In social field, for the first time in the cultural history of India, human labour was given the spiritual height as all the subaltern saint poets belonged to the artisan class. Though the movement appreciated and canvassed the monotheistic radicalism of nirguna Bhakti, the saint poets belonging to priestly or upper classes-Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Surdas, Vidyaati, Vallabhacharya, Tulsidas etc.- professed saguna Bhakti and consolidated the traditional understanding of varna dharma which, in fact, hampered the main objective of the movement. The basic difference between their understandings of caste can be seen in the following two verses written by Tulsidas and Ravidas respectively:

"Pujiye bipra sil guna hina, Sudra na gun-gyan pravina".

("A Brahmin must be revered though he be devoid of amiability and virtue; not so a shudra, however, distinguished for all virtue and learning".) (Prasad tr. 1990: 414)

and,

“Brahman mat pujiye, jau howe gun-hin, Pujahin chara chadala ke, jau-howe gun-pravin”.

(“Don’t honour a brahman who is without merit; honour instead the feet of a chandala who is virtuous and talented”.) (*Mani 2013: 186*)

Thus the Bhakti movement projected two conflicting approaches to God, Man and human relationship in society.

The Colonial Period: Contesting Aryанизation of Indian Past

The colonial period in India developed a textual construction of India and Hinduism which was not pluralistic. It was textual in a sense that it largely depended on the brahmanical Sanskrit texts and scriptures of the Vedic period. This textual understanding of Indian past developed a monolithic understanding of Hinduism which connived at the diverse Indian communities and tribes existed throughout Indian history. The colonialism, as Kosambi (2000: 45) understands, ‘wanted as far as possible to yield to brahmanism, as it was always a convenient tool for subjugation of the natives’. The discovery of a common Indo-European heritage with concomitant Aryan race theory as a part of the Orientalism programme in the very beginning of the colonial rule provided an opportunity to share a hegemonic ideology which provided the foreign and the native elites with a common language heritage. Thus during the colonial period the oppressive legacy of native tradition got legitimacy and a new meaning as the British never disturbed the hierarchical positions within Hinduism emerging out of caste.

The colonial period was a period of great translation activity in India. A number of Sanskrit texts were translated into English and other European languages during this period. This upsurge in translation activity also led to what is called aryanisation of Indian past. Nathaniel Halhed with assistance and guidance of a few pandits produced Manu’s laws as *A*

Code of Gentoo Laws, subtitled *Orientation of the Pundits* in 1776. Sanskrit language which almost became secondary during the Bhakti period with the rise of vernacular languages once again came to prominence with the rise of translation of Indian past into different European languages including English. The establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 under the leadership of William Jones (1746-94) was an important venture in the direction of discovering Indian culture and religion. Indological and Oriental studies were boosted up with the establishment of the Bombay Asiatic Society in 1804 and of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain in 1823. People like William Jones, Charles Wilkins, H. T. Colebrooke, James Prinsep and above all Max Muller did research on India, mainly through the ancient Sanskrit texts. Wilkins published a Sanskrit grammar in 1779, and rendered the *Bhagvat Gita* in 1785. William Jones translated the *Manusmriti* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanshakuntalam* into English. The publication of Jones' three essays 'On the Hindus', 'On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India' and 'On the Chronology of Hindus' in *Asiatic Researches* opened up new horizons of understanding India and Indian past through Sanskrit texts. Jones' another essay 'On the Origin and Families of Nations' brought out several features underlining the striking similarity between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek and opened up new doors of 'comparative philology'. The Aryan theory of race asserting ethnic kinship between Europeans and the ancient Aryan people emerged out of different studies of the Orientalists in India and abroad. The Indo-Aryans, in this theory, were hailed as the torchbearer of ancient world civilization. This theory became quite handy for the upper-class/caste people of India to assert the antiquity of their culture and their superiority over other non-Aryan people including the Dravidians, tribals and the caste marginalized people. Keshab Chandra Sen in 1877 declared '... in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race...' (Thapar 1975: 12). Gandhi too in South Africa (1894) responded similarly: 'Since the British and the Indians were from

the same Aryan stock, how could the Britishers rule over their own blood brothers? It was unfair for one set of Aryans to rule over another set...' (Gandhi 1979: 176).

The whole process of Aryanisation of India as a project of orientalism in India created a romantic image of India—an India of sublime spirituality, opulence, Vedic-Upanishadic galore, and epic heroism. In such a world there did not exist any hierachal differences of class or caste. Such a glorification of Indian past was well received by the upper castes because it, on the one hand, equated them with the ruling Britishers and on the other hand, gave superiority over the lowly masses and others. When we study the presence of the British Raj in India in the light of Edward Said's theory of orientalism propounded in *Orientalism* (1978), we can see that in the case of India, Orientalism had not become totally confrontationist as it was in the case of Islamic world. Said in his theory overlooks the collusive role played by the native privileged groups in Indian context. Though orientalism created the binary of the colonizer-colonized, self-other in relation to Britain and India, there did exist such relations in relation to the upper caste and the lower caste in Indian history. Hence, the race theory, a key construct of Orientalism found tremendous support among the dominant classes in India for the above given reason. Both Indology and Orientalism became a joint and mutually beneficial project for the foreign and indigenous elites. Sumit Sarkar rightly points out: 'Colonial knowledge was not just a Western superimposition: such an interpretation gravely underestimates the extent and significance of inputs from relatively privileged Indian groups with autonomous interests and inclinations' (1997:23).

The overall emphasis of the Indologists and Orientalists was on the elite culture and brahmanic literature as against material reflection in mass cultural production. Within Orientalist scholarship the non-brahmanical, Buddhist, shramanic and Bhakti texts were completely ignored. The same Orientalist scholarship later in twentieth century projected India's past as an ideal one in the name of nationalism. It was then also equated with

Hinduism and now with neo-Hinduism in our time. In the words of Braj Ranjan Mani, ‘...alien rulers and local influential elites had worked closely together to construct Orientalism as well as colonialism in mutual self-interest’ (Mani: 2013: 196).

The nineteenth century oriental scholarship encouraged Vedic-Brahmanic nationalism. Many nineteenth century reformists including Raja Ram Mohan Roy under the Oriental scholarship which was culturally rooted in the Sanskritic background operated with a romantic concept of ancient India which was a panacea for all ills. The concepts and values of western modernization were accepted only to locate them in the distant Indian past, thereby to impose the superiority of the distant Aryan-Brahmanic culture. Though it was commendable on the part of Roy that he discussed women issues, the reformist zest of Roy remained limited in raising questions about the upper strata of society; the issue of caste and other forms of marginality operating within caste-feudalism were yet to be addressed. Regarding the status of women and the sati and other traditions, Lata Mani observes the attitude of the attitude of the nineteenth century reformists:

“Tradition was not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. What was at stake was not women but tradition” (Late Mani 1989: 118).

In addition to the Brahmo Samaj of Roy in Bengal, Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra, Veda Samaj in Tamil Nadu, and the Arya Samaj in Punjab and northern India too were ideologically oriented by the vision of brahmanical values.

Many of nineteenth century ideas regarding Indian past gave birth to what can be termed as ‘Hindu nationalism’ in the first half of the twentieth century. The national revival with the passage of time became intricately entangled with the racial and religious revival.

Nationalism became another term for the Sanatan Dharma or Hindu religion. Aurobindo's definition of nationalism equates with the Sanatan Dharma:

“...Not a mere political programme. Nationalism is a religion that has come from God...If you are going to be a nationalist, if you are going to assent to this religion of nationalism, you must do it in the religious spirit...When it is said that India shall expand and extend itself, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall expand and extend itself over the world” (Thapar 1975: 12).

The revivalist movement in the north India was spearheaded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) and the Arya Samaj founded by him in 1875. His magnum opus *Satyarth Prakash* (1875) played a very important role in Aryanising Indian past. Though he denounced idolatrous and superstitious practices of Hinduism, in other ways he remained orthodox. In the first edition of the *Satyarthprakash*, as Braj Ranjan Mani (2013: 213) notes, Swami Dayananda advocates school education for shudra children but denies them the right to study the Veda. In the second edition of the book, published in 1884 after his death, he allows worthy, righteous shudras to study the shastras but still prohibits them from reading the Mantra Samhita, the most sacred section of the Vedic literature. As Vir Bharat Talwar (2001:38) has also noted that he gives the provision that a shudra can study but is not entitled to the investiture ceremony – *yajnopavit-* which enables one to become *dwija* or to use the Samaj idiom, the pure Aryan. The wearing of *yajnopavit* in past operated as a sign of learning that distinguished the literate from the illiterate shudras. Dayanada also led a campaign for *shuddhi* or ‘purification programme’ for those who wanted to come back to Hinduism. The reconverted people were squeezed into their ‘original’ jati/varna system to which they belonged to before the conversion. Such instances reject the claim that the original varna-system was an ideal social system where one’s position in the caste hierarchy was determined by one’s worth and not birth.

The most important thing to be noticed about the nineteenth century reformers was that all of them scholars of Sanskrit and they remained highly brahmanical in their understanding of Indian past and its culture. In their zeal to Sanskritise the Indian past they totally ignored the presence of other humane traditions- mainly the shramanic tradition of dissent and resistance represented by the early Buddhism, Jainism, and the traditions represented by the medieval Bhakti saint poets and other liberal traditions of folk Hinduism. The reformers never presented a critique of the ancient texts with regard to their treatment of women, the shudras and other marginal subjects.

During the colonial period caste was redefined as a glorious institution representing stability, harmony and co-operation within Hindu culture. The valorization of caste became an immediate subject for every reformer and nationalist. Before the rise of Phuleite and Ambedkarite movements in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and other similar movements in the south by Iyothee Thass and Narayan Guru, caste had been seen as the adhesive, assimilative force which unites the Hindu society together.

During the nineteenth century Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) rose to prominence as one of the important ambassadors of Indian culture and Hindu religion. Though Vivekananda appeared quite radical in presenting his critique of Hinduism and modernizing it in some areas, his understanding regarding the issue of caste remained problematic and contradictory to his image. The following statements reveal his position on caste:

“Caste has kept us alive as a nation” (Vivekananda, 1989-92, vol. 2, 489).

And,

“It is in the nature of society to form itself into groups...Caste is natural order; I can perform one duty in social life, and you another ; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can

you mend my shoes... Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life”

(ibid., vol. III: 245-6). And again,

“Each caste has become, as it were, a separate racial element. If a man lives long enough in India, he will be able to tell from the features what caste a man belongs to” (ibid., vol. VIII : 54).

The cultural renaissance of the nineteenth century and twentieth century did create socio-cultural reawakening during that period, but failed to create an adequate climate for modernization and common people-centred nationalism. The questions of equality, brotherhood and humandignity within the cultural spectrum were never taken into discussion during the freedom movement in the initial period. During this period there arose grassroots social movements by lowered castes, Dalits and adivasis, but they were opposed as divisive and were seen as weakening the struggle against the colonial rule.

The period beginning from the British colonial period to the Independence period witnessed the emergence of sophisticated Dalit movements across India. They can be classified on the basis of three major ideological strands: Dravidian, Phule-Ambedkarite and Gandhian. All these movements emerged at different times during colonial period. The earliest was the Dravidian movement in southern India followed by the Phule-Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. The Gandhian ideology affected the northern India and arrived a little late. As compared to the Dravidian and Phule-Ambedkarite movements, the Gandhian movement was pro-conservative resulting in cooption of certain movements and activities by upper caste/class leaders.

The South Indian Protest Movement: In Search of Adi-Dravid Identity

The fight against institutionalized discrimination against lowered caste people, Untouchables and tribals took another form of movement in the south India, especially in

Tamil Nadu. It witnessed the construction of a Dravidian ideology of non-Brahmanism quite early in the colonial period. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the conscious construction of a low caste or Adi-Dravid identity began. It is seen in the writings of Iyothee Thass, Masilimani, and Appaduraiar, and organizations such as Advaitananda Sangh in 1870, the Chakya Buddhist Sangam in the late 1800s, and the Dravida Mahajana Sangam in 1881 which petitioned the colonial government for separate schools and common wells, and work places for the depressed classes (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993: 2091).

Iyothee Thass through his writings claimed that Buddhism was the religion of the *panchammas*, the *poorva Tamizhar* or original inhabitants. According to Thass the degrading term ‘pariah’ had been imposed upon the panchammas by Aryan Brahmins who hinduized Buddhist texts and religion with the passage of time. Those who resisted Brahmanism became panchammas or remained Buddhists. The Dalits in Tamil Nadu sought a common identity of ‘Dravidian’ based on religion, language, and the historical past which would challenge the brahmanic identity based on caste.

The non-Sanskrit linguistic, ethnic identity of the lowered caste people provided an easy engagement with the struggle. The Tamil indigenous and autonomous tradition of the pre-Sanskrit and non-Aryan Dravidian heritage and Tamil Sangam literature were evoked by the radicals in their battle for social, political and economic equality.

Later in 1930s, the Self-Respect Movement (SRM) led by Ramaswami Naicker, popularly known as Periyar (great leader) confronted Brahmanism with militant campaigns against untouchability, support to inter-caste marriages, temple entry, denouncing child marriage and the laws of Manu as inhuman. All these efforts made the Adi-Dravids socially more politicized than any other groups elsewhere. Periyar countered Gandhi’s ideas on caste quite intensely:

“Though the public believes that Mahatma Gandhi wishes to abolish untouchability and reform religion and society, the Mahatma’s utterances and thought reveal him to hold exactly the opposite views on this matter... if we are to follow the Mahatma’s untouchability creed, we will slip into the very abyss of that untouchability we are attempting to abolish. We have been patient, very patient, and tight-lipped but today in the interests of abolition and self-respect we are, enough, forced to confront and oppose the Mahatma”
(Geetha and Rajadurai 1998:299).

The South Indian Dalit, non-brahman liberation movements find their counterpart in Phuleite understanding of Indian history in terms of the Aryan conquest and brahman exploitation of the aborigines through different religious practices. ‘Brahmanism’ for them did not refer to a particular caste, but a dominant, oppressive ideology that used umpteen socio-cultural practices to subordinate the whole class of people who were termed as ‘Untouchables’, ‘shudra’, ‘atishudra’ , ‘pariah’ in brahmanic vocabulary.

In the post-Independence period, an attempt has been made to create an independent Dalit identity in Tamil Nadu in post-Dravidian ideology/ identity politics. The Dravidian ideology of the colonial period was stridently anti-brahmin. It was dominated by the Vellalas who replaced the position earlier occupied by the brahmins leaving aside the rest of the suppressed masses. Though it was overtly anti-brahmin, it did not challenge the structural hierarchy of brahminism, hence the power structure within the Dravidian ideology remained intact. It offered very little to the *Sudra* and *Ati-sudra* masses.

Interrogating Brahmanism: A Phuleite Vision

The nineteenth century Maharashtra first saw the launch of a movement for the liberation of caste-oppressed, toilers, men and women. It was Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) who

in opposition to the elitist cultural nationalism that pervaded during that period tried to rebuild society on the matrix of equity, justice and reason. Mahatma Phule must be considered the first ideological-political founder of the anti-caste movement in modern India. Phule presents the understanding of the relationship between the brahmanic class and the shudra and atishudra class in terms of knowledge-power relationship. He saw Brahmanism as the ideological and institutional system of monopolizing knowledge and power by a particular class which uses these to exclude, divide and dominate other groups in society (Mani 2013: 251). He wanted education not a property of the elite class but a weapon in the hands of the shudratishudra people to bring about an attitudinal change which can lead to a kind of Cultural Revolution. Phule is one of the earliest thinkers who sees caste in the light of knowledge-power relationship. Gail Omvedt cites Deshpande's evaluation of Phule thus:

“Phule was the Indian ‘system builder’ …(the) first to attempt at transforming plural categories of history into singular or universal. Phule talked about knowledge and power much before Foucault did. In fact, Foucault’s post-modernist analysis came at a time when Europe has literally seen an ‘end of history’ whereas Phule’s efforts were to change the world/society with the weapon of knowledge” (Omvedt 1994: 23).

Phule in his discourse raises the issues of religion, caste, politics, education for women and the lower caste people, mass poverty, the state of agriculture and the subjugation of all types of marginalized people. According to G. P. Deshpande Phule was the first to identify and theorise the bipolar (*dvaivarnik*) structure of Indian society, marked by the dichotomous relationship between the oppressors (the brahmins) and the oppressed (the shudra-tishudras) and could foresee a revolution ahead:

...He (Phule) analysed the *dvaivarnik* structure of Indain society, and identified the *shudratishudras* as the leading agency of a social revolution. And the *shudratishudras* will lead the revolution on behalf of the whole society, to liberate the entire people from the shackles of Brahmanism...a total smashing up of the entire oppressive structure, ideological and material...(Deshpande 2002: 20-1).

Phule's anti-caste struggle emerged when India started experiencing the new era under colonialism, and was first affected by the modern European ideas of society and democracy. The social and economic relations were also changing under British colonialism.

Phule's seminal text *Gulamgiri* (1873) and *Jatibhed-Viveksar*(A Critique of the Caste Divisions) written by his friend Tukaram Tatya Padwai (1839-98) and published by Phule himself in 1865 can be said to be the first critiques of the religious world-view and social hierarchies of Brahmanism from an anti-caste perspective in any Indian language. Phule in the preface to the book written in English salutes the American abolition of slavery in 1863 and tries to compare these two issues to seek some solution. The *Satyashodhak Samaj*(1873) founded by Phule also played a major role in creating awareness about caste problem.

Phule in his assault on history politics, education, religion and philosophy tried to repoliticise varied public discourses of that time. Regarding the idea of nation and nationalism he asserts:

"There cannot be a 'nation' worth the name until and unless all the people of the land of King Bali-such as Shudras and Ati-shudras, Bhils (tribals) and fishermen etc., become truly educated, and are able to think independently for themselves and are uniformly unified and emotionally integrated. If a tiny

section of the population like the upstart Aryan Brahmins alone were to found the ‘National Congress’ who will take any notice of it?”(Phule 1991: 29).

Thus, during the colonial period Phule emerges out as one of the first subaltern social reformers who interrogates different hegemonic structures of his time and offers a new vision for the entire subaltern community.

The colonial rule encouraged the process of urbanization in India, hence, the lowered caste people were also subsumed in a growing new economy propelled by the introduction of industrialization and the introduction of the railways. A number of people preferred the option of conversion into Christianity that offered more promises of equality, dignity and economic freedom to them. But the common factor seen in different struggles, as they took different forms at different places, was a volition on the part of the lowered caste people “to throw out all civic-religious-educational-economic-administrative disabilities imposed on them by the indigenous elites” (Mani 2013: 293).

One can find a basic difference between the nationalist struggle dominated by the upper caste elites and the social struggle initiated by the lowered caste. The nationalists first wanted greater share in colonial rule and then total independence, while the lower orders first wanted to have equal right in their access to public places- roads, markets, schools, and offices; in a region like Tamil Nadu and Kerala the right of their women to cover their breasts; the right to access to religious places; and the right to give up their agricultural bondage and hereditary occupations and the liberty to choose any other. Education which had for centuries been the monopoly of the upper caste lot, became the major issue in these struggle. As Aloysisus (1997) has argued that mass literary and education is at the heart of the transition from the pre-national to the national form of society (1997: 82). In short, the

struggle was against the domination of the upper caste people internalized through the varnashrama-dharma.

Critiquing the idea of nationalism of the upper class-caste people, Baburao Bagul observes:

“The intelligentsia, that is the Indian national leadership, divided the national liberation movement ...into two warring factions: a political movement and a social movement. They also declared those who organized social movements, those who theorized on agriculture and industry, to be stooges of the British and traitors. The national movement was turned into a form of historical, mythological movement and ancestor worship...Those who propounded inequality and did not wish society to be democratic, started eulogizing history, mythology and ages gone by because, in those mythological and historical ages, they were the supreme victors and leaders” (Omvedt 1994: 88).

Dalit nationalism from below- demanded equity and justice for all, not for a few. This nationalism was embedded in multiple local struggles and anti-caste movements which erupted at different times at different places. The struggle was not against the foreign imperialists, but the indigenous oppressors. As Omvedt observes the power holders in the Congress up to the very end tended to oppose anti-landlord legislation and the efforts to protect peasants and tenants’ (Omvedt 1994: 89). The lower caste movements were then seen as an attack on Indian custom, tradition and religious fabric.

Gandhian Nationalist- Dalit Movement:

In contrast to the emerging Dalit movements across the country, especially in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, a seminal feature of the Hindi heartland in the colonial period,

according to Sudha Pai, was ‘the delayed development of Dalit consciousness among the large mass of Untouchables’ (Pai 2013:12). With the examples of a few sporadic movements, the region did not experience a large scale cultural or political anti-caste movements. The major ideological strand in this regard first emerged in the 1920s with Gandhi’s thinking on the Hindu caste hierarchy, inter-caste relationships, method of caste reform, and the future role of the depressed classes in India (ibid. : 13). Gandhi believed in the *varnashram dharma* and the idea of *Sanatan Dharma* and wanted to continue the traditional concept of a varna system, but cleansed of untouchability, in which the unclean work of the Untouchables would be made ‘honourable’. Under the leadership of Gandhi the Indian National Congress (INC) took the work of *Harijan uddhar* or uplift of the Dalits, without critiquing the caste issue or brahmanic domination at the level of epistemology. According to Gopal Guru the Gandhian ideology is close to the orthodox or conservative tradition of social justice (Guru 2010: 362). The Gandhian ideology aimed at bringing change of heart within the upper castes by arousing sympathy for the conditions of the Dalits, but it failed to offer any radical actions to create the condition of equality or change the condition itself. In the post-Independence period the Gandhian ideology was adopted by the Congress party. But in the late 1980s Gandhian ideology for the depressed class was gradually replaced by the ideas of Ambedkar.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement: New Discourse of Resistance

The rise of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) during the nationalist movement turned out to be the most significant event in the history of Dalit movement. Though criticized for ‘politicization of caste’ untimely and dividing the Hindu society when India was fighting against the colonial rule, for Ambedkar the idea of India’s political freedom was to remain incomplete without social justice given to the untouchable-subalterns. Ambedkar in his discourse on untouchability and social justice does not use ‘Dalit’ category very often.

Instead, he uses ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Scheduled Castes’, ‘Pad Dalit’, ‘bahishkrut’ and ‘Untouchables’ depending on the changing contexts.

Ambedkar elaborates the term ‘untouchable’ in *The Untouchables* (1948). He rejects the occupational reasons offered for the rise of untouchability. With the use of physical anthropology, he rejects Phuleite understanding of racial difference between the Untouchables and other castes. Physiology did not distinguish between the brahmins and the Untouchables. According to Ambedkar several reasons combined to perpetrate untouchability in our culture. The rise of brahmanic orthodoxy from about the 4th century to combat the influences of Buddhism, excessive veneration of cows and cow worship and later ban on beef eating played a major role in excommunicating and developing contempt and hatred for the Buddhists and those who were beef eaters. All these people did not adhere to the sacrificing of animals to the Vedic gods/goddesses. They also continued eating beef which the Hindus had given up to be one better than the Buddhists. According to Dr. Ambedkar this led to certain groups of people being treated as Untouchables.

Ambedkar’s thesis of the origin of the Untouchables in Indian society contrasts the proposed understanding of Brahmanic literature according to which the Untouchables were born of miscegenation among the four varnas. The Sanskrit term for a child born out of a mix of the four varnas is *varna-sankar*. Within the Brahmanic socio-religious code children born of hypergamous marriages (known as *pratiloma*) were considered inferior to those born of hypogamous marriages (known as *anuloma*); *pratiloma* children were considered Untouchables within the Brahmanic socio-religious code.

Dr. Ambedkar’s vision for the Dalits incorporated a series of action plans to combat with untouchability in Indian society. He formed Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (1924), an educational and cultural organization with a view to improving the social conditions of the

Untouchables. He organized a *Satyagraha* (1927) for the use of public lake at Mahad. The well-known temple entry campaign (1929-1930) at Kalaran Mandir, Nasik, and Parvati temple at Pune was conducted. The public burning of *Manusmriti* (1929) by him was an attempt to lodge a war against casteism. Dr. Ambedkar found Scheduled Caste Federation (1942) for the rights of the Untouchables.

Ambedkar's entire struggle is to challenge the system of hegemony, hierarchy, and oppression pervaded in the brahmanic Hinduism in radical search of an alternative vision of society with emphasis on civic equality and the economic-political empowerment of the oppressed communities. Ambedkar in a way continues the egalitarian tradition of the Buddha, Kabir and Phule. Ambedkar's famous call to 'Educate, Organize, and Agitate' can be seen as summarizing his social philosophy. Ambedkar's contribution to society can be seen in his attempts of humanizing, rationalizing, and modernizing Indian society. The oppressed, broken and the grounded position of the Dalit was located in the domain of religion by Ambedkar. Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist discourse takes a structuralist, existential understanding of the turning of 'sex' into 'gender'- "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". She, here, stresses the process of 'becoming' of a woman. But within the Dalit discourse we find that it is the birth of a child within Hindu chaturvarna system that makes him/her an untouchable. It is not the becoming, but the very being of a particular child that makes him/her an untouchable.

Ambedkar in his various discourses deconstructs the traditional monopoly of power and knowledge within Hinduism and shows how the problems of casteism, untouchability, inequality and deprivation are interlinked in the absence of education in the Dalit community. In his seminal text *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) Ambedkar illustrates how the Hindu discourse offered no escape from enslavement for the depressed classes. It is the dehumanizing caste system that is responsible for different forms of bondage, deprivation,

ignorance and ultimate subordination of millions of people who otherwise could have live a better life in other conditions. Though India was trying hard to kick out the external colonialists, untouchability-'history's most flagrant example of man's inhumanity to man'- was still a part of Hindu social order and upper caste psyche.

As Gore has observed, in Ambedkar's ideology, identity is subordinate to human dignity. Identity can be an issue once human dignity is achieved. Hence for the Untouchables in India, human dignity is more fundamental than identity, as Ambedkar said: 'We do not value Hinduism, we value human dignity' (Gore 1993: 97).

Ambedkar summarizes the horrors of casteism as follows:

- Graded inequality between the different classes;
- Complete disarmament of the shudras and the Untouchables;
- Complete prohibition of the education of the shudras and the Untouchables;
- Ban on the shudras and the Untouchables occupying places of power and authority;
- Ban on the shudras and the Untouchables acquiring property; and
- Complete subjugation and suppression of women. (BAWS : Vol. 9 : 215)

Ambedkar's great scuffle with Gandhi on the issue of caste has acquired an important place in the entire Dalit struggle for dignity and empowerment during the Independence struggle. Ambedkar's demand of the separate electorate for the Untouchables and its later acceptance in the form of what is called The Poona Pact (1932), the tussle between Gandhi and Ambedkar to be the champion of the untouchable rights and their representations at the Round Table Conferences in 1930 and 1932. Ambedkar's advocacy to abolish caste in his scholarly text *Annihilation of Caste* and Gandhi's rebuttal to Ambedkar in *Harijan* in this regard, the temple entry issue, Gandhi and Ambedkar's different understandings on caste

occupation, and education to shudras form a whole range of dissenting and conflicting ideas in the discourse on caste during the pre-Independence era. Gandhi resorted to direct action against the British rule because it was founded on injustice, but he did not recommend any such actions against the caste Hindus who meted out inhuman treatment to millions of their next door brethren for millennia. Ambedkar in his sociological classic *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables? (1945)* has deconstructed from the subaltern viewpoint, almost every aspect of Gandhian philosophy-his social ideology, his anti-modernity as expressed in his *Hind Swaraj* (1908), his trusteeship, his anti-untouchability drive etc.

In his dialogue with Ambedkar on the issue of caste, Gandhi appears as conservative, and regressive like his predecessors Gandhi too applauded caste system in many of his writings. He saw the seeds of Swaraj in caste and argued that the Hindu society had been able to survive because it was founded on the caste system:

“The seeds of Swaraj are to be found in the caste system...A community which can create the caste system must be said to possess unique power of organization... The caste system is a natural order of society. In India it has been given a religious coating. Other countries not having understood the utility of the caste system... have not ...derived...the same degree of advantage as India has derived” (*BAWS*. Vol. 9: 275-6).

Gandhi possessed quite controversial opinions about caste occupation. He supported the principle of hereditary occupation and rebuffed those who advocated social democracy:

“To destroy the caste system and adopt the western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder. I have

no use for a Brahman if I cannot call him a Brahman for my life. It will be a chaos if everyday a Brahman is to be changed into a Shudra and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahman" (*ibid.*).

At times Gandhi in a quite regressive manner opposed the education of the masses to keep the caste system intact:

"What you want to gain by giving literacy to the children of the peasants? What comfort are you going to add to their life by educating them? Do you want to ignite discontent in his mind for his thatched hut and pathetic condition?...We are going to do excess when some preach for imparting education for all, without considering its pros and cons" (Biswas 1998: 267).

Ambedkar in his writings presented a critique of nationalism and swaraj. He believed that the idea of nationalism and swaraj in Indian condition was multifarious, and not univocal. For the Indian elites, swaraj meant preserving and strengthening the traditional brahmanical order and thereby the traditional hierarchical social structure, whereas for the Untouchables and shudras and other non-elite people, swaraj meant the demolition and destruction of that order. In his views the nationalism of the oppressed and humiliated people was in direct contrast to the Congress nationalism. Clearing his ideas Ambedkar says:

"Speaking for the servile classes, I have no doubt that what they expect to happen in a sovereign and free India is a complete destruction of Brahmanism as a philosophy of life and as a social order. If I may say so, the servile classes do not care for social amelioration. The want and poverty which has been their lot is nothing to them as compared to the insult and indignity, which they have to bear as a result of the vicious social order" (*BAWS*, vol.9: 212-13).

Ambedkar associates nationalism with the negation of caste-spirit. For him caste-spirit is a deep rooted communalism as he believes: “Caste has killed public spirit. Caste had destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound” (BAWS, vol. 1: 56)

Thus, in his writings, Ambedkar systematically constructed a philosophy of protest against casteism which strengthened the Mahar movement and put the social question above all questions. His protest movement equates the philosophy of Brahmanism with Hinduism. Ambedkar found two adversaries to confront-colonial power and oppressive local power structures.

Defining the term ‘Dalit’

Dalit assertion at the grass roots level is a post-Independence phenomenon. The term, Dalit, is comparatively more recent in origin. In the second half of the twentieth century the term ‘Dalit’ became an important catchword in social, cultural and political movements initiated by different untouchable castes across the country. The use of the term delineates the caste discrimination of a great number of people within the Hindu socio-religious system as Untouchables and their social subalternity. But as James Massey (1994) has shown that concepts such as Dalit, Dal and Dalah have been used profusely in Hebrew. Dalit is a Marathi word apparently derived from Sanskrit. In Molesworth’s Marathi-English dictionary (1857) the word Dalit is defined as ‘ground or broken or reduced to pieces generally’ (Molesworth 1857: 228). B.R. Ambedkar first used the term in 1928 or so in his newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*. In 1930, there was a newspaper called *Dalit Bandhu (Dalit Brothers)* in Poona which voiced the issues related to the depressed classes. But the term gained new potency only after the death of Ambedkar during the 1970s, the period that witnessed the birth of *Dalitsahitya* (literature) in Maharashtra and later in different parts of India.

The word ‘Dalit’ today has become a field of contestation and inquiry. For Anupama Rao “Dalit identity suggests the long-standing presence of subaltern critiques of the caste-Hindu order, as well as the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which such critiques emerged” (Rao 2009: 11-12). It is a political-ethical category with its own moorings in history. Dalit as a political category represents Dalitness that in turn challenges existing accounts of history, politics, and culture, and Brahmanic epistemology. According to Gopal Guru the term Dalit literally signifies the depressed and suppressed groups of various social formations...and often leads to controversies among social reformists, literary analysts, social scientists and political workers on account of its ambiguous and strong political overtones (Poitevin 2002: 2-3). Untouchability in our culture is ideologically constructed and operates in different ways for socio-cultural banishment of Dalit subjects.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, we can witness the emergence of Dalit protest, the formation of Dalit self and Dalit community in the works of Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar. Though both Phule and Ambedkar together present a subaltern critique of caste and thus a general critique of Brahmanism, one can see the basic difference between the Phuleite and the Ambedkarite understanding of Dalit subject. Phule identified Dalits as part of a larger, distinct political and ethical community of non-Brahmans, as aborigines of India, while Ambedkar saw Dalits as a part of the subordinated Aryan groups and treated them as political minority. Both of them discussed the social, cultural and historical contexts within which their critiques emerged. In a way their collective critique ushered in India’s nativist political modernity which emphasized the issue of caste and established Dalit as political-ethical-epistemological-aesthetic subject.

Jotirao Phule’s *Satyashodhak Samaj* (1873) first presented a critique of caste by locating dalaits in the mythical and historical ancient India. For Phule the secular space of modern education and thereby employment was also monopolized by the ritualistic upper

caste people. To break the Brahmanic hegemony in culture, Phule employed a strategy of (re)naming the Indian past in general and subaltern Dalit identity in particular. For him naming was an act of representation which in itself was critiquing of the hegemonic ideology. In Phule's understanding of the past, the *shudra-atishudra* category emerges as a political category in the struggle against Brahmanism. Phule views the Indian past as a battle between the autochthonous communities (nonbrahmans) and the foreign Aryan communities. He sees history as a caste conflict between brahmans and non-brahmans. In doing so Phule, on the one hand, revalues or transvalues the entire Orientalist understanding of Indian past that aryanized Indian past through translations of different Sanskrit texts into foreign languages. He urges us to rethink the Indian nationalist fascination and reverence for the distant Vedic past in order to fight against the present colonial state.

Phule evolves a narrative of defeat and degradation in the Untouchables' relationship to the Aryan-Brahmans. In the context of Maharashtra, Phule praises the untouchable communities like Mahars and Mangs for their resistance to Aryan-brahman invasion in past. Etymologically, as Phule argues, the term Mahar meant *Maha-ari* (the Great Enemy). In their fight against the Aryan invaders, the Maha-ari lost their power on the land and relegated to slavery and banished from society. According to Phule, the Maha-ari were condemned to poverty, to feeding on dead carcasses, and to wearing a black thread around their necks as a symbol of servitude (Rao 2009: 13). Thus, Phule is the first subaltern thinker who puts forward Dalit history as a struggle against the Brahmanical hegemony. In addition to Phule, Gopal Baba Valangkar and Shivram Janba Kamble formed the earlier Dalit activism on Phuleite model. In one of his speeches delivered at the Bahishkrit Bharat Parishad (1920) Kamble argues that the Mahars had been the in the service of virtuous Dravidian kings like Bali, Ravana, and Hiranyakashipu, who were defeated by the Aryans through trickery and later castigated as *asuras* in the Puranic literary tradition (*ibid.*). Demystifying the myth of

Parshuram and his twenty one times victories against the Kshatriyas, Kamble argued that the Mahars, Mangs and Chambhars were Dravidian Kshatriyas who had fought the Aryan invaders twenty one times before they were finally defeated. For Valangkar eating carrion is the most important symbol of the degradation of the Untouchable communities that further led to their stigmatization within Hindu Varnashramdharma. Anupama Rao notes that Valangkar provided a genealogy of Dalit humiliation and suffering that demanded for rights and social recognition in the language of political liberalism and gave an alternative account of the Dalit past that emphasized the subordination of the Dalit communities (*ibid.* 15).

The major departure from Phuleite model of Dalit history and racial theory came with Ambedkar's 1948 essay, 'The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables'. Ambedkar in this essay argues against the colonial accounts of the caste system as a hierarchical ordering of racially diverse population. Ambedkar in his earlier 1916 paper titled as 'Castes in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism, and Development' reacted against this idea of biological racism that also emerges out of Phuleite critique of caste domination. In his understanding of Indian caste system Ambedkar consistently maintains that India was a nation with a common racial stock, and that castes were not racially distinct. In his account caste being a historical product was born out of social, political and economic struggles between different (ethnic) groups. It is within the Hindu religious texts with their foregrounding of varnashramdharma caste violence is legitimized and naturalized. Ambedkar instead of describing Dalits as members of shudra-atishudra groups or Dravidian Kshatriyas as they appear in Phuleite narrative, locates the Dalit history in the defeat of Buddhism by Brahmanism. Unlike Phule and his followers, Ambedkar finds the real stigmatization of Dalits not in their practice of scavenging or eating dead cattle or beef, but in their refusal to accept Brahman hegemony and their identity as non-Hindu Buddhists. In the understanding

of Ambedkar the Untouchables were Broken Men who were degraded, homeless, history's detritus and losers and fated to inhabit the margins (*ibid.* 17).

One of the major paradoxes that emerges in the postcolonial state is noted by Bali Sahota in his essay 'The Paradoxes of Dalit Cultural Politics' (2009). The paradox is that the state is formally against the caste but substantially dependent on caste inequality for its economic progress. The state at times politicize the very relations that buttress its own development. This particular reality puts a question before the state's image as a universal sovereign or neutral arbitrator and its much avowed liberal secular principles.

The Dalit concept, and its popularization and politicization came into vogue in 1970s in Maharashtra with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers Movement. The Dalit Panthers Movement emerged as a militant organization of untouchable youth in Maharashtra. Within the Dalit Panther Movement, the term Dalit was defined broadly and it included the SCs, STs, neo-Buddhists, workers, landless and poor peasants, women and all other marginalized groups who were economically and socially exploited. 'Dalit' for them became a symbol of change and revolution. Along with the Dalit Panthers Movement there came into existence Dalit Literary Movement in Maharashtra which accelerated and legitimized the process of Dalit assertion. For many Dalit activists, the term Dalit is the most secular and humanistic identity as Dalits as a class reject religion and priesthood that has made them slaves.

Many critics have attempted to understand and define the term 'Dalit'. Hence, the term is multivocal and multifarious in its understanding. In a letter written to Eleanor Zelliot, Gangadhar Pantawane, a Professor of Marathi at Marathwada University, Aurangabad, and the founder editor of *Ashitadarsh* (*Mirror of Identity*), an important Dalit magazine, defines the term 'Dalit':

“To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by (the) social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in god, rebirth, soul, holy books, teaching separatism, fate and the heavens because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution” (Zelliot 2001:268).

For radical Dalit thinkers like Babulal Bagul, Dalit as category is constructed and extended as to carry the history of the revolutionary struggles of all Dalit (oppressed) people, and has the “ontological ability to define itself with all the lower castes, tribal people, toiling classes and women...The term represents those who have been broken and ground down those above them in a deliberate manner...In term and concept Dalit itself there is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the *karma* theory that justifies the caste hierarchy” (Zelliot 2001: 267).

The term Dalit has been used in a wider sense in this thesis to include the *hijras* in addition to those who have been victimized within the varna system of Hinduism. Thus Dalit as category becomes a very comprehensive, radical category that specifically delineates those segments of Indian society which are culturally, socially, politically and physically subordinated by the dominant ideologies of the ruling class in power, the ideologies which relegate the Dalit subject to sub-human state of subservience and subalternity.

After 1980s, Dalits have constructed alternative ideologies such as Ambedkarization to create political consciousness and social and cultural consciousness to challenge the upper caste oppression. Even at the village level the grass roots activities have enabled Dalits to assert themselves against oppressive practices and atrocities of the landlords and other people. Such assertion at grass roots has not lead to any homogenization of the movement, rather it has led to further fragmentation and sometime divisions among Dalits.

Ambedkarization, as Sudha Paihas argues, enhances consciousness of Dalit identity, low caste status, and desire to improve it. It is a progressive ideology that attacks the entire caste system and goes much beyond what Dalit parties stand for (Pai 2013: 34). Ambedkarization has led Dalits to assert everyday forms of resistance at the village level and has also led to a growing protest literature. An upsurge in Dalit autobiography is also a result of growing Ambedkarization across the country.

The western India, especially Maharashtra, was largely influenced by Ambedkarization during the Independence and post-Independence period, especially in the 1980s. But in Tamil Nadu, though Dalit mobilization at the grass roots level is much older than other states, Ambedkarization is a recent phenomenon. Over the last two decades Dalits have moved away from the Dravidian paradigm and parties and attempted autonomous mobilization. Because of the emergence of the new phase of Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, there has been an upsurge in vibrant Dalit literature. The questions of nation, democracy, citizenship, development, Dalit subjectivity and especially, Dalit woman's self are now addressed with new feeling. Dalit writers have produced their work in small magazines and avoided the mainstream vernacular publishing. As Srinivasulu has argued, "Dalit assertion has been autonomous both in form and content and this dialectical relationship between these two aspects is reflected in the spirit of their writings" (Srinivasulu : 2011: 30). Though the emerging Dalit writings have questioned the past classical writings as reproducing upper caste norms, they have very often remained silent about oppression within-i.e. gender or sub-caste divisions. The phenomenon of Ambedkarization is now spreading into other regions in the country. The rise of Dalit literature and the establishments of Dalit writers' associations and magazines in Gujarat, Bengal and some other parts points to the emerging change in society.

The phenomenon of assertion on the part of Dalits is a byproduct of Ambedkarization. But this assertion does not mean that untouchability, and therefore atrocities arising out of socio-cultural factors have disappeared.

To conclude, the incessant Dalit assertion in the form of socio-political movements, the shift from agrarian village economy to industrial and post-industrial economies, the emergence of new democratic space, the infiltration of egalitarian values in society, the rise of globalized social community, and drastic political steps taken in favour of Dalits have certainly ushered in a sizable political change in the lives of the Dalits, but the journey from the political empowerment to complete social empowerment is yet to be experienced. Ambedkarization as a social experience has inherent capacity to bring in modernization and democratization not only for the Dalit-subaltern community, but also for the entire humanity.

1.2 Hijra Selfhood: A Socio-cultural Overview

Defining Hijras:

In recent years, hijra (transgender) discourse of identity has emerged in opposition to normative heterosexual identity. The emerging hijra phenomenon or studies in India can be looked at as critical discourse that investigates questions of gendered differences and how they are transformed into social hierarchies. The hijra autobiographical narratives taken up for study examine the apparent disjunction that can be observed between the cultural expectations of the hijra role in society and individually experienced some unique social roles, gender identities, and sexual preferences. Although hijras have been culturally defined for centuries in India, the narratives under study certainly show that they have like mainstream people other aspirations and desires in their lives. Thus, it is difficult to define hijra identity, though it is culturally defined.

The term ‘hijra’ is a masculine noun suggesting ‘a man that is less than a perfect man’, thought it must be noted that all hijras right from their childhood develop inclination towards feminine qualities and were treated as ‘feminine’ by friends and family members. The popular cultural definition of ‘hijra’ is that they are ‘incomplete man’, ‘not man, though man’, ‘neither man, nor woman’, or sometimes ‘woman minus man’. Though, hijras are ‘man minus maleness’, they are also ‘man plus woman’ in their external appearance and behaviour. Their wearing female attire, having long hair, and female names define them as ‘hijras’ in Indian context.

Hijras in India are defined as ‘neither men nor women’, but most of the hijras identify themselves as women. Many refer to them as ‘in-between’ gender, but Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty puts it, “As eunuchs, hijras are man minus man” (O’Flaherty 1980: 297). Being impotent is a necessary condition for hijras, if not the only condition. Nirvana or emasculation through surgery is a religious obligation for the hijras. There is a belief that hijras are born hermaphrodites, but this is a misnomer. In India, hijras are seen as emasculated men, but in reality not all hijras go for emasculation operation. Emasculation is seen as the major ritualistic experience which is revered the most among hijras. It is the emasculated experience that ties the hijras to the figures of Shiva and Shakti in the Hindu religion. In one of the stories related with the goddess Bahuchara, the goddess commands an impotent man called Jetho in his dream to cut off his genitals and dress in female clothing and become her servant. Thus, the idea of emasculation has its mythological link in Hindu scriptures.

The process of emasculation is called nirvana in hijra community. Nirvana is a state of absence of desire and liberation from all finite human consciousness to achieve a higher degree of consciousness. For the hijras, nirvana is the second birth. With nirvana the impotent male persona dies and the new persona endowed with divine power emerges. The nirvana

transforms impotent man into generative hijra. By achieving the state of nirvana, the hijras become ascetics. They literally leave their homes, material possessions, the social relations, caste, religion, male sexuality and become a part of hijra acetic order. They transform their impotency into the power of generativity by the practice of asceticism and thus gain respect among common public. Though nirvana ceases individual fertility of the hijras, it assigns them the power of universal fertility. In Hinduism, transgenderism has very often been seen as a form of transformation of masculine self to achieve higher identification with the mother goddess. Thus hijras' removing their masculinity infantilize themselves to worship mother goddess. Though, in the autobiographical narratives of Revathi and Laxmi, the protagonists-narrators get strength from such mystification of hijra generative power, but they do not mystify the generative power of hijras in their life stories.

It is believed that hijras have homogenous culture. But in a country like India where regional, cultural, linguistic, caste and class differences flourish, the hijras cannot be viewed as homogenized community, though different gharanas of hijras may share certain common things. The hijra writers in their narratives engage themselves in the task of interpreting and constructing culture in which they live. By doing this, they search for their own individualities.

Though the term 'hijra' has remained popular in Indian languages, the word 'transgender' was recently coined in the 1980s, and took the critical meaning in 1992 after its first appearance in Leslie Feinberg's movement *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* (1992). Susan Stryker in her essay "(De) Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies" (2006:4) makes a distinction between two other similar looking terms: 'transvestite' (a term coined by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910) and 'transsexual' (a term popularized by Dr. Harry Benjamin in 1950s). A 'transvestite' is somebody who changes into the clothes of the so-called 'other sex', and a 'transsexual' is

somebody who has permanently changed genitals in order to claim membership in a gender other than the one assigned at birth. For Susan Stryker a ‘transgender’ is somebody who permanently changes social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation. This particular view of Stryker is debatable in the Indian context because Revathi in *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* undergoes a sexual alignment surgery, though Laxmi in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* does not undergo any such surgery. Very often the term ‘transgender’ is used as an adjective and not as a noun. It becomes ‘pangender’ umbrella term to include all queer subjects-transsexuals, butches, drags, femme, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine women, effeminate men, sissies, tomboys, or anybody who does not want to fall into binary sexual/gender categories.

The hijras in India form a subculture. Though within the dominant patriarchal, heteronormative Indian culture, the hijra identity operates as a stigmatized identity with little role to play in the mainstream society. Hijra identity in Indian culture is formed with adhering to traditional roles assigned to themselves within hijra culture, many hijras now-a-days are transforming their identity by creatively engaging themselves with mainstream professions and exploring cultural and individual resources. The recent emergence of hijra autobiographical narratives in India and new social roles adopted by the hijras have opened up new horizons to fashion hijra identity in a newer way. A. Revathi (writer and activist), Laxmi (writer, dancer and activist), Manobi Bandopadhyay (writer and Principal of a college), Joita Mondal (transgender Judge), K. Prithika Yashini (Police officer) etc. have given new voice to hijra struggle for identity and broadened our understanding of subaltern identity in Indian. The prevailing and dominant idea (though it is mainly western) that there are only sexes and two genders, each naturally and biologically determined and exclusive of the meanings and characteristics of the other has been effectively challenged by the hijra

narratives under study and the new roles adopted by the above-mentioned hijras. The emerging hijra identity challenges sex and gender categories as binary oppositions.

The hijra theorization certainly interrogate the idea of ‘normality’ within a particular culture. In every culture normality is culturally defined. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict sees normality ‘a term for the socially elaborated segment of human behaviour in any culture, and abnormality a term for the segment that that particular civilization does not use” (Nanda: 1999: V). In heteronormative patriarchy, as Clifford Geertz understands, “human beings are divided without remainder into two biological sexes”- male and female (Nanda 1999: 128). As feminists have noted this concept of sex and later gender roles as binary oppositions is taken for granted in culture so seriously that any kind of alterity is treated as ‘unnatural’. Hijra studies have shown that gender as psychological, social and behavioural aspects of being male and female or being masculine and feminine as biological determinism like sex can also be challenged as they are not natural or permanent determiners. It is biological determinism of sex that leads to gender determinism of gender roles. The emerging hijra narratives liberates both sex and gender from any kind of determinism.

Hijras as neither men nor women interrogate the foundations of basic social categories of gender on which patriarchy and heteronormativity is build. This particular quality of hijras make them objects of fear, abuse, and ridicule on the one hand and special, sacred, and important on the other hand for ritualistic purposes.

The authoritative cultural and social aspects of sex and gender, and the mutual exclusivity of masculine and feminine categories get problematized within hijra studies. Hijra studies take one step forward from feminism and asserts that sex like gender is also a cultural construct and can take different meanings in different cultures. The presence of hijras as community and caste in a country like India subverts the western critical understanding of sex

and gender as mutually exclusive, permanent and stable categories. The mythopoetic presence of hijras in India shows that there have always been people who do not fit into sex/gender categories, and that there are multiple genders. The birth of transgender movement across the world in recent times shows that transgenderism is as real and natural as heterosexuality. As Serena Nanda observes, ‘unlike transsexuals, transgenderists challenge and stretch the boundaries of the (American) bipolar system of sex/gender oppositions, and renounce the (American) definition of gender as depending on consistency of genitals, body type, identity, role behaviours, and sexual orientation’ (Nanda 1999: 139). In comparison to transgenders of other countries, the hijras of India can be seen as culturally and socially well-defined institutionalized sex/gender variant category which has historical and mythopoetic base. Though there pervades essentialist sex/gender ideology in Hinduism, it also gives space to gender overlap or gender alterity in the case of hijras.

Dick Hebdige in Subculture: *The Meaning of Style* (1979) reads subcultures in terms of the way they challenge hegemony through style rather than simply through overt ideological articulations. Hijra culture and literature have never been discussed in the existing literature, and today they offer a new area of study for hijra scholarship. Very often subculture is looked upon for political mobilization. The deeper study of hijra narratives also involves the project of hijra subcultural historiography. Such kind of study is necessary to look at the silences, the gaps and the ruptures in the subcultural narratives, especially life narratives.

Hebdige’s understanding of subculture is helpful to understand hijra subculture in a country like India. “Subculture”, Hebdige clarifies, “are not ‘cultural’..., and the styles with which they are identified cannot be adequately or usefully described as ‘art of high degree’. Rather they manifest culture in the broader sense, as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation (Hebdige 1979:129). For Hebdige subcultural styles that

includes narratives do qualify as art but “art in (and out of) particular contexts; not as timeless objects, judged by the criteria of traditional aesthetics, but as ‘appropriations’, ‘thefts’, subversive transformations, as movement” (*ibid.*). The subculture art aesthetic expression communicates subtleties, complexities which have not yet been communicated in the mainstream art aesthetics. The subcultures, in fact, pose a fundamental challenge to the power in favour of the subordinate positions.

The subcultural practices offer alternative methods of alliance, a different form of representation of sexuality and body. It is not to be assumed that all hijras live their lives in radically different ways, but the lives of people like Laxmi and Revathi certainly open up new possibilities of hijra lives that can project themselves as heterosexual counterparts. They have the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to queer time and space. The word ‘queer time’ refers to “those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance and ‘queer space’ refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understanding of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics (Halberstam 2005: 6). Thus the idea of ‘queer time’ collides with the heterosexual notion of time. In our culture constructions of time and space get hegemonized and are uniquely gendered and sexualized. Both domestic and public time and space are gendered and sexualized. The concepts like ‘family time’, ‘industrial time’, ‘leisure time’ and the naturalized associated meanings with them are contested within hijra time framework. The hijras live outside reproductive and familial time/ space and create their own time/space in life narratives. Within heterosexual world, transgender body appears as anachronism.

Though postmodernism, on the one hand, rejects any grand narrative of identity, it, on the other hand, also encourages the construction of new identities to challenge the hegemony

of the dominant identities. The question of identity formation becomes an important issue for those peripheral groups who have always been denied any kind of ‘identity’ in history. In his essay “Taking Identity Politics Seriously”, anthropologist James Clifford warns against the blanket dismissal of identity politics by intellectuals because they very often miss the “complex volatility, ambivalent potential, and historical necessity of contemporary social movements” (Clifford 2000: 95).

The rise of hijra autobiographical narratives in India and across the world plays a very important role in numerous postmodern debates that include space and sexuality, subcultural production, literature and gender ambiguity, the politics of auto/biography, historical conception of gender and gender roles, gender and genre and idea of natural body. It is to be noted that in any given society certain struggles for identity (say class or caste) are considered to be more important than others (say sexuality), but the postmodern world has immense potential for new cultural production. The rise of subcultural activities in different forms, like the hijra narratives, gives birth to new cultural production which in turn generates new forms of protests. The fact is that unless and until new forms of resistance do not surface, new modes of dominations are not recognized.

Postmodern critics like Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), Jean Baudrillard (*Transsexuality*), Rita Felski (“Transexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History”) have taken up the issue of transgenderism. Butler uses transgenderism to represent the contradictions of being- gendered being- in postmodernism. Baudrillard, on the other hand, uses transsexuality to understand the unlocatability of the body.

Rita Felski in her above-mentioned essay connects two phenomena together: ‘the end of history and the end of sex’. Our changing cultural imaginings of historical time in the postmodern period has also affected our perceptions of the meaning and nature of gender

difference. Transgenderism challenges the very idea of ‘gender’ that remains at the central position in feminism. The binarism of gender, once historicized through different cultural means both in patriarchy and feminism, now gets problematized with the rise of transgendered subject. The previously distinct reality of sex/gender gets hybridized in the postmodern time. The postmodern period announces the end of gendered metanarrative and opens up a space for the transgendered narrative. The paradox in the postmodern philosophy is that it, on the one hand, challenges the hegemony of historically and culturally formed dominant identity groups, and on the other, makes the subordinated groups like Dalits and hijra the historical actors in the public domain. The hijra narrative creates its own *Bildung* of the hijra subject as it tries to liberate the hijra subject from the manacles of tradition and culture and proliferates it as an autonomous, self-determining post/modern individual. Thus the narrative and figure of transgenderism is a potent site of rewriting of history and time. As Felski has noted the proliferation of histories signals the death of history, leaving only multiple image of the past (and present) from different points of view (Felski 2006:371). Now, it is to be understood, the signifier ‘history’ has more than one referent or signified.

To conclude, the emergence of hijra/transgender phenomenon poses challenge to the established category of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, and calls for a fresh analyses and practices to fight against discrimination and injustice meted out to the transgenders or hijras. The transgender phenomena have affected recent feminism in a significant way. The transgender/hijra sexuality puts ‘sex’ of the ‘object’ into question, especially in relation to the object’s ‘gender’. The very idea of heteronormativity is contested within transgender-hijra discourse. It presents a critique of the earlier (modernist) epistemology of gender which treats gender as a social, linguistic representation of objectively known material sex. Transgender autobiographical narratives are basically concerned with this epistemological struggle for social change. They present different understanding of ‘body’ and its meaning. Here, sex is

not considered as the stable referent with stable gender signification. The anatomical sex, in earlier understanding, is equated with a gender role and gender identity. To clarify this, one can say that a biological male is a social man, and a biological female is a social woman. Transgender phenomena squarely question both ‘sex’ as stable referent and the relationship of it with any social category of ‘gender’. Transgenderism reveals ambiguity of physical body treats sex and gender as a floating signifier.

1.3 Dalit Women and Hijra: The Subaltern Identities

The idea of the subaltern and Subaltern Studies have their own historical evolution in academics. The word ‘subaltern’ has remained fluid over the years. Because of the change in intellectual environment and reading strategies, Subaltern Studies and subaltern subjects have been reinvented. The Subaltern Studies focuses on different subaltern positions in terms of caste, caste, gender, religion, and language. The arrival of Dalit and hijra discourses and the emerging understanding of Dalit and hijra subjectivity therein have today redefined and widened the boundaries of the Subaltern Studies. Peter Gran argues that Subaltern Studies in India is read against liberalism, Marxism, and ‘religious fascism’ (Ludden 2016: 4).

Though the word ‘subaltern’ has a long past, the use of it in cultural studies got importance and gravity with Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) use of it into theories of class struggle. Gramsci in his understanding of the word identifies the groups that are excluded from a society's established institutions and thus denied the means by which people have a voice in their society. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It is someone who has been marginalized or oppressed historically and epistemologically. The term though earlier included peasants, workers now also includes other groups, Dalit women and hijra in our case, denied access to any kind of power in society.

Ranjit Guha in the preface to the volume, *Subaltern Studies* (1982) clarifies the use of the term ‘subaltern’. He states that the word ‘subaltern’ in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. It will be used... as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way...There will be much... which should relate to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity as well as to the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems—in short, the culture informing that condition (Guha 1994: vii). Thus, Guha uses the term ‘subaltern’ to include all sorts of subordination and marginalization and puts the subaltern subjects in the larger context of history, politics, economics and sociology and ideologies and belief systems embedded with them.

Gramsci’s use of the term “subaltern” in his paper “On the Margins of History: history of the subaltern social group” (1934) can become useful to understand the marginalization or subalternity of the Dalit and hijra subjects in our society. Gramsci first used the term “subaltern” as a collective description for a variety of different dominated and exploited groups who explicitly lack class-consciousness. Now the term is used to refer to all those who could be described in opposition to the elite. Subaltern studies seeks both to unite the victims and to increase the awareness of their victimhood. It also creates the class of what Gramsci called “organic intellectuals” who openly identify with an oppressed class, share its interests and work on its behalf. The subaltern reading of Dalit women’s autobiographical writings and other hijra narratives presents a critique of hegemonic historiography which presents the Dalits and hijras in Indian history as continuous and homogeneous subjects in terms of life experiences. Within subaltern studies Dalit and hijra subjecthood emerges as a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) argues that different cultures are “incommensurables” and cannot be categorized into universalist frameworks. He advocates for “third space”. This new space is

“hybridity”. Hybridity according to Ziauddin Sardar not only displaces the history that creates it, but sets up new structures of authority and generates new political initiatives (Sardar 2010: 120). Hybridity, in a way, becomes a site of resistance, a “strategic reversal of the process of domination” that turns “the gaze of discriminated back upon the eye of the power” (*ibid.*). Thus, struggle for Dalit or hijra identity becomes a practical intervention in political practice and an attempt to enable change in society. The liberation struggle for Dalits and hijras emerges out of deep sense of alienation and powerlessness felt by them throughout history.

The Subaltern Studies in nutshell offers studies of societies, histories, and cultures ‘from below’. “Subaltern Studies groups”, in the words of Leela Gandhi, “sketched out its wide ranging concern both with the visible ‘history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity’ and with the occluded ‘attitudes, ideologies and belief systems- in short, the cultural informing that condition” (Gandhi 2000: 1). In her 1985 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak challenges the Western academy for their race and class blindness.

The discussion of culture and cultural studies also involves how power operates within a culture. Antonio Gramsci’s term ‘hegemony’ provides a critical understanding of history and the structure of any given society. Hegemony is what binds society together without the use of force. This is achieved when the upper classes supplement their economic power by creating “intellectual and moral leadership” (Sardar 2010: 49). The brahmanical philosophy and the world view created through a number of religious texts and discourses create what Gramsci calls “intellectual and moral leadership” for the subaltern Dalits.

The subaltern subject in the modern, postmodern and postcolonial locations emerges in opposition to the power. It speaks truth to power. In its quest for social justice, the subaltern subject seeks solidarity with different subaltern groups and peoples. For example, despite the significant differences between the causes of oppression, many Dalit writers have

linked the Dalit experience with the African-American one. Gangadhar Pantawane links these two experiences in a unique way:

“There is no difference between the *place* of the Negro in America and the step or the level of the Untouchable in India...Both were confined in the prison of fatalism. To prolong this imprisonment, the whites found authority in the Bible’s myths and symbols, and the clean castes in the Vedas and Manusmriti”(Zelliot 2001: 281).

In recent years the idea and movement of Dalit feminism has emerged as a very powerful resistance movement in the field of Indian feminism. The relationship between Dalit feminism and culture can only be thought of in terms of protests and struggles. It represents resistance politics of its own kind. Regarding resistance literature Barbara Harlow suggests:

“Resistance literature calls attention to itself, and to literature in general as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production”(Harlow 1987: 28-29).

Thus, the site of subalternity automatically becomes a site resistance and protest for its political activity and alliances among different subaltern groups across the world.

The Subaltern Studies offer an opportunity of re-reading of past with critiquing of it-an idea which is important in the field of Dalit and hijra studies. Within the framework of Subaltern Studies, the idea of nation and subaltern subjectivity gets reconfigured, reimagined, re-theorized and re-historicized. All epistemologies within which identities are constructed and shaped come under scrutiny within Subaltern Studies. Subaltern discourse also takes the shape of cultural discourse and includes the issues of gender and caste to broaden its scope.

The most important contribution of the Subaltern Studies is that it offers subversive cultural politics and exposes forms of power/knowledge that oppress the subaltern people- Dalit women and hijra in our case- and narrates their struggle to overcome historical subalternity. In doing so liberating alternatives are opened up and better future for the subaltern lot can be envisaged.

The Subaltern Studies offers a critique of both nationalist and Marxist understanding of modernity and progress and the place of the subaltern within these ideologies. The omission of caste, religion and other subaltern positions within these discourses make them incomplete from subaltern point of view. Regarding the nationalist-Marxist historiography and the Subaltern approach Vinay Bhal in his essay “Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies in Reading Subaltern Studies” has observed:

“Members of Subaltern Studies group felt that although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable. Their main thesis is that colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian History had robbed the common people of their agency. The Subaltern Studies collective thus announced a ‘new approach’ to restore history to the subordinated in order to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much academic work in south Asian Studies. ...Thus, with the logic of this theory the subaltern were made into autonomous historical actors who then seemingly acted on their own since they were not to be led by the elites” (Bhal 2016: 361).

Cosimo Zene in his excellent study on Gramsci and Ambedkar observes the political and practical commitments of Gramsci and Ambedkar in favour of subalterns and Dalits. The major observations of Zene in this regard are important to note:

- the historical and political dimensions of subalternity were significant to both Gramsci and Ambedkar;
 - they both sought a holistic response to subalternity and Untouchability, involving a combination of theoretical reflection and practical, political commitment;
 - the solution of the crisis experienced within the formulation of ‘international concepts’- equality, citizenship, legitimacy, democracy, the law, etc.- cannot be reached, according to them , without taking into account the presence of subalterns/Dalits at the centre of this crisis, since their exclusion reveals the essential character of the crisis itself;
 - for both Ambedkar and Gramsci, religion is a crucial dimension of politics, and a decisive factor for the self-emancipation of the subalterns.
- (Zene2013:xvi-xvii).

Thus, autobiographical narratives of Dalit women and hijras should be read along the line of new subaltern understanding of history which tries to incorporate the subaltern voices to provide them historical agency.

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Chapter Two

The Genre of Autobiography: A Formal/ Cultural Quest

The genre of autobiography, in our time, has moved away from the idea of self-image that the autobiographers convey in their narratives, but, it asserts the powerful insight into the political scene they display from a subaltern point of view. The personal stories of the subalterns like Dalit women and hijras bring to the surface very fundamental questions about their lives, their location in the hegemonic structures of Brahmanic patriarchy and heteronormativity. The conventional genre of autobiography gets metamorphosed into the genre of subaltern autobiographical narrative with the arrival of Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives. As Roger Rosenblatt puts it, “One writes autobiography not because one seeks out art or safety but out of a desire to seek both a shape and end to one’s life, to seek the end of everything which has been in flux and process, and at the same time to understand it all” (Rosenblatt 1976: 525). The emerging genre of subaltern autobiography blends the private with the public, the personal with the socio-economic, and the political. This chapter tries to assess the genre of autobiography, and the arrival of subaltern autobiographical genres of Dalit women and hijras (the transgenders) in the contexts of Dalit feminism and the emerging transgenderism in India.

2.1 The Genre of Autobiography

If we closely look around and carefully probe into different activities done through the medium of language, we can notice that autobiography— one’s own story, the narrative about self—exists everywhere. To tell something about one’s self, express innermost avenues of self, sometimes in brief or sometimes in details, is the psycho-cultural behaviour of human beings, and a necessity, too. This story about self has been told -- sometimes quite openly and

boldly or sometimes with little fear and apprehension, sometimes sitting in the living-room of the home or sometimes hiding oneself in some corner of the kitchen, sometimes with cultural support or sometimes against all oppositions within a family or society, sometimes with some romantic notions or sometimes with complete socio-political need and responsibility, sometimes with complete understanding and awareness of self or sometimes without any cognizance of the writing process of the self, sometimes in written form or sometimes using orality as a tool— in different parts of the world.

In fact, all literary forms—poetry, novel, short story, drama etc.—can reveal the self of a person, but in all literary forms of the world, autobiography attains a very distinct place for its amazing capacity to present the self of a person. Though overtly looking a very simple literary form, autobiography is one of the most intriguing and complex forms of literature. There were a few literary forms—epic, tragedy etc. – in past which had not been explored in all the languages of the world. But the genre of autobiography, as it is naturally connected with the self of a person has been explored and has become popular in almost all languages of the world and has become a part of different literary traditions. Autobiographical narratives can be found everywhere—from the oral literary tradition of some exotic African tribal groups to the well- developed written literary traditions of some ‘developing’ eastern nations or ‘developed’ Western nations.

The birth of a particular literary genre is essentially yoked with economic, social, and political conditions of a particular era. It imbibes socio-economic structures preset in a particular culture; and philosophical beliefs about the world and human body and human relations. A literary genre has its own episteme or epistemology. The presence of a particular literary form in a particular literary tradition at a specific point of time, and the absence of it in another literary tradition is not due to geographical or cartographical difference, but it is a

result of historical and political complexities that give birth to a particular literary form. As G. N. Devy puts it, "The term 'literature' combines two meanings...a) that which exists in language, and b0 that which exists in a community or a culture. It is a language-text as well as a culture-text" (Devy 1995: 36). Since literature is a culture text, there emerges an umbilical relationship between a text and its context. In this context, we can examine an epic or a tragedy as a literary form emerging within the feudalistic, monarchic, and the elitist social structure, and the emergence of the literary form of novel in the context of industrialization, urbanization and the rise of the middle class sensibility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europe. The emergence and evolution of autobiography as a literary genre in the Western countries and its late arrival to a country like India is related to different notions of self, and time that both the West and the East inherit in their different cultural traditions. As against the linear notion of time, we in India possess the circular notion of time, hence, the genres like autobiography, tragedy, and history did not flourish in ancient Indian literature.

The simplest definition of 'autobiography' can be: "a narrative about one's own life". According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, an autobiography is 'the story of a person's life, written by that person' (Hornby: 2005: 88). Autobiography is a story about one's own self, a narrative about one's own life - its joys and sorrows, its trials and tribulations. It is a story of familial, social, economic and political relations. As noted earlier, overtly looking a very simple narrative, autobiography poses very serious fundamental epistemological and ontological questions about self, narration of self, and the aesthetics of self-narrative. As it is a narrative concerned with the narrator's past life, to present one's life story with complete objectivity and detachment, without any personal attachment, is a difficult act, not only from social or political point of view, but from the aesthetic level also.. In recent years the interweaving of the genre of autobiography (that includes all types of life

narratives like Memoirs, Reminiscences, Diary, Letters, and Journal etc.) with feminism and many postmodern, poststructural theories has opened up new horizons of references, issues related to self and identity, representation, authorship etc. with umpteen theoretical possibilities. In the postmodern criticism the presentation of reality through the medium of writing is itself critiqued and problematized, hence the presentation of self and life through the medium of writing in autobiographical texts also enter into the realm of many aesthetic and epistemological complexities. Yet, when we map out the history of autobiographical practices, we realize that the genre of autobiography has existed for centuries, but it has become canonized only in the eighteenth century and only during the twentieth century, and especially, during the postmodern age, it has attained popularity among common readers, critics of literature and the subaltern groups like Dalit women, and hijras.

The English word ‘autobiography’ is derived from the fusion of three Greek words: ‘Autos’, ‘Bios’, and ‘Graphian’. The word ‘autos’ is associated with ‘self’; ‘Bios’ refers to ‘life’ and ‘graphy’ involves ‘the act of writing’. The term ‘autobiography’ was first used by the famous English poet Robert Southe in *Quarterly Review* i, 283, in 1809. Southe used this term for the literature of Portuguese poet Francisco Vieira. Southe writes:

“It is singular...that this very amusing and unique specimen of autobiography should have been entirely overlooked” (Good 1981: 125).

Before this in the issue of *Monthly Review* (December, 1797) William Taylor raised a question whether the term ‘autobiography’ could be used in place of D’Israeli’s term ‘self-biography’ for latter’s *Miscellanies*. Even before this Fuller used the term ‘Biographia’ for ‘autobiography’, and Dryden used the term ‘Biography’ in 1683. It is in W. P. Scargill’s *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister* (1834) the term ‘autobiography’ was used for the first time.

Before the term ‘autobiography’ got standardized and became an accepted term during the eighteenth century, the term ‘memoir’ was used for autobiographical writings. Though both these terms are identical in nature, some critics have shown the minute difference between these two. John Foster in his book *Essays in a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1805) writes an article titled ‘On a Man’s Writing Memoir of Himself’. Foster here not using the term ‘autobiography’ refers to Rousseau’s Confessions and celebrates the capacity of the genre of autobiography for its tremendous capacity to fathom the innermost self of the subject. He prioritizes the quest for self over the depiction of the outer world. The roots of the Western autobiography lie first in Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (c. AD 398-400) and later in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1770) and Edward Gibbon’s *Memoirs of My Life and Writings* (1796).

‘Autobiography’ as a literary term, since the time of its origin, has been defined variously in different ages. Today there exists humanistic, romantic, modern and postmodern definitions of ‘autobiography’. Yet, James Olney writes: ‘Definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible’ (1972:38). Attempts have been made by critics to define the term. Let’s examine and assess a few definitions of ‘autobiography’ to develop some broader understanding of the term in relation to our time. Jean Starobinsky believes:

“Autobiography is certainly not a genre with rigorous rules. It only requires that certain possible conditions be realized, conditions which are mainly ideological (or cultural); that the personal experience be important, that it offers an opportunity for a sincere relations with someone else. These presuppositions establish the legitimacy of “I” and authorize the subject of the discourse to take the past existence as theme” (1997:201).

For Starobinsky certain ideological, political, cultural conditions are essential for writing autobiography along with ‘personal experience’ that remains at the centre. The dual presence of these two gives legitimacy and authorization to the subject. Since autobiography as a literary genre developed within the patriarchal social structure of the West, many definitions carry the notion of patriarchal subjectivity. The postmodern, poststructural critique of these definitions help us to understand them both in historical and contemporary contexts.

According to The Oxford English Dictionary autobiography is “the writing of one’s own history. The story of one’s life written by himself” (). This definition of autobiography correlates life writing with history writing. The traditional notion of history presents history as a narrative with objective truth. The postmodern understanding of history problematizes this understanding of history and treats it not as reservoir of objective truth but as ‘text’. History being a discourse written under the influence of and representing varied power structures existing in society presents one-dimension of truth. The absence of the marginalized groups including Dalits, hijras, women, and other transgenders in history questions the advocacy of objectivity of history. The use of reflexive pronoun ‘himself’ in definition also creates an illusion that the genre of autobiography is explored by male writers.

According to Collier’s Encyclopedia, “Autobiography, a form of biography in which the subject is also the author; it is generally written in the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author” (Halsey 1983: 319). This definition takes into consideration the formal aspect of autobiography. Autobiography is such a distinct genre in which the writer himself/herself becomes the subject and object of narrative. The idea that autobiography ‘covers most or an important phase of the author’ foregrounds a very important aspect of ‘memory’ in autobiography. The definition takes it as a condition that

autobiography is ‘generally written in the first person’, but the poststructuralist writer Roland Barthes’ autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) deconstructs the traditional view of the use of first person narrative in autobiography and is written with the use of third person and second person narrative point of view. Virama, Josiane Racine, and Jean-Luc Racine’s *Viramma* (2005) (which is a part of the thesis) challenges the conventional understanding of the genre of autobiography as a “written” narrative by the writer himself/herself. Viramma’s account of her own is not “auto”, and the writing of her narrative is not even her own “graphy” as it involves life-history collectors to tell her story.

Cassell’s Encyclopedia of Literature defines autobiography in the following way:

“Autobiography is the narration of a man’s life by himself. It should contain a greater guarantee of truth than any other form of biography, since the central figure of the book appears also as a witness of the events which he records”
(62).

This encyclopedia, like *The Oxford English Dictionary* treats the narrative of an autobiography as written by male writer about his life. Such patriarchal notion of self is greatly challenged within feminist discourse as it understands the entire system of language logocentric as well as phallogocentric. Here, It is to be noted that the early critics of autobiography reads autobiography as narrative written by only male. For the reason that autobiography is written by a person who has lived life experiences, the definition given by *Cassell’s Encyclopedia* treats autobiography as more truth-oriented than other literary forms. This understanding of truth and the genre of autobiography is problematized in the postmodern era. Truth, in postmodern theory, loses its ‘objective’ nature and becomes ‘subjective’. Losing its monolithic structure, it becomes multifaceted, multidimensional. To extract socio-politico-cultural truth from one context and to establish it into other socio-

politico-cultural sphere as it is almost impossible. Despite all our trust on and faith in writer's honesty, we should not forget the fact that in autobiography a narrative in which a writer himself/herself becomes a character and a subject, and turns into a subject. Hence, the idea that autobiography attains the ideal of the highest truth is nothing but an illusion.

Josheph T. Shipley in *Dictionary of World Literature* says:

"The autobiography proper is a connected narrative of the author's life with stress laid on introspection, or on the significance of his life against a wider background" (Shipley 2013: 60-61).

For Shipley, autobiography is a 'connected narrative' in which events have chain like association with each other. He sees some teleological development in the narrative of autobiography; the important function of which is to have self-insight and the presentation of fulfilled life. The postmodern, feminist theories of autobiography read autobiography not as a complete, teleological narrative, but as a fractured narrative. In the conventional autobiographies the subjectivity of male writers achieves coherence in narrative. The emerging self in such autobiographies is unified self which is more important in patriarchal discourse of autobiography. Shipley's definition does not help in building up fractured, incoherent, marginalized self of women.

Roy Pascal, the early theorist of autobiography, defines autobiography thus:

"It involves the reconstruction of the movement of life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. The outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape" (1960:9).

According to Pascal the centre of autobiography is self, though outer world is essentially important. In autobiographical narrative life is constructed with the use of memory

not in its full form, but in pieces. Thus, Pascal's definition helps us to develop psychological insight into the genre of autobiography.

D. G. Naik, a well-known Indian critic of autobiography, valorizes the form of autobiography in his definition:

“Human life has to pass through certain inevitable stages—birth, childhood, youth and old age itself has a kind of form or order. The details of any given life, therefore, when accommodated in a story or narrative inevitably take a shape or form, which, in literary terminology, is called the form of autobiography” (Naik 1962: 44).

D. G. Naik views a particular form and organized structure in autobiography. This organized structure is associated with the chronological development of life—birth, childhood, youth, old age etc.. The definition emphasize linearity of life and associates it with the formal structure of autobiography. This particular definition avoids taking into consideration the involvement of memory in autobiography. Henry Bergson puts emphasize on memory in structuring human consciousness. For him memory is consciousness, and self. Memory can never be linear, but it moves between past and present (Bergson 2005:28). Since autobiography largely relies upon memory, the autobiographical narrative can never be linear and can never have a definite form or structure. The whole idea of linear autobiographical narrative with definite form and structure has been categorically contested by many postmodern, subaltern Dalit-hijra autobiographers and critics of autobiography for its patriarchal construction of ‘self’. They subvert the patriarchal construction of ‘self’ by making the narrative circular with the use of multiple point of views and narrative techniques.

M. H. Abrams in his definition of autobiography purposefully refers to both male and female autobiographers and rejects gender bias:

“Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself”
(1993:22).

Autobiography as a literary genre has remained the most fluid, non-static and the most malleable one. As it captures and encapsulates the complexities of life in it, it is equally difficult to arrive at one universalistic, essentialist definition of the genre of autobiography. Georg Misch grapples with the definition of the genre of autobiography in his *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity*:

“Autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition. Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form than those of lyric and epic poetry or of drama” (Misch 2002: 4).

During the contemporary time the definition given by Philippe Lejeune covers many important aspects of autobiography. Lejeune in his article ‘The Autobiographical Pact’ defines the genre of autobiography thus:

“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” (2004:2).

Lejeune in his definition puts stress on the development of the self of the subject. The self of the autobiographer is not firmly located in some spatiotemporal limit. It is a developing self, not the developed self. Its identity does not remain stagnant but remains fluid under the influence of socio-cultural and political streams. The job of an autobiographer is to narrate this fluidity of self that he/she encounters while writing an autobiography. This definition covers the discussion of four main aspects of autobiography: 1. Form of language (narrative, prose) 2. Subject (individual life, story of a personality) 3. Situation of the author

(both author and narrator are identical) 4, Position of the narrator (the narrator and the principle character are identical, retrospective point of view of the narrative)

'Self' in Autobiographical Narrative:

Since the seventies of the last century, greater stress has been put on theorizing different literary genres with the help of postmodern theorization. Autobiography as a literary genre, during the postmodern era, has been greatly theorized by feminists, cultural theorists, postcolonial thinkers and Dalit writers and theorists in the case of India. The formalist, structuralist, new critical understanding of the self in the first half of the twentieth century totally negated the presence of the self of the author in the narrative. In other words, the analysis of the presence of the authorial self was not considered to be important in developing holistic understanding of the text. Within the critical corpus of New Criticism, the genre of autobiography became the most neglected literary genre. It connived at the idea of 'context', 'history' and 'self' in pursuit of a 'structural unity' of a text. The text was to be considered a 'verbal icon' hence, 'words on the page' were considered to be more important than any other references emerging out of the relationship between the text and the author. The structuralist understanding of the modern era understood literature as 'autotelic', 'acontextual' and 'impersonal'. The modern understanding of literary aesthetics considered the Eliotic idea of 'dissociation of sensibility' as more valuable than the idea of 'association of sensibility' in a text. T. S. Eliot in his much celebrated essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917) negates the expression of self on the part of the author in literature in the avowal of depersonalization.

After Eliot, it is Rolland Barthes and Jacques Derrida who have accepted the 'textual non-subjective I' as a creator of the discourse. Barthes in his much acclaimed essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968) declares the death of the author in Nietzschean manner. The

interesting thing is to see that between all these extremes, the author and its self is reborn in the age of Barthes and Derrida. The ‘death of the author’ in the poststructuralism and the ‘birth of the author’ in the feminist discourse of the same poststructuralism clearly shows the fact that postmodernism/poststructuralism deconstructs itself.

The genre of autobiography is essentially ‘I-centered’ narrative. The most important distinguishing quality of the genre is that it dissolves in itself the author, the narrator and the protagonist of the narration. The self of the narrator is not narrated, but is created and recreated constantly in autobiography. Examining the word ‘autobiography’, we can state that, here, ‘bios’ (life) is created by ‘autos’ (I) through the medium of ‘graphe’ (writing). Thus, ‘textual self’ is created by the author-narrator relationship in autobiography. The ‘I’ of the present time is in search of the ‘I’ of the past, and in this constant dualism life gets created in narrative.

The autobiographer constantly recreates in present the life lived in the past. The entire life-content is restructured in the context of the present, in relation with the present. The autobiographical self transcends the barriers of the past and thus, does not remain the past-self, and becomes the present-self. There is a ‘selective reconstruction’ along with the ‘retrospective interpretation’ of the past. In autobiographical narrative the ‘original self’ now appears as an ‘artefact’. Wayne C. Booth (1921-2005) in his much celebrated book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) uses the term ‘implied author’ for the self being created in the text, while Kathleen Tilitson uses the term ‘author’s second self’ in her *The Tale and the Teller* (1980: 28).

The autobiographer creates a new understanding of self in autobiographical text. As seen earlier the autobiographer constantly faces the clash between two selves- the past-self and the present-self. The autobiographer is supposed to narrate the all extending

consciousness from the past to the present. The depicted self in autobiographical narrative is heraclitean in nature. The emerging self in narrative is not a unified self, but a constantly emerging one out of constant tension between the past and the present.

The narrator of the autobiography does not merely depict what s/he was in past, but what s/he has become in present out of what s/he was in the past. Hence, there is no stagnation in autobiographical narrative, but constant flux. The autobiographical self is not the fixed self in past, but a historicized self, hence, it is historical in essence. It is not fixed in time, but perpetually extending self from the past to the present.

Autobiography is a narrative realized through the medium of language where language is metaphorical in essence. Hence, the depiction of the journey of the self from the past to the present leads to reevaluation and reassessment of self. For this reason the autobiography does not contrive to be an objective presentation of the past life, but an aesthetic presentation of self. Every autobiographer can ask oneself, "How do I become what I am?" The autobiographical narrative releases the self of the narrator from the bondage of the past. The autobiographer thus develops an unfinished dialogue with one's own self.

Autobiography is a narrative about self, a quest for self; but it is not a narcissistic one. The autobiographer is not expected to fall in love with her/his own image, but to tie up a relationship with all other segments of the society through autobiographical pact. The autobiographical narrator has to examine her/his own image by constantly interacting with others through the process of dialogue. Though autobiography as a narrative emerges as a self-conceited narrative, but it is not so. The emerging self in an autobiographical narrative, though it may look personal and individual, is a collective self - as emerging out of society. The autobiographical self emerging in Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives is

closely linked with the collective self of the community. Thus autobiography becomes not an examination of individual self, but the self that emerges out as social self.

Self in autobiography is constantly created and recreated under the influence of different socio-cultural structuration. During the postmodern time the self is created with different ideologies of colonialism, postcolonialism, capitalism, casteism, transgenderism, and varied economic ideologies. The self in present time gets developed with a great number of discourses and circumstances. The self ultimately becomes a construct, not isolated or monolithic but multiple, self-effacing, and creating itself out of multiple interactive discourses available in society. To sum up, one can say that the self of an autobiographer can be gauged with the clear understanding that it is constantly in flux.

Truth, Imagination and Memory in Autobiography:

The idea of truth is inevitably associated with the genre of autobiography. It projects some completeness of self or a glimpse of some aspects of life or presents the spiritual part of self in the deterministic way. Though the genre of autobiography is expected to deal with the idea of truth in some or other way, the very signifier ‘truth’ has now become nondeterministically fluid. The conventional understanding of ‘truth’- as historical, essentialist, teleological etc. – has been contested during the postmodern era. “Is the truth of autobiography ‘historical’, ‘literary’ or ‘fictional’ or coopting both of them?” Autobiography as a literary genre absorbs the desired ‘objectivity’ of history and the narrative technique required in a literary text. As autobiography is explored through the medium of language, it obviously integrates the metaphorical structuration of language. Here, it is to be understood that truth emerging in the autobiographical narrative is the truth exhibiting the self of the narrator-protagonist at the time of writing the text. It is the one derived out of one’s own self-

realization at the time of writing his/her self. It may be different from the truth of the life lived earlier.

Like fiction, the prerogative of selection and rejection of material is also a part of autobiography. The idea of choice and memory plays a very important role in autobiography. An autobiographer may narrate differently or may not narrate the events of life as they took place. Thus, truth in autobiography is, in fact, what the autobiography has narrated in the text. It cannot be the complete truth. This leads to the conclusion that every autobiography is an incomplete autobiography. Regarding this particular nature of autobiography, Georges Gusdorf, too, opines: "To create and in creating to be created ought to be the motto of autobiography" (Gusdorf 2016: 28).

As a reader we are supposed to analyze not the entire life of the autobiographer but the life that emerges on the pages of the autobiographical text. Every autobiographical act leads to the infinite possibility of rewriting of self. In the postmodern sense, it is an *écriture*- a system of difference and absence in Derridean understanding- without any teleological beginning, middle or end. In autobiography events from complex life situations are picked up and put floating within the narrative. An attempt is made to liquidify the complexities of life, hence simplification may enter into narrative. As seen earlier the self of an autobiographer is divided into different forms and pieces, it is decentered. When an autobiographer focuses on only one aspect of life in narrative, it is because of the singular reading of life events. Every reading of self remains an unfinished reading.

The narration of truth, as it is expected in history, is also expected from the genre of autobiography; though, now, the postmodern understanding of history radically problematizes the idea of 'truth' in history. The relationship between autobiography and history has been dealt with in detail later in the same chapter. In autobiography the important

thing is to see whether the flat truth of life leads to some complex truth of life in narrative. Mere inclusion of narration of flat events from past life cannot attain the goal of aesthetic narration of one's own life. Every literary text has to achieve the goal of aesthetic balance along with the truth of life in narrative. There may be three basic truths in autobiography—the truth of events (historical truth), truth of life (philosophical truth), and the truth of form (aesthetic truth). The historical truth includes the honest description of events happened in one's life; the philosophical truth incorporates the idea of how the historical truth shapes the life on broader plane and the achieved self-realization in life; the aesthetic truth is associated with autobiographer's selection of truths from the whole gamut of life and their proper employment in narrative (it may not be chronological or teleological).

Truth in autobiography emerges in a quite complex way. The mere depiction of events in the objective manner in the autobiographical narrative is insufficient. The temptation of 'telling the truth and nothing else' on the part of the autobiographer may present the objective account of the past life, but it cannot help the aesthetics of the autobiography. The big question that emerges before the autobiographer is whether the emerging personal truth goes against the collective interest of the society or not. This tension between the personal truth and the collective interest shapes the autobiographical subject in narrative. The autobiographer in his/her narrative himself/herself becomes his/her own judge, witness, culprit and accuser.

The autobiographical truth is not an arid truth, but an emotive truth. It is would be philosophical and controversial truth also. Hence, the truth emerging in autobiography should not be informative only, but aesthetic also. Whenever we deal with 'imagination' in autobiography, it is normally believed that the genre of autobiography never exhibits total truth of/about the subject, but it is to be understood that the chunk of imagination always lies

subconsciously in the mind of the subject. Sometimes a reader may have a feeling of fabricated episodes or events in the autobiographical narrative, but that too are a part of the episodes or events once happened in the life of the narrator, as they represent the complexities of human psyche. Hence, whenever such sparse examples of fabrication are found in narrative, they should be accepted as a part of the inner truth of the psyche. Fancy and imagination are not lies but the psychological truths of life.

Writers of autobiography are translators of the human experience, responsible for reconstructing a life and deciphering it for us. This reconstructing and deciphering may take place at both conscious and unconscious levels. The autobiographical self is not the conscious self only, but the unconscious one also. In autobiographical narrative such unconscious self opens up through the medium of writing. Virginia Woolf in her famous essay, “The Art of Biography” wrote that “almost any [auto] biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection...He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders” (Woolf: 7; 2016).

Like the question of truth in autobiography, the question of the use of imagination in autobiographical narrative is also a pertinent one to answer. The notable orientalist William Jones in his “Discourse XI” on ‘On the Philosophy of the Asiatics’ (Jones 1824: 36) refers to three characteristics of the human mind- memory, imagination and reason- and their employment in different human discourses. With memory the discourse of history is created; with reason sciences, and with imagination literature. Memory has a role in literature, and imagination in history, but with the employment of memory only no historical discourse can ever be written. The logical distribution of memory is required there. Similarly in autobiographical narrative both memory and imagination are coopted. Hence, no autobiography can be written with the use of memory only. The logical distribution of facts

from the lane of memory is a part of autobiography. The autobiographer through logical distribution of memory achieves some sort of coherence in narrative. Georges Gudorf in this regard remarks:

“...the original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization. The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator’s consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has directed his life” (Gusdorf 2016: 26).

Memory is not stable in nature, but a fluid one, a process, an ever changing one. It may be accessed in different ways at different times. “With what touchstone can ‘truth’ in autobiography be assessed?” “Is the narrated truth in autobiography a historical one or a literary one?” Autobiography as a genre absorbs in it both historical truth and fictional truth. It admits the art of ‘objective’ narration of past and the art of narrating it aesthetically in words. As autobiography is explored in language, it also explores the potential of the metaphorical structure of language. Like fiction, it both accepts and rejects the available past. The life of an autobiographer may extend into a series of incidents and events in a person’s life span, but the narrative of an autobiography does not include all the events that have taken place in the narrator’s life, but largely depend on choice based on memory. The self of the autobiographer is transported from wider life situations of the past to the play of restricted signifiers in the present.

Truth in autobiography is a disputed term. It is not something that has really happened, but something that has been narrated in the narrative with a focus on a particular dimension. As a narrative it may not tell the historical truth, but aims at it in philosophical terms. Not the entire life of the autobiographer, but the selected life of the autobiographer in the narrative becomes a text to be analyzed for the reader.

Every autobiography, as the title of Indira Goswami's autobiography, *An Unfinished Autobiography* suggests, is an unfinished, incomplete narrative. It is a narrative with no teleology. In autobiography events from the life of the autobiographer are extracted from the complex configurations of proceedings and are put into limited narrative framework. As complex life events are offered for communication and analysis, there are chances of simplification in narrative. As seen earlier, the self of an individual in autobiographical narrative is divided into different forms, and pieces and decentered. As the autobiographer chooses from the whole gamut of the past life events, there do remain chances of simplification in selection of events. Hence, every autobiography offers unlimited possibility of reading of self, and no autobiography can become the ultimate reading of self.

What we call ‘memory’ is not a stable, unified unit, but a constantly emerging, shaping and being shaped element at mental level. It is a process, an every changing element. It is not that memory is located in a stable form somewhere and which can be accessed to when need arises. Whenever the past is remembered, memory appears before us in different configurations in all its complexities. Past never remains a monolith, but takes the form of new impressions every time it is accessed to. Hence, every act of transcribing the past into present time narrative does not remain an act of mimesis only, but a creative reconstruction of past in present. Sometimes some individual experiences are forgotten, new complexities arise, and other people’s experiences become the experiences of the narrator in the narration. The autobiographical narrative enters into three different “times”: the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual’s historical context. Since autobiography is a memory laden narrative, imaginings enter into narrative knowingly or unknowingly.

In this context Henri Bergson's understanding of past and memory is worth to be noticed. Bergson notes: If matter does not remember the past, it is because it repeats the past unceasingly, because, subject to necessity, it unfolds a series of moments of which each is the equivalent of the preceding moment and may be deduced from it: thus its past is truly given in its present (2005 : 222-23). For Bergson memory is the most compelling factor in the construction of consciousness. For him memory itself is consciousness. By rejecting teleological notion of memory, he erases any demarcation line between past and present. Autobiography being dependent on memory thwarts any expectations of 'objective truth' in the narration.

Thus autobiographical narrative is a complex activity. As a genre it constantly deconstructs itself. It constantly accepts and rejects the notion of historical and objective truth. Autobiography as a genre disrupts and deconstructs all our notions about its form and subject matter.

Autobiography and History

The relationship of the genre of autobiography with history is full of complexities. Though autobiography has umbilical relationship with history, the genres of history and autobiography are not two sides of the same coin. History being a narrative of the past is basically concerned with (1) events happened in the past and (2) the documentation of the events as they took place. History in its conventional sense is concerned with the 'truth of context'. Since the genre of autobiography demands artistic narration of past, it is also concerned with the 'truth of coherence' in addition to the 'truth of context'. Georges Gusdorf in this regard notes:

"An autobiography cannot be a pure and simple record of existence, an account book or a log book: on such and such a day at such and such an hour,

I went to such and such a place...A record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be no more than a caricature of life; in such a case, rigorous precision would add up to the same thing as the subtlest deception” (Gusdorf 2016: 27).

Though fictionality enters into the narration of both autobiography and history surreptitiously, both the narratives use a lot of documented material. Viramma et al.’s *Viramma* uses a lot of documented material for narration. Despite the fact that documented past is the raw material for both history and autobiography, they differ from each other in narrating the documented past; history being chronological in narration and autobiography rejecting any conventional understanding of chronology in narration. The conventional idea of chronology in autobiographical narrative is thwarted because autobiography profusely uses memory in addition to the documented past. Chronological narration of past events was once hailed as a virtue in conventional Western patriarchal model of autobiography, but the arrival of autobiographical narratives from the subaltern groups including Dalits, hijras, women and others has helped to deconstruct any idea of linearity or chronology in narrative. Besides this, autobiography differs from history in terms of the use of point of view in narration. History being written about others uses third person point of view, while autobiography being subjective in nature, with a few experiments here and there, largely uses first person point of view in narration.

A Postmodern Perspective

The basic aim of the thesis is to understand Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives as subaltern narratives. The postmodern understanding of autobiographical

narrative weaves different ramifications of employment of language in narrative, the construction of meaning, reality, knowledge, history and cultural contexts. A brief theoretical insight into the writings of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and others will, here, help us to understand the idea of self/subjectivity and autobiography.

The postmodern understanding of language and literature deconstructs any monolithic structuration of self and subjectivity. It negates the idea of ‘metanarrative’ and gives space to ‘fragmented poetics’ which includes ‘little or mini narratives’. The postmodern/poststructural understanding of self contests the conventional understanding of ‘unified self’ and makes into play the understanding of ‘multiple selves’ or ‘fragmented self’. The postmodern critics have treated ‘tradition’ as being shaped within political/patriarchal/casteist/heteronormative cultural matrix. The subaltern Dalit and hijra criticism deconstructs the patriarchal, colonial, Brahmanic, heteronormative tradition of culture and assesses the absence of Dalit men and women, hijras, and other subaltern communities and their narrative voices in it. The rereading and deconstruction of the conventional self is prioritized in such subaltern narratives. Such rereading of the dominant canon can only help us to squeeze in the subaltern voices.

The understanding of self in autobiography correlates with the new emerging knowledge about individual and society in the fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy and other branches of knowledge. Sigmund Freud in his studies of human psyche has already negated any fixed concept of the present and the past. His idea of the Unconscious, though formed in/with past experiences, always affects the present.

A new insight into the relationship between the autobiographical narrative and the protagonist of the narrative gets developed within Freudian understanding of autobiography. Memory, here, does not remain merely a physical or bodily process, but interweaves many

psycho-biological aspects of personality. Remembering past is not as simple as carving out a part from the lump of past experiences and using it as it is in present time. One can associate remembering the past with what Freud calls ‘dream-work’. Freud explains:

“It consists of a peculiar way of treating the preconscious material of thought, so that its component parts become *condensed*, its mental emphasis becomes *displaced*, and the whole of it is translated into visual images of *dramatized*...” (Freud 1989: 50).

The narration being a part of this entire process necessarily drops into literary-fictional world. Freud sees his patients’ case histories as ‘literary’ and reads them as short stories.

Following Freud, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan extends Freudian understanding of the Unconscious Mind. For Lacan the Unconscious cannot be bound within the limits of time. It sprouts out during the moment of intuition. It is always slippery in nature. For Lacan, “...the unconscious is structured like a language...the unconscious is structured by a language” (Lacan 1999: 48). He reads the Unconscious as ‘a play of signifiers’. Since the Unconscious is constructed like/in language, it reveals itself in a metaphorical way. Thus the process of bringing out the past with the help of memory takes place not in the literal way, but in a metaphorical (literary) way.

Lacan outlines three stages of the development of the subject: imaginary, symbolic and real. The first stage is the stage of the ‘imaginary’ where the child has not yet entered the realm of language and its relationship with the world is governed by fantasy and self-love. The entry of the child into the realm of language is its entry into the ‘symbolic’ stage where a child comes under the ‘law of the Father’ - the realm where the Unconscious is constructed. For feminists, a child having grasped the patriarchal symbols present in the patriarchal

linguistic structure treats the entire system as ‘natural’ and ‘universal’. The third stage is the stage of the ‘real’ that describes the realm beyond language and offers the possibility of something which is not possible within the first two realms. The subaltern Dalit women and hijra autobiographers in their narratives subverts the realms of ‘the imaginary’ and ‘the symbolic’ as they carry the traces of hegemonic casteism and patriarchal heteronormativity, and aims at achieving the realm of ‘the real’ that is the real subaltern and beyond the hegemonic language structuration.

Autobiography, within the conventional criticism, is understood with an analogy of mirror. It is understood as a mirror to the autobiographer’s personality. Lacan in ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the ‘I’ as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ (1949) explains his idea of the ‘mirror stage’ and says that a child looks at his/her image in the mirror and determines his/her identity. The image seen in the mirror is visualized as the ‘other’. Thus the ‘mirror’ is nothing but the ‘other’ which represents ideology. Identity in a child is constructed in relation to the other, with other’s permission and in reciprocation. Thus our subjectivity is constructed in relation to and with interaction with the ‘others’. The ‘other’ is both visible (our parents and other people) and invisible (social order, ideology etc.). The meaning of ‘relational identity’ is that it is the socio-politico-cultural order that shapes and constructs a person as an individual. Since the order is spatiotemporal in nature, the identity of an individual cannot remain stable, but fluid. Within postmodern-post-structural understanding of language ‘...identity can be said to be a linguistic construct: we are constructed in language (Bertens 2003: 162). According to the Lacanian understanding of Mirror Stage, the autobiographer in the autobiographical narration realizes the reflected image in the mirror. Thus, the very genre of autobiography thwarts the search for ‘original self’, but we can see that the subaltern autobiographies challenge the whole idea of realizing

the image in the mirror, and aim at deconstructing “the mirror image” by searching out an alternative mirror image of the self through the process of resistance and rebuttal.

Roland Barthes in his autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1979) interrogates himself as a text and presents a critique of conventional autobiographical practice. Barthes, here, deconstructs the idea of a unified subject and the conventional technique of first person point of view in autobiographical narrative. The repeated change in the narrative technique in the text distances the addresser from the addressee. Barthes’ use of ‘he’, ‘R.B.’ ‘you’, and ‘I’ for autobiographical self in narrative helps him totally subvert the foundational, essentialist understanding of the genre of autobiography. Barthes remarks: “I had no other solution than to rewrite myself- at a distance, a great distance- here and now...Far from reaching the core of the matter, I remain on the surface, for this time it is a matter of "myself" (of the Ego); reaching the core, depth, profundity, belongs to others” (Barthes 1977:142).

For Barthes ‘essentialized subject’ is a myth, and it needs to be deconstructed. He denies any definite, final representation of self when he says: “This book is not a book of ‘confessions’; not that it is insincere, but because we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is never the last word: the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: authenticity” (ibid : 120).

Barthes in his autobiography problematizes the any idea of ‘beginning, middle and end’. The narrative is not teleological and does not reach any end when it completes. The narrative has many ‘beginnings’. The past, here, is not revealed in chronological manner.

This does not mean that the past is neglected here, but is deconstructed to see it bereft of any particular ideology. To achieve this goal the distinction between past and present is eliminated, no particular references are used to denote them and narrative freely runs between these two, thereby achieving the fractured narrative at the end. Here, it is to be noted that the subaltern autobiographical narratives differ from the Barthean idea of locating the self in an ideologyless realm. As the first world subject, Barthes can have the privilege of deconstructing his self once it has been achieved, but the subaltern subjects like Dalit women and hijras have yet to achieve their selfhood and identity hence, they cannot think of dropping the issue of identity without achieving it. In a country like India, the upper caste/class writers in their autobiographies can cherish the Barthean idea of deconstructing their hegemonic selves in their writings. Thus, the genre of autobiography in a unique way, quite paradoxically, encourages varied subjects of different class, caste, gender, and sexuality to achieve different goals of selfhood and subjectivity through their self-narrations.

In Barthes' autobiography, life becomes a text. He uses phrases like 'the text of life', 'life-as-text' to stress the textuality of life narrative. The entire narrative is an attempt to understand the play of signifiers as Barthes says: Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image" (ibid. 64). Elsewhere he says: "which body! we have several" (ibid. 160).

Though Jacques Derrida himself has not written an autobiography, he has in *Of Grammatology* (1967) referred to Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782) and has shown his insight into the genre of autobiography. According to Derrida, Rousseau in his autobiography fails to achieve the goal of attaining unified selfhood because the very nature of writing cannot hold the idea of unified, monolithic self. In his another article 'To Speculate- on Freud' (1980) Derrida opines that the genre of autobiography deconstructs itself in narrative.

Any formal or objective understanding of autobiography gets contested within the autobiographical narrative itself. When an autobiographer tries to express past self with the help of present time narrative, s/he does so through ‘supplementary’ and ‘substitutive’ process. Past appears to the autobiographer in the form of ‘logic of supplementarity’ and creates a possibility of endless ‘substitution’. He, too, like other poststructural philosophers, contests the sharp distinction between ‘life’ and ‘writing’ as he believes: “Autobiography still exists, but its meaning will not be the same” (Anderson 2004: 80).

Autobiography: As ‘Literature’

Though explored in the West for about sixteen hundred years and in India, barring the sporadic autobiographical writings in Sanskrit and other languages, for about the last three hundred years, autobiography has recently carved a niche as a ‘literary genre’ in the realm of autobiographical criticism in particular and literary criticism in general. Over the years, autobiographical narratives have remained marginalized in the field of literary narratives.

Though scholastic works had been written about the genre of autobiography even in the past, new insight about the genre has become available only in the postmodern age. Autobiographical writings like testimonials, memoirs, reminiscences, letters, slave narratives, trauma narratives, diaries and other such narratives were not recognized in the heyday of New Criticism. In defining ‘literariness’ New Criticism treated a text as a ‘verbal icon’ and encouraged its reader to read ‘words on the page’, and in doing so neglected the important fields of knowledge like history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, politics, and philosophy. The idea that every ‘language text’ is a ‘culture text’ was completely negated in this period. The postmodern critical practices like feminism and the subaltern studies have adequately shown the importance of context in reading of a text. This has given rise to the publication of the writings from the marginalized and other subaltern groups. The new

publications from the hitherto subaltern groups like Dalit women and hijras have made it imperative to change our assumptions about ‘literature’.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language defines ‘literary’ thus:

“Literary treatment of a subject requires creative use of the imagination; something is constructed which is related to ‘real’ experience, but is not of the same order, what has been created in language is known only through language, and the text does not give access to a reality other than itself”
(Widdowson 2007: 12).

This structuralist definition of literature prioritizes language over anything else and inspires reader to study language prior to anything else. The Russian-American linguist and formalist critic Roman Jakobson opines that it is ‘literariness’ that gives birth to ‘literature’. He says: “...the object of study in literary science is not literature but literariness—that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature” (Hawthorn 2000:192).

In the light of the subaltern literature, it is to be understood that what we call ‘literature’ or ‘literary’ is not universal, essentialized act. ‘Literature’ is structured within a particular socio-cultural realm. Literature is itself a cultural institution. Like everything else, literature too is canonized. It is literary canon that determines the addition and omission of a particular text within a canon. The subaltern literatures like Dalit and hijra life narratives put a challenge to any such concept of canonized literature. They, too, challenge, the canonized idea of ‘literary tradition’ because such traditions are interlinked with power structures existing at a particular time which also determine our aesthetic understanding of a particular

literary genre. Because of the elitist power-centric understanding of literature, a number of voices (mainly the subaltern) are negated, marginalized or suppressed in literary field.

Though critics have tried to make distinction between ‘literary’ and ‘nonliterary’ text, Roger Fowler (Widdowson 2007:16) thinks that both ‘realistic’ and ‘literary’ texts use equal stylistic tropes and take shape as a part of discourse, hence to make a distinction between them with the use of literary, critical or other aesthetic definitions is futile. It may not be completely throwing away of literary canons, but the understanding that there do exist such canons with certain ‘presences’ is worth to be cultivated. The malleable nature of the canon is necessary to adequately treat other literatures as ‘literature’ and to give approval to their ‘literariness’.

While addressing the issue of ‘literature’ and ‘literariness’, and presenting a critique of New Criticism, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton shows how while discussing issues regarding the aesthetics of literature we totally connived at other literatures that prioritized social life and otherized them:“ The assumption that there was an unchanging object known as ‘art’ or an isolable experience called ‘beauty’ or the ‘aesthetic’, was largely a product of the alienation of art from social life...Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish” (ibid : 36). For Eagleton ‘aesthetic experience in literature’ is something which gets shaped within historical conditions. The self-narratives of Dalit women and hijras are ‘literature’ and possess ‘literariness’ in Eagletonian understanding as they breathe in the material practices, social relations and ideological meaning of their time.

Caren Kalpan in her essay ‘Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects’ quotes Derrida from his article ‘The Law of Genre’, and critically explains the idea of a literary genre:

“As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: “Do”, “Do not” says “genre”, the word “genre”, the figure, the voice, or the law of genre...Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Smith & Watson 1988: 208).

Thus as Derrida explains literary genre is not god given or natural, but God itself- the panoptic eye of which examines and assesses every text. But the subaltern Dalit women and hijra self-narratives under study disrupt all conventional assumptions and expectations that we have from the genre of autobiography.

2.2 Dalit Feminism and the Genre of Dalit Women’s Autobiography

This unit analyses Dalit feminist discourse and the genre of Dalit women’s autobiography as they emerged in the wake of the anti-Mandal Commission agitation, Shah Bano case, and the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid controversy. All these political events brought forth a special relationship between culture, women and gender in the 1990s. With all these events, there began another phase of feminism in which Dalit women too became a part of these socio-political changes, and their visibility was also seen in political, economic and social spheres. Though political importance was also given to women’s caste and community affiliations to understand the category of Dalit women, the emerging change was also resisted by religious cultural tradition with its norms of ideal femininity, and the fundamental appropriation of women in general and Dalit women in particular.



The emerging Dalit feminism had to wedge its battle on many grounds: firstly, it had to fight against the Brahmanic patriarchy for its caste concepts of endogamy, and the concept of caste purity that it exercised to have regimented control over Dalit women's body; secondly, it had also to fight against Brahmanic or Savarna feminism of the upper caste women for its total neglect of the issue of caste in its battle against patriarchy; thirdly, it had to make a critique of the left movement in India for its subsuming the feminist struggle - both the upper caste and Dalit- under the 'larger' struggle against capital. According to Debjani Ganguly (2005), ideologically, Marxian analysis sees caste as 'superstructure', and since Marxism focuses more on the material base, the super structural formations like religion and caste do not find an adequate place in the left movement in India, despite the fact that Dalit women form a very large working class group in India. The Marxian understanding of 'working class' subsumes Dalit women's struggle and their relations to capital. All major movements against oppression lack holistic vision of the issue of subalternity and focus on only one aspect of the issue. The left movement takes up the issue of class struggle, and ignores the caste struggle and the place of Dalit women in it; the feminist movement interrogates patriarchy but remains elitist and connives at the issue of caste; the Dalit movement takes up the issue of caste, but fails to build up caste-gender relation. Dalit feminism shows its sensitivity to class (Marxian category), caste (Dalit category), and gender (feminist category) in its understanding of the formation of Dalit woman's subjectivity in the hegemonic structure of Brahmanic patriarchy.

Gopal Guru in his seminal essay, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" advocates for the need for Dalit women to have a different discourse for the reason that they suffer two distinct patriarchal structures: the Brahmanical form of patriarchy that stigmatizes Dalit women due to their caste identity of being untouchable, and political and literary marginalization of Dalit women by Dalit male dominant movement. Regarding Dalit patriarchy he says: ...dalit men

are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them" (Guru 1995: 2549). Guru encourages the "politics of difference" on the part of Dalit women writers to contribute to the rethinking of feminist practice in India. Anupama Rao in her essay "Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism" urges "to rethink the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women's "difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics" (Rao 2003: 2).

The debate over gender had begun in the second half of the nineteenth century, and gender had become a crucial factor in social-political life of India. The reformist steps began during the colonial, nationalist period were to affect and shape in the long run the identity of middle class in general and women in particular. The paradox of these reforms was that certain lower castes models were adopted for higher caste/class people. For example, ban on widow remarriage, Sati tradition were vices of the upper castes, and not lower castes. The reforms directly affected the women and challenged the gender formation of upper caste women. Later the challenge given to the upper caste notions about womanhood through reformation was replaced by construction of single notion of Hindu womanhood and wifehood based on Vedic civilization. The nationalists and the Orientalists of the nineteenth century remained successful in their challenge to British colonial power with their invocation of the distant Aryan, idealized India past, but could not show any radicalism in deconstructing the hierarchisation of different social groups. The foregrounding of nation state in the distant past eventually muffled the voices of the subaltern people, especially Dalit women.

Feminism in India has never been a unified movement. Since the 1990s, women's multiple affiliations to caste, community and the state have emerged. Middle-class and upper

caste women's active participation in the anti-Mandal agitation has also questioned the imagined feminist solidarities across caste lines. As no monolithic version of Indian feminism is possible in this scenario, new visions of women's empowerment and identity are emerging within community and caste settings. Feminist discourse is also affected by postmodern cultural relativism which in turn gives birth to a number of local identities. This also thwarts the possibility of forging larger feminist solidarities.

Though both the Western and Indian feminisms are rooted in distinct socio-cultural settings and have distinct issues to deal with, one may still discover a thin link between them. Like the Western feminist criticism, Indian mainstream feminist criticism has passed through three distinct phases of development: feminine (imitation), feminist (protest), female (expression). The first 'feminine' phase was a phase of imitation where Indian women writers began to write and explore women characters in their writings, but the women characters were fashioned after the presentations of women in male writers' writings. The women characters in such writings were submissive, domesticated and following the traditional model of Sita-Sati-Savitri. The second phase was the phase of 'feminist' struggle, a phase of protest, in which traditional women characters were reevaluated and an attempt was made to find out a distinct women's tradition of writing- a "gynocentric" tradition of writing, in the words of Elaine Showalter. The reevaluation of women's representation in earlier texts written by both male and female writers show that the material realities of women's lives were largely ignored as they were framed by patriarchal assumptions and expectations. The third phase is the phase of 'female' phase – a phase of expression where independent women characters begin to emerge and form the narrative. In this phase as Panjab and Chakravarti observe, feminist cultural critique moved from women's representation as passive bearers of cultural meaning to the role of women as producers of culture. Here in this phase, questions began to be asked about the historical processes with which suppressed or enabled women's

cultural expression in different media like literature, theatre, music, dance or films (Panjabi and Chakravarti 2012 : xxvi).

But unfortunately, in all these phases the emphasis was still again put on the reading of upper caste women's texts. Despite the fact that the feminist cultural critique has alerted us to the power-knowledge nexus and questioned the patriarchal values of rationality, objectivity and universality as markers of legitimate knowledge, the Dalit women's tradition of writing and their cultural location is totally neglected in this feminist cultural critique. This happens because of the Brahmanic-Savarna orientation of Indian feminism.

Dalit feminism foregrounds a distinct Dalit culture in which Dalit women have played a seminal role. It does not aim at merely collection of Dalit women's literature, but marks the beginning of a new self-consciousness influenced by the philosophy of Ambedkar and the rise of Ambedkarite counterpublics. It challenges the bourgeois nationalist perspective on caste of the nationalist movement led by Gandhi in politics, and the Indian literary historiography in the field of literature. The bourgeois nationalist politics celebrated India's spiritual superiority over the material West by aryanization of Indian past, but observed silence over the internal hegemonic colonializing structures of caste. Sharmila Rege locates the autobiographies of the upper caste women within this framework:

“...Brahmin women's autobiographies have been narratives of upper caste women, their struggle with tradition and their desire to be modern. It is this self that claims to be universal, modern unmarked by caste through its journeys of companionate marriage, modern institutions and marital discord. This claims of the upper caste women's autobiography to represent modern Marathi/ Indian women serves, on the other hand, to render invisible their complicity in privileges of brahminical patriarchy; and on the other, it

classifies the narratives of women whose self-definition is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity, as if it were the ‘other’ of modern and feminist” (Rege 2006:50).

Indian Dalit feminism and its major thrust area can also broadly be seen as cultural studies. The objective of the use of the nomenclature cultural studies is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the social and political context within which it manifests itself. The study of culture helps us understand how power and challenges to power function in society. Cultural studies aims to examine the cultural practices and their relation to power. It exposes power relationship and examines how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices. Thus cultural studies is committed to a moral assessment of society and to political action for social reconstruction. In short, cultural studies aims to understand and change the structures of dominance everywhere. For Raymond Williams the word culture comprises three varieties of meaning: as *process* of spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic development; as a particular *way of life*, of an individual, a group or even humanity at large; and as *actual works*, of intellectual production and creative artistry (Williams 1988: 87-90). Dalit women’s writings with special reference to their autobiographies can be seen as a cultural discourse that voices above-mentioned understanding of culture.

The idea of Dalit feminism necessarily involves the reading of Dalit feminism’s historical moorings, its nature of resistance, content and its significance and relevance in an anti-caste feminist poetics and politics. The roots of the emergence of Dalit feminism can be sought in the writings of Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Parallel to the Indian upper caste feminist movement in the twentieth century, the political struggles of Dalit women inspired by Phule and Ambedkar in

Maharashtra largely revolved around claiming access to public resources, such as schools; creating new institutions, such as Dalit women's hostels and reading groups; and creating new religious identities, such as Buddhist and Christian by resisting Hindu caste identity.

Though feminism in India in recent years has foregrounded the capitalist exploitation of women by the globalized economic forces on the one hand, and the fundamentalist appropriation of Indian women on the other, the mainstream feminist movement by and large has not engaged itself with the question of gendering caste identities and the caste character of gender discrimination and violence. The active participation of middle-class, upper-caste women in the anti-Mandal protests in the 1990s questioned the so called feminist solidarity on women issues and exposed the division among women on the basis of caste.

Though Itothee Thass, Periyar, and Narayan Guru had early influences on Dalit movement in South India, the modern Dalit feminist movement has its sources in the 1989 Ambedkar centenary celebrations. The fourth national conference of women's movements held in Calicut in 1990 raised its voice against the caste-specific violence faced by Dalit women. Dalit women were especially targeted when Dalits in Tamil Nadu converted to Christianity and Islam in the 1980s. Dalit feminist movement in Tamil Nadu had its own Self Respect phase of the Dravidian movement. The feminist scholars in the 1990s focused more on exploring the caste and gender question in historical terms. The Dalit women became more vocal and visible with the introduction of Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Tribes Act (1989). All these together helped creating what we can term as 'female Dalit political subjectivity'.

The most important area in Dalit feminism is its content. "What is the content of Dalit feminism and politics?" "Is it different from the mainstream feminism and its content and

politics?" One can distinguish the basic difference between the mainstream feminism and Dalit feminism in the following manner.

The mainstream feminist movement may be termed as an upper caste or Brhmanical-Savarna feminist movement for its focus on the upper class/caste women. It focuses more on the issues of the *bhadra mahila* of the *bhadra lok*. The personal becomes political in the mainstream feminism. It focuses more on private, intimate realm of woman's self. Dalit feminism on the other hand does not reclaim the political claims of the mainstream feminism. In Dalit feminism, not the personal, but the collective becomes political. Since Dalit women are collectively affected by issues of constant hunger, labour, oppression, sexual exploitation by the caste people, impossibility of justice in everyday life, Dalit feminism demands new orientation and theorization that makes it distinct from the mainstream feminism. Though in

Dalit feminist narratives such as autobiography, descriptions of domestic discord, violence, conjugal relationship and other tales of marital issues do find place, the personal appears irrelevant and minor. All Dalit women's narratives including autobiography invoke the presence of Ambedkara and the Ambedkarite counterpublics in the lives of Dalit women. The mainstream feminism does not carry any such influences of Ambedkar.

Contrary to Dalit feminism, the mainstream feminism accepts its indebtedness to the nationalistic struggle and women's participation into the public life because of the Gandhian call. Ambedkar's call for Dalit women to lead rich, productive public lives and recreate their lives like their upper caste sisters shedding off caste barriers was largely connived at. As Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon (2014) feel that Ambedkar created a new sense of identity among the Dalit women. The mainstream feminism, though comprising of diverse groups and campaigns and dependent on regional histories in India, had largely remained influenced by the Western feminist theorization of the woman subject. As the white feminism

in the West neglected the black subject in its initial stage, the mainstream upper class feminism in India also neglected the Dalit subject in their overarching, universalistic patterns of Indian feminism.

The shared world of labour is one of the areas that distinguishes Dalit feminism from its Indian counterpart. The Dalit women's consciousness is filled with the world of labour and inequality. The autobiographical narratives of Dalit women carry the stigmatized experience of their pariahness and untouchability. The autobiographical narratives that emerge from such women are not about personal marital or sexual angst, but more on comradeship or collective existence of Dalit women. For Dalit women, their status as labourers gets doubly stigmatized because Dalit identity is often sexualized in our culture. Labour for the Dalit women often includes forced sexual labour. The general tendency among the public is that to be female and untouchable is to be sexually available. V. Geetha in this regard notes that the Dalit women's sexual otherness rendered the caste Hindu woman automatically 'pure': a domestic goddess, on whose virtuous status the durability of the caste order depended (Geetha 2012: 249).

Another contrasting feature of Dalit feminism is that it examines the idea of 'public shame' that Dalit women face. No other caste woman faces any such shame that a body of a Dalit woman carries. Dalit feminism, hence, engages itself with sexual politics as much from the point of view of caste, as gender. For a Dalit woman, struggle for sexual justice can never be limited to freedom from suppressive heterosexual domesticity within Dalit patriarchy, but to challenge the usurpation of Dalit female body and soul by the caste male. The Channar revolt (1813-59) of Kerala by Dalit Nadar and Ezhava women against *Mula karam* or breast tax to be able to cover their chest with a cloth is one of the earliest examples of challenging the upper caste hegemony over the Dalit female body. Hence, Dalit feminism unlike the

mainstream feminism treats Dalit women as distinct social subjects whose issues cannot be addressed under one universalistic umbrella term. The autobiographical texts of Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, and Viramma explicitly deal with the question of sexual usurpation of Dalit female body.

Dalit feminism favours the re-examination of all religious beliefs and customs and articulate their rights to freedom and liberal, egalitarian worldview. Since caste is considered as an evil of Hinduism, life is viewed on a more rational basis in Dalit feminist literature. For example, in Tamil context enforced chastity or *karpu* was considered as distinctive marker of female morality, but the Dalit feminists speak in favour of reproductive choice or what Periyar referred to as the right to ‘womb-rule’ or the right to regulate pregnancies. The anti caste movement in India has given new turn to the sexual politics which was central to the gender question.

Another conspicuous feature of Dalit feminism is its sharp critique of Hinduism as religion of injustice, inequality and hierarchies. Dalit feminism revisits the tense relationship between feminist politics and religion. It tries to relocate Dalit or non-Brahmin women’s responses to questions of faith and spiritual meaning in the context of Dalit subjects’ exposure to other religious faiths. In Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the rejection of caste went hand in hand with the rejection of Hinduism as faith. This also buttressed an appeal to science and rationality in life. All the Dalit autobiographical narratives studied here take into account the question of faith, conversion to other faith and thereby creating a new social identity.

Dalit feminism emerges out of public culture of Dalit women. Both in Maharashtra and in Tamil Nadu Dalit women have performance traditions. In these performance traditions anti-caste and feminists expressions have emerged. Tamil Nadu has a tradition of young Dalit women performers who play the thapu, the Dalit drum—traditionally beaten at funerals—and

angry vigorous dance. Tamil poet Inquilab's *Manimegalai* and V. Geetha's *Kalakkanvu* (both plays) dramatize anti-caste approaches to literature and history. In Maharashtra, Sushma Deshpande has done solo rendering of Savitribai Phule's life and times to raise anti-caste consciousness. Viramma in her self-narrative *Viramma* appears as a proficient folk singer who sings all types of songs- from birth songs to dirge songs- popular in her Pariah community.

Thus, the theoretical perception of Dalit feminism presents the recasting of the relationship between sexuality and politics on the one hand and politics and religious culture on the other. Dalit feminism in general focuses on social respectability for Dalit women, on radical public action, respect to Dalit women's labour and annihilation of stigmatization attached to their labour, and on interrogation of Hinduism.

Dalit women's autobiographical narratives on the one hand demonstrate Dalit women's material struggles in everyday life, and on the other hand prepare the readers to examine the epistemological challenge their narratives pose before the mainstream understanding of culture and society. Translation of such narratives from regional languages into English has also helped to uncover Dalit women's life-stories so far unheard and unrevealed. Feminist and Dalit publishers like Kali for Women, Zubaan, Navyana and Women Unlimited in addition to Oxford and other renowned publishers have contributed a lot with critical focus on Dalit women issue. #*Dalitwomengirl* has started the dialogue on social media. *Savari*, *Roundtable India*, *Forward Press*, and *Feminisminindia* are websites that take up Dalit feminist issues on regular basis. *Dalitwomencaucus.blogspot.com* discusses Dalit women's issues with a focus on domestic violence. In 2006, Dalit activists and academicians started the Dalit Women's Network for Solidarity (DAWNS). It was in 2006 itself, that the neologism 'Dalit womanism' was first coined.

Now-a-days, a good number of personal blogs and social network pages flourish that take up Dalit women's issues. Women's Studies centres at Pune, Jadavpur University, and at some other places have also contributed towards building up of feminist Dalit archives of translation and critical theory. Yet, despite their radical deconstructive stance, Dalit writings and life narratives are largely absent in our curricula. About this absence Sharmila Rege asserts: "We therefore need to examine more closely our failures as teachers and as students to connect the complex lived experience with critiques of disciplinary knowledge and the academy" (Rege 2006: 96).

In the last few decades it has been seen that feminist subaltern criticism has excavated many Dalit women's voices in the form of oral narratives. Instead of focusing on the written word of literate women, the subaltern autobiographical criticism has focused on the hitherto subordinated, unvoiced voices of Dalit and other subaltern women including the hijras. *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (1989) played an important role in opening up the field of oral autobiographical narratives. Similarly Sharmila Rege in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006) locates the testimonies of Marathi women. Viramma's *Viramma* is also a narrative transformed from orality to textuality.

The idea of Dalit feminism interweaves the dialectics of self and community with the gender issue in Dalit women's autobiographical narratives. The field of Dalit writings, including autobiographical narratives, has been dominated by Dalit male writers. Hence, the singular communitarian notion of Dalit selfhood too becomes important to be interrogated. Dalit women's autobiographical narratives perform the task of deconstructing monolithic, essentialist idea of Dalit selfhood created within the Brahmanic mainstream and Dalit male writers' narratives. Regarding the rise of Dalit feminism Divyani Rattanpal observes:

“The assertion of autonomous Dalit women’s organizations in the 1990s threw up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics” (Rattanpal 2015: 2).

Thus, Dalit feminism in Indian society has to constantly interrogate caste and gender equations.

Women’s Question in the Colonial Period - Subaltern-Dalit Point of View:

The subaltern-Dalit point of view offers a holistic understanding of “the woman question” with special reference to Dalit women. It must be noted that before the rise of mainstream feminism in India, the woman’s question began to be contested within the emerging discourse of caste in the second half of the nineteenth century colonial period. The initial reformist steps that involved the women of upper caste communities were largely based on lower caste models. But the reforms in upper caste Hindus were deterred by the fear of losing caste and power of caste. In this respect Uma Chakravarty (1998) has adequately shown how Pandita Ramabai’s rejection of patriarchal Brahmanic practices and her later conversion to Christianity in the second half of the nineteenth century was seen as a revolt and a betrayal of a nation.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, and in the first half of the twentieth centuries the woman question was aptly discussed by Phule’s Satyashodhak Sabha and Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra. Besides, the print culture, it was also discussed through the popular folk songs of the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite counterpublics. The women’s rights were juxtaposed with the demand of political rights for Dalits.

Phule intertwined women's question with his project of rewriting of mythology from Dalit point of view. He proposed education for women of all castes and recognized the plight of enforced widowhood from psychological and moral point of view. In his *Akhand* (verse) entitled *Kulambin* (woman of the laboring peasant caste) he feministically records the labour of the women of the laboring castes both inside and outside the household. This verse can be considered as one of the earliest attempts to understand the division of Brahmanic patriarchal labour and the enforced burden of double labour on untouchable women in contrast to caste privileges of the Brahman caste.

Dalit woman's question was further raised by Satyashodhak women activists like Savitribai Phule, Muktabai Salve, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Rhode, and Janabai Rokde. Muktabai and Tarabai Shinde's essays 'About the Grief of Mahars and Mangs' (1855) and 'A Comparison between Men and Women' (*Stree Purush Tulana*) (1882) respectively set the direction of Dalit feminist movement. Both Muktabai and Tarabai were the followers of Phule and members of *Satyashodhak Samaj*. About miserable condition of pregnant Dalit women Muktabai writes, "Our women give birth to babies and they do not even have a roof over their heads. How they suffer rain and cold! Try to think about it from your own experiences" (Rege 2006:46). Tarabai in her text interrogates brahmanical patriarchy and criticizes other non-brahman castes for the practice of widowhood. She also raises questions about the representation of women in literature of her time. As Rosalind O'Hanlon, the translator of Tarabai Shide's *Stree Purush Tulana*, has noted, Tarabai's articulation spans issues ranging across practical matters of the domestic and everyday, enforced widowhood, women's education and the exclusively masculine public sphere (O'Hanlon 1994:8). Savitribai Phule, the mother of Indian (Dalit) feminism, in one of her poems describes the Peshwa rule thus: "In the Peshwai that ruled, the immoral practices scared the ati-shudras, a pot around the neck to spit, a broom tied to the back to clean their own foot prints. The

shameless husband, sends his wife to his Master Bajirao, the brahman women are exploited by this tyrannical rule, they keep saying may the Peshwai burn down to ashes" (Mali 1980: 90).

Savitribai Rhode used to run a journal called *Kshatiya Ramoshi*, a journal that focused on the enlightenment and education of women in general and the Dalit women in particular. Janabai Rokde, another Satyashodhak activist attained popularity as midwife in Mumbai in the early years of twentieth century. Thus the Satyashodhak women trained under Phuleite philosophy of democracy and egalitarianism gave a new shape and set a new subaltern Dalit voice to Indian feminist movement.

The Satyashodhaks fought the women's question on different fronts. *Din Mitra*- the newspaper of the Satyashodhaks- gave voice to many contemporary issues related to the untouchables and other subaltern people and demanded the solutions in public sphere. The Satyashodhaks, in addition to the print media, also explored the musical form *jalsa* (a recording of the folk form *tamasha*) for communicating their political messages. The *jalsa* being musical in form became very popular among people and became an important instrument in raising women's issues, and launching an assault on untouchability and brahmanism. Shayamarao Kulat in one of the *jalsa* compositions titled as 'The Request to all Women' addresses Dalit women:

"To all you women, I request,...

Don't be carried away by the Bhats (brahman),

Do not take their advice

To all you women, I request,

Guide your sons and daughters

to the best path,

Teach them- at day and at night,

Send the boys and girls to school..." (Rege 2006: 49)

Jalsas also presented a critique of brahmanism for its enforced widowhood and practice of tonsuring of widows. In one of the *jalsas*, a young brahman widow argues with her father:

"I am your loved one, father, your loved one,

why do you make me a tonsured widow?...

Drop your adamant behavior, Arrange for my *Pat* (second marriage)

allowed among lower castes." (ibid. 50)

Thus, the Satyashodhaks played an important role in creating pre-Ambedkarite Dalit publics and counter discourse of Dalit identity.

Sharmila Rege (2006) has noted that with the collective efforts of the Satyashodhaks, pre-Ambdekarite untouchable leaders, and many other nonbrahman social reformers of that time, many legal reforms affecting the position of Dalit men and women were administered. Important among them include the declaration of reservation of 50 per cent positions for Backward Castes, order for Compulsory Primary Education (1917), a Law for the Registration of Intercaste and Interreligious Marriages (1919), a Law against Cruelty to Women (1919), the Divorce Act of 1919, and the Act granting inheritance rights to 'illegitimate' children and Devdasis. Here, it is important to note that many of these acts were aggressively opposed in *Kesari*, the Tilakite newspaper, and were contested by the emerging Satyashodhak and other non-brahman discourses.

Dalit feminism that started to be shaped under Phuleite ideology in the second half of the nineteenth century got its firm form and character under the Ambedkar movement and the emerging Dalit public sphere in the first half of twentieth century. The Mahad satyagraha in 1927 for access to the Chavadar lake for untouchables, and the burning of the *Manusmruti* (December 1927), the debate on Communal Award of separate electorates for the untouchables, Hindu Code Bill and later Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism played a major role in raising sensibility about Dalit woman's question. The important thing to be observed in this regard, as noted by Mary E. John (2000 : 3824), is the opposition of all reservations and denying of political representation to the depressed classes by the women's organizations (AIWC, NCIW and WIA) of that time. The women's organizations did oppose the practice of untouchability as a disgrace to Hinduism, but the issue of caste was relegated to the 'private' sphere, hence not to be debated in the public, political spheres. Located into the nationalist politics of that time, the upper caste women's organizations glorified brahmanic femininity as pan Indian femininity.

The Ambedkar movement radicalized Dalit women. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon note Ambedkar's speech addressed to dalit women to actively participate in public struggle for equality, justice and self-respect:

... Men and women together resolve the problems of everyday life. If the men take up this work (annihilation of caste) on their own, there is no doubt that they will take a long time to complete it. But if women take this work on themselves, I am sure they will soon succeed...To tell the truth, the task of removing untouchability belongs not to men, but to you women.....you must all give up your old and disgusting customs...no untouchable person carries the mark of being untouchables stamped on his

forehead. But untouchable persons can be easily recognized as such because of their customs and way of life.

The way you wear your saris is a sign of your being untouchable... Knowledge and learning are not for men alone, they are essential for women too.... I am hopeful that you will not go away and forget his speech (Pawar and Moon 2014: 121-23).

In Ambedkar's thinking the subordination of women is embedded with the theory of caste. The absence of intercaste marriage or endogamy is the core of caste, and is the essence of control over women and subordination in patriarchy. Ambedkar in his essay 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' (1916) has argued that the practices of sati, enforced widowhood, child marriage come to be prescribed by brahmanism in order to regulate and control any transgression of boundaries (Ambedkar 1916:15-16). Ambedkar in this essay clearly maintains that the caste system can be maintained only through the controls on women's sexuality and prohibiting exogamy. He radically challenges the linkages of caste and purity and asks Dalit women to challenge upper caste women's claim of purity. Since woman is subordinated in caste, Dalit woman is subordinated at multiple levels within brahmanical patriarchy. Ambedkar's analysis of caste and women's position in it encourages Dalit women to create new public space for them.

Ambedkarite movement gave birth to Dalit women's literary activity which is quite different from the mainstream women's literary tradition. One examples will suffice to elaborate the social theme in Dalit women's writings in early Ambedkarite movement. In Dalit women's writings community is prioritized over conjugality. In one of the compositions by a Dalit woman addressed to Ambedkar's second wife who was a Brahmin, the speaker says:

“O girl from brahman family,
Drape your sari well to cover yourself,
Baba is busy with his work –
Sitting on the chair,
He’s not looking at you” (Gaikwad 1993: 64).

Thus, the Ambedkarite influence left a great influence on Dalit women to carve out their own Dalit vision.

Modernity in India entered during the colonial period not by simply adhering to English education or adopting Westernized life styles in cultural sphere; it entered Indian socio-cultural setting through renegotiating and interrogating the fixed social relations in private and public spheres. Such reconstitution in social sphere helped the educated people to form a ‘middle class’ that was distinct from the feudal rich and the lower classes. In such a condition, women’s question in relation to caste reemerged. While understanding the colonial intellectual position in Maharashtra in the context of Dalit and women’s question, Sharmila Rege points out four basic positions: the brahmanical revivalist (Tilak), the brahmanical reformist (Lokhitwadi, Agarkar, Ranade), the non-brahmanical reformist (V. R. Shinde) and the non-brahmanical revolutionary position (Phule, Ambedkar) (Rege 2006: 59). Within the nationalist discourse the Gandian understanding of women’s question, to some extent, did open up the public space for women, but it did not radicalize women’s space with its meek approach to caste and the condition of Dalit women within it.

Before we have our reading of Dalit women’s autobiographical narratives in the next chapter, a brief sketch of Marathi women’s autobiographical narratives from the early twentieth century is attempted here to locate the selected Dalit autobiographical narratives

within a broader Dalit women's literary tradition. By 1975, Marathi literature witnessed the publication of more than thirty five autobiographies by women. But the narratives in these autobiographies mostly revolve around the life of the husband and his reformist zeal and the narrative of joy and pains at times. In such autobiographical narratives woman as a subject of the narrative does not take the subject position. Such narratives could not challenge the brahmanic patriarchy.

The categorization of Marathi women's autobiographical tradition shows that the earlier autobiographies, associated with the lives lived by women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were basically concerned with the life sketches of husbands and their public image. Later, with the rise of middle class and upper caste women, women's presence was slowly but steadily felt in public fields like education, music, dance, and cinema. In such narratives the women's place was marginal and their identities were subsumed into their husbands' identities.

In the next phase of Marathi women's autobiographies, the narratives of idealized companionship and the intricacies and discord of conjugal life emerged. Since all these autobiographies have been penned by upper caste women, caste has not yet entered the narrative. The modern Marathi women's autobiographical self tries to be universal, modern and Indian without passing through the trauma of caste experience. Thus, the omission of caste in the mainstream Indian feminism is viewed by Dalit feminists as brahmanic appropriation of the field of feminism.

In contrast to the upper caste women's autobiographies, Dalit women's autobiographies exhibit new poetic and political aspirations. Some major observations about Dalit women's autobiographical narratives are as under:

- The Dalit women's autobiographical narratives exhibit double marginalization and discrimination of Dalit women. Being women they suffer gender discrimination within Dalit patriarchy, and caste untouchability within brahmanic patriarchy. In their self-narratives they expose both kinds of exploitation at the hands of Dalit and caste males. Dalit women experience discrimination and exploitation both in the private and the public realms. Her untouchable body becomes an object of gaze and appropriation in the public realm. Her body becomes a privileged space within Dalit and brahmanic patriarchy and is crushed by public untouchability and private machismo.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives studied here do not display laments, resentments or shame of their Dalit past and their existence as women subjects. They rather frankly present a critique of the available reality and strive for dignity and new identity.
- The Marathi Mahar women's autobiographical narratives historically confirm the active participation of the country women in Dalit liberation movement initiated by Ambedkar. The narratives humbly accept the role played by the Ambedkarite movement in their lives. The Ambedkarite movement for the liberation of women in general and Dalit women in particular has been shadowed by the mainstream nationalist and feminist movements of that time. These narratives provide an opportunity to the reader to understand Indian women's struggle for liberation from another angle.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives share collective Dalit feminine sensibility and cultural creativity. Here, personal becomes collective and vice-versa. Unlike the mainstream feminism's quest for individual subjectivity, the Dalit feminist quest for subjectivity is very often subsumed within the collective quest for subjectivity of the Dalits as community, but that does not trivialize Dalit woman's quest for self. The

self-narratives unravel the hidden feelings of dissent and revolt and the humiliated place both in home and outside home.

- The patriarchal tradition of autobiography centres around the quest for the sublime, elevated self. But in women's, and especially in Dalit women's autobiographies women's humdrum existence becomes a space for knowledge. As compared to the middle class women's lives, Dalit women's lives form a very different site of contestation. Their lives are highly influenced by the intersections of religion, culture and politics. Unlike the middle class women, Dalit women's lives are marked by daily labour relations within caste hierarchies in addition to private and family life. Though subaltern, there consciousness is not dead subjectivity.
- Dalit women's autobiographical narratives very positively expose the mundane, at times, violent religious rituals and superstitions whose victims they become in everyday life. Baby Kamble and Viramma in their autobiographical narratives refer to such superstitions which are nonsensical but the Dalit, especially women, are succumbed to them. The paradox is that women keep themselves occupied with such rituals, sacrifices and superstitions that actually bind them to the tradition and are responsible for their downtrodden condition.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, gender had become a crucial factor in social-political life of India. The reformist steps began during that period were to affect and shape in the long run the identity of middle class in general and women in particular. The paradox of these reforms was that certain lower castes models were adopted for higher caste/class people. For example, ban on widow remarriage, Sati tradition were vices of the upper castes, and not lower castes. The reforms directly affected the women and challenged the gender formation of upper caste women. Later the jolt given to upper caste notions about womanhood through reformation was replaced by construction of single notion of Hindu

womanhood and wifehood based on Vedic civilization. The nationalists and Orientalists of nineteenth century remained successful to challenge British colonial power with their invocation of the distant Aryan, idealized India past, but could not show any radicalism in deconstructing the hierarchisation of different social groups. The foregrounding of nation state in the distant past eventually muffled the voices of the subaltern people, especially women.

2.3 The Transgenre of Hijra Autobiography

As hijras are both subjects and objects of knowledge in our culture, they carry ‘hidden histories’ with them in which the personal story and the collective political history form significant degree of subtlety to understand the hijra discourse. The personal stories of hijras bring forth some fundamental questions not only about themselves, but also about the whole structure (social, religious, political) in which their identities are formed or deformed. As Frederic Jameson has remarked, “The only effective liberation... begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political” (Jameson 1981: 21). This theoretical framework given by Jameson provides better understanding to fathom the plight of hijras in our time.

The autobiographical narratives taken here provide a progressive articulation to hijra cultural tradition existing in India for millennia. Their autobiographical narratives open up a space in which the idea of hijra self (third gender self) can be circulated against the dominant gendered self. The hijra life narratives inaugurate a new literary, cultural tradition within the dominant autobiographical tradition occupied by men and women. The narratives of A. Revathi (*Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*) and Laxminarayan Tripathi (*Me Hijra, Me, Laxmi*) and sketch out the silenced history of the forgotten third gender of our society and their lives in the symbolic autobiographical act of self-appropriation and self-determination.

In doing so a very confident self, a multi-dimensional and multifaceted images of hijra identity comes to forefront. The fragmentary narratives of self ably construct the awareness and consciousness of hijra identity-the third gender identity which is ‘different’ from the conventional gendered identities. The search for self-image takes place not outside of history, but inside of it. Both Revathi and Laxmi turn out to be the outstanding representatives of not only of their generations, but all the generations from antiquity. The ideological positions they take in their narratives help them to deconstruct all gendered socio-political establishments to achieve socio-historical and political protest. The progressive, linear, unidimensional narrative of male autobiographies is subverted here to achieve the goal of personal becoming collective. The hijra autobiographical discourse is self-conscious, subjective, analytical, introspective, and self-revelatory. The objective of the narrative is to assert hijra subjectivity, third gendered integrity, social cause and political awareness about hijra identity.

Hijra identiy that emerges in these narratives is neither heroic nor epic. In the texts under study the narrators-protagonists see themselves as individuals who respond to their circumstances and their times either through their actions or their life writings. Through different modes of expressions, tone, voice, and style they present a very concrete attempt to control and shape their lives despite the adverse circumstances which lead them either to be socially exiled or nearly to die of poverty or stigmatization.

“As a category”, R. Raja Rao defines, “hijra is a social, as opposed to a natural or biological, construct” (Raja Rao: 2017:196). Hijras are a social group, part religious cult and part caste. They are culturally defined either as “neither men nor women” or as men who become women by adopting women’s dress and behaviour. But a hijra is first born as a male and becomes a hijra later. A castrated hijra is a eunuch. A hijra can be differentiated from a

hermaphrodite who is naturally born with male and female organs and characteristics. A hijra may in the initial period be termed as effeminate homosexual man who later joins the hijra cult for survival. But it is to be remembered that all effeminate men do not become hijras, and all homosexual men are not hijras. Thus becoming a hijra is a choice sometimes and compulsion at other times. Like a person who leaves home to become a sadhu, he, too, leaves home to become a hijra and never turns back. Thus a hijra life can be divided and viewed into two parts: life before becoming a hijra, and life after becoming a hijra.

The term ‘transgender’ is very often equated with the term ‘hijra’, but according to R. Raja Rao ‘transgender’ is a broader term than hijra, the later category being only a variety of the former (Raja Rao 2017:197). Transgendered men may become transsexuals by opting for sex reassignment surgery, and may call them trans-women. The major difference between the trans-women and hijras is that while the latter voluntarily ghettoize themselves, the former prefer to continue to be a part of mainstream society.

Another category that comes closest to ‘hijra’ is ‘koti’ (literally means ‘monkey’ in Telugu). Like the hijras, the kotis, too, come from underprivileged sections of society. They, too, are effeminate and homosexual. But unlike hijras, they wish to be a part of the majority and get married and enjoy male privileges. Within the patriarchal set up of their family, their homosexuality is not considered as adultery, but connived at by their wives.

The hijra identity is paradoxical in itself. It subverts the heterosexual basis of sexuality and gender. As R. Raja Rao puts it, “While they destabilize normativity on the basis of their gender identity, they also betray a desire for normativity on the basis of their sexuality” (Raja Rao 2017: 200).

There is no denying that hijras, like Dalits, are the most despised lot in India. They are treated as menace, nuisance and ill-omen by average Indians. A lot many biases, prejudices

prevail about hijras who form a very typical level of subalternity in our social set up. They can be treated as gendered, caste, class, economic subaltern group. They are the victims of natural disaster (if sexuality is viewed strictly as ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories), but they are treated as victimizers in society. Several myths prevail about hijras in society, the most conspicuous among them is that hijras kidnap young male children, castrate them and forcibly make them hijras. Though a few sensitive portrayals of hijra life have come up in films like *Tamanna* and daily soaps like *Shakti* on television, hijra identity is normally presented in a stereotyped way in films and social media.

Hijra identity is a revolt against the idea of ‘natural’ in our society. As R. Raja Rao puts it, “They grow up with a sense of being wronged by Nature, and their method of redressing or righting this wrong is by talking it out on ‘normal’ men and women, towards whom Nature has been partial. Their behaviour on the streets is thus subversive” (Rao 2015: 182-83). Thus hijra presence on the streets always create the binary of the mainstream vs. the marginalized.

A. Revathi’s *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), Laxminarayan Tripathi’s *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* (Marathi 2012, English 2015) and Manobi Bandopadhyay’s *A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi* (2017) can be considered as one of the earliest self-narratives in Indian literary tradition that belong to the genre of hijra literature. The narratives, here, make readers aware of who the hijras really are, and what goes into the making of hijra personalities. As Revathi puts it, “My aim is to introduce to the readers the lives of hijras, their distinct culture, and their dreams and desires” (Revathi 2010:V) These narratives seek to dispel myths about hijras and help us rethink our prejudices about them.

The emerging hijra literature in India is not an extempore creation of the writers’ imagination. It can be broadly be seen and placed within the wider tradition of Lesbian-Gay-

Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) writings in India. Non-heterosexual people have been writing testimonies about their lives for hundreds of years, both in the West and in India. In our time many LGBT activists have penned their voices to break territorial boundaries and get access to other centres in order to make their voice to be heard. Ismat Chughtai's story 'Lihaaf' (translated into English as 'The Quilt'), Suniti Namjoshi's many poems and fiction such as *Feminist Fables* and *The Conversations of Cow*, Sultan Padamsee's poetry, Aubrey Menen's autobiographical books *The Space within the Heart* and *It Is All Right*, Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* and his poems in *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, Mahesh Dattani's plays like *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Night Queen*, the poems of Aga Shahid Ali and above all Hoshang Merchant's 25 collections of gay poetry and his autobiography *The Man Who Would Be Queen* revolve around the theme of same-sex longing.

The other predating LGBT writings include Ashwini Shkthankar's *Facing the Mirror*, Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narrain's *Because I Have a Voice*, Minal Hajratwala's *Out*, and Rakesh Ratti's *A Lotus of Another Colour*. R. Raja Rao's collection of short stories *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City*, and poetry collection *BomGay*, a play *The Wise Fool on Earth and Other Plays*, the novels *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*, and the forthcoming *Lady Lolita's Lover*, the co-edited book *Whistling in the Dark*, Ruth Vanita's *Queering India* and *Love's Rite*, Hoshang Merchant's *Forbidden Sex/Forbidden Text* and Brida Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya's edited book *The Phobic and the Erotic* have given birth to important discourse on gay sexuality.

In recent times, the tradition of gay writing continues with writers like Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi, Mahesh Natarajan, and Himadri Roy. Though most of these writings are in English, there too exist such writings in Marathi and Tamil. In Marathi, Bindumadhav Khire's *Partner* and *Indradhanush*, Chetan Datar's *Ek Madhav Baug*, Pramod Kale's plays

like *Na Yetil Uttare* and Zameer Kamble's *Hijra* are worth to be mentioned. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in their seminal text *Same Sex Love in India* elaborately deals with samples of such writings covering what they term ancient, medieval, and modern periods. The earliest writings involve mythological rather than real people, but they do represent psycho-cultural dimensions of hijras.

Hijras, once, were the subjects of literature and before the rise of the British rule did enjoy respectable positions and power in Indian social structure. Indian mythology is replete with numerous stories pertaining to hijras. Indian epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have hijras as characters. In the legend of *Ramayana* hijras are shown waiting eternally for the arrival of Ram from his exile. Feeling apologetic for forgetting about them, Ram blesses them with a boon that they will be sought on every auspicious occasion.

In *Shaiva* mythology, Lord Shiva's Ardhanarishvara form- the left half of the body is female- is much venerated. According to Piyush Saxena the Ardhanarishvara form symbolically refers to the earlier period 'when human mind was mainly preoccupied with concepts of creation and fertility' (Saxena 2011: 12). Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Mohini, a charming woman, is another example of mythologization and divinization of hijras in Indian culture. Both Shiva-Ardhanarishvara and Vishnu-Mohini represent the hijra culture and diverse sexuality existing in past. Shiva-Ardhanarishvara represents the divine hermaphrodite and Vishnu-Mohini, the divine transsexual. All these mythological images have recurring presence in hijra narratives.

The stories of *Mahabharata* have many references to hijras. During the period of exile, Arjuna was turned into a eunuch. Under the curse given earlier by Urvashi, Arjun accepts to be turned into Briannala for a period of one year. The Yaksha-Yudhisthira dialogue embodied in the Madhya Parva of the, the yaksha asks eighteen mystical questions

with philosophical and metaphysical ramifications and Yudhishthira is supposed to answer them to save his four brothers who lie dead because of the curse of the yaksha. The hijras of North India believe that a yaksha, gandharva and kubera are neither man nor woman. The story of Shikhandi is one of the most popular stories from the epic *Mahabharata* which involves the hijras. The death of Bhishma is only achieved through Shikhandi, a transgender person. In recent times, Devdutt Pattanaik has reinterpreted mythological tales from a non-heterosexual perspective in books like *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You, The Pregnant King* and many others.

Indian transsexual autobiographical narratives construct a narrative space in which gender identity predicated on anatomical difference is contested. The hijra autobiographical narratives fight for self-justifications that seek social acceptance for the identity emerging out of body and mind cluster. The narratives of Revathi and Laxmi can be called the narratives of 'celebrities' or 'public hijras' because they have chosen to live publicly as hijra in order to set an example or work toward public acceptance of transsexuality. Again when most hijras do not write their life stories, the self-narratives of Revathi and Laxmi certainly give a glimpse of, if cannot comprehensively deal with, the phenomena of hijrahood. Their writings open up a space for future hijra narratives to contest the questions of socio-political and economic condition of hijras in Indian society, the location of transsexuality in heteronormative structure of society, and the philosophical questions of hijra body and subjectivity. As any autobiographical narrative offers an opportunity of rewriting of self, hijra autobiographical narratives, too, offers different representations and modes of transsexual subjectivity. The hijra subjectivity that emerges in the narratives is alternative, multifaceted, and very much subversive account of heteronormative idea of gender and sex.

For hijras autobiography writing becomes one of the strategies by which they can create a place for themselves and assert themselves in Indian society. Writing self creates an opportunity for them to voice their alternative gender identity and can help them create social mobility within hierarchized social structure.

Hijra autobiographical narratives under study are available in translations. They have been narrated into the mother tongues of the protagonists-narrators, and later translated into English. Thus though the narratives give an impression of seamless web, they might not have been collected that way. They must have passed through double selection process: what the protagonist-narrator chooses to tell and what the translator chooses to tell the reader. The translator is a person who provides some structure to the personal narratives of Revathi and Laxmi. Hence, they do involve the whole idea of selection and rejection of events in a genre like autobiography. It is possible that with a different translator a different text may emerge.

Moreover, the narratives studied here should not be understood as strictly factual accounts of the lives of the protagonists-narrators. They present subjective truths about the lives they have lived, experienced and analyzed. Distortions of facts, omissions and exaggerations certainly become a part of autobiographical narratives. In autobiography, it is individual's self that interprets the culture in which it is located. It is the increasing understanding of self that makes any individual write his or her autobiographical narrative. The emergence of hijra autobiographical narratives herald the new dawn of the emergence of new self that seeks new gender identity and roles.

The hijra narratives, here, try to understand the idea of hijra role as gender role in Indian society. Hence, one can see the emerging hijra identities in these narratives in terms of their gender roles and gender identities and the attempts made by the narrators-protagonists of the narrators to challenge these roles and identities. The idea of 'identity' is personal here,

something experienced by the subject; while the idea of ‘gender role’ is something given and expected within a particular culture. But in reality one’s identity is molded by the roles given within a culture, hence, both identity and gender role become two sides of the same coin. Though gender roles have been clearly defined within heteronormative patriarchy as either masculine or feminine, the hijra narratives offer the concept of dichotomous identity or alterity. The hijra protagonists of the narratives studied here offer alternative identities and speak of themselves as a ‘not man’ or a ‘man but not man’, or a ‘man but a woman’, or a ‘man minus man’, or ‘neither a man, nor a woman’. Laxmi’s reluctance to undergo the nirvana operation suggests that her gender identity may not be completely feminine, but somewhat ambivalent.

One of the important points raised by these hijra autobiographical narratives regarding gender is that gender identity/role is subject to change, and is not decided early in childhood. The autobiographical narratives of Revathi and Laxmi challenge the idea that gender identity/role is decided in the childhood and are not open to any kind of change and transformation. The narrative suggest that the development of gender identity is gradual, hence, not fixed. Thus both the narratives challenge the cultural construction of ‘normal’. What we call ‘normal’ is not ‘natural’. The hijra lives narrated here are testimony to the fact that human personality is unlimited and highly creative in nature.

Among two hijra autobiographies, the autobiography of Revathi raises many questions about the process of sex conversion, its importance and its implications on the body and subjectivity of hijra. It is to be remembered that Laxmi, on the other hand, does not go for any sexual reassignment surgery. Revathi’s narrative of sex change highlights the physical pain that occurs as a result of medical intervention. Hijra narratives raise some important questions: ‘what is it that makes medical intervention necessary for the

transgender?' 'Is transsexualism caused by aberrant sexual physiology?' or 'Is transsexualism caused by aberrant gender identity?' 'Is it mind's identification with the other sex or is it the change in body that demands sex change?' Revathi in her narrative feels that the body that he (before sex change Revathi is male) attains after sex reassignment is his 'real body', the one s/he always wanted or was meant to have, but denied by Nature. Thus, hijra accounts challenge the very idea of 'natural' or 'natural body'. They challenge the 'natural' or 'given' which is not in tune with their 'natural' desires. The narratives foreground hijras as "the third gender" with the acceptance and assertion of their own sexuality.

To conclude, our understanding of the genre of autobiography has drastically changed over the years. The earlier preoccupation with the individual subjectivity of the narrator-protagonist has changed to the idea of collective subjectivity of the community in the case of Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives. The genre itself offers a challenge to its earlier androcentric biases, and opens up a door for the subaltern subjectivities like Dalit women and hijras to flourish. Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives challenge patriarchal hegemony over literary history, poetics, and aesthetics, and offer alternative histories, poetics, epistemology, and theories. Dalit women and hijras as marginalized, inferiorized and historically subalternized subjects in Indian casteist, patriarchal, homonormative structure attain new understanding of identity with their autobiographical narratives. By employing both personal and collective subjectivities in their personal narratives, they successfully offer a political and socio-historical protest.

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Chapter 3

Marathi Dalit Women's Autobiographical Narratives: A Foundational Voice

The emergence of Marathi Dalit women's autobiographical narratives in the wake of the development of the Ambedkarite counterpublics in the later part of the twentieth century can be seen as self-narratives which offer a site where there is an intersection of autobiography and history. The arrival of these autobiographies, first in Marathi and later in English translations, open up a new space where the larger issues of aesthetics and epistemology can be contested. This include the issues related to the genre of Dalit women's autobiography, Indian literary historiography, the issues of gender and caste, Dalit feminism, a critique of Brahmanic hegemony, etc. Dalit women's autobiographies studied in this chapter offer a foundational subaltern voice of Dalit women, and their autobiographical selves.

This chapter offers a study of two Dalit women's autobiographical narratives: Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*, Trans. Maya Pandit), and Urmila Pawar (*The Weave of My Life*, Trans. Maya Pandit). The life-writings of Kamble and Pawar traverse the domain of Dalit autobiographies, and women's autobiographical writings with their own poetics and politics. Both these autobiographical narratives affirm a voice of 'differentness' - to use Arjun Dangle's term. The 'differentness' of these two autobiographical narratives forms new aesthetics of Dalit women's autobiographical narratives with a search of new subaltern epistemology in which all human relations are restructured, and the idea of 'literariness' is different : "...Dalit literature is deeply immersed in life's struggle. The Dalit world is filled with dreadful, terrible, humiliating events. Dalit writers cannot escape being tied physically and mentally to this world. Dalit writers are doing the difficult work of portraying this life, through personal experience

and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility. To live this life is painful enough; it can be equally painful to recreate it on the mental level, Dalit writers are deeply involved in this process (Jadhav 1992:303). The autobiographical narratives of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar move in the direction of reading life stories that radically challenge all foundational positions and assert the subaltern voice of the narrator-protagonist.

I

The Prisons We Broke

Baby Kondiba Kamble, better known as Baby Kamble (1929-2012) is one of the earliest Dalit women writers and activists, whose *Jina Amucha* (1986) has been hailed as a path breaking autobiographical narrative ever written by any Dalit women writers in Indian languages. Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* (2008) is an English translation of her Marathi autobiography *Jina Amucha* by Maya Pandit. *Jina Amucha* was first serialized in Marathi magazine in *Stree* in 1984. Having been translated into Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, French and Spanish over the years, *Jinna Amucha* has carved a niche into the Indian (Dalit) autobiographies in general and Indian (Dalit) women's autobiographies in particular. The text opens up a new critical debate in the field of Indian autobiographical studies. It offers a radical detour from the traditional autobiographical narratives which foregrounded the upper caste/class Indian male and female selves in different Indian languages including English. Being located into one colonial caste ruled village of Maharashtra, the narrative of *The Prisons We Broke* offers a challenge to many of our autobiographical conventions concerning form and content of autobiographical writings. It offers a challenge to the conventional idea of autobiographical self that is (male) dominated, individual, linear, teleological, and self-affirming in nature. The narrative of Baby Kamble's autobiography offers a possibility of

growing up of the new Dalit woman's self that has historically been subalternized within patriarchal, casteist Indian society. The Dalit woman's self that emerges in the autobiographical narrative of Kamble is radical, path breaking, and deconstructive in essence. It seeks to radicalize all human relationships present in Indian society while offering the possibility of liberal, humanitarian, democratic and egalitarian relationships among people in Indian context. The text opens up the doors of Dalit subaltern autobiographical genre with special reference to Dalit women, the new genre within which the personal and collective Dalit self can be interrogated, reexamined, and restructured.

The autobiographical narrative of *The Prisons We Broke* traces out the life journey of the protagonist-narrator as a poor Dalit girl born in a lower caste Mahar family within Indian caste structure in a village named Veergaon, a village in the Purnder taluka in Pune district, Maharashtra. The bildungsroman narrative of the text maps out Babytai's search for identity as a Dalit woman within Indian casteist society in general and Dalit patriarchy in particular. Having been influenced by the rise of Ambedkarite movement during her lifetime, the autobiographical narrator offers a rereading of Dalit past in the light of Ambedkarite vision to challenge the uppercaste hegemony, hierarchy and power in Indian culture. The deliberate choice of the autobiographical genre to tell the story of her self and the self of the entire Dalit community creates a possibility for the subaltern people to have personal, political self in the world where the very idea of self for the subaltern is very often mocked at and annihilated. The present text is an important document in the tradition of Marathi Dalit women's autobiographical writing. It sets an example and opens up doors for many Dalit women to pen their experience of formation of self in Brahmanic caste structure in society. Baby Tai without any sophisticated educational qualifications enters into the realm of literature that presumes high level intellectual, literary and linguistic sophistication from a writer. Kamble in her personal narrative, to express the Dalit world, challenges the hegemony of the upper caste/class

Marathi language by introducing the Dalit oral tradition with its neologism, and break with syntactic structure. With her Dalitist-subaltern stance she also challenges caste-ridden filed of mainstream Indian autobiography.

The Prisons We Broke (2009) is an affective outburst of anger and historical pathos. Baby Kamble foregrounds the life of the Mahar community in the pre-Ambedkar era and highlights the change that came with the emergence of Ambedkarite counterpublics. The autobiographical narrative of Baby Tai revolves around the inevitable sufferings of her village Veeragaon in the western Maharashtra due to the Brahmanic institution of caste. The present narrative is a narrative about female protagonist Baby Tai on the one hand and her umbilical ties with her Mahar community on the other hand. The entire autobiographical narrative portrays two major plights: the plight of Dalit women and the plight of Dalit community. As it happens with many Dalit narratives, the personal becomes collective and political in Baby Tai's narrative too. The narrative depicts Baby Kamble's position as a Dalit person within caste system on the one hand and her position as a woman within patriarchal Dalit household. Thus, the position of double marginalization for a Dalit woman in Indian society is aptly described in the narrative.

The narrative of *The Prisons We Broke* is replete with memories of childhood miseries and wretchedness, memories of food and hunger, memories of caste, culture and labour, memories of humiliation at the hands of high caste Hindus, memories of domination and later resistance with the arrival of Ambedkar on social, political arena, memories of gender subordination and gender discrimination in consumption of food and above all memories of household - the plight of young married girls, daughter-in-laws, tyranny of husbands and mother-in-laws, domestic violence etc. Firmly rooted into the Ambedkarite ideology and movement, Kamble's narrative takes political framework and presents a critique of Hinduism and its caste structure. The narrative underlines knowledge-power relationship as it emerges in

Brahmanic epistemic framework and the narrator believes that it is generations of illiteracy thrown on untouchables which is responsible for their rotten condition in present time. The entire narrative is centered on the experience of ‘humiliation’- the term which has occupied central space in Dalit discourse. It is not simply Dalit body which is humiliated but the entire Dalit existence is humiliated within Brahmanic epistemic and ontological framework.

The Prisons We Broke is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence arising out of Hindu caste system in which the Dalits have lived for generations. It is at the same time a narrative that is born out of the emergence of Phuleite-Ambedkarite conterpublic in Maharashtra in post-Ambedkar era. The narrative is one of the earliest contribution to Dalit feminism and forms what can be called ‘Dalit women’s autobiographical tradition’ having its own aesthetics.

Spread into twelve chapters, the narrative of the autobiography unveils Baby Tai’s childhood experiences -her growing up in Mahar community in her village with her grandparents, her experiences at schools when she goes to live with her parents, her growing interest in the Ambedkarite movement with the rise of Dr. Ambedkar as an icon of Dalit struggle, and later her attaining a sense of Dalit woman’s self that helps her present a critique of twofold patriarchy-caste and gender- in Indian cultural context. While defining the term ‘Mahar’ and its relationship with ‘Maharashtra’, Baby Tai asserts the Mahars as the original inhabitants of the land of Maharashtra. In the narrative she argues that their memories of humiliation and enslavement are precious and must be narrated to develop a sense of understanding of past for the future generations. The sense of the past is also achieved by the narrator by looking at it with a sense of pride for the indefatigable Dalit culture which despite all kinds of oppression, humiliations and pain stand erect; and also by interrogating and critiquing epistemological structures of Hindu religion in general and socio-political foundations of caste system and Dalit patriarchy in particular.

The narrative of *The Prisons We Broke* can be examined with special reference to 1) the memories of Baby Tai focusing on Veergaon and Maharwada as geographical space, 2) the autobiographer's memories of the household, 3) Baby Tai's memories of the life cycle of household in Maharwada, 4) her memories of food and starvation, 5) memories of caste humiliation and gender subordination, and 6) memories of narrator's participation in Ambedkarite movement and the idea of Dalit resistance and Dalit vision.

Baby Tai's Veergaon, a small Mahar village in western Maharashtra, becomes the microcosm of the entire Dalit world of the country in general and the Dalit of Maharashtra in particular. The geographical space of the village and Maharwada in the narrative structures the limited space in which the Mahars- the Dalit- are born, grow up, and die. The Dalit experience that emerges from the cultural space of Veergaon is highly controlled by the hegemonic power structures of the village. The village has been divided into the upper caste space occupied by the Patils. Brahmins and other upper caste communities; and into the Maharwada occupied by the Mahars and other lower caste people of the village. Kamble describes how the ideology of caste succinctly operates with the division of the village space demarcated as the 'pure' and the 'impure' living spaces in which people from different castes live and move. The distinct spaces for the caste people and the untouchables constantly oozes out the feeling of humiliation and subordination in the mantle make-up of the Mahars. The Mahars as individuals are not supposed to transcend the *lakshman rekha* drawn by the upper caste people. Any attempts of transgressing the line certainly invites violent response from the other side. Thus, space in the present narrative appears as culturalized phenomenon, and not merely a geography or socially neutral space. It is hierarchically ordered.

Baby Kamble narrates a number of tricks used by the caste people to control the movement of the poor Mahar people in the village, and thereby the touch and sight of the untouchables. Since the Mahars of the village work for the upper caste people and for generations have been doomed to be associated with dirt, dust, and the dead; and other unclean and unhygienic works, they are treated as the moving contaminator. The entire set up of the village is made to avoid the untouchable's touch and sight. Referring to the architecture of the brahmin's house, Kamble observes:

“Each house in the lane had a chest-high platform, like a wall, to prohibit the Mahars from directly reaching the door. The Maher woman would stand in the far off corners of the platform and call out, “Kaki, firewood!” (54).

In return, the Kaki would throw money to the Maher woman to avoid any kind of contact. When at upper caste shopkeeper's shop, a Maher woman has to maintain a specific distance to buy consumer items. The language used by the Maher woman does reflect the caste difference and low dignity of the Dalit woman:

“Appasab, could you please give this despicable Maher woman some shikakai for one paisa...” (13).

The shopkeeper's child is also addressed with utter respect to save him or her from any type of pollution:

“Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted” (14).

The idea of purity-pollution is so strictly observed that even the mobility of Dalit children is also restricted and controlled when they enter the upper caste space:

“These idiots Mahar women!...why do you bring these brats along? They’ll touch things and pollute everything. Tell them to sit quietly” (55).

When a Mahar woman errs somewhere, she is reprimanded by the upper caste person:

“... You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn’t it? ... Your parents belong to the Kolhati caste? Don’t they have this custom of bowing down before the master of their village? (53).

The humiliation and exploitation is so naturalized in Dalit community that every Mahar man and woman that the elders of the family themselves expect the younger ones to follow the customs of the village.

Baby Kamble in her self-narrative succinctly shows that within Brahmanic caste system, Dalit body is not only controlled, but treated as devoid of any spiritual meaning, hence meaningless and worthless. Gopal Guru in his essay, “Experience, Space, and Justice” remarks that the untouchable’s body as space doubled up as both corporal substance and its shadow. The untouchable’s body and its shadow worked in tandem to produce a humiliating experience for the former (Guru 2017:81). Everything related to Dalit body and self is insignificant and immoral. Since good birth within Hindu religious system is attained by previous life’s good karma, the birth of the Dalit- the untouchable- is treated with contempt, repugnance and hatred, because the very birth of the Dalit has followed his bad karma of the past life. The otherization of Dalit body within Brahmanic epistemology helps to create relationship of constant marginalization and the condition of perennial servitude for the Dalits.

Baby Kamble in her narrative refers to the Dalit space in the village. The Dalit space known as chawdi operates as the public space for the Dalits in a village which is mostly occupied by the upper caste people. Chawdi is both secular and spiritual for the Dalits. It is a

place where Dalit men and women can move freely and talk freely and can enjoy an air of freedom and unrestricted life. It is a place where there is no panoptic eye watching over them and controlling them. Chawdi in Baby Kamble's narrative emerges as a floating signifier with unlimited signifieds. It is a place for an inner expression of Dalit self, a place for social affiliation, religious participation, superstitious performance, spiritual aspiration, and political discussion. It is a place where Dalit women can equally participate with other folks of the community. Chawdi as a space is relatively open, democratic and dynamic as compared to the Dalit household which is patriarchal, exploitative, and male dominating. Chawdi as a space played a very important role in catering Ambedkar's thoughts to the exploited Dalit mass. Chawdi became an epicenter in propagating and promoting Ambedkar's social and political thoughts and movement. Thus, chawdi in Kamble's narrative emerges as an ideological space where true Dalit imagination emerges. Gradually chawdi becomes a modern space with adoption of modern vocabulary of social justice, equality, self-respect and dignity as against the Brahmanic vocabulary of caste, capitalism and feudalism. Chawdi is linked with the Dalit struggle to liberate themselves from the rigid spaces created within caste structure.

Babytai in her narrative reveals two contrasting structures of the Patil chawdi and the Mahar chawdi. Mahars depicted in the narrative are those people who have been historically pushed out of the main village, beyond the Gaonthan (physical boundaries). Babytai refers to them as Veskar Mahars. A Mahar known as a Yeshkar is a person who waits upon the Patil's chawdi for the whole day and will do any kind of work assigned by the Patil. The Yeshkar always possessing a stick with a bell in his hand has to announce his presence lest the upper caste people get polluted with the shadow of his body. The sound of the bell heralds the entry of the untouchable dait in the upper caste chawdi, Thus, the Mahar presence, even his voice is always seen as polluting. Since the Mahar are associated with the dirty and laboring jobs (cleaning the sheet of the upper caste people, performing duties towards the dead people and

the dead animals, tanning the skin of dead animals, taking away the garbage pit, cleaning the pandal after the upper caste marriage etc.), the entire body posture of the Mahar is controlled. Kamble has effectively shown how the Mahar “had to stand with his back bent all the while and greet anybody who happened to pass that way, including children! He had to bend down, till his palms together to say, and touch his head with his palm joined in salutation” (78). Babytai has paradoxically also shown how the shadow of the untouchable Mahar operates as a powerful space that can regulate the movement of the upper-caste body. Babytai mocks at the mythification of the Yeskar’s stick in Mahar community as it is worshipped with haldi and kumkum and prayer is offered to it by the Mahars.

Space for the Mahars appears as a culturalized phenomenon. It is controlling, enclosed, and divided site, hence hierarchical. It has its own epistemological implications in the lives of the Mahars. Indian Brahmanic system of space in village India has entailed two divisions of “two mutually connected and yet culturally exclusive social space: agrahara (the puritan inner) and the cheri, the untouchables’ ghetto (the impure exterior)” (Guru 2017: 86). Kamble’s autobiography suggests the ideological and epistemological division of space into the sacred (*agrahara*) and the profane (untouchables’s *Maharwada*). She shows how her father’s body in particular and the Dalit body in general defined two mutually exclusive spheres of the *agrahara* and the Dalit ghetto. Outside the *Maharwada* the speech power of her father is lost and he has to communicate with the bell tied at the top of the stick that he was supposed to carry as a Mahar. As soon as her father enters *Maharwada* his body would become flexible, relaxed and speech would return. Here, he would enjoy power over the ghetto and home. Thus, Dalit subjectivity emerges out of this very complex process of space. Regarding two different configurations of space enjoyed by the Dalits, Gopal Guru rightly observes that the “Brahmanical rule not only controlled the social space but also turned the untouchable body into a cultural space that pushed the untouchable into shadow during the daytime” (*ibid.*). Thus,

Baby Kamble in her autobiographical narrative effectively brings out this dynamic between the puritan agrahara and the impure Dalitwadas and the Dalit struggle to achieve the modern space with the arrival of Ambedkar.

Ambedkar argues that it is not the space that is the source of humiliation; it is just the manifestation of indignity (Khairmode 1990: 67). The restricted Dalit space allotted to the Dalits within Brahmanic religious structure disowns and creates a condition of utter humiliation and indignation for the Dalits of India. The cultural hierarchy emanating from the caste creates the discriminatory structure in which neither vertical nor horizontal mobility is granted to the Dalits. Kamble shows how Hindu public spaces of the village are closed to the untouchables. Thus, the idea of space for the Dalits remains stagnant, claustrophobic and fixed. Baby Kamble's imagination of space in her autobiography is based on the Ambedkarite imagination of India which is egalitarian, and democratic: and which prioritizes self-respect and social justice over self-rule in the colonial context.

Like many other autobiographies, Baby Kamble's autobiography also begins in the childhood, but it does not have the typical bildungsroman development in narrative. The personal of Baby Kamble gets assimilated with the collective Dalit self of the community; the personal woman-self of Kamble too becomes a part of the collective Dalit women's selves. The entire narrative in the initial chapters of the text focuses on Kamble's growing up at her grandparents' home with her elder brother Babu in the Maharwada of Veergaon. Kamble's father is a contractor who generally remains out of the village for his work, hence, her Aai stays with her parents- Baby Kamble's grandparents. Babytai's grandfather who worked as a butler in the British army is the only educated man in the village. His earning of sixteen rupees a month is an envy for the entire community.

Kamble's exploration of childhood offers an opportunity to delve deep into some critical questions regarding the use of memory in the genre of autobiography. As seen in chapter two, memory in autobiography operates at both at personal and collective levels. The collective memory of the family members and the villagers too becomes a part and parcel of the memory of the protagonist-narrator in autobiography. Hence, in *The Prisons We Broke* other people's memories become Kamble's memory and the narrative starts before the birth of the protagonist-narrator. The narrator-protagonist succinctly recalls the incident of her early childhood when she is declared dead and is about to be buried. When all of a sudden she regains consciousness, a big cock is buried in pit to appease Kalubai-the goddess. This incident reveals the presence of superstitions that exit in the lives of the Dalit people of her time.

Though the narrative otherwise portrays the impoverished condition of the Maharwada, Baby Tai humbly, when at grandparents' home, remembers her silken dress and silver earrings, nose rings, anklets and the silver adornments on her plait that gave her special look in the Maharwada. Baby Tai's father Pandharinath appears in the narrative as an avatar of 'Lord Kama- the generous' for his philanthropic nature, but the father-mother relationship does not transcend the patriarchal structure of the Dalit community. Though Baby Tai does not elaborately narrate her parents' conjugal life, she does mention that how her mother and father as opposite poles and, "how one Pandarinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her...locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage...My aai must have felt so oppressed, suffocated!" (5-6).The father's philanthropic nature is contrasted with the mother's realistic approach to life and financial matters.

One of the childhood games that Baby Tai refers to in her narration throws light on the Dalit child's socialization within caste hierarchies. Baby Tai remembers how they all in their childhood imitated the upper-caste women with their typical casteist treatment to the low caste

women. A long piece of white cloth that was used to cover a dead body of the upper caste would be used as a saree. She describes the pitiful play of Mahar girls with outburst in this way:

“A lengthy piece would be given to the young daughter who would be related to get it. She would drape it around herself in various styles and perform a kind of fashion show. One moment she would drape it around her shoulder like a Brahmin kaki and imitate her accent, ‘Hey you, Mahar woman, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don’t touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion’. The next moment she would be a Gurjar woman, draping the pallav in the Gujarati style, and finally, a Mahar daughter-in-law, pulling the pallav from head down to her nose. ... they, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery. It was on the Mahar’s labour that these idle parasites lived. The condition of the Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, those beasts of burden, who slogged all their life for a handful of dry grass” (88).

The childhood of the Mahar girls in particular and Mahar children in general gets contrasted with the romantic notion of childhood enjoyed by the upper caste children in the mainstream writings. The Mahar children rolled in mud, and snot-dripping noses generate a picture of utter degeneration of the people as human beings. Kamble’s autobiographical narrative in every way deconstructs any idealized, universalized notion of childhood devoid of any difficulties in the lap of parents and other family members. The Dalit childhood on every step is a site of hardship, struggle, and suffering.

The autobiographical narrative describes the Maharwada, the residential quarters of the Mahars on the outskirts of the village during the colonial period, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. The Maharwada emerges as a symbol of poverty, destitution and epidemics. The detailed description of the Maharwada with its houses plastered with mud, clay chulha, clay

pots, a wooden pali, a tawa, wooden katwat for rolling the dough, and a tin for turning the bhakri while baking it contrasts with the pucca houses and other utensils of the upper caste people with chest high platforms. The narrator describes that above the *chul* (fireplace) hung the *valni*- the rope on which the skins of dead animals would be dried. The humorous description of the *valni* can be contrasted with *janeu*- the sacred thread of the brahmins and some other upper caste people. The contrasting nature of these two different threads- one holy and the other polluted- evoke very complex symbolism on which casteism is based. The carnal, physical utility of the ‘Mahar thread’ is contrasted with the spiritual, metaphysical affiliations of the Brahmin thread. The casteism of India creates a condition of humiliation and stigma for the Mahars for their caste association with the whole work of tanning the dead bodies of animals. The emerging binarism between the *janeu* and the *valni* refers to two unequal professional qualifications and qualities of the upper castes and the Dalits respectively within the caste structure. *Valni* is associated with the dead, hence impure, polluted, and stigmatized; while *janeu* is associated with the spiritual, hence pure, sacred, and idealized.

Baby Kamble in her narrative refers to what the sociologist M. N. Srinivas terms ‘the process of Sanskritization’. Sanskritization is a process by which the lower castes in the caste hierarchy follow the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes seeking upward mobility. One can observe the process of Sanskritization taking place as the Mahars are seen worshipping so many gods and goddesses like the upper caste Hindus. The process of Sanskritization can also be perceived in Mahar woman’s latent wish of living like a Brahmin woman. The irony of the Mahar is that despite their worshipping of Hindu gods and goddesses, they are not accepted in the fold of larger Hindu community, but are constantly seen as polluter and hence, humiliated, excommunicated, and exorcised. An upper caste woman would say: “Hey, you, Mahar woman, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don’t talk anything, You will pollute

us and our gods and religion" (80). Deploring the horrid state of the Mahar community, and critiquing the idol worship of the Mahars, Kamble comments:

“...What kind of life did these people really lead? What was there worth living for? Generations for generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery” (11).

Baby Tai gives a very detailed description of the celebration in the month of Ashadh and its spiritual importance for the untouchables. The month of Ashadh is normally considered to be inauspicious in mainstream upper caste Hindu culture. Auspicious ceremonies like marriage, *gruhapravesh*, sacred thread wearing, beginning house construction and many other important functions are postponed due to Ashadh. But ironically, for the Mahars the same month of Ashadh is more auspicious than Ashwin and Kartik when Diwali comes. The month of Ashadh is the month of ritual baths, house cleaning, polishing of floors with dung. Baby Tai sees the month of Ashadh as an antidote to the horrible curse on the Mahars for all eleven months. One of such rituals is connected with the eldest son of the family who is offered to deity and becomes *vaghya* or *potraja*. The eldest boy's turning into a *potraja* ironically shows the miserable condition of the Dalit people because the ritual prepares the boy for his conventional job- the begging for alms in the village for the family. This also contrasts with the Brahmanic ritual of the initiation of a male child of the family who goes to the gurukul to get education. The rituals depicted in the narrative also reveal women's superstitions, suffering, pain, and misery. Many women get possessed during the ritual time and invite awe and respect from other community members including their husbands temporarily. Baby Tai not only describes the Mahar rituals and beliefs, but presents a critique of them in the light of her anti-caste and anti-patriarchal stance that she takes in the autobiographical narrative. The narrative has long descriptions of something common as uncommon. The shampooing experience of women, which is in other ways very common, becomes very uncommon and important event

for Baby Tai and other Dalit women of the Maharwada. The narrative also offers two contradictory symbolism of Poonam- the full moon- (the upper caste Brahmanic symbol) and Amavasya- the new moon- (Dalit symbol) to assert two different lives lived by two different groups of people belonging to one religion. Baby Tai's anguish is seen in her address to the custodians of Hindu philosophy who have discarded millions of people as untouchables and nonliving entities. She piteously describes the collective condition of the Mahars:

“ Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditons possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts... We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on” (18).

Memories of food, hunger and starvation form the important part of every Dalit narrative. The Dalit life's umbilical relationship with hunger and starvation and perennial craving for food has its roots in the caste structure of Indian society which Kamble unfolds in her autobiographical narrative. The impoverished condition of the Dalits should not be read as an outcome of economic disaster within a given society, but a moral, spiritual and epistemological failure of the entire Hindu society. The stories narrated from the past memories present a gruesome picture of Hindu society in which millions of people remained historically impoverished, hungry and starved because of the social structure in which they were born. When the announcement of food share is made in the *chawdi* at certain occasions, Kamble describes, “people would literally pounce upon their share. Children jumped up and down to snatch food from their parents' hands” (29).

At *Rede jatra*- an extremely important event considered to be a gift the Mahars had received directly from Indra, the king of gods- a buffalo is sacrificed and distributed among twenty-five odd houses in the Maharwada and the mangwada. The memories of the feast lasts

for the whole year and the next year's buffalo sacrifice is awaited. Baby Kamble in her narrative does not seem to be celebrating such sacrificial ceremonies, rather she presents a critique of such sacrifices which she treats as superstitions. But the irony of the Dalit life is that only such sacrifices in the form of ceremony provide them belly full food once a year. While presenting a critique of such gory rituals, Kamble asks some biting questions to the upper caste Hindus:

“The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions.

The upper caste had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge... Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully... We never rebelled against you, did we?... You considered cow holy; we never insulted her, did we? ” (37).

Kamble, here, links the presence of superstitions in Dalit community with illiteracy among them which is resultant of the unequal relationship between the upper castes and lower castes in Indian caste structure. At the same her narrative forecasts the future rebel on the part of the Dalit community with the arrival of Dr. Ambedkar. Kamble's understanding of her own society also explains the working of Foucauldian knowledge-power relationship in Indian society. The hold on knowledge by the upper castes by systematic exclusion of the shudras and later the untouchables create a structure of unequal relationship in which ‘the literate and the illiterate’, ‘the cultured and the uncultured’, ‘the civilized and the uncivilized’ constantly appear before each other as masters and slaves, the rulers and the ruled, the colonizers and the colonized. Kamble in her narrative throws light on the postcolonial understanding of colonization of cultures through appropriation of knowledge tools and using them against the colonized to represent them to benefit the colonizers. Thus, the lack of education because of access to education creates a condition for the Dalits in which they are constantly inferiorised, humiliated and oppressed.

The other memories of food, hunger and starvation include the early morning tea with leftover bread from the yesterday night, the fermented curry that the children receive as alms in the village, the eating of mud in place of jaggery, eating dried meat, feasting on onions with dried *bhakri*, having decaying food, and eating dead animals in the time of epidemics among the cattle. For the Mahars there is no work except begging for food in the village and the humiliating jobs they do at the upper caste people's homes. Kamble's childhood games too include begging, fetching water, collecting firewood for the upper castes, pretending grinding grain and bathing. The boys become potrajas and boys and girls in a procession walk all over the place where people go to defecate. The condition of untouchables was worse than the animals. Kamble observes:

“We ate the left overs without complaining and labored for others. The only difference, however, was that the beasts could eat a bellyful and they could stay in their masters' courtyards. But our condition was far worse. Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste... We had to fight with cats and dogs and kites and vultures to establish our right over the carcasses, to tear the flesh from the dead bodies” (49).

Thus, Kamble's memories of food, hunger and starvation are heart penetrating and pose a number of epistemological questions regarding the emergence of Dalit lives in general and Dalit self in particular that help the reader understand the real causes of the devastating condition of the Dalits in society.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is one of those few autobiographical narratives that offers a very strong critique of caste humiliation within Hindu Brahmanic caste structure on the one hand, and gender subordination within the fold of Dalit patriarchy on the other hand. The autobiographical narrative opens up a new vision of feminism in the Indian context which

prioritizes and foregrounds the issues of the most marginalized- the Dalit women subalterns- among women folks. The narrative of Kamble's life challenges many stereotyped understanding regarding the idea of self- the autobiographical self in general, and the Dalit woman's self in particular- in relation to caste and gender formations in Indian society.

Anupama Rao believes that caste relations are embedded in the Dalit woman's profoundly unequal access to resources of basic survival such as water and sanitation facilities, as well as educational institutions, public places, and places of religious worship. On the other hand, the material deprivation of dalis and their political powerlessness perpetuate the symbolic structures of untouchability, which legitimizes the upper caste's access to Dalit women for sexual exploitation (Kumar 2012:218). Kamble's autobiographical narrative is replete with a number of examples of caste and gender discrimination from personal and collective Dalit lives. Kamble refers to the fact that the Mahar community is a part of the *balutedari* and received lands called the *Mahar watan*, which were allocated to the entire community. But the lands are inadequate and infertile to support the Mahar community, hence, the entire community becomes dependent on the upper caste people of the village. The casteist discrimination in allocation of land is one of the major blows to Dalit community in economic and social terms. The acquisition of property in the form of land by the Patils and other upper caste people not only subordinates the Dalit people, but strengthens both economic and political feudalism in rural settings.

The effect of caste begins with controlling of Dalit body and mind as objects made for the upper castes. At Patil's *chawdi*, a Dalit woman is supposed to supplicate and repeat the customary salutation "Johar Mai-Baap" ("I salute you as my mother and father") three times. The caste humiliation of Dalit women is also seen in their clothing. The entire Dalit clothing culture is influenced by caste rules. In casteist society, wearing clothes is a social norm and Dalit men and women having been deprived of clothes in front of others feel constant

embarrassment and humiliation. The Mahar Yeshkar's clothes are made of shroud. A lengthy piece would be given to the young daughter to use as a sari. Unlike the upper caste women, Dalit women wear a long cloth made of some rags stitched together. Kamble remembers that a sari had to be long, so the women had to stitch many pieces together till the piece attained the length of a sari." (16). There are caste rules even for how one tucks the pleats. Mahar women have to tuck them in such a way that the borders remain hidden. Only high caste women have the privilege of wearing the saris with the borders visible to all.

A Dalit woman experiences caste humiliation at every stage in her life. While going for selling firewood, Dalit women are not allowed to use the regular path used by caste people. They are supposed to make themselves "as inconspicuous as possible, hiding themselves from others" (54). Regarding this Kamble notes:

"When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside. They had to cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher caste coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, 'The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master' (52).

When some mistake is done in salutation, a great uproar is made by the upper caste men in the Mahar chawdi:

"...who the hell is that new girl? Doesn't she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?... You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn't it?" (53).

The Mahar woman is in return heavily reprimanded by the in-laws: What does she know about our customs! Impudent bitch! They are our masters, do you understand? We must behave according to our custom, that's our religion!" (54).

Casteism in Indian society operates at many levels. There is what can be termed as 'subcasteism' (castes within castes) among the Mahars. Baby Kamble in her narrative problematizes not only the caste relationships between the upper castes and the Mahars, but also the caste relationships among the Mahars. The Mahars too appear as hierarchized community in the narrative. With a tone of irony and humour Kamble refers to casteism within the Mahars. According to Kamble the Mahars of the sixteenth share holds a prestigious position in the Mahar community. The Mahars of the sixteenth share enjoy more prerogatives and benefits as compared to other Mahars. They have higher status in marriage, receive so many *bhakharis* from the village in return of their duties, perform a *jatra* during every full moon and Amavasya, sacrifice a goat during the *jatra*, work as fortunetellers and medicine men, have a platform for the gods on higher place, possess idols of gods from far off places and perform so many rituals, the liver, kidney and such other delicacies go to their part at the time of feast, and their daughters-in-law would remain busy because their men would bring home a lot of meat.

In addition to caste discrimination, the Mahar women also suffer from gender discrimination for their being a part of the Dalit patriarchy. This position of double marginalization helps many Dalit theorists and critics to draw a parallel between the position of Black women in American white racist and Black patriarchal societies on the one hand, and the position of the Dalit women in Brahmanic casteist society and Dalit patriarchy on the other hand.

Regarding Mahar women's obedience to the traditional symbols of Hinduism, Baby Tai sarcastically says:

“We are very protective about the kumkum on our foreheads. For the sake of the kumkum mark, we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands...if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her. It’s another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering” (41).

These statements of Baby Tai offer a critique of existing patriarchy within the Dalit society on the one hand, and the caste structure on the other hand. This is also an example of the process of Sanskritization which encourages the subjugated subjects to follow their rulers’ behavioural patterns.

Kamble has minutely observed the motherhood of Dalit women in the narrative. Devoid of any romantic meaning, the motherhood for the Dalit woman is full of hardship, struggle and suffering. The idea of Dalit motherhood is deromanticised with the description of mothers who “go hungry...labour pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by onlookers’ nails, ever- gnawing hunger...” (60), and Dalit mothers looking like ‘proverbial black cow who can survive even on thorns’ (58). Kamble mocks at permanent motherhood of Dalit women and the Brahmanic belief that goddess Satwai (Saraswati) and god Barma (Brahma) come to write fate of the child. Anger of Kamble as a Dalit woman and mother is expressed with her minute observation about the fate of Dalit children and the futility of fate writing ritual: “Didn’t all babies in the Mahar community share the same fate?” (62) A Mahar or Dalit baby has no individual fate, but collective fate. The reproductive labour of women and the repeated motherhood experience till the woman reaches menopause is seen ironically by Kamble. She links it with Mahar women’s inner strength to withstand all calamities. In Kamble’s narrative the Dalit woman appears as a slave enslaved by Dalit men who too are slaves. The daughters-in-law appear as slaves in the narrative. In chapter 8 and 9 of the text, Kamble exhaustively deal with the idea of “Mahar woman” in Hindu caste society and Dalit patriarchy. A girl about

the age of eight or nine becomes a daughter-in-law. For Kamble marriage means “chaos, a lot of hustle and bustle... for eight days...nothing but calamity” (87, 93). The Brahmanic casteism is experienced when the Brahmin priest performs the wedding ceremony from a distance for fear of pollution” (87). When they try to escape the domestic torture, they meet the same fate at their fathers’ and brothers’ hands. Kamble mentions a few inhuman practices performed by the in-laws. They include domestic violence like tying girl’s foot in wooden log, chopping off her nose, thrashing her head and back, and infesting mannerism like drawing her pallav forward from the forehead down to the nose.

Dalit women’s songs of daily life, children and marriage ceremony become a part of the narrative and express the Dalit women’s hopes and conviction for bright future. For Kamble they are the songs of aspirations, and dreams which would never materialize. Babytai also lengthily narrates the incidents of possessed women during the time of festivals which for her were performances. The behaviour of the possessed women reveal their hidden pain, frustration and the present possessed condition as an outlet to get some relief. Despite the fact that *The Prisons We Broke* is a serious narrative about the suffering and plight the Dalit face collectively, it never misses a touch of irony and humour. Baby Kamble has at times both ironically and humorously depicted Dalit men and women’s struggle for existence, identity and meaning in life. She uses understatement to highlight the plight of the Dalit people. Regarding the position of the Mahar daughters-in-law she says:

“The Mahar daughters-in-law experienced one comfort, however. There were no pots in the house to clean and no clothes to wash, because there were not even rags” (95).

The Prisons We Broke is perhaps the earliest autobiographical narratives by a Dalit woman writer which is completely set into the emerging Ambedkarite counter-public in the

colonial and postcolonial India. It clearly accepts the Ambedkarite influence in the shaping of the protagonist-narrator's self in the narrative and hopes to build up new Dalit vision of egalitarian Indian society based on the principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity. It is one of those earliest socio-political literary documents that revisits the question of caste and Dalit identity using the genre of autobiography and deconstructs it. It attempts to set up new Dalit aesthetics in the field of autobiography by using the Dalit oral tradition with its neologism, Dalit parlance, and break with syntactic structure. By doing so, Kamble expresses the Dalit world and challenges the hegemony of the upper caste/class Marathi language. At the end of the narrative, Kamble along with many other Dalit women emerges as an independent Dalit woman with her own Dalit subaltern identity and presents a critique of the general portrayal of Dalit women as passive "victims of the lust of the higher caste men and never as rebels to fight against the injustice perpetrated upon them" (Kumar 2010: 219), and Dalit writings set up in patriarchal structure depicting Dalit women "firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimized sexual being'" (Rege 1998: 42). The narrative also offers a critique of Dalit autobiographical narratives written by Dalit males in which "Dalit women make only a guest appearance" (Guru 2009). The narrative addresses those unraised questions about caste, caste and gender, caste-gender and the genre of autobiography which had never been asked before this in the autobiographical tradition of Indian literature.

Uday Kumar observes, "The movement from ascribed to assumed identities recurs in the narrative structure of several Dalit autobiographies" (Kumar 2013:166). It is the emergence of Dr. Ambedkar on the political scene of India that creates an opportunity for socio-political revision of the historicized racial humiliation of the Dalit community and helps a writer like Baby Kamble to challenge the ascribed 'untouchable' identity to achieve the assumed 'Dalit' identity in the narrative. The later part of the text narrates Kamble's participation in the emerging Ambedkarite movement and her role as a member in the emergence of Ambedkarite

counter public. The narrative links the thoughts of Ambedkar with the rise of new modernity in the social sphere of India.

The narrator recalls the first meeting at Jejuri where the family deity of the Mahars is located. Kamble narrates Ambedkar's speech which deconstructs the very foundation of the religious faith of the community which is Brahmanic in essence:

"Generations after generation, our people have paid homage to this god...But did Khandoba see you?...Why have you come after having suffered so? You have no clothes to wear. You have nothing to eat. You have no place to stay! And yet you come here...You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance!...You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god...When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving....Our women...will now give up these superstitions and take a lead in educating their children...Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance...do not eat carcasses any more...This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily... be the first ones to step forward for reform." (64, 65).

Kamble in her narrative shows that the radical thoughts of Ambedkar are not easily accepted by the dalits, but resisted in the beginning. The Mahar *chawdi* becomes a site where Ambedkar's new thoughts are discussed, resisted and adopted. The radical thoughts of Ambedkar are resisted Thus,:

"Stop teaching us this padri knowledge of yours. How dare you ask us to give up our custom of eating dead animals! You are asking us to revolt against the village. Stop preaching us this Christian knowledge" (66).

But Ambedkarism pervades the Mahar community and there enter slow changes in society. Following Ambedkar's clarion call to change the society to get rid of casteist humiliation, children are first sent to school, the customary ritual of eating dead animals is discarded, and resolutions are taken to bring about change in clothes and haircut of girls. The youth changes and the entire Veergaon of Kamble experiences change.

The narrative has some political references, too. It pays tribute to Ambedkar for the introduction of Hindu Code Bill. Kamble shows her gratitude to Ambedkar because it is due to Ambedkar her writing has become possible. Ambedkar is referred to as 'the god of gods' (118) for it is because of him that the age-old suffering of millions of people has been addressed and a hope for the downtrodden people has been created. Kamble's narrative, too, refers to the well-known Ambekdar-Gandhi debate on social reforms. Kamble remembers that at her school how she fights with other girls on Ambedkar-Gandi debate on casteism. At school at Phaltan, Babytai is harassed and humiliated by her upper caste classmates. The caste girls would treat her like 'leapers', would cover their nose and mutter 'chee, chee' when they pass nearby; they are made to sit in the corner, hit with a long ruler and made bend down and hold their toes by the teachers, and are not allowed to touch the taps of the school when they are thirsty. The upper caste students take bath after reaching home, hurl stones at the Dalit girls. The Dalit girls, in return, to take revenge, touch an upper caste woman to get solace. The narrative also mention the historical event of 1927 temple entry of Ambedkar against untouchability.

The autobiographical narrative of Baby Kamble offers a challenge to Brahmanic Hinduism and its entire epistemology with its belief in radical, liberal, and modernist idea of religion based on the principles of Buddhism. It encourages Dalit men and women to break shackles of slavery and usher a revolution. Kamble notes:

“This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. Let three-fourth of our people die in this endeavor, then, at least, the remaining one fourth will be able to live their lives with dignity...I appeal to you, my mothers and sisters, be the first ones to step forward for reform” (65).

Though the narrative does not refer to the personal life of the narrator, it cursorily does mention the effect of Ambedkar’s call for education on Kamle and her children.

The narrative offers both hope for the Dalits in the form of Ambedkar’s radical conversion to Buddhism, and also expresses a sense of grief and despair because the philosophical and ideological values of Ambedkar are under eraser as in recent years Dalits have become victims of the process of Sanskritization. The narrative searches for unity in ‘Bouddha community’ and ends with a sense of urgency to accelerate the speed of change in Dalit community. Kamble remembers herself as a product of the Ambedkarite movement and remembers the active participation of Mahar women in the movement. For Kamble the Ambedkarite Dalit movement yielded three things: humanity, education, and the religion of the Buddha.

Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* as a life writing breaks many conventional narrative patterns of autobiographical narratives. “Life writings as a distinct genre emerged in the West along with bourgeois individualism and cherish the first person “I” in autobiographies” (Naik 2016:17) but this conventional understanding of the genre is problematized in the life writings by Dalit women as “Dalit life narratives challenge the bourgeois genre of autobiography and pull at the boundaries of what are considered the parameters of the life world” Pantawane qtd. in Rege 2006:13). Kamble’s autobiography invokes the communitarian idea of “we” with which the narrator constantly identifies her

individual self. The individual “I” of the narrator-protagonist gets merged with the collective, communitarian “we”. The lived experiences of the narrator get pluralized and vice-versa. Kamble’s narrative prioritizes “we” over “I” and opens up a new understanding of self- the Dalit, subaltern and woman. Kamble writes: “our people rooted...we kept believing...we may be...we have been...this land of our birth...it is we...you played with our lives...we may have lost everything, but never truth” (37). This does not mean that the self and subjectivity of Dalit woman gets subsumed or eclipsed under the broader collective “we” of the Dalit community. The self of the narrator gets an additional dimension as self-identity gets anchored within the collective, communitarian identity. At the structural level one may find shift between personal “I” and collective “we”, but this shift helps the Dalit woman writer to raise the socio-political issues with force and more moral determination. The title of the autobiographical narrative, *The Prisons We Broke* also sets the narrative structure of the memoir. The “I” of the Dalit individual integrally associated with the “we” of the community because without “we”, “I” does not exist at all.

To conclude, Kamble as a Dalit woman writer certainly writes differently from the available autobiographical tradition of the West and India. Writing a tale of pain, suffering, and humiliation of the subaltern people with a new hope for them in future is a challenging task that Baby Kamble performs quite successfully.

II

The Weave of My Life

Urmila Pawar (1945-) is one of those significant dalit women writers after Baby Kamble in Marathi language whose memoirs, *Aaydan* (2003), translated into English as *The Weave of My Life* (2008) by Maya Pandit, has given dalit women's autobiographical narratives not only greater visibility and acceptance, but also aesthetic and political meanings. Unlike Kamble's autobiographical narrative *The Prisons We Broke*, which may be considered an earliest attempt of voicing and foregrounding dalit-subaltern women's consciousness through literature, Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* can be seen as a text that makes a very powerful attempt towards developing what can be termed as 'peripheral aesthetics' in Indian literary tradition in general and Indian autobiographical tradition in particular. While Kamble's text is more of a socio-biography as it basically records the struggles and change of the Mahar community under the Ambedkarite philosophy, Pawar's text is an autobiographical narrative (the translator uses the term 'memoirs') weaving the life experiences of a single individual with the collective experience of the Dalit community of the village. The text presents an ardent critique of caste structure of Brahmanic Hindu tradition and advocates for new casteless society based on the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar. The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* both literally and literally weaves pain, suffering, and agony experienced in the life of the protagonist-narrator, and writer of the memoirs- Urmila Pawar.

In her autobiographical narrative Pawar remembers three generations of Dalit women and their struggle under the Ambedkarite influence to overcome the burden of caste, untouchability, humiliation, alienation and the position of subalternity experienced within the dominant Brahmanic Hindu culture. The narrative weaves different patterns of growing up as a Dalit woman in Brahmanic casteism and Dalit patriarchy on the Kolkar coast near Mumbai in the 1950s and '60s. There emerges dalit woman's selfhood in the memoirs which is

independent of the idea of selfhood seen in mainstream feminist literature. Marginalized at different levels- caste and dalit patriarchy- the emerging self of the protagonist-narrator constantly takes the form of a rebel until the end of the narrative. The emerging Dalit woman's identity for Urmila is something to be carved out not only for her, but for the women of future generations also. This identity is not achieved at the end of the narrative as something finale, but remains fluid and in process, because it is to be carved out while presenting a constant critique of Brahmanic caste structure and Dalit patriarchy. The process of attaining some identity, though floating, is important for Urmila because such an identity had never been achieved by the women of the earlier generations. The entire process of writing memoirs has been inspired by the writings of Dr. Ambedkar, and it helps her to foreground her identity as a Dalit woman. The very writing of her memoirs helps Urmila form a tradition of Dalit women's writings and explore the epistemological and aesthetic possibilities of the new genre. Urmila Pawar in her memoirs echoes Dalit thinker and writer Baburao Bagul's understanding of Dalit literature. Bagul says: "The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is Dalit literature, which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. 'Dalit' is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate" (Bagul 2008:28). Pawar through her initiation into Dalit literary field with her memoirs interrogates and subverts the aesthetics and epistemology of the mainstream (Hindu) literature including autobiography and heralds a new age of Dalit literature. The narrative also weaves the psychological and spiritual need for an individual and the mass for conversion to Buddhism-the religion of equality and egalitarianism.

The narrative of the memoirs begins before the birth of Urmila-the narrator-protagonist. Urmila was born in Phansawale village of Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra. She is the youngest among seven children of her parents. Her father had studies up to the sixth standard and was a primary school teacher, but the narrative deals with memories of not only the protagonist-

narrator Urmila, but the collective memories of the entire dalit community of the village. This distinct quality of Dalit autobiography helps Urmila inculcate the memories of other women of her community and extend the scope and meaning of the genre of autobiographical narrative.

The narrative of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* can be read with special reference to 1) Memories of her Childhood, Dalit Household and Community 2) Memories of Food and Hunger 3) Memories Caste, Dalit culture, Women Labour, and Humiliation 4) Memoires of Courtship and Marriage 5) Memories of Urban Caste Inequality, Writing and Activism

The Weave of My Life begins with Urmila's memories of childhood, Dalit household and community. In dalit women's autobiographical narratives, childhood of the protagonist-narrator is not personal or individual, but collective. Hence, the memories of the childhood necessarily include the memories of the community and shows how individual subjectivity of the protagonist is shaped collectively. The prioritization of collective self in self-narratives of Dalit women's autobiographies distinguishes them from the mainstream autobiographical narratives written by mainly upper caste women where individual self of the protagonist-narrator does not form any umbilical relationship with the community. This particular aspect, in the words of Sharmila Rege, "signifies the increasing visibility of dalit studies as an epistemic community and recognition of the dalit *testimonio* as an articulation of life experience and source of articulating theory. Dalit life narratives have created the genre of the testimonio in the process of summoning truth from the past and consciously violating the boundaries set by bourgeois autobiography" (Rege 2008:323). The search for 'I' – an outcome of bourgeois individualism both in the west and in India- gets displaced with the collective 'we' of the Dalit community in the narrative. The collective 'we' of the Dalit community is brought forward by narrating the past events of the community through accessing collective memories of the community. This does not mean that the subjectivity of the individual

protagonist-narrator gets subsumed under the broader collective ‘we’ of the Dalit community, rather in this reciprocal exchange both personal and collective selves assume added meanings. Pawar’s memoirs weave a very subtle pattern of individual memories on the one hand and the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, struggle and resistance of the collective on the other hand. For Pawar her memoirs become a powerful medium to wage her protest against the Brahmanic establishments in all fields. The category of ‘Dalit’ that develops in her memoirs is radical, rational, humanist, and egalitarian, and voices the thrusts of a modern individual emerging from the Phule-Ambedkarite philosophy and social movements.

The narrative of the memoirs begins with Urmila Pawar’s recalling of the site of Dalit women of Phansawale village climbing up and down the mountains to travel to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things. The women in their conversations and stories abuse and curse the ancestors for choosing this village for dwelling because they have to struggle so much for their bare survival:

“Women from our village traveled to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things. They trudged the whole distance with huge, heavy bundles on their heads, filled with firewood or grass, rice or semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets or ripe or raw mangoes. Their loads would be heavy enough to break their necks. They would start their journey to Ratnagiri early in the morning. Between our village and Ratnagiri the road was difficult to negotiate as it wound up and down the hills. It was quite an exhausting trip...

When they came to the first hill, the vexed women would utter the choicest abuses, cursing, the *mool purush* of our family, who, had he heard them, would have died again. The reason for the abuse was quite simple. It was he who had chosen this particular village, Phansawale, in the back of beyond,

for his people to settle. It was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain, as it lay in an obscure ditch in a far-off corner of the hills...

"May his dead body rot... why did he have to come and stay here, in this godforsaken place?" "May his face burn in the stove!" "Was that bastard blind or what? Couldn't he see this bloody land for himself?" "Didn't that motherfucker see these deadly hills, paths, forests? How I wish somebody had slapped him hard for making this decision!"

My mother also belonged to the group of the cursing women. We heard so many curses from her!" (1-3).

Urmila, the youngest in her family, loses her father at the age of three. Urmila is the child of his father's second marriage to her mother. Her father had studied up to the sixth standard and was a primary school teacher. Her mother, though an illiterate woman, turns out to be a great woman who raises all her children with her hard work of weaving baskets (*aaydan*). Urmila along with her siblings be a helper of her mother in weaving and selling the baskets in the market. Urmila, in the very beginning of the narrative, remembers her father as a visionary man who wanted his children to be educated. The influence of the Ambedkarite movement is seen in the father's character. But after his death it becomes difficult for the children to continue school education, however, with all difficulties some of the children even go for higher education. Urmila herself completes her Matriculation in 964 (at the age of nineteen), and gets a job in the Public Work Department in the government of Maharashtra. After her courtship with Harishchandra, she gets married with him in 1966 and becomes a mother of two daughters and a son. The narrative shows Urmila's penchant for education which later gets her Masters in Marathi. Urmila's desire to register for a Ph. D. is thwarted by then Bombay University saying that her doctoral thesis topic "Dalit Women's Participation in the

Ambedkar Movement' does not fall into literature category, and she needs a Masters in Sociology to undertake the Ph.D. project.

In her memoirs, Urmila remembers how casteism in education system spoils the lives of the dalit children. Urmila's grandfather fails to give education to his children in the village and sends Urmila's father to town at his elder's sister's home for education as the *pantaji* (brahman teacher) of the village would teach only brahman children in his own house. Urmila who belongs to the second generation too suffers the evil of casteism as she too becomes a victim of untouchability practiced by the upper class teachers in the class. Being a Mahar girl she has to sit in the last row of the class and is victimized by the upper caste students too. Her teacher, Herkekar Guruji, often picks her to clean the dung in the school grounds when it is the turn of her class to do so. She also remembers her teacher's reaction and her humiliation when she receives a scholarship of twelve rupees in her fourth standard. Her teacher reacts that she should use the amount of scholarship to stich two new frocks and buy soap so that she can come to school neatly dressed and with cleaned body. At one occasion, she is asked to contribute money instead of food and is not allowed to touch the food that is being cooked by the girls of her class. She also recalls how two of her close friends who are Muslims suddenly stop interacting and eating with her after a relative of theirs advise them to observe the customary distance from the Mahars.

Regarding casteism, Urmila notes that how her father's uncle (Urmila's grandfather's elder sister's husband) who had been converted to Christianity had given space in his house to missionaries to run a school. Urmila interestingly notes that how the Mahars converted to Christianity could study at such schools known as 'school of the converts'. After finishing his sixth standard Urmila's father begins to teach in a school for untouchable children on the hill called Sinaltedkdi. Urmila's narration of the struggle to get primary education exposes Brahmanic casteism of her time. It shows how casteism creates a different space and limited

mobility for the subaltern Mahar community and ostracizes them from entering into the domain of education and knowledge totally controlled by the upper caste people, especially by the brahmins. The special sitting arrangement for the Dalit children in school, prohibitions on them to touch water taps and the caste people, and the location of the school for the Dalit children on the hill away from the main village show that casteism quite subtly creates the idea of space which has its epistemology at ideational level and physical realization in the living world. It is this passion for education resultant of Ambedkarite philosophy which helps Urmila and other Dalit men and women to sharpen their intellectual power to understand the world and its structures – social, religious, political etc. Urmila's struggle for education in particular and the community's struggle in general epitomizes Dr. Ambedkar's dictum, 'Educate, Organize, Agitate'. Urmila later in her life when she becomes a literary figure and a Dalit activist realizes how education offers a holistic response to caste and gender subalternity and untouchability with theoretical and practical, political activism. The road to liberation and salvation –political, social, religious, economic, etc. - goes via education.

One of the memories of Urmila Pawar's childhood goes back to when she is only two years old. She remembers how her mother's father comes to their home and that her mother bathes him with coconut milk and serves him hot food and tries to pacify him on his complaints on daughters-in-law and sons who do not take care of him. But on the same night he hangs himself from a tree and dies. Such depiction of very early childhood is common in the self-narrative of Urmila Pawar. Urmila herself alludes to this in her narrative when she says: "On this same road, we heard hundreds of stories about the history of our family, across generations (12). Thus, the narrative of the memoirs shares collective memories of the participants in the autobiographical discourse. It certainly problematizes the idea of 'truth' in autobiographical discourse. Since autobiography as a genre largely rests on past memories, truth in

autobiographical discourse does not appear as ‘the final truth’, but as one of the dimensions of truth.

In one of the very early childhood memories, Urmila’s grandfather appears as a rebel against the caste profession of Brahmins. Urmila recalls how the brahman priests perform the rituals of marriage and ceremonial worship for lower caste people like the mahars, chambhars and others. The brahman priest climbs a tree on the outskirts of the locality and mutters some chants. This is found insulting and humiliating by her grandfather Hari who inspires the Dalits to conduct all ceremonies on their own. Pawar links this incident with the influence of the Satyashodhak Sabha of Phule which started the Satyashodhak movement in 1873. Later the tradition of performing rituals carries on with Urmila’s father and his elder sister Phatiakka perform the ritual of marriage. This reformist act of Urmila’s grandfather and father become quite inspirational for Urmila because it encourages her to problematize the relationship between caste and occupation within Brahmanic tradition and draw up the entire tradition of reformism initiated by Phule and his Satyashodhak movement in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century.

Urmila’s early memories of childhood and Dalit household are inevitably linked with her memories of the Dalit food culture. Pawar minutely observes how nasta boxes of school children speak up their castes. The upper caste girls bring *puran poli* and Urmila rushes to home to eat a bhakri. The upper castes girls also bring sumptuous savouries to school and school picnics, but Urmila realizes so early in childhood that her family cannot afford savouries due to poverty. Baby Urmila has a question: “How rich dishes like ladu, modak and puranpoli could dare come to our house when it had place only for aloo?” (95). The narrator links this with caste question which alienates the Dalits from She says: “Without anyone telling or teaching us so, we had realized that we had to live in the location, the caste and the condition in which we were born” (77). Pawar in her narrative echoes Dr. Ambedkar’s famous example

of caste as a pyramid structure to understand caste in India. Regarding her memory of mango pickle she says:

“I would dash across the road to their house for the pickle, tightly holding the coins in my fist. Taking care not to touch, or even let my shadow fall on things lying around, I would reach the cement steps of their house. I had to stand at the lowest step. The pyramid would make anyone standing at the bottom feel really low. From there I tried to peep in the house, trying to see if anyone was around”
(77).

Pawar in her narrator closely links the problem of poverty with community's Dalit identity and with her gender position in patriarchy of Mahar community. The position of the Mahars within Brahmanic caste hierarchies isolates them so much that their very basic right to have an access to food is marred. Again, being a women her right over food in patriarchal family structure is secondary. An Indian wife, whether an upper-caste or a lower caste, is expected to eat after all family members have taken their food, and not to complain if no sufficient food is left for her. The collective hunger of the Dalit community is narrated Thus, by Urmila Pawar:

“They somehow managed to buy a little rice, which they would cook in a big mud-pot and serve with some watery soup. This was served to the men first, in one common dish. They sat on their haunches to dine, as if they had sat down to shit! It was true that Dalits had the custom of all people eating from one plate, but that was usually because there were few plates in the homes” (17).

She further notes how on festive occasions the people of her community go for begging in the village:

“Our sisters-in-law, Vitha and Parvati, would also go begging, along with other women in our community... Their entire house would survive for two days on those leftovers. In some houses the flesh of dead animals would be eaten. But that was forbidden in our house” (43).

Food and water are the means of survival for human beings, but the Dalits are denied that basic right to have an access to the basic means of survival. The Dalit characters of Urmila Pawar’s memoirs enter into a twofold struggle- to survive, and survive meaningfully. The first kind of struggle is aimed at the preservation of human body through food, shelter, and clothing. The second struggle is the struggle for preservation of the self from the biased, oppressed social structure in which they are born. The Dalit subject in upper caste hegemonic structure is reduced to a natural level through his/her comparison with animal, plants, stones and other inanimate things, and Thus, denied human dignity and social recognition. Unlike the upper caste subject, the Dalit subject has to struggle to retain his/her existence at the first place, and then his/her identity as a human being. Pawar’s self-narrative should be primarily seen as a struggle to get rid of Dalit human being’s reduction from cultural to natural.

Urmila Pawar’s memoires of caste, Dalit/Mahar culture and women labour form the core of her narrative. Urmila in the very beginning of the memoirs shows how the Dalit women’s labour and earning amidst all difficulties help them run their households. The Dalit women who are mothers also promise their children to bring food for them in return because many of the male family members squander their earning on liquor. Through her writing about the Dalit women of her community in her self-narrative, Urmila Pawar enters into the complex process in which personal memory becomes collectivized and collective memory of the Dalit women folks are articulated in individual recollections. This helps her build the archive of memoires and knit them together for the present and future generations so that they can develop a sense of the past and the place of the Dalit men and women in it. The whole idea of ‘weaving’

becomes a metaphor of the labour in which the Dalit women are involved. It also refers to the ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ labour on the part of the Dalit women. The task of weaving of bamboo to make baskets to earn livelihood is the main profession of the protagonist’s mother that indicates their low caste as well as the dire economic poverty. Urmila links her writing with her mother’s act of weaving bamboo baskets. As the narrator declares,

“My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us” (2).

Urmila Pawar in her memories presents Mahar women folks quite vividly. She recalls the rhythms, the smells and colours of that times and how the women escorting her and her siblings from her village and dropping them at their mother at Ratnagiri during their visit to sell the wares. Pawar shows how the hard lives of the Mahar women get some relief with their worldly talks on the way:

“Some of the women, before they started their journey back, would first sit in our yard...draw water from the well, quench their thirst, roast cheap tiny fish on dry twigs and eat them with some dry bread...And the things that they talked about! Relatives they had met in the market, the sad and happy incidents in their lives, programmes of ‘seeing’ prospective brides, a programme carried out successfully in the market itself, marriages arranged and broken, divorces, and, of course, the experiences while selling the wares. ...Their talk now took on the colours and smells of slightly decomposing fish, of provisions they had bought in tiny packets, their sweat and the setting sun” (9-10).

Urmila Pawar also shares with her readers the sexual harassment of these women by the upper caste men on the way. Sexual humiliation of Dalit Mahar women has remained a culturally accepted phenomenon. Pawar narrates:

“When I put down my bundle of grass on the stand, an old guy came, the bastard! Winking at me, he kept pressing the grass bundle. So I said, ‘Why are you pressing the grass; do you think I’ve hidden a grain bag inside? These are just paddy stems. Your cows and buffaloes will gobble it like candy. Buy if you want! The bastard just pushed his dhoti aside and showed me his ‘cobra’. I was going to beat him but he ran away fast.” (11).

Dalit woman’s body, here, becomes a site for releasing upper caste men’s sexuality. Dalit women become victims of organized or institutionalized humiliation because it is the social institution and practices that systematically violate the self-respect of Dalit women by employing certain means and measures. Drawing out the connection between humiliation and the socio-economic condition of the humiliated subject, Bhikhu Parekh observes:

“...a society based on humiliation uses all means at its disposal to keep the humiliated groups in conditions of poverty, squalor, long working hours, ill health, political isolation, and social marginalization” (Parekh 2001:33).

Dalit women’s sexual humiliation at the hands of upper caste men should be seen as being operative within the system of coercion developed under casteism. The Dalit woman’s response to sexual humiliation can be seen as an attempt to preserve the inner sense of one’s absolute worth and respect. In Pawar’s memoirs, the idea of self-respect is not concerned with an isolated individual, but is a collective achievement.

The major issue associated with the Mahar caste is that of untouchability. “Untouchability”, as seen by V. Geetha, “is both a condition of existence as well as a violent

expression of power" (Geetha 2011: 96). To Dr. Ambedkar it is "a system of graded inequality", and to E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, "untouchability was a norm that informed the caste system, at every level of its hierarchical existence" (*ibid.*). Pawar's narrative refers to a number of such incidents in Dalit life of the village where untouchability is experienced in routinized forms. Since the Mahar stand at the nadir of the caste system of the village, they experience untouchability from a group of Kulwadi people who are otherwise understood as lower order peasant castes. The Kuklwadi people also take great care to avoid touching the Mahar women. One of the incidents of untouchability involves Urmila's sister Shantiakka who works at the mental hospital. When figured out Shantiakka's caste, one of the mentally ill women at the mental hospital refuses to accept food from her and even abuses her.

V. Geetha finds untouchability as "a form of extreme alienation where the labourer-the Dalit is invariably a labourer- is dissociated not only from the products of her own creation, but also from her own laboring body" (*ibid.* 97). Since Dalit body is constitutively impure, it is held suited for all difficult and hazardous tasks. During the holi festival in Phansawale village, the Dalit men and women labour hard carrying firewood, but they are not allowed to participate in the ritual of actually lighting the fire. On the contrary, the Marathas, Bhandaris and Kulwadis who participate in the ritual seek the blessings of the goddess also pray for diverting the calamities to the Mahars, but the Mahars dare not lodge a protest against this. When the palanquin of the God decorated with tassels is being carried on the shoulders of the upper caste people, none of the Mahars is allowed to touch it. Thus, the untouchable Dalit body becomes a distinctive laboring body within caste structure, and does not possess either material or symbolic value. Born to labour, Dalits cannot claim the right of knowing the ritual or participating in it, on the other hand, the upper caste people are the natural custodians of learning who escape the labour which is instrumental in creating the conditions of knowledge.

Such ritualistic otherization of Dalit people remain a daily experience for all the Mahar people in the narrative.

Urmila in her memoirs draws a link between oppression and humiliation. She records an incident of cruelty undergone by the Mahar people at the hands of the upper caste Hindus. Her narrative illuminates the fact that within upper caste epistemology Dalit body is treated like a sacrificial object:

“Once when I had gone to stay with Akka, a poor couple came to see them from a village called Anaav. They were sitting on their haunches in the verandah. The husband had wrapped a loincloth around his waist. There was a huge gaping wound on his bare back. His wife sat crying, wiping the tears with her torn sari. It seemed that in their village there was a ritual. An upper-caste man would inflict a wound on a Mahar’s back and his wife had to cover the wound with some cloth and go on walking around, howling! Quite a ritual, that one! Dada, Akka’s husband was telling them, “You have to resist this custom! How can you tolerate it? This ritual is symbolic of some old sacrificial rites! The Mahar symbolizes the animal sacrificed! I tell you, get converted then this will automatically stop” (86).

Thus, Dalit body within Hindu caste hierarchy suffers from what American philosopher Cornel West describes as ‘an ontological wounding’.

Pawar in her memoirs recalls the experience of untouchability and the recurring humiliation experiences occurring in different ways. The narrative explores the work of ‘begging’ as an experience of humiliation. During the festival seasons the people of Urmila’s community go to the houses of Brahmans, Marathas, and the Kulwadis to beg for festival food. Urmila recalls how “especially houses that performed the customary Mahar duties, such as

beating the dhol, disposing off dead animals, reaching messages, would go to beg as a matter of right”, but in return, “the Kulwadi women who gave them food would pour everything together in their baskets...Women would bring back basketfuls of rice, in which many things are mixed” (51). The effect of Ambedkarite philosophy is seen in the thinking of Urmila’s father who lambasts the women of the house for their begging activity:

“These stupid women! When will they cease to behave like beggars? Go tell them, don’t go begging! At least don’t bring any such food to my house. And don’t ever show your faces to me again” (*ibid.*).

The humiliation process continues when Urmila becomes a mother after marriage. There is continual suffering and experience of humiliation in all her social intercourse with people due to her caste. She becomes a victim of puritanical, and separatist tendencies of the upper caste people. Her belonging to the Mahar caste brings her humiliation at the occasion of the birthday of her younger daughter, Manini. Manini invites her friend Kishori to celebrate the birthday with them. Urmila narrates the experience of humiliation thus,

“Kishori and her brother came, ate the cake, and went home after celebrating the birthday. Kishori’s brother told his mother that he had seen photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha in our house. The next day, Kishori’s mother came and stood at our door. She started abusing us without even stepping inside. ‘We did not know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sent my children to you. From now on, don’t you give my daughter anything to eat if she comes to your house. We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you’” (241).

Humiliation becomes reality for Urmila and other fellow Dalit human beings in an everyday existential sense in the form of food taboos, taboos on certain sorts of clothes, use of water

from certain places, and the their association with dirt and death. All these things are rationalized as customs and valorized in society to sustain caste hierarchies.

The conventional definition of autobiography or memoirs would try to read personal life in the narrative. The Dalit autobiographical narrative as seen earlier destabilizes the traditional understanding of the genre and links personal with greater collective. Though Urmila Pawar's memoirs like many other Dalit autobiographical narratives weave a pattern of the collective Dalit self, the personal self of the narrator-protagonist does emerge in her relationship with her husband Harishchandra. The narration of the private life lived with her husband and her children does give an additional touch to the overall form of the narrative. The narrative of personal life is a narrative of joys and sorrows, daily struggles and victories, courage and strength of character, and experience of much loss and tragedy. The development of the narrative projects Urmila Pawar as a strong woman who does not easily fit into the traditional roles of wife and mother, and for which she suffers and blamed too. In her narrative she honestly exhibits her courtship and conjugal life with Harishchandra and her suffering within Dalit patriarchy.

Urmila falls in love with Harishchandra for “the crow had touched” (128) her (attained puberty) and goes against her family’s wishes and marries “a dark man, with a fresh-looking face...a wide forehead, amber eyes, straight nose, thick curly hair, nicely trimmed moustache and smiling lips” (128-129). Pawar’s narrative takes a gynocentric stance and describes her puberty experiences- how she gets frightened when she first sees blood-stained skirt, her mother’s advice and list of ‘dos and don’ts’, her sister’s explaining of the menstruation process as a natural phenomenon, her developing interest in boys and keen desire to mix with them, superstitions about menstruation and pregnancy, and her curiosity to know about baby’s birth. The narration of courtship becomes romantic and adds a different flavour to the otherwise serious narrative. For his less educated background, Harishchandra is not a unanimous choice

of family members, but the family succumbs to the strong attitude of Urmila and her marriage to Harishchandra is arranged.

Urmila in her narrative notes the Brahmanical linguistic custom of *Chiranjeev* and *Saubhayakanshini* and also the addition of *Namo Buddhaya* alongside. The groom's family has to pay up to become members of the *Bauddha Jan Panchayat*. Urmila refers to the idea of 'subcaste' within Mahars, and how her subcaste (belmahar) is critically looked at by some women at the wedding. Pawar's narrative problematizes bodily experiences of woman after marriage. Woman's body after marriage has often been seen as a domain to be controlled by man- her husband. Pawar says that despite the husband being a man of her own choice, she could not come to terms with him suddenly holding her in a tight embrace, so she gets the certificate from her husband after their first night, "So frigid" (183). Urmila rejects the accusation of frigidity and asserts her right over her body when she says, "I was not at all frigid! I understood every move very well. However, these were being done to me against my wishes" (184). To have control over one's body is one of the major issues being discussed within feminism. Pawar raises an important issue within the scope of Dalit feminism because for men as Grosz puts it, "Women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (Grosz 1994: 14), and such enmeshment in corporeality is also attributed to colonized bodies and those attributed to the lower classes (Alcoff 2006: 103). No other Dalit women writers before Urmila Pawar has ever discussed the corporeality of Dalit woman body and its colonization by man in literary narratives. The reference to the breaking of hymen as a "proof of my virginity" (187) is ironic and reflects the patriarchal belief of her husband in 'purity of woman' in marriage.

Urmila Pawar in her narrative challenges the idea of treating woman as a reproductive object in marriage. She remarks:

“When our son was two, I found myself pregnant once again. I wanted another son so that I could go through the family planning operation...But my second child was a girl. So Harishchandra said, ‘Let’s take one more chance’ But once again it was a girl. I thought how simple and easy it was to have a baby, like saying let’s have one more cup of tea!” (218).

Though Harishchandra does not object Urmila’s participating in literary activates and her playing a role in one act plays, he appears as a husband who possesses patriarchal notions of woman and womanhood. Urmila in her narrative writes about constant criticism and emotional abuse of her husband who because she continues to do ‘social work and her writing gains acclaim in the form of awards and published works. The narrative weaves stories told by other women characters about male domination and domestic violence, and thereby exposes the domain of Dalit patriarchy.

The Weave of My Life is not a narrative of humiliation only, but a narrative of resistance also. The narrative of the memoirs offers a critique of caste and gender oppression in Brahmanic Hinduism on the one hand and Dalit patriarchy on the other hand. It also offers a critique of mainstream feminist movement and the Dalit literary movement for their utter neglect of Dalit women as worthy subjects of literary and theoretical presentations. The narrative uses Dalit woman’s memoirs as a form of resistance to interrogate the conventional foregrounding of Dalit woman’s self in literary narratives. For Urmila Pawar ‘writing’ memoirs is a strategy to rewrite the Dalit past and evaluate the place of women in it, so that a different, alternative narrative of the Dalit past can be formed and the issues of Dalit subalternity can be analyzed with the use of knowledge gained under the Phule-Ambedkarite movement and the rise of modernity in India. By resisting religious and cultural influences of upper class/caste Hinduism, the narrative makes an attempt to build a body of subaltern Dalit knowledge about past and present in which the Brahmanical imagination that sustains and reproduces the casteist

social order can be challenged and changed. Such resistance on the part of the Dalit subject inspires a new Dalit personhood, individually and collectively, to sustain Dalit self-respect, dignity, and meaning in life through revaluation of their devalued identities.

Conversion to Buddhism has been seen as a panacea for all ills of the Mahars. The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* repeatedly refers to the egalitarian philosophy of Ambedkar and his call for conversion to Buddhism to form a new society free from the Brahmanic caste oppression and humiliation. Following Ambedkar's call for conversion to Buddhism, Urmila's family too get converted to Buddhism. The narrative sees conversion to Buddhism as a strategy of resistance to counter the influence of Brahmanic Hinduism. Urmila Pawar notes that how certain superstitions of Hinduism that they performed, and gods that they worshipped before conversion go into the background after *Dharmaantar*:

“All such things—ghosts and supernatural experiences—stopped abruptly after the conversion ceremony took place...we had firmly resolved to discard the gods with all the accompanying paraphernalia. So we went to the river with the other people, the young children in tow. On the way, people chanted the same traditional invocation but with a completely different set of words:

‘O Ye Gods,
Yes that’s right, Maharaja,
Go back to your own place,
Yes that’s right, Maharaja,
You never did any good to us.
Yes that’s right, Maharaja,
Now our Lord Buddha has come.
Yes that’s right, Maharaja.

Now we aren't scared of anyone.

Yes that's right, Maharaja.' (110).

Thus, first resistance to Brahmanic Hinduism takes place when Buddha and Ambedkar replace Brahmanic Hindu gods and goddesses. All older rituals performed to mark birth, marriage and death are given up and new ones gradually set in according to the Buddhist religion. The elaborate description of her cousin Bhikiakka's son's marriage ceremony in the Buddhist way produces a counter narrative of emerging new Dalit world. The new narrative of Buddhism woven in new rites and rituals aims at the birth of new spirituality and the spiritual man committed to social and political justice.

Ambedkar's call for migration to cities from villages can also be seen as a resistance strategy. In Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, like Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, village appears as a site where Brahmanic hegemony of caste is experienced the most. In the memoirs, Indian village becomes a geographical space where relations between men are defined with villages' own cartography of caste. Pawar notes in her narrative Ambedkar's visionary understanding of the link between caste and village economy and politics. Harishchandra Thorat, Urmila's would-be husband also quits his job at the Mamlatdar office because of constant reminding of caste, and the experience of casteist prejudice. Once, on an official visit, when a village officer comes to know about the caste of Harishchandra, meal is served to him in the cattle shed which humiliates Harishchandra the most and he vows to move to the city in search of jobs. Urmila's getting settled in Mumbai with her husband, in fact, commences her search for new Dalit identity in the urban space. Though in her narrative the protagonist-narrator realizes that even the urban space is not free from the evils of casteism.

Urmila remembers how with a passage of time, her family gets courage to challenge caste abuses. When her son is born, one upper caste man passing by their home asks if the child is a boy or a girl. When he hears that it is a baby-boy, he remarks. "The bastards! They always

get sons!” (210). Her mother in repartee says, “Why, does that give you a stomach ache?” (ibid.). But the man runs away from the scene. Urmila remembers Buddha songs of the Mahars as the greatest weapons of resistance. The Buddha songs of marriage replace the earlier Brahmanic songs. The songs that weave narratives of Buddha and Ambedkar composed by women from Vidharbha and Marathawada help the Mahars resist the Brahmanic influences of Buddhism, but Urmila in her narrative is also aware of the fact that in some areas of Konkan, after the death of Bhayyasaheb Ambedkar (Ambedkar’s son), the pace of reform slows down and the people are still seen caught in differences between castes and sub-castes.

The latter part of the narrative of *The Weave of My Life* weaves Pawar’s memories of her turning into a Dalit woman writer-activist in Mumbai, and the caste inequality of the urban space. The narrative explores the unique phenomenon of urban casteism in a city like Mumbai. Even the rightful Dalit owners are abused by illegal occupants of flats. Urmila Pawar remembers Dalit people’s adopting of English initials for a name; like L.R. Tambe or K. D. Kadam to redefine their relationship with the English language. Urmila’s initiation into a short story writer along with her job weaves a new pattern of life in which she turns out to be a successful Dalit feminist writer-activist and a humanitarian, subaltern activist-thinker. It is Urmila’s past that propels her to write her short stories and later memoirs. She reminisces, “Whatever that may be! I felt a terrible restlessness growing inside me which refused to let me sit quiet. My own experiences, those of my friends and other women that of living in the village, casteism, being a woman, built up a pressure inside me!” (226). Urmila’s growing up as a Dalit woman writer and activist in a patriarchal, casteist set up is naturally resented by many- both outside and inside. Urmila in her memoirs presents herself as a Dalit woman writer, and addresses the issues of secondary position given to Dalit women writers in Dalit literature. Even the Dalit movement does not adequately acknowledge the share of Dalit women activists of the past in bringing about a new change in society.

The narrative of the memoirs depicts the struggle of a dalit woman writer in patriarchy—both Brahmanic and Dalit. Urmila by overcoming all the difficulties pursues her career of creative writing with remarkable zeal and zest. Urmila's writing symbolically offers a resistance to the established tradition of mainstream literary writings done by Dalit men and uppercaste women. Writing for Urmila is not a writing in 'one's own room' like many privileged men and women writers. It is a challenge to be taken, a task to be accomplished, and has a collective meaning. Regarding her writing process, she remarks:

"I began to write. I would write anywhere: sitting in the office, traveling in the bus or train, waiting at the bus stop, even standing in a queue. I scribbled furiously. Sometimes there were interesting reactions. Once I had bought a pen and began to write, the person sitting next to me would try to see what I was writing. Men would feel I was making a pass at them and lean more to my side. That would disturb me. But my terrible handwriting and the speed of the vehicle would make it impossible for them to decipher anything. Then they would straighten up, and my writing would proceed without further hitch. Sometimes I forgot to get down at my stop and went further on. Then I had to get down and trudge backwards all the way on foot. Sometimes I had to pay a fine to the ticket collector. At night after I had satisfied everybody else's needs, and mine as well, I would sit down to write without any disturbance. I used to sit in the kitchen, so as not to disturb the others, and write stealthily. Sometimes my eyes would droop, heavy with sleep, and I found myself dozing off. Then I would start, shake the sleep out of my eyes, and scold myself severely, 'Hey, lazy bones, wake up, wake up! How dare you sleep! Come on, write!'" (227-28).

The entire process of writing that Urmila sums up in her memoirs is intricately linked with

caste and gendered subalternity that she experiences at office, home, and in public space. It helps the writer to articulate gender and caste question in relation to writing.

Urmila's decision to study M.A. and later her growing literary interest, and social activism bring in the crack in the conjugal relationship with her husband Harishchandra. Her husband firmly shares the patriarchal notion that looking after the house is the sole responsibility of the woman. She is allowed to continue her studies provided she does all the housework, and looks after the children as usual. As Urmila begins to ask her husband to pay some attention to the household and children instead of going to the bar, there develops disagreements and quarrels. Urmila's acquaintances with a number of Dalit thinkers and writers inspires her to be a Dalit writer and thinker with a feminist traits. On passing her M.A., Urmila proudly declares, "I was publically felicitated for being the first woman from the Konkan region to have obtained an M.A. while I was taking care of the house, children and my job" (245). She notes how before joining the *Maitrini* group, she was a woman who looked at herself from a patriarchal perspective, but the new feminist vision brings homr a new perspective of looking at women. Pawar acknowledges the important role played by women's movement which gives her "strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual" (248).

Urmila Pawar in her memoirs passes through all three different stages that feminist movement outlines: feminine, feminist, and female. Her participation in Dalit feminist movement and Ambedkarite counter-public makes her interrogate her role as a submissive wife and the feminine values that patriarchy imposes on her. About this phase she remarks:

"I slogged whole day in the office, at home, and after an arduous journey was dead tired by the time I reached home. And yet at night, thugh my body was a mass of aches and pains, I pressed my husband's feet. I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to make him happy. I was ready to die for a smile, a glance from

him. But he accused me, ‘Leave alone being an ideal wife, you are not even a good one!...I was far from being a good mother as well!’ (246).

Urmila’s gradual understanding that “everything that gave me an independent identity—my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes-irritated Mr. Pawar no end” (*ibid.*) propels her to realize the feminist phase in her life. Later her broader understanding of her own identity as a Dalit feminist woman writer voicing the issues of individual Dalit woman and the community in general makes her realize the female phase of her life. The narrative openly describes the contradictory attitude of her husband who, on the one hand, feels proud of her writing and admits before his friends and relative, and on the other hand, immensely resents her being recognized as a writer, her speaking in public programmes and her emerging as a figure in the public domain. The institution of marriage, in Pawar’s memoirs, is critiqued for its intricate structure which grants power to the male counterpart to control woman’s autonomy. Pawar’s narrative reflects how she is controlled—her free movement, her distinct voice in family affairs, reproductive choice, her economic independence, and her life as an activist. But Pawar’s narrative offers a succinct understanding of control and autonomy within patriarchy with respect to women’s lives in marriage with a few stories of her family members. The narrative also relates women’s control and autonomy in the context of caste in the public world.

Urmila Pawar’s feminist stance as it emerges in the memoirs does not altogether rejects the conventional patriarchal symbols of Indian society. At some places she is found fusing Indian tradition with western modernity. After her husband’s death she refuses to remove her *mangalsutra* and thereby defies the conventions of the patriarchal order. This incident should be seen as an independent choice of Urmila as a woman, and a resistance to the patriarchal order that does not allow a widowed woman to wear *mangalsutra*.

In addition to tracing out her own personality, the narrative of Pawar's memoirs offers a detailed picture of many people that include her family members and friends, and those with whom she shares her social ideology. Writers like Meenakshi Moon, Vasantrao Moon, Dalit theorist Eleanor Zelliot and others appear in the narrative. With its invaluable cultural record of Dalits in Maharashtra and depiction of the ethnic specificities like dress codes, food culture, family structures, rites, rituals, and the use of distinctive dialect, the narrative of *The Weave of My Life* offers a sharp contrast to the mainstream autobiographical narratives available in Marathi and other Indian languages. Pawar use of non-linear, episodic narrative challenges the well-structured, teleological narrative very often found in patriarchal tradition of autobiographical narratives. The writer in her narrative very often uses the clause, "The story went Thus,:" to tell her story of oppression and resistance. The use of such structure merges other stories into her own story and offers plural, multiple voices in the narrative.

At the end of the narrative Urmila Pawar establishes herself as an accomplished Dalit woman writer who challenges the structures of caste and patriarchy. The narrative presents her understanding of the term 'Dalit'. Explaining the extended meaning of the term Pawar says, "...dalit does not mean only socially suppressed or oppressed people! It also signals rational, secular people who have discarded the oppressive system and concepts like God, fate and the caste system. 'Dalit' is being replaced by 'Phule-Ambedkarite' or simply 'Ambedkarite'" (275).

Thus, in Pawar the term 'Dalit' becomes a rational, secular category, and whoever challenges the concepts of caste, and Brahmanic God in particular and the oppressive system in general is a Dalit. In the memoirs, she also offers a vision of Dalit gynocentric tradition by discovering Dalit women writers and poets. Such tradition can be created by bringing these writers together, organizing their public oral narratives and getting them printed; and organizing Dalit women's literary gatherings. Pawar's *We Also Made History* (2014) with Meenakshi Moon can be seen

as her contribution towards building up the Dalit gynocentric tradition. The narrative offers an understanding as to how in India caste and gender are inextricably linked, and they interact with and shape each other. They together produce a Brahmanic hegemony of power and Dalit version of patriarchy in which woman's self attains the position of double marginalization. For a woman, caste ideologies and patriarchy provide a base for the culture of oppression and exploitation. The narrative of the *The Weave of My Life* ends with Urmila Pawar's optimism for restructuration of Indian society. She remarks,

“My confidence gives me the energy to struggle against the present situation—our larger dream is to build a new society, I know this is difficult path, full of crevices and ditches, but my experiences of travelling through this further strengthens my confidence” (215).

The writer wants her memoirs to be seen as what Sharmila Rege calls “*testimonio*- an articulation of life experience and source of articulating theory” (Rege 2008:323). Urmila Pawar remarks,

“I expect nothing from the readers. I want them to see that each and every person's life is a social document.” (320).

The narrative faithfully follows Pawar's earlier introduction of herself: “I was born in a backward caste in a backward region, that too a girl!” (94). But the narrative of the memoirs is not a narrative demanding pity and sympathy from the readers, but a narrative that aims at forceful articulation and critique of the issues of caste and gender positions in which the narrator-protagonist is put in for no choice of her own.

To conclude, the narrative of *The Weave of My Life* offers an honest, bold and affirmative articulation of a Mahar Dalit woman born and brought up under the influence of Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. The personal, domestic and societal life of the

narrator-protagonist with all its suffering, pain and wounds is revealed to the reader with an aim to raising consciousness about the subaltern issues concerning the Dalit society in general, and the Dalit women in particular. Becoming a ‘Dalit’ is a process through which Urmila Pawar enters into the political commensuration and establishes her identity as the caste subaltern. It also helps the reader as a “prod to self-understanding, self-improvement and self-healing” (Smith, Watson 2001:22-23). The narrative weaves a pattern of Dalit subaltern gynocentrism and reflects the narrator’s and community’s journey from non-living subject to living subject, from silence to speech, from multiple bondages to socio-political emancipation by establishing a new Dalit vision.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TAMIL DALIT WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES: A DISTINCT CULTURAL VOICE

Life histories in India do not necessarily conform to Western conventions and models of writing self. The emergence of the genre of autobiography in the West developed an umbilical relationship with the idea of ‘individualism’ in the Western historical context. But, the autobiographical narratives of Bama’s *Karukku* (trans. Lakshmi Holmström) and Viramma et. al’s *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* (Trans. Will Hobson) offer a variety of forms life narratives can take in a single region, Tamil Nadu. Originally written and spoken in Tamil, and, then, translated into English, these autobiographical narratives become valuable sources for understanding the emergence of Dalit women’s voices in a state like Tamil Nadu. The emerging self of a particular autobiographer in her autobiographical narrative is both individual and collective. The individual self-consciousness achieved through the act of narration co-mingles with the collective identity of the community to emerge as a bigger self to raise certain collective issues of existence. The narrator-protagonist’s affiliation with her community makes an individual life story a cultural category which can be assessed from different viewpoints. The location of Bama in Christian Dalit background, and of Viramma in Dalit Pariah background offers immense possibilities to examine their narratives under overarching systems of Brahmanism and patriarchy in Indian context. Bama’s search for autonomy in *Karukku* with a pungent critique of the Church, and Viramma’s use of collective memory to fashion her Pariah self in *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* form the collective aspirations of all Dalit women of the region for an egalitarian world in which their distinct subaltern voice can be heard. In both the autobiographies, there emerges a “Dalit style of language” which takes recourse to oral tradition and breaks the syntactic structures to express Dalit world in general and Dalit

women's world in particular. By doing so, they offer an alternative version of language and socio-linguistic structure. In such Dalit women's writings, as Purnachandra Naik observes, "Dalit women who emerge as visionaries with revolutionary programmes towards forging a new society and in this endeavor they see themselves as the very fulcrum of the struggle, thereby deconstructing the imbued condescending colonial idea of the "passive subject" waiting to be "salvaged" by others" (Naik 2016:18).

The autobiographical narratives of Bama and Viramma et al. offer a distinct subaltern voice of Tamil Dalit women, and provide some important glimpses into their world with radical socio-political insight.

I

Karukku

Karukku (2000), translated into English from Tamil *Karukku* (1992) by Lakshmi Holmström, is an epoch making autobiographical narrative of Bama Faustina Mary, a Roman Catholic, born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Hailed as Dalit women's first outburst in autobiographical genre in Tamil, Bama's *Karukku* offers a threefold critique of caste, class, and gender in three traditions: the Hindu hegemonic tradition, the Dalit patriarchal tradition, and the Christian religious tradition. Bama's use of the autobiographical narrative as testimonio of Dalit community in general and Dalit woman's life in caste-gender dichotomy of Indian society in particular helps her to subvert the very genre of autobiography as essential narrative of narrator-protagonist's individual self. The generic conventions of autobiographical narrative as individual life writing are largely rejected to accommodate the biography of the community. The other important works of Bama include her two novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanman* (2002), and three collections of short stories, *Kisumbukkaran* (1996), *Oru Thathavum oru Erumayum* (2003), and *Kondattam* (2009).

As compared to Dalit women's autobiographical writings in other languages like Marathi, Kannada or Hindi, the Tamil tradition of such writings is in its embryonic stage, yet it is vibrant and articulate, and multi-faceted in problematizing gender-caste issues. Bama's *Karukku* can be seen in the context of the historical rise of Dalit critical and creative writing with the spread of Ambedkarite philosophy in Tamil Nadu in the 1990s on the one hand, and the revisit of Itohee Thass and Periyar's philosophies on the other hand. Together with the emerging political unrest on the issue of caste across the country in the wake of Mandal agitation, Bama's *Karukku* problematizes the idea that caste discrimination and violence is found only in traditional societies and has no place in contemporary modern India. It tries to project that humiliation, rejection and exclusion based on caste are still contemporary issues and have taken new forms.

Karukku is a document of lived experience of poverty, violence, dejection and misery that every Dalit woman experiences in rigid caste hierarchies. It is also a narrative of reconstruction of self that a Dalit woman achieves after going through the traumatic experience of Brahmanic hegemony on the one hand, and Christian religious hegemony on the other hand. The life narrative of Bama details her experiences from childhood to the present time when she attains some kind of understanding of self. The understanding of self is only achieved by going through the process that unravels the casteism of an Indian village. The narrative presents a powerful critique of Brahmanic hegemonic caste structure, Indian civil society, the education system, and the church as a symbol of religious hegemony. The marginal position of Bama in Indian social structure makes the narrative more challenging because she is speaking for those who have remained voiceless for centuries in casteist, patriarchal Indian social structure. According to Mini Krishnan, "Readers may find Bama's expose of certain aspects of our society shocking" (n.p). For the translator Lakshmi Holmström, *Karukku* "questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers all those who have

suffered different oppressions...argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression” (xiv).

The life story of Bama is divided into nine chapters and a postscript. It begins with the description of the village in which she lives, and then moves on to describe her childhood, her school and college education, her religious upbringing and her love for Jesus Christ, her religious faith and skepticism, later her joining the Roman Catholic order by becoming a nun, and her eventual disillusionment with the Christian religious order and returning to her home and community. There remains caste at the core of all her experiences in life.

Many scholars of Dalit autobiographies have argued to read Indian Dalit autobiographies “less as an individual life-writing than as a testimonio” (Nayar 2006:83). Defining the term ‘testimonio’, John Beverley says: “A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience.” (Beverley 1992: 93).

In *Karukku*, the experience of caste becomes the most significant life experience which is told by the narrator- the real protagonist- who has lived experience of the events. The lived experience of poverty, caste and gender violence, and suffering becomes the subject of Bama’s self-narrative. Thus, the narrative becomes a narrative of trauma, pain, resistance, and protest for social change. The trauma for Bama takes form of caste experiences as a member of the Pariya community within both Hindu and Christian caste structures. The narrative also reveals the protagonist’s resistance to the caste experience through the means of higher education and interrogating the smothering structures of the Church.

A testimonio represents the excluded subjects and provides authorized representation. According to Pramod Kumar Nair, “the testimonio is the voice of the one who witnesses for the sake of another” (Nair;2006: 220). Thus in *Karukku* the subaltern voice of the Dalit woman

Bama becomes the voice of the entire community. Her personal victimization, and the status of marginalization and subalternity of the entire community form the narrative of trauma. The personal victimization and collective marginalization occur at many levels. This includes social and linguistic-literary marginalization of Dalit (women) subjects. Linking the personal narrative to the narrative of the community, Bama, in one of her interviews, argues:

“The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma—of my community—whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages” (Bama 2001).

The conventional understanding of the genre of autobiography presupposes an autonomous individual subject attaining sense of selfhood at the end of the narrative which traces out some proportionate development of the protagonist-narrator in teleological manner. Bama’s being a Dalit woman’s autobiographical narrative subverts the conventional understanding of the genre and develops general understanding about the common Dalit men and women. The protagonist-narrator Bama metonymically stands for the entire Pariah community. The objective of the narrative is not to problematize an individual crisis, but a collective condition faced by the entire community. In *Karukku*, Indian caste system is reviewed and problematized.

The autobiographical narrative opens with the personal ‘I’ of the protagonist-narrator but quickly develops a link between ‘I’ of the individual and ‘We’ of the community. In the preface of the text, Bama says:

“...there are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life...unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating...There are other Dalit hearts like mine...They, who

have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku, challenging the oppressors”(xxiii). Here, Bama metaphorically uses the title of the text to refer to the plight of the entire Dalit community on the one hand, and the possibility of revolt on the other hand. The personal plight and fight of Bama turns into collective plight and fight of the community. The use of collective ‘we’ is seen in the very first line of the narrative of the text. Describing her village, Bama says: “Our village is very beautiful...Most of our people are agricultural labourers” (1-2).

The communal is described at length in her narrative by Bama. The narrative has a description of the collective life lived by the Pariahs of the village. There is Muniappasaami shrine where a festival is organized every year when offerings of food and money are made. Bama in her narrative weaves the story of a man called Bondam, from the North Street of the village where the Pariahs live, and mythologizes the character. Bama in her narrative incorporates popular community beliefs and the superstitions they possess. The stories of community’s belief in ‘fire-breathing pisaasu’ who ‘stood very tall, between the sky and the earth’ (41), and the bravery of Pariah women who do the cremation of the dead body on their own at the dead of night are aptly woven in the narrative. Bama’s recalling of childhood games remind us of similar games played by Baby Kamble and her childhood friends in *The Prisons We Broke*. There are references to kabaddi matches during the Easter time, and Bull chasing ceremony in which the people of her community take part. There is no in depth analysis of Dalit patriarchy in *Karukku*, though there is a passing reference to a person called Uudan- a wife-beater. A few community people are mentioned in the narrative who take part in different festival events, but the narrator-protagonist’s participation in any such event is missed to be narrated. Bama in her narrative mentions different types of songs sung by Dalit women while working. They include the songs sung while planting paddy seedlings, weeding the fields, and

harvesting the grain. The women sing songs while rocking the babies in their cradles, and when the young girls come of age. They also sing dirges to their dead, and the songs to the prospective bride and groom who may be cross-cousins. But the narrative makes only a passing reference to them. They are not highlighted as it happens in the next autobiography, *Viramma*.

One of the conspicuous elements of the narrative is Bama's description of Pariah food culture and hunger. Hunting animals and eating them is a part of the Dalit culture. Beef eating is common in Dalit culture, and Bama remarks that a cow is normally slaughtered on Christmas time, and people of other castes also eat beef. Other animals which are slaughtered and distributed in the community include porcupine, wild pig, and deer. When Bama's father who works in the army comes home, he brings with him "grapes, apples, tins of biscuits, sweets, new clothes, tinned milk, tinned fish, and all sorts of exotic things" (71), but "there were times when there was nothing at all at home" and they "boiled and ate drumstick leaves...my mother who had to go hungry" (72-73). Bama recalls how the children become desperate when there is something like a fish or meat waiting. She humorously recalls how as a child she preferred Christmas to Easter because on Christmas they have customary festive meal of beef.

Bama's narrative can be divided into two parts: the details of her personal experiences as a Dalit woman and her position in Christian religious order, and the collective experiences of the Pariah community in Indian casteist society. In the second chapter of the text the movement from personal to collective is quite apparent. The chapter opens with Bama's memory of school life when she is in the third class- "When I was studying in the third class..." (12), but the chapter ends with a call to change the social order collectively: "We who are asleep must open eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low..." (28).

The collective experience of the community is emphasized in the narrative repeatedly by the narrator. The narrative weaves many community stories and legends and thereby a sense of communal life is evoked. The very first chapter refers to the stories of Bondan-Mamma (5-6). The characterization of Kaaman (9-10), and that of Nallathangal (10-12) shifts the attention of the reader from the individual to the community.

The references to the topography of the village and the Dalit space in which the Dalit men and women usually operate again foreground the idea of community in the narrative. Most of the Pariah people work as agricultural labourers and work at Naickers' and other upper caste people's fields. When there is no call for work in the fields, they go to the woods on the mountains. Bama describes the hard work of the Dalit labourers: "Our people were hard at work, driving cattle in pairs, round and round, to tread grain from the straw" (14). The entire chapter four (48-55) is devoted to the Pariah community work. While the Naikkers being the better-off castes own fields, wells, pump-sets and live in comfort, the Pariah people work for the Naickers who possess three quarter of the land in their area. Each Pariah family is attached to the Naicker family as bonded labourers. In addition to the agricultural labour, the Dalit people are involved with "construction labour, digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel, and stone", they "go up to the hills to gather firewood, or they must work with palm-leaves, or at the kilns making bricks...The Koravar or gypsies, and leather-working Chakkiliyar would sweep the streets, dredge and clean the drains, and make a living that way...Everyone in my community had to work hard for their livelihood" (48-49). Some of the people of the community also work at the match box factory.

Bama's own work as bonded labourer is interwoven with the community's work. She recalls her childhood experience of working on the fields: "I'd go and collect such things as the thorns used for fences, or palmyra and coconut- palm stems and fronds for fuel. Sometimes I would go into the fields and pick up dried cow dung (49). It is to be noted that the title of

Bama's narrative, *Karukku*, is inspired by her association with palmyra and coconut-palm stems and leaves and the scars she received right from her childhood.

Bama describes Dalit women's labour work and the unequal wage for men and women for their equal labour. Men of the community get more wage than the women. The hard work of the people is exploited by the Naicker employers. Despite all these hardships, the community people "laughed and were cheerful", but they cannot "afford to study when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies" (55).

The narrative moves from the private to the public. In the very first paragraph of the narrative, the narrator-protagonist makes it clear that the narrative is going to be the narrative of castes and communities. Bama says: "But before I come to castes and communities, I have a lot to say about the village itself" (1). The description of village topography has caste marks on it. The village is divided into caste based communities, and the upper caste people called the Naickers own the land of the village. The fields of Naickers spread over many miles. Bama describes the caste based settlements of the village, and the Pariah community to which she belongs have their settlement near the cemetery. Bama notes that the dividing line between two settlements is clearly drawn and any unnecessary trespassing is strictly prohibited. Bama interestingly notes the division:

"I don't know how it came about that the upper castes communities and the lower castes communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools—all these stood in their streets...a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper caste children" (7).

Bama's description of village settlements clearly shows that spaces are hierarchically ordered, relatively closed, and construct their own politics of domination. The subaltern space occupied

by Dalits of village lack all markers of modernization, and sovereign status. The Pariahs of Bama's narrative appear as Ambedkar's 'broken men' who have been pushed to the margin, beyond the pale of human interaction. It is because of the Brahminical ideology of purity-pollution, the untouchables are created and pushed outside the main village. The untouchables, as Bama notes, are required to enter the village only during a specific period of time. They are supposed to remain in their dark ghettos and remain as "untouchables, uncrossable, unseeable, unhearable, unapproachable, and uncommunicable" (Guru 2017: 84).

Bama's narrative states that there are five streets that make up Dalit community. As Dalit body is unadorable, it remains uncovered, partly dressed, and children wander bare-bottomed. Bama refers to the idea of naming a person and realization of identity through names. Though the Dalit men, women and children have baptismal names, they are known by other derogatory names. In caste ridden Indian society the very name of a person carries his or her caste, and thereby jostles the person into hierarchical relationship with others. The differences between two streets- Upper caste streets and Dalit street - is pictorially described by Bama. The upper caste streets with all their pomp, glamour and vivacity are contrasted with the polluted, inanimate Pariah streets.

Untouchability produced by caste structure remains at the centre of narrative in *Karukku*. Chapter Two abruptly opens with narrator's referring to the experience of untouchability. The community –Pariahs- to which Bama belongs to means 'outsider', 'exorcised', 'excommunicated', and 'alien'. Referring to her experience of being a 'Pariah', Bama says:

"I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is" (13). The Third grade school going child Bama has a very pertinent question: "What did they mean when they called us 'Pariah'?" (16). Bama's both grandmothers worked as

servants for Naicker families. When countered by Bama for their bringing home the unwanted food given by the Naickers, they in return say: "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive?

Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?" (17).

Bama's narrative in does not refer to caste atrocities experienced by her and her community in linear manner. As far as her experiences of caste during her school days are concerned, she recalls the experiences that she undergoes when she is in class three, class six, class seven, and class nine in nonlinear way. The narrative of caste experience very often shifts from the school life to the college life and again comes back to the school life. There are no details of her life in between years. Bama as a school girl faces humiliation at several occasions. At her new school in a nearby town, she "felt very shy and almost fearful" (20). The Warden-Sister of the convent school does not abide low-castes and poor children, so is scolded for no "rhyme or reason" (*ibid.*). The Warden-Sister lambasts the Dalit children:

"These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat...Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home—just skin and bone!"(*ibid.*)

Bama in her narrative shows how a typical Tamil Nadu village is divided into two parts: Ur and Cheri. The Ur is the upper caste space and the Cheri is the Dalit space. Bama recalls how once she is interrogated by fellow traveler on the bus about her street that she belongs to. The Naicker woman immediately moves off to another street when she hears that Bama belongs to the Cheri street- the Dalit abode. The upper caste people expect the Dalit to vacate the seat, but when there is resistance, Bama recalls:

“They’d prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the Cheri. They’d be polluted apparently” (20).

Bama’s caste experiences continue even after she joins college. The narrative shows that caste in India is something that you carry with you wherever you go irrespective of any differences between urban-rural cultural spaces. At a big college in town place, for her caste she is mocked at and faces contempt of fellow students. For not to become an object of contempt of upper caste students, Bama leaves an opportunity to join special tuition in the evening for the Scheduled Caste students. At other occasion, when Bama wants to join her family for the First Communion of her younger brother and sister, she is not allowed to go home in the weekend. The Principal and the Warden humiliate Bama: “What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion?” (22). Bama’s narrative also reveals the oppressive and discriminatory role played by the state machinery- the police- and its unequal treatment to the poor Dalits and the wealthier Chaaliyars. Bama in her narrative clearly realizes that the Pariahs are doomed to suffer in the caste hierarchy and have to live their lives without self-respect and honour. She realizes:

“In this society if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us” (26).

Bama’s *Karukku* refers to one of the most neglected aspects in Dalit studies—casteism within castes. Though the narrative of *Karukku* revolves around the plight of Dalit people within Indian Brahmanical caste order, and upper caste hegemony in the Christian religious

order, it also problematizes the relationship between two Dalit castes, Pariahs and Pallar. While referring to the caste relationship of two Dalit communities, Bama exposes casteism within Dalit community. Dalits, too, have internalized social system of caste. Pariahs and Pallars are outcastes in the eyes of Naickers, Chettiar, Naidus, and Nadars, but the Pallars and Pariahs, too, create caste hierarchies among themselves. Pariahs have become Christians, Pallars have remained within the Hindu fold. They get into arguments over cremation land, and whose land should be watered first. Pariahs are socially advanced because of their access to education due to missionary run schools. They have greater political awareness among them.

The self-narrative of Bama is different from other autobiographical narratives taken into study for its sharp analysis of the institution of Roman Catholic Church and the condition of Dalit Christians into the Christian fold. Her narrative raises a number of questions about the issue of conversion to Christianity to get rid of Hindu casteism and the aftermath of it. No other Dalit women's autobiographies till the publication of *Karukku* ever made an attempt to present a critique of the power structures of the Church as a religious institution. During her school life, Bama develops inclinations towards joining the Christian religious order as a nun. Her love for Christ develops from the early age when she brings home a broken idol of Christ and starts worshiping it. Hence, after completing her B.Ed., Bama joins the convent first as a teacher and then as a nun. In her Bama says that she was a little aware of casteism in the Church, but, inspired by her sheer love for the Christ, she enters the Church to make some difference in the lives of the poor Dalit people. But after entering the convent she gets the firsthand experience with the functioning of the Church, and is horrified to see the degeneration of the religious order. She realizes that Dalit Christians are looked down upon by the Church authorities who belong to the upper castes. During her nun's training every single one is anxious to find out her caste, and Bama realizes that "in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere...that there was

no place that was free of caste” (25). After her course work is over, Bama is posted to a remote rural area as a teacher. She is further shocked to find out that all the sweepers, attendants and the lower rung officials of the Church belong to the Dalit community, and there is no scope for them to rise above within the caste hierarchies of the Church.

Bama laments her joining the convent for its internalization of caste hierarchies. She enters the convent “to help other children to better themselves” but soon discovers that “the convent I entered didn’t even care to glance at poor children” (77). The corruption of the Church officials is boldly narrated by Bama in her narrative. At one occasion, Bama shows, how the Mother Superior humiliates her by obliquely referring to her caste: “Have you given me some money in order to buy you holy pictures? Very well, now, you may all go home quickly *without leaning on the walls or touching anything*” (italics mine) (67). The priests at the Church demand gifts on the occasion of New Year, and later the gifts are sold by him.

Bama’s narrative presents two different lives lived by her: the ordinary life as a Dalit woman, and a life at the convent as a Christian nun. Bama honestly accepts that the life lived at the convent is casteist, elitist, and more comfortable. Describing the inner life of the convent, Bama says:

“Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty” (77).

Bama at length describes the comforts at the convent. But the narrative offers a scathing critique of the entire Church order and the convent life:

“For worse is the attitude within our own Church. They have made use of Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business, and only profited their own castes...It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Even among the priests and nuns, it is the

upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about...if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all...we find there is no place for us there" (80).

The nuns from the convent are found matching their attitude and behaviour to the power and prestige of their families.

Bama in her narrative exposes the violence meted out to nuns by the Church priests. The nuns are even beaten when they fail to attend the assembly. Bama feels that the Church's job is to spread fear in the name of God. There are no cheerful stories to be told but the stories of the Devil and sins. She also refers to the rituals and superstitions of the Church. She finds that Bishop's slapping her cheek for the *Spiritus Sanctus* is worthless. The Church shares its affiliation with caste hierarchy with other institutions where caste oppression is felt by the Dalit people. Bama notes that "The church, the school, the convent and the priests' bungalow were all in places where the upper-caste communities lived" (88). The confession ceremony also turns out to be a mere ritual to be performed at the Church. Bama finds all rituals meaningless and sees the Church people as middle men. At the boarding schools run by the Church, poor Dalit children are exploited by the ecclesiastical people. Bama observes that "there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke" (103).

Bama in her narrative repeatedly expresses her feelings for the Christ and the reverence for the Christian religious order, but she also fills ebb and tide in her devotion to God. The narrative clearly shows her vacillation between entering the convent for her love for Jesus and poor Dalit children, and keeping a safe distance from the priests for their corrupt nature. In the initial period of her life, with the rising understanding about the nature of God, her desire to be a nun diminishes, though she joins the fold only to leave it later in her life after spending about

seven to eight years. She clearly makes a distinction between the Jesus of the Bible and the Jesus of the Church, created by priests and nuns.

Bama in her narrative uses the term ‘Dalit Christian’ to reveal the plight of the people whose ancestors got converted to Christianity generations ago. The use of such term empowers Bama to make distinction between the ‘upper caste Christians’ and the “Dalit Christians” and their different roles in the Christian religious order. The narrative boldly deals with the reality of conversion and the sordid fact that such conversions do not change the real problems that the Dalits face in their lives. Pariahs, to which Bama belongs to, even to this day, are considered to be the lowest among low in Indian caste society. Though Bama’s family members got converted to Christianity a few generations ago, it has not brought about a remarkable change in their lives. Being a Dalit woman, Bama wishes to create a Dalit-subaltern version of the Church as she expresses her desire:

“...all my prayers, my meditations, and my thoughts were directed towards oppressed and exploited people, and towards the Jesus who fought for justice and fairness...it was meaningless to repeat prayers in beautiful and decorative language, and to live without that correspondence and connection between prayer, worship, and life” (105).

She compares the structure of the convent with that of the Naicker house and thus foregrounds the fact that the convent is also run by caste rules and promotes caste and gender binarism. Bama in her narrative sees the Roman Catholic Church as an elitist, casteist, sexist, undemocratic, and hierarchized order in which the Dalit-subaltern identity is not valued.

The narrative of *Karukku* presents a critique of the rhetoric of the Church. Bama during her stay at the Church finds the discourse of the Church “irrelevant, meaningless mumbo-jumbo” (101). There are prayers throughout the day, but “there was no connection between these prayers, the life we led, and the work we did...all these prayers were said only as a duty”

(113). The sisters' and the priests' eloquent rhetoric that "we should love everyone, for we are all God's children" (ibid.) is nothing but sheer hollowness because "the people they chose to talk to, those whom they admitted into their schools, those with whom they claimed relationships were all rich" (ibid.). Since the Church gives priority to the rich, there does not exist the idea of 'Dalit' in the Church. There is no observance of the three vows of the nuns (poverty, chastity, obedience). Bama deconstructs the spiritual image of the convent as "the discussion was at the level of what to prepare, what to eat, what to celebrate and how to enjoy, what to build and what to break, what to buy where and how to sell it... They never asked, why do people suffer, what is the state of this country, what did Lord Jesus actually do for people, why did we become nuns, how can we undo these injustice. Such questions never came out of their mouths" (111-12). Bama in her narrative honestly accepts that at the Church she lived a privileged life.

Though in Dalit (women's) autobiographical narratives the community is prioritized over an individual, it is not to say that the personal of the protagonist is completely erased. In *Karukku* personal suffering, humiliation, and plight of the protagonist-narrator within Indian caste system come to the forefront. The 'corporeal' descriptions occur in the narrative that show that how in Dalit women's narratives the corporeal is associated with the caste. Caste is not something which exists in spirit, but is inscribed on Dalit body throughout his life. Bama in her narrative refers to the scars of suffering she carries on her body:

"Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather fire-wood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them... The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed..."
(xxiii).

The idea of being wounded is metaphorically conveyed by the title of the narrative.

The corporeal Dalit body is a site on which the Brahmanic idea of untouchability is exercised. Since the Dalit body is stigmatized within caste system, the very touch of the corporeal body is considered to be polluted, hence, avoided and loathed. Bama narrates a few individual and community experiences of untouchability in her narrative. She undergoes the first experience of untouchability when she was a school girl when she watches a Dalit elder carry some vadais to an upper caste Naicker man. The packet of vadais is held by the man with a string so that food does not get polluted. This is done to avoid the touch of the untouchable Dalit corporeal body. She is informed by her brother about the ‘untouchable’s touch’ and how it pollutes the upper caste people. Bama as a young girl also notices how some Naicker women give water to her grandmother:

“The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paati and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mounts. I always felt terrible when I watched this” (16).

According to Derrida the narrative of untouchability shows how the tradition of untouchability creates its own ‘law’ that is governed by a sense of tact understood as “knowing how to touch without touching, without touching too much” (Derrida 2005:67). The above examples narrated by Bama show, in Derridean sense, a privileged position of the upper caste people which determine the behaviours of the untouchables related to touching. Casteism in India privileges certain people and make them autonomous agents to make choices about behaviours of those people who are belong to the ‘lower castes’. In his critique of untouchability, Ambedkar points out how the upper caste individual, in the case of the Brahmin, voluntarily takes on the mantle of untouchability. In this regard, Sundar Sarukkai observes that such an individual refuses to touch others because he believes that he is in a ‘purer’ state. Untouchability in the case of such individuals is a mark of *greater purity* and not of greater impurity” (Sarukkai 2017: 192). Indian Brahmanic religious tradition draws out a

relationship between *dharma* and skin. In the theory of karma, and mythologies the “skin is a primary register of the fruition of sins committed in previous births” (Glucklich 1994: 99). Glucklich identifies body as a “microcosmic reflection of the world” and also as a “self-enclosed space” in an antagonistic relation with the world (Sarukkai ibid. 168-169).

Bama’s autobiographical narrative offers significant insights regarding untouchability with the complex narratives of the skin, senses, and the body of the Dalit subject/object. Bama narrates how bodily prohibitions lead to humiliation. Bama’s Dalit woman’s body becomes an object for voyeurism and a site for humiliation. Bama narrates her experience of humiliation at school:

“It was the same story at school, though. They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste...Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn’t hesitate to use us for cheap labour....When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping” (18-19).

Bama like many other Dalit women autobiography writers shows that the idea of space operates differently for Dalits. In this regard, Gopal Guru explains, “experiential space is a culturalized phenomenon and not merely the geography or an empty, socially neutral space. It is thus primarily about controlling people in finite, enclosed, and divided sites” (Guru 2017:78). In Indian caste system, space is hierarchically ordered and it does not produce and promote the vocabularies of individualism, civil society, dignity, freedom, self-rule and self-respect for the underprivileged subalterns. Bama underscores the abhorrence with which Dalits are treated by the upper castes in public places negating them any space:

“How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain” (27).

Whenever there is a riot in Bama's village, Dalits have to suffer the physical violence at the hands of the police. Dalit bodies are hurt and brutalized. In her Afterword Bama recalls the scars that Dalit bodies have to carry:

“...there are a thousand difficulties which beset a Dalit woman living on her own...Each day brings new wounds...I have seen the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society and been enraged by it...I have also been crushed by the growing violence, cruelties, and repressive measures directed towards Dalits in recent times.” (137-138).

Though Bama's narrative does not clearly mentions the influence of Ambedkarite movement in Tamil Nadu, in her introduction to *Ambedkar: The Attendant Details* (2017) she acknowledges the influence of Ambedkar on her writings. She says:

“In the 1990s people in Tamil Nadu came to speak rather intensely of the life, writings and work of Ambedkar. The upsurge that swept the Dalits captivated me too. It was only then that I began to read his books” (Bama 2017:18).

Further, Bama in her narrative charts out the complex relationship of Dalits with modernity. Modernity envisaged as official ‘development’ has little to do with the lives of Dalits, hence Bama in her narrative speaks in favour of the empowering modernity of education through her brother Kannan and her own examples. She is of the opinion that “because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination” (22).

Karukku is an unconventional autobiography. It encompasses the narrator-protagonist's personal crisis which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, a Roman Catholic Christian, and a Dalit. The narrator-protagonist uses the convention of writing under a pseudonym to focus on the public self as a Dalit Christian woman. The protagonist-narrator not only ignores the naming of the protagonist, but also avoids the depiction of many personal

details of the protagonist. The life of Bama in the narrative does not follow any linear, chronological order, but rather reflects the life events in repeated forms from different perspectives. Bama refers to her childhood and school years not in linear, teleological fashion, but in circular way. She jumps from school days to college days and again comes to school days. The narration of school life experiences of casteism is also not linear, but repetitive. This happens because autobiography as a narrative largely rests on memory and memory is not available to us in linear fashion. Bama as a narrator-protagonist exercises her power over narrative and says in an interview: "There were many significant thing that I chose not to recall in *Karukku*. I was witness to many violent incidents related to caste conflicts" (Bama 2001).

A reader may find events arranged in disorderly manner, but they offer alternative understanding of the structure of the text with its own coherence. At times stories of self and community are told cryptically without much elaboration making the reader participate in the process of dialogue. In the narrative Bama appears as a 'primary witness' of her own testimonio, and the reader appears as the 'secondary witness' by his/her willing participation in victim's stories. According to Pramod Kumar Nayar the reader's participation as 'secondary witness' in the narrative creates the "possibilities for solidarity and affiliations among critics, interviewers, translators and the subject who speaks" (Nayar 2006: 93).

Bama in her narrative subverts the conventional idea of autobiographical narrative as mere foregrounding of narrator's subjectivity and personal life. Bama uses the strategy of mix of genres to build up the narrative of *Karukku*. Regarding the narrative, Mini Krishnan, the editor to the first edition, writes:

"Breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama's *Karukku*, a text which is a life story...Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama's is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function" (np).

For such narratives, Caren Kalpan (Smith 1998:208) uses the term “out-law” genres. Dalit autobiographical narratives written by women can be termed as “out-law” genres because they deconstruct literary conventions of autobiography and build up resistance against the entire dominant epistemology in the postcolonial, postmodern societies. The resistance is developed by rejecting linguistic idioms of the dominant groups, interrogating the presentation of the subaltern subjects in mainstream literary genres, and by searching out the subaltern-Dalit tradition of writing. Regarding her use of language in Tamil version of *Karukku*, Bama, in one of her interviews, says:

“One thing that gives me most satisfaction is that I used the language of my people—a language that was not recognized by the pundits of literature, was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, was not included in the norms of Tamil literature” (Bama 2001).

Another conspicuous thing about the narrative is that Bama never mentions any individual oppressors in her narrative. Though *Karukku* is a personal narrative of Bama, it is less personal and more collective, hence, there is no individual oppressed in the narrative, but the collective is the oppressed. Similarly there is no personal oppressor, but the entire upper caste or the people with Brahmanic casteist mentality appear as oppressors in the narrative.

One of the most significant characteristics of the narrative is that nowhere in the text, the narrator’s name is given. “Bama” is itself a penname adopted by the writer. Bama’s adoption of the pseudonym and popularization of it in place of the real name suggests the fact that ‘personal’ identity of the narrator is less important than the “collective” identity of the community. Bama- the Dalit Pariah woman- metonymically represents the entire Dalit community.

With their saw-like edges on both sides are like double-edged swords. The title – *Karukku* – means the saw-like double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf. In Tamil, the word *karu*

also means ‘embryo’ or ‘seed’ that refer to the idea of newness and freshness or new beginning. In fact, Bama has been inspired by the biblical reference to the New Testament in which the idea of *karukku* is found better explained. The scripture says: “For the word of God is living, and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Holmstrom 2013: xv).

Bama in her preface to the book brings forth the connection between the saw-edged palmyra leaf and her own life as a Dalit woman. The wounded Dalit life is beautifully shown by the image of Karukku. The idea of *karu* or embryo refers to the sprouting Dalit consciousness and a symbol for Dalit revolution aiming at bringing a new social order in India. The symbol of karukku also functions positively for the Dalits, as those who have been the oppressed are now like the double-edged Karukku challenging their oppressions. One of the important features of the narrative is that the personal ‘I’ is constantly shifting to the collective ‘we’ and thereby foregrounding the motif of collective caste oppression and gender subalternity. The narrative constantly expands the identity construction by stretching ‘I’ to ‘we’ in collective pursuit of a better world for the suppressed and oppressed lot. Bama’s narrative strategy supports her aim of providing collective biography of the community as nowhere in the narrative Bama refers to any individual name including the narrator’s name. ‘I’ in the narrative is unidentified, impersonal and hence, collective. Yet, personal is constantly foreground in description of personal humiliation, discrimination and suffering. What Bama suggests in the narrative is that though suffering is individual, one suffers as a Dalit. The individual suffering body merges with the collective suffering bodies of Dalits.

Bama’s narrative is not simply a narrative of Dalit victimization, it also seeks different strategies to challenge the process of caste victimization. The narrative, too, follows Ambedkar’s dictum, “educate, organize, and agitate” to interrogate the caste dominance. Bama

finds education a panacea for all Dalit ills. She fondly remembers her brother Annan who inspired her to take education in life. Annan links lack of education among Dalits to their caste plight. He says:

“Because we are born into the Pariah jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can... Work hard and learn” (17-18).

The narrative reveals that Bama’s parents do not want to send her for higher education, but it is one nun who sells her earrings and sends Bama College. With little money in hand, and no good clothes and chappals to wear, she takes her studies and later uses her education as a resistance strategy to counter caste oppression.

Bama uses “writing”- testimonio- as one of the resistance tools to challenge multiple hegemonic traditions. By her first ever autobiographical narrative in Tamil, she challenges the mainstream autobiographical tradition that prioritizes upper caste men and women autobiographical writings and Brhamanic epistemological structure. She in her narrative problematizes hierarchical relationship between the Naickers and other upper castes with the Pariahs. The narrative sees Dalit women’s liberation as associated with the abolition of caste oppression. The conception of liberation that the narrative proposes is based on the community and not individual. Bama uses the autobiographical narrative to transcend established norms and standards of the genre of autobiography to create new ideals and norms emerging out of the subaltern cultural awareness. In his assessment of Bama’s use of Tamil language in *Karukku* as resistance strategy, M.S.S. Pandian argues,

“Bama’s conscious choice of spoken Dalit Tamil, ungoverned by the tyranny of elaborate grammatical rules, as the medium to voice the story of her community is indeed instructive. In a spirit of defiance, it obviously challenges the authority

of literary over orality, a divide which was ratified and nourished by Tamil Saivism or Tamil nationalism of different hues, including mainstream Dravidianism during this century...it is an effort by Bama to break free from her proficiency in standardized written Tamil...and to lose herself in the community of Dalits" (Pandian 2003: 132-33).

In her narrative, Bama's resistance to caste continues till the end of the narrative when Bama leaves the convent which in her experience makes "us alienated from ordinary people...strangers to ourselves" (120), and her job as a teacher with the convent and decides to join her community. It is Bama's idealism and her genuine feeling of oneness with her community that inspires her to leave the material comforts of the convent. It is difficult to return to one's community where one has to strive hard for survival. She remains unemployed for a long time, because there is no 'Dalit school', and "Nadar schools only admit Nadars and Naicker schools only admit Naickers (119). The narrative shows her anxiety over her being unemployed and getting older. Though her resistance makes her "feeble as a murunga tree that blows over in the wind..." (121), she feels "a certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people" (ibid.). But she does in her life encounter two different spaces. Her returning to village community is not an easy return because caste people in her village continue to treat her as an ordinary Dalit woman, and the community people treat her as an outsider because of distinct educational background.

Bama's search for a true Dalit-subaltern identity (both personal and collective) begins with her act of resistance when she decides to run away from the convent with an understanding of new Dalit vision that seeks equality, freedom, democratic temper, and egalitarian world for all human beings, the world which is free from humiliation, suffering and full of self-respect. Though the narrative is the narrative of suffering, it also celebrates Dalit life proclaims aloud '*Dalit endru sollada; talai nimirndu nillada*' ('Say you are a Dalit; lift up your head and stand

tall') (138). Education develops resistance and resistance leads to the molding of Bama into a Dalit activist. Regarding present Dalit status, she remarks:

“...Dalits have begun to realize the truth...They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated: and to begin to live with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion” (108-09).

Bama's *Karukku*, in conclusion, defies three traditions: Hindu tradition, Dait tradition, and Christian tradition. To be a Dalit Christian is to possess multiple identities and positions of marginalization in Indian cultural setting. The narrative interprets a Dalit woman's life as a part of her community to search out the Dalit vision of social reform and discursive space where the Dalit-subaltern can express themselves confidently to challenge traditional patriarchal, casteist culture.

II

Viramma: Life of a Dalit

Viramma: Life of a Dalit (1997, 2005) by Viramma, Josiane Racine, and Jean-Luc Racine is altogether a different type of Dalit woman's autobiographical narrative from Tamil Nadu. It is an oral life narrative in Tamil recorded, collected, edited and then published within a span of ten years (1980-1990) by French sociologists Josiane Racine (native of Tamil Nadu) and Jean-Luc Racine. It has been translated into English from the French by Will Hobson. The autobiographical narrative of Viramma presents a Tamil Dalit woman's experience of Dalit life in sharp contrast to Bama's *Karukku*- another Tamil Dalit woman's life narrative. While Bama is educated, Viramma is uneducated woman with straightforward and apparently artless manner of narration. Viramma, being a Pariah, works as an agricultural labourer attached to the upper caste landlord family of the Reddiar in a feudal agrarian system. In addition to that she also works as a midwife. Within the hegemonic caste structure of Karani, Viramma's village, she is subjected not only to material dispossession and economic enslavement, but also to the most horrible form of social discrimination, namely untouchability. In the case of Dalit wo/men, both the material bases (class) and non- material bases (caste) combine to create the overall subaltern identity of an individual located within his/her community. As Viramma's oral narrative is compiled by sophisticated sociologists, it appears well structured and interwoven as compared to the above-studied Dalit women's self-narratives which are formless and ateleological.

Viramma's life history revolves around the most specific and gloomy sphere of Indianness: the pariah problem. Viramma tells her own story to Sinamma, Josiane Racine, with utter precision, dramatic humour, and with a sense of a born storyteller. The narrative takes into account her carefree Pariah childhood, her marriage before puberty, her becoming a mother

of twelve children, her life as an agricultural worker on the upper caste Reddiar's fields, the weaving of tales of gods and spirits, the stories of upper castes and lower castes of her village and her inability to cope with the new age with new Dalit vision. The narrative takes into account some important questions relating to caste, gender, linguistic inferiority of Dalits, the status of orality and the value of oral narratives as a tool for knowledge, and the place of oral culture in written narrative. Viramma in her oral autobiographical narrative appears as a storyteller and singer as the narrative is replete with many folk songs of Dalit community. The ethnomusical quality of the narrative emphasizes on music and songs as expressions of Tamil Dalit culture and society. Thus Viramma in her narrative presents herself both as an heir and witness to Tamil Dalit culture. Like many other Dalit women's autobiographical narratives, her testimony is not an exploration of bourgeois 'I' expressing 'bourgeois individualism', but the collective 'I' of her family and community. It covers joys, sorrows, material dimensions, beliefs, superstitions, tradition and possibility of change.

Located in Karni village of Tamil Nadu, the narrative of *Viramma* explores the structuration of the village with major two divisions: the *ur* (the main upper caste settlement of the village) and the *ceri* (where the Parias, the untouchables live). The strict division of the village into *ur* and *ceri* is a Brahmanic upper caste strategy of the well-off families of landowners (Reddiars) and other small peasants to restrict corporeal movement of Dalit body. The corporeal body of Dalit has always been a stigmatized body which has power to pollute the sacred body of the caste people.

Viramma is an *adimai* (bonded land labour woman) and an *oppari*, a funeral lament, singer. The narrative weaves her childhood memories, her conjugal life with her husband Manikkam, her children and the rise of Dalit consciousness emerging among the youth of the village. Viramma is not so radical as Urmila Pawar or Bama or Baby Kamble. She firmly believes that she has to perform her duties as an *adimai* diligently because this is the structure

which she has naturalized for generations. Viramma's son Anban possesses strong political views on the fate of Pariahs and contrasts his mother's understanding of Dalit life. Viramma in her narrative very coolly accepts Dalit humiliation and discrimination and never elaborates on atrocities meted out to Dalits.

The aim of narrating her own life story is not certainly political for Viramma; it may be political for the translators or co-authors. The aim of the narration on the part of Viramma is not to form a critique of the ideological system in which she lives. She simply relates and shows how it functions in a village space. Though Viramma appears as an apolitical and submissive woman, her liveliness can be experienced in her vibrant interest in other human beings- the itinerant singers, eunuchs, snake-catcher tribes, hunters, her interests in songs, stories, street theatre, the abundance details she provides on Gods, Dalit rites and rituals, ceremonies, food culture, and other facets of life.

Thus Viramma in her narrative appears as a woman caught between the traditional compulsions of her status on the one hand and her quest for expanding her marginal status as a Dalit woman. In the narrative the protagonist Viramma passes through different stages of life: a little girl, an innocent child-bride, a teenage wife, a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law, a mother, a grandmother and above all a folk singer and a midwife. The oral narrative of Viramma is an important subaltern document.

The narrative of *Viramma* begins with the description of the paternal grandfather Samikkannu's family at Velapakkam, the village where the childhood of Viramma passed. Viramma's father Nadesan and mother Pattu had seven children who survived. Viramma's paternal grandfather Samikkannu used to practice sorcery which is very common in Pariah community to which Viramma belongs to. The first reference to the caste relationship appears in the very first line of the narrative when Viramma describes her paternal grandfather as 'a serf of Swara Reddi' (1). The English translation 'serf' is used here to translate the Tamil term

‘adimai’ which refers to the agricultural worker whose family has been attached to and dependent on the Reddiar- the upper caste landowner family- for several generations. ‘Adimai’ are one of the types of bonded labour which arises within Hindu casteist structure. The narrative later shows how the traditional relationship with all its epistemological ramifications is very strongly internalized by Viramma and other people of her generation.

Like many other autobiographical narratives by Dalit women, this narrative, too, weaves the stories of other people as a part of narrator-protagonist’s memories. Hence, Viramma’s narrative, in detail, describes the event of her birth at her paternal grandparents’ home in Velpakkam. The gender biases of Dalit patriarchy is described thus by Viramma: “...in the *ceri*, the men were getting ready to go to the fields after staying up all night. They stopped in front of the house and seeing my father sitting near the door, his head in his hands, was all they needed to guess what sex the child was. They carried on their way, saying: “Nadesan has had another daughter” (3). The grandmother, though, comforts the parents saying that “the fourth daughter brings good fortune”, also adds that ‘the fourth daughter reduces her family home to poverty...’ (3). Explaining the relationship between her name based on god’s name and her caste, Viramma says that the Pariahs often use gods’ names because they are not “meant to live in a state of cleanliness or take ritual baths all the time”, and by using the gods’ names “we can purify ourselves many times a day” (3).

Viramma is an illiterate woman who never went to school but brought up on games, songs, and stories of the community and the village. Describing her impoverished childhood, Viramma remarks:

“Getting ready didn’t take much time: a little water on the face, arms and feet and a little ash to brush our teeth. Then we’d swallow some rice in water and

millet gruel. My little brother went around naked. I just put on an underskirt like my sister..." (4).

Memories of her childhood labour is recorded with pain in the narrative. Viramma starts working as a child labour on the fields of the Reddiars. She accepts her destiny as a child labour without making any kind of fuss and finds satisfaction with her domestic work at the Reddiar's house. Viramma's story telling ability gets born in her childhood when she tells stories to the children of the Reddiar, but the Reddiar wife cautiously uses her power and keep Viramma away from telling tales to her children, and thus maintains caste hierarchy and assures obedience on the part of Viramma as a Pariah.

Though Viramma's marriage has been decided by her parents at a very young age (Viramma is only eleven years old when she gets married), after initial resistance, she accepts it as "the fate of women" (16) and optimistically looks forward to it:

"Leaving is terrifying, you believe that everything is coming to an end, but everything is only beginning when you get married. You become a woman and you blossom in the light of your new household" (ibid.). Viramma notes the age difference between her and her husband. She humoursly says: "He must have been the same age as my youngest uncle, he was an old man for a little girl like me (21).

Viramma in her narrative quite boldly describes the coming of her puberty age, her initiation to the conjugal life and the first experience and exploration of female body and sexuality. "Women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (Grosz 1994: 14). In recent times, feminism has celebrated the female body as a source of pleasure, fertility, and empowerment. Without any kind of feminist awareness, Viramma's narrative celebrates her female body- the biological and corporeal of it. The announcement,

“Viramma’s got her period” (29) brings happiness in the house and celebrations begin because it is now time for Viramma to go to her husband’s house. Viramma in depth narrates rituals to be followed to keep her pure and away from evil spirits. Regarding her puberty, Viramma says: “The time of my puberty was fortunate, both for me and my family-in-laws. I would be a strong healthy woman and the mother of many children” (32). The narrative also assimilates a song of period and sexual relationship with husband, which is unique among all Dalit women’s self-narratives discussed so far. The song of Kuppu (Period) runs thus:

“Oh sweet little one, you’ve had your first period,

When did you have it, little girl?

Tell me what you’re feeling,

Don’t be ashamed as you find out.

O little girl, afterwards you’ll leave

With your husband, for his home.

Lots of good things will come to you,

Your husband will do everything he should.

He’ll caress your pretty, firm breasts,

That will make you feel good, little girl.

He’ll put his thing in your pretty, fanny,

He’ll put it in the hole above,

That will be good, it will be de delicious,

That’s how he’ll make you pregnant,

And the child will come out by the same hole,

And will hurt your pretty fanny, O sweet one” (33).

Like any ordinary Indian woman, Viramma is initiated into the conjugal life with Manikkam- her husband who is older than her. Viramma's mother advices her on duties of an obedient bride:

“Obey your parents-in-law, from now on they are your gods. Obey your husband, he's your master. Be faithful to him. Don't be arrogant, don't provoke anybody, don't speak wildly but earn yourself a good reputation” (35).

But Viramma in her narration appears quite ‘wildly’ and shatters all inhibitions expected from a woman narrator in her narrator. Viramma recalls her first mating experience in her narrative:

“The man came in at last. I shut my eyes straightway. I was curled up like a shrimp...I was still as a corpse. He took off his *soman* very quickly and with the same speed he undressed me. I was humiliated to be naked. He stuck to me like a leech and took a firm grip of my breast....I was suffocating under his weight... At last he let go of one of my breasts, took his tail which was as hard as a sugar cane and pushed it in at the top of my thighs, which kept apart with his own...he was tearing me...He roared like a lion...I suffered in silence” (44).

Viramma relates the brutality of her husband with his Pariah background and the socio-economic condition of the community as these people do not have the time or the space to perform love act.

Viramma quite naturally in her narrative reveals Dalit patriarchy without wearing a mask of a feminist. She is forced to do everything for her husband and on her refusal, she gets smacks, hence, she “sulked, scowled, and never laughed” (45). Yet, Viramma shows resistance on her part from the very beginning. She does not show proper respect to her husband when she takes a pot of *kuj* flat on her head without rolling up the fold of her sari on her head. Despite all her complaints and grievances, Viramma calls her husband kind and says that he “ tried to

get to know me, to make friends with me" (47). She tries to prove herself the best wife of her husband. Though the Pariahs are considered to be the lowest caste people, she says: "If the husband raises an arm, the wife raises a foot! But they're different castes, they're nomads. We don't move around. We live in a colony and we follow rules" (*ibid.*).

After the initial shock and torment in marriage, Viramma gradually starts enjoying a sexual relationship with her husband, and frankly reveals her sexuality and bodily desires. She recalls:

"My crying fits had ended and I almost looked forward to these arguments, because, little by little, they were bringing us closer together... We caressed each other for a long time, a very long time.... I made him lick the soles of my feet and my toes! It made me feel very good at the same time. I found out with him that the ears and the hollows behind the knees are places that give pleasure...I looked admiringly at his little hairy balls and his sting which was thick and hard as sugar cane with its violet head. I was always very moved at those times, and I felt feelings that I had never known before... In the end we were happy, we satisfied each other. I felt good with him...In any case, it was then that I began to love my husband as the dearest being in my life" ..." (48-49).

A whole chapter 'He still desires me!' (50-58) is devoted to depict Viramma's romantic relationship with her husband. No other Dalit women's autobiographies have depicted the narrator-protagonist's romantic relationship with her husband with exuberant, overt sexual references as Viramma does in her narrative. The earlier brute husband in later narrative gets metamorphosed into "a gentle and good" (50) husband, and the narrative does not elaborately describe any exploitation of the narrator-protagonist at the hands of her husband. Viramma in her narrative does not present herself as a victim or an oppressed subject within Dalit

patriarchy. Rather she describes herself as a victim of some women's jealousy in her house. Viramma's narrative celebrates what French feminist Helene Cixous calls 'écriture féminine'- 'women's writing'. The 'écriture féminine' promotes women's feelings and celebrates women's writing about their selves, and their 'bodies'. It puts women's experience before language, and privileges anti-linear, cyclical writing which foregrounds women's bodily experiences that include sexual pleasure. Viramma's personal narrative presents all those experiences from which women have been driven out in patriarchy. Viramma without having any kind of feminist awareness, in her narrative, offers a radical reading of 'écriture féminine'.

Helene Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1981) inspires women writers to write about her self and to write about her body: "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth." (Cixous 1981: 250). Viramma's 'writing her body' in her self-narrative allows her to break all censorships existed in patriarchal tradition of autobiographical narratives which prioritized only male desires. She in her narrative brings women to the domain of writing self and body from which they have been driven away. The sexuality of Dalit women has never been recognized and accommodated in either the mainstream or the Dalit writings. In her description of her body, Viramma celebrates Dalit woman's sexuality, the idea that has always been neglected both in the mainstream and the Dalit literary narratives. Describing her sexual urge and body, she writes:

"We 'did it' well. My doughnut was sore because it took a long time to satisfy me...I was beautiful, young and healthy. My hips and thighs were as smooth as

the trunk of a banana tree. I was small and black as a crow, but my curves were attractive (51).

Viramma's self-narrative on the one hand celebrates her sexuality, and on the other hand shows resistance to any kind of sexual assault made by any person. A civil servant of the village of the village tries to seduce and abuse Viramma by offering some money to her, but his attempts to victimize Viramma are thwarted by her as she makes an uproar and exposes the mal intentions of the civil servant. Viramma also exposes the sexual advances of doctors at the hospitals, and other upper caste men for whom "... Paratchi have the reputation of being easy women who'll jump into bed with anyone if they whistle" (52), but Viramma firmly affirms that, "...we're not whores" (*ibid.*). Viramma exposes the hypocrisy of the upper caste people who treat the Pariah women as untouchables, but are ready to have them to quench their sexual appetite.

Viramma's narrative, though on the one hand it celebrates Dalit woman's sexuality, offers a critique of Dalit patriarchy in which women constantly become mothers. Motherhood is both celebrated and critiqued in the narrative. Viramma is a mother of twelve children whose names she is able to remember with great pain. But out of her twelve children, she is left with only three children- Miniyamma, the fourth child, Anban, the eighth child, and Sundari, the eleventh child. The gynocentric narrative of Viramma without any conscious intention to problematize the issue of motherhood in patriarchy reveals the condition of Dalit women who are laid with the burden of constant motherhood along with other labours. Viramma remarks:

"We lose blood with each child and, on top of that, there's all the work we get through: planting out, weeding, harvesting, looking after the cattle, collecting cow dung, carrying eight jars of water, and then pounding, winnowing the millet, hulling the paddy, taking it to the rice mill ...and all the work at home and in the *ur*" (52).

As compared to Dalit men, Dalit women work more in the socio-economic structure of Dalit patriarchy, but do not have much control over home economy and other areas where decisions are taken. Viramma in her narrative also resists against her husband's lust, especially when she has become a grandmother and a mother of so many children:

“Listen, we've had so many children...Aren't you ashamed? Are you a man or not?...Don't you have brains to understand that? Do you want me to end up with another child in my womb at my age?” (58).

She also raises an important question of Dalit women's health, the nutrients they get and the incessant condition of motherhood. She also refers to the very serious condition of malnutrition among Dalit women whose “stomach's full the day we work, otherwise it's empty” (56), and contrasts this condition with that of the Dalit men who “eat well and are as strong as the clubs the gods' guards hold” (*ibid.*).

The condition of constant motherhood is something that is beyond the control of Viramma. Within Dalit patriarchy, she accepts her fate to be a mother of twelve children. Viramma minutely details the birth of her twelve children and the deaths of nine out of them. She develops religious understanding about their birth and death. She says:

“Isvaran has done his work well: he's put plenty of children in my womb. But it's been different afterwards. A lot of my little ones have died” (78).

But death in Viramma's community is not seen as a perpetual loss, as the dead always remain a part of the community forever. Viramma says:

“Even now, when I buy something—some new clothes, some cloth, some sweets—as soon as I get back home, I put it down straightaway where my little ones breathed their last sigh... It is only after that I hand out what I've bought

to the others and help myself. ... good fortune or bad fortune, our dead are like gods to us. We call on them at difficult times, we pray to them to help us..." (148).

Though caste in Viramma's narrative is not interrogated as it is done in other Dalit women's narrative, the memories of caste and its implications and relevance in life constantly configure human relations in narrative. At the very outset of her narrative, she ponders over caste poverty and gender biases in society:

"Disappointment or misfortune don't last among us, the poor; we can't live if we brood on them the whole time. So the disappointment of my birth was quickly forgotten and I was welcomed into the household very well" (4).

Viramma's narration of her breastfeeding to upper caste children exposes the upper caste hypocrisy in their treatment to the Pariahs. The Pariahs are treated as objects by the upper castes as per their whims and whams. The untouchable Viramma becomes touchable when the need for mother's milk arises for the upper caste children in the village. Viramma narrates many accounts when she breastfeeds the upper caste children, but the same children treat her as an untouchable when they grow up. Similarly the untouchability of the Pariah women does not deter the upper caste men from developing sexual relationship with them.

Though Viramma's narrative reveals complex configurations of casteism and patriarchy, it does not operate with any political design. Viramma's lived experiences of casteism and gender discrimination does not prompt her to take any radical stance in her life. In her narrative, she is very often seen willing to keep hierarchies intact without voicing much resistance. Untouchability is not contested as it is done in Marathi Dalit women's narratives. Viramma has accepted her caste as the upper castes have accepted theirs. She describes herself and her community from the point of view of the hegemonic discourse. For her, caste is not

men made, but god made. She mythologizes the origin of caste and the hierarchies of castes. She does not see caste as an ideological construct that prioritizes the upper castes' desires and subordinates the lower castes' yearnings. In Viramma's narrative, caste is not seen as a social institution with its own ideological and epistemological bearings, which structure family, religion, educational and legal systems, and other organizations including socioeconomic relations. Viramma presents a very simpleton understanding of caste:

“Just as there the rich high castes, so there are the poor low castes. God gave the land to the rich high castes and he gave the poor low castes the duty of cultivating the land. The duty of the rich high castes is to employ us, us the Palli, the Pariahs, the Kudiyar” (160).

Viramma, here, does not comprehend the intricate relationship between land ownership and the formation of upper class/caste in Indian society. Viramma, though, successfully grasps the historical reality of beef eating and its association with the purity-pollution concept and the formation of the untouchables- the pancham varna- in Indian society. Viramma belongs to the Vettiyar or Vettiyan caste which is the sub-caste of the Parays with ritual tasks connected particularly with funerals. Thus Viramma's caste forms the category of the lowest among the low within caste hierarchies. Drawing out the connection between beef eating and untouchability, Viramma observes:

“Other low castes have their particular trade. They are a little higher than us because they don't eat beef. They eat eggs, vegetables, fish, poultry...But meat is unclean, it's waste. Milk is pure. And as we eat waste, we're unclean. That's the difference between low castes and high castes” (*ibid.*).

The narrative quite succinctly finds some correlates with the issue of caste and the general health of the Dalit people, especially women. The Dalit women's lives lack in good

health, control over reproduction, and adequate nourishment. Diseases and epidemics are the main reasons for infant mortality and death tolls in the community. In the light of poor health conditions and frequent child-bearing, the women of the community lose their beauty and health very early on in life. Viramma opines:

“Young, yes, we are as strong as tamarind seeds, but after children start coming, it’s all over. We lose blood with each child and on top of that, there is all the work we get through: planting out, weeding, harvesting, looking after the cattle, collecting cow dung, carrying eight jars of water and then pounding, winnowing the millet, hulling the paddy, taking it to the rice mill in Tirulagam, and all the work at home and in the ur. A Pariah woman loses her strength and beauty very early” (52).

At the hospital Dalit people have to suffer caste humiliation at the hands of upper caste hospital staff including doctors. Viramma in her narrative explains the details of child birth and her expertise in a midwifery. This example shows that Dalit women prefer to have a child birth at home to avoid caste discrimination at the hospital. Viramma’s narrative gives a very detailed description of Pariah community and the occupations of each sub-castes quite interestingly. The artisan communities like pig farmers, cobblers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, traders, launders and potters are described with their place in caste hierarchy. The castes within caste is a unique feature of Indian caste system. Over the years, caste system has developed and shown tremendous resilience because it accommodates other castes to form what Ambedkar has defined as “ascending order of respects and descending order of contempt”. The narrative clearly shows that there are hierarchies among Dalits.

Though Viramma does not pose any revolt against the Brahmanic social structure in her narrative, she does share her pain and trauma of her being trapped into Pariah caste. Even

a Reddiar child whom she once fed humiliates her when he grows up. Viramma recalls: “And now he’s a man, he doesn’t respect me and if I’m at his house, in the courtyard, he says to me ‘Aye! Stop there, you! It smells of pariah here!’” (75-76). While cursing the god, she outbreaks: “If we ever meet him, we’ll smash his face in! Why did he do that, bloody God: them rich and us poor?” (191).

Viramma, in her narrative, is not aware of Dalit politics around her, and never uses the term ‘Dalit’; rather she uses the term “Harijan”. This seems that the influence of Ambedkar is yet to come in Tamil Nadu in the wake of Dalit politics and the rise of Ambedkarite counter-publics. Viramma admires Indira Gandhi and thinks that she had done good work for the poor. It is Viramma’s husband Manikkam and her son Anban who have got a little understanding about political parties and their political relationship with the Reddiar landlords. Manikkam is influenced by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and shares his understanding of the communist parties and Congress. Manikkam’s rebellious nature is seen when he resists his master when he is beaten by him.

Virama in her narrative recalls different types of violence she passed through. Jociane Racine in this regard notes: “Violence has been very much a part of Viramma’s horizon: the physical violence of a master, of *goondas* beating up Dalits on behalf of powerful men with political ambitions, or violence encountered in police stations...” (Racine 2000: 311). But the most important violence that Viramma depicts in the narrative is “the established silent violence of a system of oppression which has worked so intensely and for so long that Viramma herself testifies to how it can be internalized by those who have been submitted to its rule. This is the violence of hunger...This is the violence of sickness, which killed nine of her twelve children in their prime. This is the hidden violence of words or a gesture expressed in all possible shades of contempt, when upper caste landlords, government officers or simple peasants talk to Dalits, or talk about them: the violence of bondage, debt, economic

dependency; the violence of a fate of uncertainty; the violence of sex,...and the subdued, general, and permanent violence which sustains the daily practice of untouchability; the violence of tradition which gives no consideration to ‘Pariahs’ ” (ibid. 312).

The narrative refers to an event that throws light on the relationship of servitude that develops between the Pariahs as subaltern community and the Reddiars as the upper caste people within the caste system. At the time of Viramma’s marriage, her father borrows a large sum by pawning the two plots of land that her grandfather owned. But after that her father pays interest for a long time, and has to give up the two plots also. This example shows how the Pariahs enter into compulsory loans and debts which last for generations and they have to lose their property to the upper caste landlord. Thus, Viramma’s narrative reflects the fact that caste dominance is based on wealth, and the control over land gives the dominant castes access to all power positions in society. The Pariahs as Dalit-subaltern community lose all productive resources and they become slaves to the dominant caste groups in the village economy. The Indian caste system keeps all productive resources with the upper castes that endangers the condition of economic and social subalternity for the Pariah community in a village like Karani.

Viramma’s autobiographical narrative is perhaps the first Dalit woman’s narrative from Tamil Nadu that charts out the detailed Pariah culture of the state. It minutely captures the daily throbs of the Pariah world - their labour and perspiration, trials and tribulations, rites and rituals, fears and hopes, superstitions and beliefs, births and deaths, songs of harvest and songs of gods and goddesses, tales of fertility and good harvest. The festivals of the Pongal of the Oxen and the festival of Draupadi, the blood sacrifice to Periyandavan, the spells and spirit possessions which form the community ethos are described in detail by Viramma. The community tradition of eating beef also finds its place in the narrative. Viramma recalls: “What’s important for us is the Pongal of the Oxen, the Day of Meat and then the Pongal of the Calves” (221). Viramma, being a woman and a folk singer, remains quite engrossed in the festive celebrations of

Mariamman (goddess of smallpox), Perumal (the most common name for Vishnu), Periandavan (Shiva's double created by his father-in-law, Daksha; the god of Viramma's line), Murugan (second son of Shiva, god of masculine beauty, youth, war and the mountains), Viran (secondary divinity, fearsome, a carnivorous, alcohol-drinking god, a son created by Shiva to kill his father-in-law), and Aiyanar (the guardian of the fields and the protector of the village). Viramma in her narrative mentions twenty-six different gods and goddesses that the Pariahs worship as a community. Viramma's narrative also mentions twenty-six castes living in the village to give a comprehensive picture of the caste relations in the village.

The supernatural place an important role in the lives of the Pariahs. There are a number of references to the role played by the supernatural gods and goddesses, the possessed persons of the village, and the importance of sorcerers in the Pariah lives. The mythological past always remains present in the Pariah lives. The funeral rituals described by Viramma contrasts the Brahmanic funeral rituals. Viramma mockingly describes the Brahmins as 'thieves' who literally run with the dead person on their shoulders and perform all rituals in silence. The Pariah burial, on the other hand, is more cheerful and musical than their marriage. Viramma informs:

“We are cheerful people and never hold any funerals without songs, without music, without laments...It's a sort of tribute, a feast which we offer to the dead before they leave us...beautiful funerals are a sign of pride on the part of the dead person's family....We Pariahs are a caste who express ourselves by noise.

You'll find the best weepers among us....Everyone drinks at funerals, from the leader of mourning to the musicians...” (137-38).

Caste violence and humiliation is an everyday affair with the community. Viramma's husband Manikkam's story narrates the nature of violence meted out to them by the upper caste people. Manikkam recalls an incident of getting beaten up by their landlord:

“The Reddiar called me, ‘Manikkam! Manikkam’! But I did not hear anything because of the wind blowing from the south and all the noise the people were making, and I stayed sitting down next to the cow without answering him. He picked up a tamarind branch and, coming up behind me, hit me hard on the head. I fainted, unconscious” (p. 269).

One of the important characteristics of all the Dalit women writers' narratives is that they are full of auditory details of Dalit life. In male Dalit writers' narratives, we find more accent on the olfactory images, and the auditory images are totally neglected. Among all Dalit women's autobiographical narratives, Viramma's narrative thrives with sounds, rhythm, and noise. The community songs on different life experiences occupy the narrative space. Even the dirge song has its own rhythm:

“Hey! salak, salakek salak, slakan,
Hey! salak, salakan
Hey! salak, salak
Hey! atchang, atchagatan, tillagatan”(136).

Viramma in her narrative refers to her as a Pariah. The Pariahs have remained the poorest, most neglected, the most ill-treated class in Tamil Nadu ever since the colonial period. The understanding of the term ‘Pariah’ is necessary to understand the condition of Viramma and many other Dalits like her during her life time. An editorial published in *The Hindu*, in June 1891, defines the Pariah problem thus:

“...the condition of these castes is truly miserable. The Hindus do not recognize them as part of their community and nothing can be more humiliating and intolerable than the treatment that the Pariahs...receive from the Hindus of

higher castes. The Hindu religion has done nothing for them except to prescribe a most abject slavery as the lot for which they alone are fit" (Viswanath 2015:1).

In Tamil Nadu since the late 1890s, the term 'Pariah' (an anglicized term of the caste name Paraiyar) has been used to refer to all Dalit castes. The word Pariah has often been interchangeably used to mean 'slave'.

The narrative foregrounds Pariah identity. Viramma is not ashamed of her Dalit identity, rather she celebrates the Pariah rites and rituals which may be seen as regressive, superstitious, and uncivilized by the upper caste people. Viramma weaves the mythological story around her caste. Virama's grandfather explains the mythology in which the Pariahs appear as "rejected for being descendants of the thief" (166) who stole a drum from a temple. Viramma further explains her Pariahness thus:

"I thought that it was because we aren't civilized, because we don't have beautiful teeth, because we chew betel, we carry our meals in earthenware dishes, because we neglect everything to do with cleanliness and dress... We use soap to wash and *sikakai* for our hair. But we'll still be unclean....Soap does not remove uncleanness." (167).

Like other autobiographical narratives that we have seen so far, Viramma's narrative does not present a contested view of caste. The binary between the Brahmin and the Pariah is presented with humour and irony: "They take if (the food) raw because they are in contact with God and must be pure: they have the food cooked at their homes. We prefer to give it cooked: it saves us the time and cost of cooking. I heard the Brahmin murmuring prayers as he raised the sacrificial fire...I was looking through the window when the Reddiar's mother saw me and chased me away...(169).

Ambedkar, in his essay “Untouchability, the Dead Cow and the Brahmin”, finds “correlation between untouchability and the use of the dead cow” (2015: 185) and sees beef eating “the root of untouchability” (*ibid.*). In the same essay he further observes that following the deep struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism, the Buddhists who kept the practice of beef-eating became the Broken Men and came to be treated as Untouchables. Viramma, too, in her narrative weaves a mythological story in which the god takes the possession of the priest and commands: “I don’t want to stay in the old temple which has been soiled by those Pariah beef eaters. I want a new temple to be built and Pariahs to be forbidden to enter it!” (168). Thus, Viramma tries to show how the Pariahs are mythologically ostracized from the temple, a place of Brahmanic purity.

To be a Pariah woman is to get ready for sexual assault. Viramma narrates several incidences of sexual assault at the public places like hospitals, and offices that the women of her community have to suffer:

“All of them make passes at us, from the doctor to the sweeper. ‘Aye! What do you say? Are you coming’...we are harassed non-stop down there. But we don’t dare shout or make a scandal: we’d be called liars, our names would be crossed off the hospital registers and we wouldn’t be given any more treatment” (52).

Viramma notes the upper caste Reddiar perception of the Pariahs as people who “speak a half language” (194). This alludes to the prevailing illiteracy among the Pariahs since ages and the epistemological silence observed by the Pariahs in Indian culture. Viramma deplores the state of aphasia and its relationship with Pariah’s social location:

“And that hal-language betrays us every time we open our mouths, even when we’re well dressed, even in the market when everybody’s mixed together. In the

buses people move away from us when the conductor says, ‘That has to be the Pariahs!’ We’re recognized everywhere, at the temple, in the cinema” (194).

It is Dalit patriarchy that is critiqued at many occasions in the narrative. Though both of her parents work on the field, on their return to home, it is the father who leaves home again for the wine shop, while the mother has to manage with a bit of money to prepare the evening food. The division of labour in the domestic field lays onus on women. Viramma in her narration obliquely refers to an uneasy scene when the half-drunk men return home and find their evening meal not as per their expectations.

There are not many references to domestic violence or or perpetration of Viramma at the hand of her husband in the narrative, except during the phase when Viramma has already born twelve children, she refuses to have a sexual relationship with her husband, but her retaliation does not always succeeds. She says: “But the only answer was to obey. If I refused, then I had smacks in store” (45).

Viramma’s life narrative is embedded with graphic references to gods, demons, and spirits; and stories about them in the form of vivid folk expressions of the Pariah community. Though the narrative is from an illiterate woman, the narrative about the Pariah religious beliefs has become so powerful and elaborate that it is no less than any such narratives present in the Brahmanic religious tradition. Though the untouchable Pariahs have been historically crushed under Brahmanic Hinduism, Viramma’s narrative remains faithful to Hindu mythological tradition. Viramma in her narrative fashions out a separate tradition of Pariah Hinduism with distinct rites and rituals of its own. This conspicuous quality of Viramma’s narrative can be understood with Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony as ‘consensus’. Clarifying Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, Valeriano Ramos, Jr. notes:

“... hegemony (“predominance by consent”) is a condition in which a fundamental class exercises a political, intellectual, and moral role of leadership within a hegemonic system cemented by a common world-view or “organic ideology” (1982 : 8).

A big part of the narrative is about the Pariah community’s religious beliefs in gods and demons; and rites and rituals. The narrative interestingly weaves stories of Dalit mythological world and shows hopes, despairs, faith, and superstitions of the community. Viramma’s narrative does not offer any sharp critique of the Brahmanic mythological world the Pariahs inherit and the epistemology it offers to the Dalit community in relation to the upper caste people, rather it shares with the readers the complete internalization of the mythological world view with all their intricacies by the Pariahs and its importance in their lives. Unlike the Marathi Dalit women’s autobiographical narratives which offer a sharp critique of Brahmanic mythology and epistemology for their control over the Dalits, and the ideological hegemony they exert on the Dalit lives, Viramma’s narrative quite innocuously present the caste relationships existing in her village. But though her expository nature of narration, she provides enough opportunities to the readers to interrogate caste rule and caste power. It does not critically evaluate the Brahmanic hegemony as an organic arrangement of all ideological elements into a unified system. But the detailed narration of Pariah rites and rituals along with their religious bearings is informative for any students with sociological and anthropological interests.

The narrative offers a detailed description of gods, goddesses, demons, and spirits. The place of the supernatural and the belief in them may be a laughable stock for the urbanized people, but Viramma’s narrative makes them alive and presents them before our eyes from the distant realm of mythology. Their existence in the narrative is as real as the other characters. They are the constant companions of the community’s life. They have got tremendous powers

which can affect both positively and negatively the lives of the Pariahs. They can cause illness, infertility, mental and physical harm, and deaths in family. Viramma's belief in spirits and counter-spirits also operates quite palpably her narrative. She firmly puts her belief in spirits:

“People who commit suicide are different. They become demons, that's for sure! Here at Karani several people have brought about their own death. All of them have been changed into Mohini, Budam, Minisuprayan or Katteri and then they've come back to disturb us. That's how we know” (142).

The lack of education among Dalits is the main reason for their firm beliefs in such supernatural elements. The looming insecurity, pain, and trials and tribulations of everyday lives make them believe in such things quite religiously without interrogating them. Though quite bold in other terms, Viramma appears quite vulnerable to the community beliefs in the supernatural.

The hold of the supernatural on Viramma is not an individual crisis, but a collective crisis of the entire community. There is no doubt that in the absence of education, and lack of modernity and rationality, such beliefs prevail in the Pariah society. The new wave of Dalit movement is yet to be experienced by the veteran people like Viramma, though people like Viramma's son, Anban, have started experiencing the new wave of democratic temper as it is evident in Viramma's narrative. Anban very often shows his radical approach and critiques Viramma's traditional beliefs in the supernatural, gods and goddesses.

The narrative elaborates the cultural practices, customs, rituals, ceremonies, and festivals of the Pariah community with all precision. The rites and rituals are related to life-cycle events, gods, and spirits. The rituals are celebrated with passion, care, and have their own aesthetics and epistemology. Conducting and participating in such rites and rituals is an integral part of the Pariahs. Though they may appear superstitious and futile from the upper caste angle,

they symbolize self-expression for the Pariahs. The celebration of their customs and festivals provide them an opportunity to exercise some autonomy and movement.

An incident woven around fulfilling a vow of her family in which a goat is to be sacrificed to god is described thus:

"First of all we washed to purify ourselves... Then I washed the piglet...coated it with turmeric paste. I rinsed it and hung a thick garland of flowers around its neck. It was radiant! Now it had to be fed. In a brand new earthenware pot we'd made it (for the pig) a rice and palm sugar gruel. That smelled good! ... The smell of camphor and incense filled the ceri10 and we felt like we were in a heavenly world. In this joyful atmosphere, with all shouting and noise, other families took advantage of the auspicious day to fulfil a vow... It wasn't just my celebration, it was everybody's and I still hear mothers saying today that they had their son shaved the day I dedicated the pig and girls saying, 'My ears were pierced the day Velpakkata¹¹ dedicated the pig'. I'm very proud when I hear that... and I tell myself that God has been good to me!" (173-74).

The narrative also shows Viramma's belief in the world after death. Quite optimistically she describes the life after death:

"Isvaran won't sentence us midwives to hell. We see too much suffering with our own eyes! The blood we saw flowing!... The pain! That's why there won't be any obstacles for us. The sixteen gates will be flung open and we'll go straight through and shut ourselves away in the residence of Yama. He won't send us to be reborn! No, not this damnation of rebirth" (73).

Every Dalit (woman's) narrative is a community narrative. The dividing line between the personal and the communal is very hazy in Dalit women's narratives. Viramma in her

narrative gives a detailed account of Pariah marriage and other ceremonies related to marriage and other walks of life celebrated in the community. She shows how before a girl attains puberty, a match is selected for her, and once she attains puberty she is married to the man selected for her. The narrative is enriched with folk songs sung by the community members on different occasions and addressed to gods and goddesses at the time of rituals. The inclusion of folk songs reflects the mood of festivity and celebration in the community amidst trials and tribulations of daily life. Viramma in her narrative emerges as a proficient folk singer whose songs foreground community ethos. The songs of Viramma give speech to the individual character of Viramma which is closely attached to the community.

Unlike Bama's *Karukku*, which takes political stance on Dalit women's issues, Viramma's *Viramma*, though problematizes the condition of Dalit women in caste and class structures of India, does not take any political stance and offer any critique of Brahmanic epistemology to bring about radical change in society. The narrative is more of an expository, and less of an interrogative in nature. Yet, the narrative does incorporates the advent of modernity in *ceri*. Tamil Nadu, after Independence, too undergoes political reformism that affects the lives of the *ceri* people, though the change is slow in nature. The radio, a symbol of new society, informs Dalit labourers about crops, use of fertilizers, and new reaping practices. New land and houses are also allotted to the Dalit people of the *ceri*. Schools have Harijan teachers. The crèches have been opened in the village for the Pariah children to be taken care of; midday meals, clothes, and books are now given to the poor children; and with government patronage new land ownership laws, some lower caste people have also moved from the *ceri* to the *ur*. Viramma's daughter, Sundari, chooses a husband on her own. People like Manikkam and Anban report to the police and demand legal actions against the upper caste people when the caste conflict breaks out in the village. But Viramma as an individual remain silent on caste issues. Being born and brought in the village caste hierarchy, she is not in position to challenge

the hegemonic principles of the upper castes despite the fact that modernity offers umpteen essential opportunities in restructuring of the society. The political leadership of the upper caste is exercised on the subalterns like the Pariah in such a way that, Viramma, a representative of the Pariah community, is not able to transgress the rule of caste despite all her understanding of caste.

Viramma equates modernity with *Kaliyugam*. She hears around her the slogans, ‘Don’t stay separate! Don’t be divided! Down with castes!’ (181), a call for ‘educate yourselves’ (*ibid.*), and ‘Demand an increase in your wages!’ (*ibid.*). *Kaliyugam* in *Viramma* stands for education for all, resistance to caste, political reforms, change in Dalit attire, flexible social structures, annihilation of untouchability, and awareness of one’s exploitation and identity. It is Viramma’s location in the economic, social structure of the village that does not allow her to exploit modernist ideas of equality, freedom, justice, and egalitarian society.

The upper caste of the village wields power through social hegemony and economic supremacy. The upper caste power is diffused through what Gramsci calls ‘civil society’, which includes social institutions and structures such as the family, schools, the legal system, religion, rites and rituals; and other organizations, to create unequal socio-economic relations between the upper castes and the subaltern Pariahs. Viramma is quite aware of the fact that the Pariahs enter into the relation of the owner of production and non-owner of production with the Reddiars and other upper caste people. It is the agrarian economy that entails the hierarchical class structure in which people like Viramma are caught in. Hence, Viramma is happy with the marginal autonomy she enjoys. She feels more protected under the patronage of her master and the age-old caste system than the politicians who offer electoral promises. Viramma does not want to experiment with the old structure, though it is suffocating and humiliating. For Viramma, the caste system is created by the God. She argues:

“ I always tell Anban and all the youth of the *ceri* not to go against the will of the goddesses. They look after us, they protect us. Thanks to them we work and have enough to eat. Why would you want to break that tradition?” (123).

In Virammas account, God says, ‘Each of you stay in your caste. Live apart. There’ll be no arguments. There’ll be harmony and the world will turn in the right direction!” (191). The narrative ends with the revelation of Viramma’s compromising nature, though the awareness of the changing world with the advent of modernity is also sensed. Viramma at the end of the narrative appears as a meek woman who possesses indefatigable will to survive amidst oppressive conditions. Viramma sums up thus:

“In the past, the owners made the poor work and gave them their food. They made the law. No one came and asked us what we wanted. And then they wanted us to vote and today, we Pariahs are becoming civilized...and they are making demands now. For my part, I work for a house which carries a lot of weight and everyone is well off. Thanks to their *dharma*. I live well too. My children are married. I’ve got grandchildren. I don’t go without anything. I live without starving Sinnamma” (281).

Despite her association with her community, Viramma in her narrative emerges as an individual who possesses a distinct identity of her own. Viramma is a folk singer, a serf, a midwife, a person with great story telling ability and minuscule memory, a scholar of Dalit mythology, and Pariah rites and rituals. In her narrative she emerges as a person with tremendous vitality, wit, panoramic understanding of Dalit life. She is self-confident, garrulous, elaborative, and honest in her presentation before the co-author Jociane Racine. Viramma in her narrative does not remain submissive and docile in her relationship with other people including her husband. She resists patriarchal biases within her Dalit household. It is

with her relationship with the upper caste Reddiar family, she appears as submissive and docile for her internalization of Brahmanic values of caste hierarchies. Viramma in her narrative appears as an individual who has witnessed a distinct historical epoch as against the emerging modernity in *ceri* with the rise of new political powers and changing socio-political structures.

Viramma's self-narrative presents a sharp contrast between the *ur*- the place where the upper castes live, and the *ceri*-the place where Pariahs along with other lower castes live. In contrast to the silent upper caste *ur*, the Pariah *ceri* emerges alive with children's' songs, dances, games, and other activities. *Ceri* is the Tamil word for the quarters where untouchables live and is located outside the main town which forms *ur*, where other castes live. Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine note that "the 'impure' *ceri*, by contrast, was seen by the *ur*, as the right place for subaltern activities, including non-religious songs" (Racine 2000: 307).

Though Dalit women's self-narratives are normally serious narratives, humour is a part and parcel of Viramma's narrative. Regarding her pregnancy at a young age, she remarks: "I was small with a fat stomach like a baby elephant and I moved around us just like one, taking little steps" (62). Viramma's humour is infused with pain. Recalling an incident after marriage, she remarks:

"I was forced to do everything for my husband: serve him meals, heat the water for his bath, take his meal to him in the fields, give him betel. ...it wasn't the work that made me recoil, it was doing it for this stranger who hurt me at night, and disappeared in the day" (45).

Viramma uses alternative ways of teasing her husband and taking revenge on him, but her description also brings forth the humorous quality in her narrative.

The present book became possible after ten years of conversation between Viramma and Josiane Racine, herself a sociologist and the co-author. Josiane whom Viramma in her

narrative addresses as Sinamma. Josiane became a patient yet an active listener to the narrative of Viramma's life for ten years, and then she penned down the narrative of Viramma in French along with her sociologist husband Jean-Luc Racine, and later it was translated into English by Will Hobson. The narration of Viramma's life story as it appears in *Viramma* is the transcript of what she herself said to Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine. Josiane remains present in the narrative from the beginning to the end as 'Sinnamma' (Little Mother), a title given to her by Viramma.

Josiane's act of listening is also an act of composing, because she composes a narrative of her own based on Viramma's narrative of her own and her community. Josiane organizes the Viramma's narrative told to her during a long period of time: Viramma's narrative may not have strategic organization, but Josiane's narrative uses strategies of organization- beginning, middle, and the end. Josiane in Viramma is retelling the story, although she remains very faithful to the original narrative. Another important thing to be remembered in this context is that retelling of the same plot may take many different forms. The oral narrative of Viramma challenges the western, mainstream faith on the written tradition to understand historical location of different subjects. It stresses the point that people without any sustained writing tradition or written culture too have tradition and voice of their own which must be heard. Viramma's narrative asserts oral traditions as tools of knowledge and offers a critique of ideological, and literary aesthetic of the mainstream Brahmanic Indian tradition.

The narrative of *Viramma* is conspicuous for Viramma's detailed description of the Dalit life lived at Karnani. While reading the details one can experience the lively character of Viramma- her gestures, facial expressions, voice, laughter, and her tone. All these together create Viramma's identity. Her story telling ability has largely been influenced by her grandfather Munisamm's tales that substituted for her schooling. The narrative moves between the real time in which harsh realities are stored for the Pariahs, and the mythological time which

offers hope, solace and peace to Viramma and her community. The garrulous character of Viramma's narrative makes the narrative full of digressions, though it is not formless and amorphous in nature. The incidents taking place in Viramma's life are systematically arranged by the co-writer to create an organic whole.

The structure of Viramma's autobiographical narrative poses a sharp contrast to the structure of male Dalit autobiographical narratives. Like many other Dalit women's autobiographical narratives, Viramma's narrative, too, peeps into the intimate social realities of Dalit world and unfolds inner meanings of the Dalit households.

Viramma's use of sexually explicit language may sound obscene to the purist, but this can be seen a form of self-assertion on the part of Viramma. This is also an acknowledgement of Dalit woman's sexuality which is otherwise seen as nonexistent for its non-glamorous character. The narrative presents the sayings of a Pariah in her unadulterated language. The Tamil literary scene has always been dominated by the Sanskrit Brahmans, but Viramma's story deconstructs the entire Brahmanic literary tradition with its illiterate, agricultural, Pariah dialect. The use of Pariah dialect and Viramma's perception should be understood in the socio-ideological context of untouchability. The narrative offers a great stuff in the field of oral and popular culture of Tamil Nadu.

Viramma, the narrator of *Viramma*, though an illiterate Pariah woman, possesses incredible understanding of popular songs sung during marriage time, and at the time of performing different rites and rituals of her community. There are songs of child birth, barren women's songs, songs of welcome, songs of menstrual period, songs for the sterile women, dirty songs for young boys and girls, songs telling the stories of widows, songs of goddesses Kali, Mariamman and others, songs of demon, and songs of dirge and lamentations.

The relationship developed between Viramma and Josiane Racine over the period of five years is quite interesting. Viramma addresses Josiane as ‘Sinnamma’. Josiane Racine worked on the taped material for some time and then selected and translated Viramma’s narrative into French and published in France in 1995. The present edition in English translated by Will Hobson is based on the first French edition. When oral cultural narrative is translated into written narrative, it certainly meets certain compromises and omissions. It may lose the flavour of the Pariah dialect and certain linguistic and cultural flavours, but for the foreign readers who do not know either Tamil or French, the translation itself becomes the ‘original’.

In conclusion, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* is a narrative that talks about Dalits- the Pariahs. The narrative takes its form out of incessant listening that happened over the period of ten years. The objective of the narrative is not to offer any comprehensive socio-political analysis of Tamil Dalits, especially the Pariahs, but foreground the varied lives of these people with an understanding that a single life of a woman like Viramma can provide immense information and insight into the Dalit-Pariah-subaltern life. The form of autobiographical narrative with all its elasticity has been explored by the narrator/s to define a particular human condition of untouchability, and caste experience that can only be shared with one’s own lived experiences. Viramma does not belong to those groups which are known for voicing their issues for their public struggle, hence the use of the form of orality to reveal the autobiographical self makes the narrative truly anti-foundational and subaltern. The narrative certainly demands participation of the reader who may belong to the different section of society to understand the epistemological construction of the subject called the Pariah.

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Chapter 5

Hijra Autobiographical Narratives: In search of Transgender Selfhood

The arrival of hijra narratives on Indian literary scene is a recent phenomenon. The autobiographical narratives of A. Revathi (*Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, Trans. V. Geetha), and Laxminarayan Tripathi's (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Trans. R. Raja Rao and P.G.Joshi) accelerate the postmodern, poststructural process of subaltern identity formation with foregrounding of hijrahood/ transgenderism in Indian socio-cultural context. The self-narratives examine a number of unexamined, unasked, and masked questions related to sexuality and gender formation in culture. By problematizing the given categories of male and female sexualities and the following gender roles in society, the narratives of Revathi and Laxmi deconstruct the entire structure of patriarchal heteronormativity in which hijra identity is stigmatized. The chapter deals with these narratives in the light of some recent critical interventions in the field of transgenderism, and stresses the importance of listening to these stories with wider understanding of the subject, because the hijras are basically human beings who suffer from social exclusion, widespread stigma, discrimination, and multiple oppressions because of the concept of a gender binary that exists in our society. Both Revathi and Laxmi in their narratives weave the indigenous brand of feminism which is rooted and anchored in the realities of our country. As Devara Dasimayya, a tenth century mystic and Kannada poet puts it:

“Breasts and long hair—is this a woman? Beard and moustache—is this a man? But what of the soul, which is neither man nor woman?” (Revathi 2016: ix).

The narratives of Revathi and Laxmi offer a deconstructive reading of the world in which they live, and search of the world where diverse sexualities are accepted and honoured.

I

Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story

Contemporary postmodern, poststructural feminist and cultural discourses have largely focused on the aspect of identity construction. Identity construction is one of the significant tasks of contemporary literary discourse. The earlier chapters were basically concerned with dalit women's identity construction. Identity construction is a challenging task for the subalterns, especially gendered subalterns like transgenders or hijras. This particular chapter deals with the idea of transgender or hijra identity in heteronormative patriarchal discourse of sexuality. A. Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) and Laxminarayan Tripathi alias Laxmi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2012 Marathi, 2015 English) are the seminal texts in our time that voice the issues of hijra identity in our culture.

A. Revathi's *Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* is perhaps the first hijra autobiography ever written in any Indian languages including English. The autobiography inaugurates the whole genre of hijra autobiography in Indian literary tradition. Spread into 29 chapters the narrative of the autobiography encompasses the life of Doraisamy- an effeminate boy who later chooses to be a hijra and becomes Revathi- a transgender and subaltern activist. The narrative of the autobiography deliberately does not mention the name of the village and the names of the parents and other people related with the life of Doraisamy or Revathi- the protagonist and narrator. Revathi hails from a village of Namakkal taluka which falls in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. One of the reasons of not mentioning the names of the village

and family members is not to put the associated people in any kind of troubles and to keep the narrative as much as personal and self-centered as it is also one of the demands of the genre of autobiography. By not naming certain people associated with her, Revathi in her narrative saves them from feeling any kind of awkward situation in their lives for their being associated with her either as a father or a mother or a brother or a sister. The narrator's objective in the narrative is to focus on personal experiences of being a hijra in a heteronormative and patriarchal society of Tamil Nadu, India.

The narrative of the autobiography moving more or less in a linear way covers Revathi's childhood in her village as Doraisamy- a boy, Doraisamy's struggle with his growing effeminate in character, his experiences at school and in village, his meeting with some people of his type and later his running away from the village in search of his identity and joining the hijra cult, his growing awareness of hijra identity in particular and later foregrounding and affirming it; his passing through the experience of emasculation-nirvana and becoming Revathi, Revathi's traumatic experiences in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad for her being a hijra, her bodily desire and also physical and mental suffering at the hands of family members and police, and finally her socio-political activism to raise hijra issue for gaining political and social space for the community. The narrative of the autobiography largely moves into five different locals: the village of Namakkal- Revathi's birth place, Delhi- her running out in search of her identity, Mumbai- experiencing life as a hijra, Bangalore and Hyderabad- searching for some higher meaning in life and turning into a hijra and subaltern activist at the end of the narrative.

Born into a youngest son in a family of six (three brothers, one sister and parents), the protagonist-narrator Doraisamy alias Revathi in the very beginning of her autobiographical narrative brings forth her growing effeminate nature and the gender trouble she faces as a male child when she describes herself as a fifth standard boy who "played only girls' games"

and “loved to sweep the frontyard clean and draw the kolam every morning” and a boy who helped his mother “in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessel” (3). She further narrates her growing effeminate nature and the gender trouble:

“As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister’s long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh” (4).

People’s calling Doraisamy ‘Number 9’, ‘female thing’, ‘girl-boy’ or sometimes ‘female boy’, in fact, does not hurt him as he ‘wanted to be so’ (4). Street boys’ pinching of his cheeks, kissing him and hugging him which in other terms can be seen as sexual assault is loved by Doraisamy because he imagines himself as a girl and feels gratified because as Revathi says:

“I did now that I behaved like a girl, it felt natural for me to do so. I did not know to be like a boy...” (7).

The narrative of Revathi’s autobiography constantly focuses on Revathi’s perplexed relationship with her sexuality when she was a boy. Her perplexed sexuality invites thrashing from brothers and father and scolding from mother. Grappling with her sexuality she says:

“I was a boy and yet I felt I could love other boys. Was this right or wrong?...I lived with these questions and doubts, which lay buried deep inside me” (9, 14),

and this further leads her to what she calls ‘growing sense of irrepressible femaleness... A woman trapped in man’s body...a flawed being...obsessed, confused and anxious’ (14, 15) when she enters class 10. In men’s clothing Revathi feels ‘in disguise’ and feels her ‘real self behind’ (16). Revathi’s constant grappling with her sexuality, harassment by men

for female attributes and treatment meted out to her as an object give her an opportunity to meet some people of her type and later an accidental meeting with Amma at Dindigul who accepts her as her chela and gives new name, thus, turning Doraisamy into Revathi after a Tamil heroine known for her beauty.

Doraisamy's constant struggle with his sexual identity is a manifestation of the patriarchal and heteronormative society in which he lives. In heteronormative society it is believed that people naturally fall into distinct and corresponding genders (male and female) with natural roles in life. In such a society heterosexuality becomes the only norm and sexual orientation. In such a world marriage can take place between those people who are sexually opposite to each other. Thus, "a 'heteronormative' view therefore involves alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles. Heteronormativity is often linked to heterosexism and homophobia" (Lovaas et al : 2008)

In India it is the heteronormative patriarchal family structure that starts creating sex/gender categories at an early stage in childhood. Since sex is taken as something that is assigned at the time of birth and something that remains stable till date, gender roles too follow it and remain permanent. Since Revathi's parents and elder brothers have imbibed the same cultural ideas, Revathi becomes a victim of physical torture at the hands of family members. Unable to understand the growing effeminate character of Revathi, they constantly torture her and is even hit with a cricket bat by one of her brothers when she returns home after absconding home. When beaten heavily even the mother says:

"That's right. Beat him and break his bones. Only then will he stay at home and not run away" (35).

Revathi's head is shaven clean as punishment and as an offering to the goddess at Samayapuram temple to make her 'normal'. At one point in the narrative when she becomes

desperate to commit suicide to end her pitiable condition in life, the family members do not extend their helping her to save her life. The repeated humiliation, torture and suffering at the hands of family members, villagers and stigmatization of her sexuality, Revathi at last runs away from her house for Delhi, then Mumbai, and later Chennai.

The autobiographical narrative reveals Revathi's family members', especially her brothers', confrontation with her hijra identity. At the time of division of property the brothers are of the opinion that a hijra is not entitled to have any property rights in family's properties. Revathi's brother says:

“....with you cock chopped off and still demand your share of property?” (168).

The very presence of Revathi in the house is troublesome for the brothers. It is Revathi's strong determination and awareness of hijra rights that makes her demand her share in family property.

The narrative of the autobiography centres on Revathi's running away from house in her childhood as Doraisamy and then becoming a hijra by joining a hijra gharana and her experience of becoming a hijra in Indian society. Joining the hijra cult provides both social and economic security. Revathi ponders:

“Marginalized by mainstream society, denied a legal existence and disposed of their rights, hijras turn to their community and its culture for comfort and nurture. In the hijra community there is no high or low-hijras do not observe caste or religious difference and there are hijras from both poor and rich homes” (62).

Becoming a hijra is a choice that Revathi makes to realize her third gender identity. She proudly says: “I AM NOT a man now. I am a woman, and I have a family with a mother, a grandmother, and sister-in- law.” (43).

Hijras in India function as social organization because with their unique religious rituals and rites, they form and function like a caste and a community with traditional occupations. Like other communities and castes, they too have hierarchies within them. The hijra households described in the narratives of Revathi clearly show that the hijras have social organization with kinship ties and relationships that they form among them. Revathi becomes a member of hijra community at Mumbai when she joins her guru's mother's gharana as her chela. Describing the guru-chela relationship she says:

“Among hijras, a guru is everything to a chela- she guides her at work, offers her a place to stay, she is with her in times of good and bad. A mother is different, for a hijra who is a daughter, the mother’s home is like the natal home. The guru’s home is like the marital home”

(59).

Revathi's guru's home comprises of chelas, naathis and sadak-naathis (daughters, granddaughters, great granddaughters). Nani's figure in the household is something that is feared, respected and worshipped.

Revathi's autobiographical narrative shows that as compared to other households in society, the hijra household is organized as a commune because the relationship of a hijra with her household is not permanent. The hijra household has permeable boundaries. Since the hijra household operates more or less as an economic unit, the members of the commune or community can easily change their affiliation with one household, and get assimilated with the other when need arises. There are no castes among hijras, but seven official houses of hijras. The hijras can join any one of them and change them and can leave them also. The houses are: Laskarwallah, Chaklawallah, Lalanwallah, Bendi Bazaarwallh, Ballakwallah, Poonawallah, and Adipurwallah. Revathi, too, in her narrative shows how for different reasons she has to change her allegiance to hijra households in Mumbai, Chennai

and Hyderabad. The details of hijra gharans in the narrative reflect the fact that hijras have evolved a culture of their own to enable them to exercise order and restraint and also their rights as human beings and citizens of this country.

The hijras of India are a religious community of men who are men but dress and act like women and whose religious faith centers on the goddess Bahuchara Mata. The hijras in India form a special caste group who form identification with the Mother Goddess or the female creative power embodied by the Mother Goddess. This particular characteristic of hijras makes them special in Indian context and makes them different from other transgender categories that exist in the west. Revathi in her self narrative expresses this kind of identification with goddess both in the beginning when she has not yet joined the hijra cult, and at the end of the narrative when she has already joined the cult. In the beginning she prays to be one with the goddess:

“Amma! Why must I suffer like this? Why must you put me through this ordeal?... I have known only pain....It was you who made me male in form, but with female feelings....By this day next year, you must make a woman of me, just like you, If you can’t, at least make me into a man completely” (57).

Revathi in her narrative raises the issue of professions of hijras. As compared to mainstream genders, the hijras do not have many activities to do for their survival in the world in which they live. The most prestigious activity of the hijras is ‘doli-badaai’, i.e. to give ‘badaai’ on auspicious occasions like birth of a child (especially boy) and marriage. They sing and dance while playing the dholak. Badaai hijras do not get involved with sex work like other hijras. Other popular works of hijras include sex work, begging and working for elders at home.

Nirvana or emasculation is a rite of passage for those who want to join hijra community. Revathi's narrative gives visual description of the painful experience that Revathi and her fellow hijra sister pass through in Chennai. Nirvana is a state of absence of desire and liberation from all finite human consciousness to achieve a higher degree of consciousness. For the hijras, nirvana is the second birth. With nirvana the impotent male persona dies and the new persona endowed with divine power emerges. The nirvana transforms impotent man into generative hijra. Only through nirvana experience, one can become a completely feminine. Revathi clears the importance of nirvana as a rite of passage to become a hijra:

“I was eager to become a woman and that was all that matters to me...in order to turn femininity, all I needed to do was to get rid of this male object and I would become free to be a woman, like other women”
(66).

In the entire self-narrative, Revathi deplores over the common people's attitude towards hijras. Hijras in India are the most abhorred community because common people cannot identify with their sex, i.e. either male or female. Within heteronormative society they are treated as aliens, criminals, subhuman and entirely detestable creatures. Revathi Thus, summarizes the overall attitude of people:

“Men and even women stared at us and laughed, and heckled us. I realized what a burden a hijra's daily life is. Do people harass those who are men and women when they go out with their families? Why, a crippled person, a blind person- even they attract pity and people help them...we are not considered human” (83).

Despite all suffering in life, Revathi's narrative celebrates Doraisamy's turning into Revathi after going through nirvana. Revathi Thus, celebrates turning into a woman:

"It's not my vanity that made me cut it off! I felt like a woman-I wanted to stay true to my feelings, so I changed into a woman. And I'm going to live as one" (114).

The narrative gives detailed description of the rituals to be followed after nirvana operation. Revathi observes that after forty days of operation she receives feminine looks. The new birth as woman is celebrated by Revathi thus,

"My face had changed! I felt like a flower that had just blossomed. It seemed to me that my earlier male form had disappeared and in its place was a woman. I felt exultant" (88).

The narrative clearly shows two different mental stages that Revathi passes through before and after nirvana. Nirvana bring in psychological relief in her life.

Revathi's becoming a woman after nirvana operation changes her psychological make up as she finds herself attracted towards men. The narrative succinctly captures twenty year old Revathi's growing bodily desire to have some man in life. The narrative shows that the desire becomes so acute that in order to satisfy her sexual hunger, she leaves her guru's home and joins other guru's house where sex work is done. Revathi in the narrative admits the dilemma:

"I became a chela to my new guru because of my desire for sexual happiness, in order to fulfill my sexual longings" (104), and moreover "I had not chosen sex work in order to make money. It was because I could not really repress my sexual feelings that I had opted for this life. I cried and confessed that I wanted to go home to my parents, that I could fall at their feet and beg to be taken back" (110).

Though she dislikes being ill-treated in this work, she continues it for some time till she returns to her home and later to her old guru.

Being compared with the life of an ascetic is perhaps the most earnest desire seen in many hijras. By achieving the state of nirvana, the hijras become ascetics. They literally leave their homes, material possessions, the social relations, caste, religion, male sexuality and become a part of hijra acetic order. They transform their impotency into the power of generativity by the practice of asceticism and thus, gain respect among common public. Revathi, too in her narrative, compares her life with that of an acetic which is bereft of pleasure. Revathi passes through a great psychological turmoil about her sexuality. She suffers from trishanku condition of sexuality. On the one hand she has left her earlier sexuality and adopted a new one, but it is not accepted so easily in society. At one point in narrative she expresses the paradox in life and her trishanku position:

“Could not God have given me a woman’s voice at least? When I was dressed like a man, they said I spoke like a woman, and now after I’ve changed into a woman, they say my voice is like a man’s!” (173).

Like any common woman she too thinks of getting married and having children. She ponders:

“Though I thought of myself as a woman, I felt that I was a man who had become a woman. Could I bear a child? Would I be able to marry? These questions bothered me and I felt them as so many insistent pinpricks” (121).

The narrative reveals Revathi’s candid acceptance of her relationship with one cinema hall operator of nearby town and later her marriage with her colleague at Sangama- an NGO where she works. But such kind of relationship is seen as abnormal by her brothers who reprimands her:

“We are men and we have married woman. We’ve made families. How can you claim to be a woman, you who have gone and chopped off your

cock and worn a sari? Do you want to dishonor our name, the respect we enjoy?" (185).

But it is to be noted that later Revathi's later accepts her status as a hijra. There is a journey from confrontation, and rebel to later acceptance of newly adopted and accepted sexuality i.e. third gender or hijra identity.

The narrative raises a number of confronting questions about hijra identity. Hijra identity is not an easy task to put with. Revathi passes through everyday trials and tribulations as in her feminine attire she is perceived by people as 'oddity, a comic figure, or no. 9" (123). Being a hijra she is expected by her guru and community to do sex work to earn some money. Though Revathi becomes a part of sex work to earn her livelihood, her unique understanding and empathy for other hijra sex workers and women at brothel can be seen in her narrative. She says:

"How people suffer to eat and live!...My heart melted seeing all these people, with their dreams, tears and troubles" (132).

The narrative in detail bares open the entire hijra world which is at times abusive, violent, smothering and exploitative. Revathi in search of her true identity leaves Mumbai forever to return to her hometown and later to go to Bangalore to join a hamam- a place for hijras to live and work. In the narrative 'hamam'- a hijra household- emerges as a symbol of religious syncretism. It is a place where Hindu gods, Islamic inscriptions and Christian figures coexist on the wall. The houses of hijras which form their households inherit mixed Hindu and Muslim ways of life. The hierarchical Hindu caste system positively coexist with the egalitarian ideals of Islam among the hijras. The hijra community is formed with people from all religious, caste and creed, hence hijras as community present greatest example of communal syncretism. They do not have any caste rules like purity and pollution in connection with intercaste dining.

The narrative of *Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* is a saga of unspeakable torments and pains Revathi passes through as a hijra. As treated as pottais and no. 9, tomatoes are thrown at her on the streets, when beaten people connive at her, and sexually harassed and tormented both by the police and the rowdies. The police snatches her money, asks for bribe, humiliates, tortures and jails her for the only reason that she is different from ‘normal’ human beings. Revathi at length describes her humiliation and torture meted out to her at the police station. Revathi treats her humiliation and torture at the hands of rowdies and the police equally. She narrates:

“I endured physical violence and torture of the mind. I had to fight every day with police and rowdies. The police took bribes from us all the time, and yet at the end of the month we were taken to the police station, beaten, hurt and sent back...In fact, from our perspective there was no difference between a police and a rowdy. They both behaved in a similar way” (210).

The entire narrative of humiliation and exploitation incorporate the idea of ‘space’ for the hijras. As human beings, the hijras do not share any ‘space’ with other men and women. Their very presence on streets or public places is not tolerated. As a hijra she has to struggle and fight in order to live and retain her identity as a human being and a hijra. The story of Revathi’s applying for a driving license and the resultant struggle and trepidation throws light on the fact that for a hijra achieving simple human rights is a mammoth struggle. Revathi undergoes a phase of tremendous psychological anxiety during the period of applying and receiving a driving license. Revathi’s narrative presents a succinct critique of patriarchal social structure, law, and the naturalization of heteronormativity in our culture.

Revathi in her narrative presents a critique of not only mainstream patriarchal world, but also of the hierarchical hijra world. Hierarchies in hijra world does not function as they function in caste ridden Indian society on the basis of purity-pollution concept, but Revathi in her narrative clearly shows how the hijra household functions hierarchically. The guru-chela relationship, though it is like that of mother-daughter one, is also hierarchical and exploitative as a chela is supposed to work for the well-being a guru and is expected to behave like her guru when she becomes a guru in future. Revathi does all sorts of work that includes prostitution, and begging to earn money for her guru, but her status in the eyes of a guru always remains subordinated. Hijras can be seen as caste, but not in the traditional sense. Revathi in her narrative rejects the idea of seniority in the hijra household and accepts their chelas with their individual identities. They challenge the control of gurus over their chelas in different ways.

Revathi breaks this hierarchical relationship of guru-chela when she herself becomes a guru of three young chelas. She does not expect any monetary reward for her being a guru, on the contrary, she permits them to live life of their own freely in the mainstream world. She does not enforce any division of labour on them that is normally seen at hijra households. Revathi's decision of joining Sangama as an office assistant- an NGO that works for hijras, homosexuals, gays and other sexual minorities- can be seen as quite radical one because by doing so she challenges the age-old hijra professions and opens up doors for new employability for other hijras. By doing so she gets rid of traditional hijra works that include sex work, begging on the streets and giving badhai on auspicious occasions. When opposed by other hijras, Revathi answers quite radically:

“You taught us your way of life but hijras of my generation want more.

We want to acquaint the world with our lives, and we wish to live like others. That’s why I am going to work.” (242).

Revathi's working experience at Sangama develops her awareness about "sexual minorities, minorities in general, about violations against dalits and adivasis; Hindu-Muslim differences and conflicts; the effects of wars waged by the large nations" (242). At Sangama she participates in different events, speaks about hijra culture and discrimination faced by them. It is her Sanagama experiences that encourage her to break her own silence about herself and adheres to speech. She gets involved with a book project on hijra lives, delivers lectures at various colleges, conduct classes for students for raising awareness about sexual minorities, their identities and cultures. The Sangama experiences makes Revathi accepts her hijra self and foregrounds it before other selves. She admits that before joining Sangama she was reluctant to admit her hijra self publically. The Sangama experience transforms Revathi into a hijra activist who fights for all sexual minorities.

Revathi in her narrative draws a link between dalit self and hijra self as subaltern selves marginalized in the mainstream world-patriarchal, heteronormative, and casteist. She draws inspiration from the dalit movement to fight against violence meted out to them in culture. Revathi raises a very important question of "the right of changing one's own sex" (247),, and by doing so she subverts the entire common perception that sex is biological, hence, natural. Such perception stabilizes sex at the time of birth and does not take into account the idea of deferment in stabilization of sex in a particular human being's life. In heteronormative patriarchy, as Clifford Geertz understands, "human beings are divided without remainder into two biological sexes"- male and female (Nanda 1999: 128). As feminists have noted that the concept of sex and gender roles as binaries is taken for granted in culture so seriously that any kind of alterity is treated as 'unnatural'. Revathi in her narrative shows that gender as psychological, social and behavioural aspects of being male and female or being masculine and feminine as biological determinism like sex can also be challenged as they are not natural or permanent determiners.

The self-narrative of Revathi offers a bildungsroman development of self. The transformation of Revathi from a common hijra into an activist hijra with radical mind is unprecedented in the entire history of hijra culture in India. The narrative asserts Revathi's hijra identity as third gender identity that emerges with growing development of hijra self within heteronormative, patriarchal Indian socio-cultural setting. The hijra self at the end of the narrative is achieved by passing through different phases of life that invite bold decisions by Revathi. It is achieved by an effeminate child Doraisamy who decides to be Revathi- a hijra- by attaining the status of nirvana by fighting against all odds at home and in the outside world with his revolt against the hijra world itself, later becoming a hijra human rights activist and a writer.

At the end of the narrative Revathi emerges as a subaltern activist writer who fights for the all subaltern identities. Writing for Revathi becomes a panacea for all ills as it turns out to be "the healing balm" when she is "restless, sad, confused, pained and exhausted" (293). Her book writing project, *Unarvum Uruvamum*, for Sangama covering the life stories of about thirty hijras opens up new horizons for hijra studies in India. The narrative also uncovers loving and family oriented self of Revathi who single handedly nurses her ailing mother in her last days. Revathi in her narrative feels that she could not completely inherit aravani culture of hijras, but as readers of the narrative we feel that her narrative liberates the hijra culture from traditional set up and opens up new horizons for them.

Revathi's use of the genre of autobiography to voice gender subalternity is unique in many ways. Autobiography as a literary genre in history has remained marginal and hence, subaltern in many respects. For a long period of time autobiographical practices remained limited to the elitist groups of society both in the west and India. It remained a genre which basically voiced the identities of white, upper class-caste men and neglected voicing the subaltern identities of women, dalit people and hijras. The lives of the oppressed, marginal

and the Other could not find any space in autobiographical narratives. Revathi's use of autobiographical narrative as a hijra in our time can be seen as a strategy for survival. The autobiographical narrative of Revathi helps her construct and organize not only her individual self, but also the collective self of the entire hijra community. The use of the genre of autobiography as subaltern narrative helps the writer to foreground the subaltern voice of hijras that has remained silent in history, to subvert the authority of the hegemonic power to redefine patriarchy and heteronormativity in Indian culture. Thus, for Revathi the genre of autobiography becomes a genre of literary protest. With the use of textual production of self in autobiographical narrative, Revathi deconstructs the colonial, patriarchal discourse about hijra sex and hijra role in society. The autobiographical narrative of Revathi helps her create a niche for hijras in Indian literary tradition in general and Indian autobiographical tradition in particular. Through the process of writing self Revathi displaces her object position in society and takes stance as subject position in narrative with her own selfhood.

In conclusion, it can be said that Revathi's autobiographical narrative- *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* offers ample opportunities to readers to theorize hijra self in patriarchal heteronormative Indian culture of our time in quite unconventional way, so that new diverse sexual identity of our time can be understood and accommodated in our culture.

II

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi : Laxminarayan Tripathi

Laxminarayan Tripathi's alias Laxmi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (2012 Marathi, 2015 English) is one of the most important and the earliest works of autobiographical narratives that opens up the new discourse that belongs to hijra literature. Like A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) it makes readers aware of the hijra phenomenon and the emerging hijra identity in a country like India. R. Raja Rao, the translator of Laxmi's autobiography in English, suggests that the autobiography should be read in the 'wider tradition of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGBT) writing in India' (183). Like Revathi's autobiography, the narrative of Laxmi's autobiography is not authored by the autobiographer herself but is told to a person who writes on behalf of Laxmi. Vaishali Rode, a Marathi journalist, originally wrote Laxmi's autobiographical narrative in Marathi in 2012. The English translation has been done by R. Raja Rao and P. G. Joshi from the Marathi original work. According to the English translators 'the disadvantage of this kind of (spoken) reportage is that it relies too heavily on the spoken word, and thus, risks being rambling and sloppy in structure' (213). The job of the second translator, the first Marathi work can also be treated as translation as it translates the spoken words of Laxmi, the protagonist, into written form, is to retain certain elements of the first work and represent the life to different readership. Regarding the title, Raja Rao says that the Marathi 'me' and the English 'me' means more or less refers to the same signified, hence, they keep the original title to retain the flavour of Marathi language.

Spread into twenty one chapters the autobiography is a life narrative of Laxminarayan Tripathi alias Laxmi, a Thane, Mumbai, Maharashtra, based male who later turns into a female and becomes a hijra. According to Laxmi the word 'hijra' is a term of abuse. Its variants in colloquial languages include expressions like number six, number nine, and *chakka*. The word

derives from the Urdu word ‘hijar’. A hijar is a person who has walked out from his tribe or community. Thus,, a hijra is one who has left mainstream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras (171). For Laxmi a hijra is a social construct because one is not born a hijra but becomes a hijra. A hijra is always born a male and later develops psychological and sexual traits which are of the female gender. Thus, the hijras undergo a conflict between their biological, and psychological and sexual identities borne out of their body language which imitate girls rather than boys. They experience a feeling of entrapment, being caged in a wrong body.

The narrative of the book explores different stages of the life of the narrator-protagonist Laxmi-childhood, adulthood, her vocation as a dancer and conversion to hijra clan, her life as a hijra and LGBT activist and above all, her identity construction of the Third Gender-hijra. In doing so different psycho-sexual weaves of Laxmi’s life get unknotted before the reader. The psycho-sexual dimension of self is entangled with the constant conflict she feels between her sexuality and personality. The narrative opens up in Laxmi’s childhood and ends with her celebration of hijrahood in present, yet feeling nostalgic about childhood, though it is not filled with sweet memories.

Laxmi’s autobiographical account, in fact, reveals sexual/gendered subalternity faced by the hijras in the patriarchal, heteronormative world. The entry of a hijra narrative into the field of mainstream autobiographical writings should be seen as a challenge posed to the epistemological and aesthetic structure of the mainstream autobiographies including women’s autobiographies. Though Laxmi’s narrative cannot/should not be taken as a representative narrative of the entire hijra community universalizing their experiences, there are certain meeting points which can be read as common hijra experiences. Like Laxmi every hijra goes through the plight of getting awareness of a body that does not cope with the psycho-sexual orientations.

Born into a middle class family of Thane, Mumbai, Laxminarayan Chandradev Tripathi, a Brahmin by caste, right from his childhood, when he is about seven, develops an awareness of different self and body. He is the eldest son of the family, an elder brother of Shashinarayan and a younger brother of a sister whose name is not mentioned in the narrative. Fraught with all types of illnesses in his childhood, Laxminarayan develops love for dance which is considered to be ‘womanly pursuit’ in ‘patriarchal misogynistic cultures such as ours’ (4). Addressed as a homo and a *chakka* for his feminine body language, Laxminarayan lives a life of a loner in childhood. He says:

“I was a man, my body language was that of a woman....My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine” (4).

Because of his feminine mannerism, Laxminarayan is very often becomes a victim of male sexual gaze and lust. The indescribable physical and mental torture for him begins at the age of seven when he is first sexually abused by a distant cousin and his friends at a family function. This sexual abuse continues when he is repeatedly molested by his brother Shashi’s friends and other people. At one time he luckily avoids a gang rape. Laxmi/narayan, the narrator, says:

“My body was a playhouse and a play thing, and any man could do anything with it” (27).

It is through suffering that Laxminarayan gets maturity as he discovers:

“Passivity did not pay. It might endear me to society, but it came with a price. I decided at that moment to raise my voice against the things I did not like” (8).

This raising of voice leads Laxminaryan to two things: making choices of his own and accepting his new transgender-hijra identity. It is Laxminaryan’s attraction towards boys that puzzles him because being a boy he is supposed to be attracted towards girls in our heteronormative society. Grappling with his different sexual orientation, Laxminaryan meets

the renowned LGBT rights activist Ashok Row Kavi to develop understanding of self and body. It is Ashok Row Kavi who consoles Laxminarayan and makes him accept his queer sexuality as normal. Addressing Laxminarayan he says:

“No, my child, you are not abnormal. You are absolutely normal. What is abnormal is the world around us. They simply don’t understand us” (11).

After this meeting Laxminarayan starts accepting himself as gay, and not abnormal. The narrative is abundant with Laxminarayan’s sexual attraction for a number of boys. He finds some of these affairs ‘rejuvenating’ (14) and enters into sexual relationship with some of his new ‘yaar’ with his own choice. Laxmi in her narrative ponders over the change that was occurring to her when she was Laxminarayan-a boy. There has been a constant battle between a biological boy and a psychological girl in one body. When attached with man, Laxminarayan thinks of himself as a woman, and not as a man. The grapple with male body experience is narrated in quite succinct way:

“But then, what was going on inside my body? Though I was born as a boy, how come I fell in love with boys and not with girls? Slowly, gradually, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t a boy. I was a girl. But then I had a penis and testicles, not breasts. So how could I call myself a girl? (22).

Laxmi’s entire narration takes into account the idea of gender performativity (to use Judith Butler’s phrase) and sexual orientation as it appears in heteronormative culture like ours. In patriarchal heteronormative society sex is always already gender. The basic concept of ‘gender performativity’ is that ‘gender’ is constructed through repetitive performance of gender and there is no stable, coherent gender identity. It is an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender. Butler claims that “the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Butler 1988: 526). In an interview with Liz Kotz Butler argues,

"I think for a woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect. I don't think that it's a given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that 'coherent identification' has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and that the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame"

(Kotz 1992: 88).

Since sex is always already gender, Laxmi is expected to perform the role of a male member of society. Her parents expect her not to be Laxmi but Laxminarayan only and treat him to be their eldest son and want him to be married to a girl and beget children.

It is Laxmi's passion for dancing that contributes to her "feminine movements of the waist" (23) and her "being thought of as effeminate" (23) and saves her from being alienated from the society. Since the time of school days when Laxmi was Laxminarayan and in 8th standard, she has run dancing class known as 'Vidya Nritya Niketan' and later 'Lucky Chap Dance Academy' in partnership. Later she becomes a model-coordinator and sends girls to play bit parts in Bollywood films. She works as a bar dancer for four years and eleven months, plays a role in album 'Lavani on Fire', does a film 'Between the Lines', and later becomes a part of TV shows like 'Das Ka Dam', 'Sach Ka Samna', 'Big Boss' and American TV programme 'Moment of Truth'; does documentaries like 'Slut' and '*Bambaiya*' and meets many people of her kind in the glamour industry. In the initial period, his family members were not aware of her association with glamour world and hijra community. For them she remains Laxminarayan-a dutiful son who studies and works and gives his earnings to the family.

The narrative shows Laxmi's struggle to be a part of two worlds- the familial world of parents and siblings, and the public world of hijras. Laxmi's meeting with Lawrence Francis alias Shabina, a hijra, later opens up the doors of an altogether new world of hijra clan. She gets acquainted with hijra community, their history, traditions, lifestyles and their source of income. Her acceptance of hijra identity, without revealing it to the family members in the beginning, is

a rebel in itself as it disrupts the patriarchal idea of identity formation on the basis of anatomy. Laxmi calls hijras a culturally rich sub-sect and proudly says that ‘Not everyone could become a hijra-it took guts’ (39).

Etymologically the word ‘hij’, as Laxmi explains, ‘refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called ‘hijra’...God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man-woman frame. A hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra’s male body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man” (39-40). Thus, Laxmi in the narrative sheds off many biases and cultural misconceptions that prevail in our society about hijra identity.

Though Laxmi in the narrative does not elaborately deal with her initiation into the hijra clan, some light on the christening ceremony (*reet*) is certainly thrown. Laxmi’s christening ceremony takes place in 1998 when she becomes a chela of Lata Nayak (her hijra friend Shabina’s guru) and later Lata guru. In the ceremony she is ritually given two green saris which are known as *jogjanam* saris in the presence of other hijras in saris. She is also crowned with the community dupatta. Laxmi’s new identity formation in the form of a hijra destabilizes stable anatomy-gender relationship found in society. Her new identity as a hijra proves the fact that there is no seemingly seamless identity. Her appropriation of hijra identity can also be seen as rejection of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of subject’s social existence can be derived from physiology or anatomy. Thus, in Laxmi’s case ‘gender’ becomes what Butler calls ‘an historical situation’ rather than ‘a natural fact’ (Butler 1988: 520).

Laxmi in her narrative describes herself as “fiercely independent human being who follow her own inclinations” (70). Even after attaining hijra identity, Laxmi’s life style

constantly deconstructs her newly embraced identity. Being a hijra she is supposed to be a part of the hijra clan and live with the hijra community, but she adopts neither the mainstream rules nor the hijra clan rules. Instead of living in the hijra locality, she lives with her family members, wears shirt, T-Shirt and trousers at home and sari when she is out. Regarding this choice she says: "My dominant identity was that of a hijra. I wanted to live with the hijras, but I also want to live in society" (118). Unlike other hijras who beg, sing, dance and do sex work, Laxmi is an English speaking college educated person and an accomplished dancer who earns money with her own talent. It is her education that provides Laxmi a distinct identity and leads her to social work and activism. She participates in agitation against Section 377 of Indian Penal Code that treats homosexuality unnatural, appears on TV debates to protect the rights of LGBT subjects.

Laxmi's movement between two spaces-domestic familial and public hijra- challenges the heteronormative demands of choosing one identity with respect to sex. Laxmi's activism enables her to live with the hijra ghetto, and her dancing talent enables her to be a part of mainstream society. Normally hijras are supposed to be living in their own ghettos and leading a life of insularity from the mainstream. Laxmi through her life sets an example that hijras can be a part of mainstream public life and can raise their voice against atrocities meted out to them. Laxmi quite confidently affirms her new identity: "I am Laxmi, the hijra and the transgender activist" (120). Regarding hijra public life Laxmi asks, "Can hijras in India ever aspire to be a doctor, engineer, teacher, journalist, or business manager? The answer is a resounding NO" (110). In the narrative Laxmi proves herself to be a "rebellious hijra who rips off the masks of morality worn by the middle class" (119) and opens new avenues of life for hijras.

Laxmi's identity formation uniquely combines art and activism. At times Laxmi thinks that art is prioritized in her life and activism is marginalized, but she feels that she is more an

activist than an artist: “Activism runs through my blood. It is the elixir of my life” (117). As an activist Laxmi decides to organize the sex workers of Kamathipura and participates in a protest march of sex workers in Toronto, Canada. Laxmi’s activist life is widespread and has global connections. The narrative refers to a number of occasions and events, in India and abroad, where Laxmi actively takes part as an ardent spokesperson of transgender rights and presents the case of Indian hijras as an Indian ambassador. She attends Transgender Film Festival in Netherlands in 20017, and during her second visit to the city she brings with herself hijra troops from India to perform a cultural programme. Laxmi’s participation at gay parade at Stonewall, New York to pay tribute the martyrs of LGBT persons who lost their lives in a riot called Stonewall Riot is an important event that shapes her activist persona. Gay parade organized on 26th of June every year is a unique way to voice LGBT rights across the world.

Laxmi is perhaps the only hijra from India who is a globetrotter. Her visits to America, Canada, Bangkok, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries help her develop an international stand with regard to Indian hijra issue. The comparative understanding of different transgender groups across the world helps her analyze their socio-economic condition in a given culture. In her analysis she shows that how the transgender people of other countries, especially economically developed countries, have better socio-economic status and live a mainstream life. Regarding the transgenders of Thailand Laxmi writes: “Kathoys of Thailand are transgenders who cross-dress from childhood and have the body language and mannerisms of women. They go to school and college, and work in shops, restaurants, beauty parlours and even factories” (115). The modern advances in medical science, pharmaceutical inventions, rise of medical clinics, growing body of academic work and activism and the pliant cultural and historical conditions in these countries have made hormone replacement therapy, breast implants and genital reassignment surgery easily available for the transgenders. This has not only discovered the transgender culture but is also acknowledging it and giving birth to it.

Laxmi in her narrative shows the basic difference between Indian hijra and foreign transgenders. In India hijras live in a very pathetic condition. They suffer from socio-economic poverty and estrangement. Laxmi ironically says:

“Except for the newly introduced Aadhaar Card, we have no *aadhaar* or official recognition...We are Thus, destitute. Estranged from family and ostracized by society, people couldn’t care less how we earn a livelihood, or where our meal comes from” (155).

The basic difference between Indian hijras and foreign transgenders is that “in India, becoming a hijra is a spiritual process; here, it is clinical, involving counselling, surgery, and hormonal therapy. After that, the person concerned goes about his/her business as if nothing has happened” (88). Unlike hijras of India, the transmen and transwomen do not live in ghettos. Hijra ‘gharana’ and hijra ‘parivar’ are unique to India. The narrative introduces some transgender people from the west and shows their assimilation in the mainstream life in contrast to the lives lived by Indian hijras. To alleviate the conditions of hijras, to raise voice against discrimination against transgender, and raise socio-cultural awareness about the hijra subject and subjectivity, Laxmi sets her own NGO ‘Astitva’. Laxmi’s organization along with many other LGBT activists wages a fight for distinct ‘Third Gender’ for the transgenders; later the Supreme Court of India in its landmark judgement of 15th April 2014 reverses the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment, reinstating the constitutional validity of Section 377 originally introduced in the Indian Penal Code by the British government in 1869 to criminalize all non-procreative sexual acts, and grants ‘Third Gender’ to the transgenders. In order to foreground third genderism, Laxmi organizes beauty pageant for hijras to bring them out of inferiority and interiority; break the myth that hijras are ugly people; and make the world clap for those who are called “born-clappers” (131).

Dalits and hijras of India share similar socio-cultural humiliation at the hands of the elite class people. Laxmi in her autobiographical narrative tries to draw parallel between the lives of dalits and hijras. To her both the subjects have been marginalized, inferiorized and historically subalternized in Indian casteist, patriarchal, homonormative structure. Laxmi emphatically puts hijra-subaltern relationship: “To us, the hijras were the ultimate subaltern, deprived of fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution. We were slaves, non-persons. We had been suffering injustice for centuries” (91). The hijra-dalit identity merge into each other as subaltern subjects. Revealing hijra plight in the public world Laxmi narrates: “The hijras told us that they were no different from the untouchables of the past. When they went to the District Civil Hospital in Thane...no one touched them- neither the doctors, nor the nurses, nor even the ward boys and ayahs. They were pariah” (91). Hijras face similar apathetic treatment at the hands of doctors and police even when they are raped.

The narrative of *Me Laxmi, Me Hijra* sharply bring into light the place of violence in hijra life. Hijra body becomes a site of different types of violent tricks for the society. Despite the fact that Laxmi is a celebrity activist, she becomes helpless when her *chela* Subhadra goes missing and is later found dead. The case is finally closed for lack of evidence. Laxmi confronts the police when they arrive at odd hour and randomly pick anyone of them for investigation. Regarding a hijra death Laxmi says: “A hijra’s death, nay murder, didn’t seem to matter to anyone”(57). The roots of violence against hijra can be traced back to the British colonial period when the hijras came under an Act for Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs (1871) and were ‘reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or committing offences under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code’ (Narrain 2003: para 14). Hijra’s visibility as androgynous body in our world very often becomes an easy target to legitimize one’s masculinity.

Laxmi is a unique example of both ‘hijra-activist’ and ‘hijra celebrity’. Laxmi in her narrative is quite aware of her celebrity status, the public status which is not always celebrated by the hijra clan, especially by her guru. Her visibility and celebritization of hijra self in public comes under scanner and becomes vulnerable. Lataguru’s disapproval of Laxmi’s self-fashioning as a voice of the community in popular media is an example of how Laxmi as hijra-activist is viewed within the traditional set of hijra *gharana*. Her modernizing efforts sometimes viewed suspiciously. The conservatism hijra *nayaks* (leaders) become apparent when they arbitrate against the use of condoms by hijras because condoms put off clients. While Laxmi with her liberal, modern, individual lifestyle subverts essentialist binaries of gender and negates the patriarchal, heteronormative world view, the hijra clan conforms to its own hierarchies. Though Laxmi underscores certain hijra rules in the narrative, she largely critically evaluates the hijra social structure. She writes:

“We hijras virtually have a parallel social structure. There are seven hijra gharanas...It is a vast extended family” (174). Laxmi’s staying with her family is sharply viewed by Lataguru: “why must you cling on to the male-female society” (72).

Laxmi going against the dictates of Lataguru clings to her family ties and celebrates the support of family, especially her father, at the show *Such Ka Samna* when her father says: “Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility” (123).

In the narrative, Laxmi fights against two different currents –the mainstream society and the hijra community. Laxmi is a real ‘deconstructive angel’ who is always at the forefront to demolish all hierarchical structures. For her rebel against the hijra community she says:

“I observed all the rules because the decision to become a hijra was, after all mine. But soon there came a time when I rebelled. I could not stand the restrictions on

my freedom. I began to give interviews to the media. I appeared on television. I travelled abroad. I drank liquor. The community fined me for these transgressions. I paid the fine and committed the ‘offences’ again. I was all ostracized by the community. But my chelas stood by me. They were proud of me because I was educated and had a mind of my own. So what if I broke all the rules?” (160).

Laxmi uses her hijrahood to spread social awareness about the hijra community. She uses social activism to “make the viewers aware that hijras are normal people, just like them” (125). Laxmi merges her individual hijra self with the larger socio-political nation-space to create a mainstream gender identity for her subaltern group. Her awareness that she represents, not the hijra issue but the entire India, at international fronts helps her reimagine India as androgynous reality in the light of emerging hijra counter-discourse.

Two incidents in the narrative are of special importance that shape Laxmi’s character as a rebel and an activist. To attend an international conference Laxmi is in need of a passport, but she is denied it at the first place, because she is not a castrated hijra, nor does she possess any medical certificates to prove her hijrahood. All her earlier records including ration card states her male. Laxmi undergoes tremendous psychological pressure during this time as proving herself a hijra becomes a challenging task for her. After a lot of hustle and bustle and going from pillar to post, finally she gets a certificate from a doctor that though not castrated, Laxmi is a hijra from psychological point of view. Though many, including hijras, believe that castrated males are real hijras, Laxmi has never subscribed to the view that person’s biology determines gender. Laxmi’s understanding of transgenderism later gets legal approval when the Supreme Court of India in its seminal declaration about the transgender people states that the ‘Psychological Test’ to be conducted as opposed to the ‘Biological Test’ to determine the third gender of a person, and also that insisting on Sex Reassignment Surgery as a condition for changing one’s gender is illegal. The other incident involves the CEO of Bombay

Gymkhana Club who objects Laxmi's- a hijra's- presence at a party at the club. Laxmi sends a legal notice to the CEO and fights on the grounds of discriminatory behaviour against the third gender people. These two incidents motivates Laxmi to raise her voice in favour of the entire hijra community. Here, personal becomes political and Laxmi's individual fight becomes a collective fight for the community.

In the case of Laxmi, we must differentiate between Laxmi as a celebrity and Laxmi as a hijra. Judith Butler in her essay "Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" draws a complex link between what she calls 'a theatrical and social role'. She says that gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions...the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (Butler 1988:527). Laxmi as a celebrity hijra dancer is very much appreciated on public spaces like TV and conferences, but she is not when she represents herself as hijra at certain places as we have seen above. Being a hijra she expresses the distinction between sex and gender and thus, poses a challenge to the stabilized sex-gender relationship that structures our popular understanding about gender identity. Her appearance contradicts the 'reality' of the gender.

Laxmi's hijra identity in a way unsettles many conventional stereotyped identities that concern a particular human being. One of the major identities that a human being carries right from his or her birth is religious identity. In patriarchal socio-religious structure religious identity is something that is given to a particular human being with birth. Religion is a cultural-political product that constructs human being's physical and mental makeup that includes behavioral and thinking patterns in relation to other people. Religion in a way otherises those people who belong to different religion or sect. Though a hijra is born into a particular religion, her initiation into hijra cult sheds off all religious differences and binarism. In fact, as we see in

Laxmi's case, hijras have no particular religion. Laxmi herself says that they celebrate both Hindu and Muslim festivals. The Tijja of Muharram holds great significance for them and they are the worshippers of Hindu goddess Bahuchar. Laxmi's becoming a hijra makes her more eclectic, secular, liberal and democratic as compared to the "normal" people for whom religion is the sole identity. The presence of multiethnic, multireligious identities in a single person makes Laxmi's life different from other so called "normal" people. Laxmi celebrates this all embracing identify when she says: "I was proud that I was a hijra" (52). Though Laxmi is not critically concerned with the socio-cultural influence of religion in hijra's life, her narrative certainly portrays a hijra not belonging to any particular religion, and by this challenges the association of any sex by birth with any particular religion.

The final chapter (chapter 21) of the text is not autobiographical in fact. In this chapter Laxmi calls herself "a practicing hijra with hands-down experience" (171) and shares her understanding of the term 'hijra' in socio-cultural settings of Indian society. She dwells on hijra cultural setting and tries to establish hijra culture as third gender culture. "The word 'hijra', Laxmi notes, "derives from the Urdu word 'hijar'. A hijar is a person who has walked out of his tribe or community. Thus,, a hijra is one who has left mainstream society, comprising men and women, and joined a community of hijras (171). The hijras are called *khwaja sara* in Urdu, *napunsakudu* in Telugu, and *aravani* in Tamil after the well-known Mahabharata story of Lord Krishna and Aravan. Laxmi deconstructs sex and gender ties existing in patriarchal world and explores different sex-gender affiliations in hijras. Laxmi states:

"Hijras are born as male children biologically. Psychologically, however, they feel they are female. Sexually, they are attracted not to the opposite sex but to their own sex. This conflict between their biological, and psychological and sexual identities is borne out by their body language-their gestures, mannerisms, movements, and expressions all belong to girls rather than boys. Their social behaviour, which includes dress, hairstyle, make-up, jewellery, etc.,

is also that of women. Thus,, there's a feeling of entrapment, of being jailed in the wrong body" (172).

Laxmi sees the roots of estrangement and ostracization of hijras in society in their biological and psychological identities which within the patriarchal society must follow a predefined, given association. The psychological affiliation with other gender makes a hijra "get rid of his male sexual organs, either through sex reassignment surgery, or by having another hijra sever his private parts from the rest of his body, without anaesthesia...they may acquire breasts, either through hormone therapy or simply by sporting falsies" (172). Laxmi views that "hijra is a social and not a biological construct" (173) and in believing so she supports the feminist understanding that any subject ('woman' in feminism) is a social construct, and not a biological one. She, here, makes a comparison between a male born with low levels of the male hormone testosterone and a female born with low levels of the female hormone testosterone. Since the term hijra is a social construct, it is used for such men and not for such women. Though such women are derogatory referred to as tomboys, or butch females, within patriarchy, "a tomboy or a butch female can carry herself about with relative ease and without the fear of ridicule, as compared to an effeminate man who has indignities heaped on him" (173).

Laxmi in the narrative dwells on the parallel social structure that the hijras have. According to her there are seven hijra gharanas. They include Bhendibazaarwala, Bulakwala, Lalanwala, Lucknowwala, Poonawala, Dilliwala, and Hadir Ibrahimwala. These gharanas have their hierarchical structures with a chief known as nayak and below him a guru. The members of each gharana are supposed to keep secrecy about hijra life and the outside world is not supposed to know about it. A panchayat is held twice a year that comprises of nayaks of all seven gharanas. Any hijra can become a chela of another guru, but for that fine is to be paid to the former guru. The relationship between a guru and a chela is that of a mother and daughter.

Hence, the guru's other chelas become the hijra's sisters and the guru's sisters become her aunts or massis, and the guru becomes her grandmother or nani.

Laxmi, in details, narrates the training of a hijra that she undergoes. A hijra is instructed to isolate herself from the mainstream. She is also taught clapping to create a firecracker-like sound, to beg, and to flatter people and also to harass in order to extract money. Laxmi mentions three stages of hijra rites: nirvana (castration), *haldi-mehndi* (applying of turmeric to the body), and *chatala*. Though Laxmi herself is not castrated, she narrates how the traditional castration rite is performed on a hijra by another hijra without the use of anaesthesia. Though excruciatingly painful, the genitals must be severed from the hijra's body in one fell stroke and all blood must not be stopped from flowing with the use of any artificial means. Castration is also done at doctor's clinic now. Though castration is a spiritual process and an important initiation rite, it cannot be imposed. The healing process takes about forty days and a hijra is not allowed to see any man or woman during these days. The castration rite is followed by another ritual known as *haldi-mehndi* where turmeric is applied to the hijra's face, hands and feet. A bindi is stuck her forehead and she is given sugar to eat. Money is distributed among the poor. This rite is done to protect the hijra from the evil eye of the society. In the *chatala* rite the hijra is bathed and dressed in green –green sari, green blouse, and green bangles. In the rite as Laxmi narrates “she must show her private part-minus her penis and testicles- to the sea, as she must to a black dog and a leafy tree” (176). The performance of the rituals may slightly differ from gharana to gharana. At the time of hijra's death, an artificial penis made of cotton or wheat flour is stuck on her body before she is burnt or buried.

Laxmi's narrative historically and mythologically places hijras in Indian context. She refers to the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Kamsutra and other legends that refer to hijra stories and give them respectable place in society. Historically, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb forbade castration as Islam did not permit castration, while Hinduism did. The condition of hijras became worse with the arrival of the British who prohibited

nonprocreative sexual relationship. The hijras who enjoyed respectable public life were thrown on the street “to beg in shops and other public places, and do sex work, not out of choice, but out of necessity” (178). According to Laxmi, Tamil Nadu is the first state where hijras first earned their right to vote in 1994. They are also allowed to use ladies’ toilets.

The narrative ends on a political understanding of the transgender people. For Laxmi the term transgender means ‘transcending gender’ (179). She makes a very crucial distinction between hijras and other LGBT members as political categories. Though hijras belong to the LGBT category, theirs is the only category that refers to gender, while all the other three categories—lesbian, gay, and bisexual—refer to sexuality. She believes the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ redundant as showing one’s sexual preference. Instead, she uses ‘andro-sexual’ for those who are attracted to men and ‘gyno-sexual’ for those who are attracted to women. Laxmi also interrogates the non-inclusion of hijra issue in feminism. She rejects the feminist difference between ‘feeling a woman’ and ‘being a woman’ (180). Very often hijras are not included in the feminist discourse because they are not born as women. But this kind of approach has been challenged by many post-feminist critics like Judith Butler, and Susan Stryker.

The title of Laxmi’s autobiography-*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* succinctly foregrounds Laxmi’s hijra identity. Laxmi deliberately uses ‘me’ which is associated with public self rather than ‘I’ which is more private. In the title the gender identity comes first, followed by biological identity. As we will see later in this chapter, by doing so strategically, Laxmi places her autobiographical narrative under the genre of testimonio that records the collective trauma of the community and creates a ‘transgenre’ of its own. This kind of foregrounding of hijra identity in the title is a kind of celebration of hijra selfhood, which is rather a choice than a compulsion for Laxmi. At the end of the narrative, it is hijra identity that prioritizes over everything for Laxmi. It is for this identity that Laxmi has waged war against the entire society, including the hijra society itself. It is the identity which destabilizes the

heteronormative concept of sexuality and gender in a patriarchal society like ours. By achieving hijra identity, Laxmi at the end of the narrative achieves her true selfhood which has been seen as ‘deviant’ by the society, but accepted as ‘natural’ by Laxmi.

To conclude, Laxmi in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* makes a journey from Laxminaryan Tripathi (biological male) to Laxmi (conversion into a hijra clan) and very boldly accepts her third gender identity, the identity that she and other hijra activists later legally win and adopt from the court of law.

Comparing Hijra Autobiographies

Though both autobiographies fall into the category of hijra discourse, they do not present essentialistic, monolithic picture of hijrahood. Both narratives certainly have some similarities in terms of the use of specific tropes of sexual abuse, attempted suicide, and activism as a means of survival and identity, but both Revathi and Laxmi belong to different social categories and different socio-cultural background. Revathi hails from a lower caste family of rural Tamil Nadu, while Laxmi is a Brahmin by caste and comes from an urban set up of Thane, Mumbai, Maharashtra. Because of their distinct family backgrounds, Laxmi is a college graduate from a city like Mumbai and an established dancer with own dance class, while Revathi has not completed her schooling and strives hard to meet both her ends.

The comparative study of both the narratives throws light on certain differences in the narratives. As far hijra identity is concerned, Revathi derives her essential identity only by virtue of her being a hijra. In Laxmi’s narrative, though hijra identiy is certainly plays an important role, the very identity is decentered by her identity as a dancer, an activist and a celebrity hijra. Revathi in her narrative constantly presents herself as a victim, Laxmi celebrates her hijrahood. The victim motif largely remains absent in Laxmi’s narrative. In Revathi’s story victim motif is the core concern of the narrator. The narrative depicts the humiliation and violence meted out to hijras on daily basis quite eloquently and poignantly. Laxmi

too experiences humiliation as a subject, but that too in her childhood. Once she joins the hijra cult, she becomes quite an independent hijra living her life on her own terms. The collective pressure of hijra community on the individual, though sparsely narrated, does not affect Laxmi's life to large extent. Her life as an activist, her work for the eradication of AIDS among hijras, her participation in national and international seminars and conferences for hijra cause occupy much of the narrative space. Laxmi successfully presents herself as a rebel among the hijra community.

The most conspicuous difference one finds in both the narratives is family set up and the position of both the subjects in it. Laxmi is lucky enough to have supportive parents who, especially her father, who accepts Laxmi's different sexual preference and treats her as their normal son- Laxminarayan is the eldest son of the family after her sister. As compared to Revathi's parents and other family members, Laxmi's parents and other family members are quite liberal and understanding. Laxmi in her narrative accepts and shows her gratitude to her parents as like other hijra parents they did not throw her out of their home. They even allow her to keep long hair. They are not ashamed of her being a hijra. They even appear on TV with her and express their feeling of pride in her present status and do not leave her on the street to beg and trade body. Revathi, on the other hand, is ill-treated by her brother and parents. Revathi is given no share in property of the family and she becomes a sex worker for livelihood. Even the parents trade their daughters. As compared to Revathi, Laxmi is quite independent. While Revathi has to live as per the wishes of older hijras, Laxmi stands up against bullies like Lataguru and goes against her dictates.

Both the narratives have many references to sexual act of the autobiographers. As compared to Laxmi's narrative of sex and sexuality, Revathi's books is quite sensational for her graphic description of sexual activity of the hijras. Though, Laxmi's book has covert references to her sexual experiences, she avoids any descriptive reference to sex in her book.

Revathi possesses intense desire of marrying a man, and she does get married, though, her marriage fails. Laxmi, on the other hand, does not show any desire of marrying a man, though she derives a thrill when she attends her brother Shashinarayan's marriage.

The basic difference between Revathi and Laxmi is that Laxmi is a college educated hijra, while Revathi is uneducated. It is Laxmi's education that redeems her and brings home enlightenment and makes her take up the gauntlet of life. With her higher education and urban nurturing, Laxmi is able to raise her voice against all injustice meted out to the hijras and other LGBT group members. Laxmi in her narrative historicizes and mythologizes the entire hijra struggle for identity since the ancient age. In their respective narratives both Laxmi and Revathi fall victims to the hostile and insensitive bureaucracy set up when they apply for passport and driving license respectively.

The biggest difference between Revathi and Laxmi is that the former is castrated, the latter is not. In Revathi's narrative castration or *nirvana* is a sine qua non for becoming a hijra, while Laxmi does not believe so, hence, many of her chelas are not castrated. Revathi's narrative gives a detailed account of her castration and excruciating pain she undergoes. Castration is performed by a *thayamma* in the traditional ritualistic way without anaesthesia. Revathi in her account clears that when a thayamma performs the rite, the hijra's penis and testicles are severed from her body in one stroke. Hijra's painful screams are unheard with loud, ear-splitting music that accompanies the rite. Revathi is given a choice to have it by a doctor. Readers are shocked and terrified to be a part of Revathi's agonizing nirvana experience as she travels to Tamil Nadu from Mumbai along with another nirvana hijra in an unreserved compartment of a train in acutely painful condition as the effects of anaesthesia wears off very soon. In the case of Laxmi, her passport application is first rejected because she is not a castrated hijra. Unlike Revathi, Laxmi has experienced quite comfortable childhood and parental love, hence she is not accustomed to going through the nirvana like experience as

Revathi passes through. Regarding castration in the hijra community, Rajoshri Das notes Gayatri Reddy's observation that in the Hyderabad hijra community a "real" hijra is like an "ascetic of sannyasi completely free of sexual desire" and the nirvana operation is essential to attain that status (Das 2015:198). She further notes that the castration of male genital is also important to becoming a "badhai" hijra who occupies higher status in the hierarchy than the "Kandra" hijra who earns money through sex work (*ibid*). As opposed to Revathi, Laxmi is anti-essentialistic in her approach to life. That too makes her abhor anything that is against her wishes and individual choice. While not opting for castration, Laxmi subverts many hijra norms. She contests that belief that it is only through nirvana, womanhood is achieved in hijra community. Laxmi here contradicts Gayatri Reddy's research finding that castration is an essential requirement of a pure hijra identity when she says that this is a belief held by a "minority" section (175).

In addition to this, Laxmi lives her life on two spans- family life with her parents and public life with the hijra community in two different attires- shirt and trousers at home and sari outside. Revathi feels homeless throughout her life. In a patriarchal culture like ours, a son voluntarily becoming a daughter is socially terrifying and emotionally unbearable for parents. Revathi might have won her parents' hearts if she had not undergone nirvana.

Another striking difference between Revathi and Laxmi is that the former continues to be a sex worker even after nirvana, while Laxmi, thought she had a few sexual encounters, is not a sex worker like many hijras. Laxmi has worked in Mumbai dance bars for four years to earn money but she confesses in the narrative that she has not sold her body for money. Revathi, on the other hand for her livelihood, continues to cater to service to different types of men- straight, homosexual, and transsexual. The paradox of her body is that for the homosexuals she is a man, and for the straight and transsexuals she is a woman.

In their respective narratives, Revathi and Laxmi both try to commit suicide but are saved. Revathi tries to set herself on fire outside her parental home, while Laxmi tries to end her life by drowning into sea during her visit to Gujarat. Revathi's account of her suicide is very much excruciating as her parents and brothers simply become observers of her suicidal attempt.

Revathi writes:

"I poured kerosene over my head and demanded a match-stick from the crowd of onlookers...My parents and brothers remained inside (the house). Perhaps they wanted me set myself on fire and die...For about fifteen minutes, I stood there, kerosene in my hair, screaming and sobbing in agony...No one came forward to console me or help me. If I had access to a matchbox I would have surely set myself on fire. But...there was no matchbox and after a while, I changed my mind" (253-4).

Both the narratives present a sharp critique of society's dual standards with regard to hijras. The mainstream society, on the one hand, treats hijras as menace, while on the other hand, thinks of hijras as mascots of good luck. Hijras are invited to bless a new born child and solemnize marriage and a new house. For the mainstream society, hijras are extraterrestrial and ostracized creatures. Joining the hijra clan does not necessarily improves the lives of hijras. Very few hijras like Revathi and Laxmi become successful in transforming their lives and be social and political activists. Laxmi first joins DWS and sets up Astitva, her own NGO and Revathi joins Sangama in Bangalore. Laxmi in her narrative is lucky enough to rejoice over her celebrity status and celebrates hijrahood:

"Who can deny that I am a celebrity? People laughed at me once, but today I have the last laugh. But then, I owe all this to my decision to become a hijra. It was a bold decision and it yielded rewards. Had I not become a hijra, I might have been

any ordinary effeminate homosexual guy. Being a hijra made me glamourous and militant...But it is not as if, I don't' miss my old self either"(169).

The narratives of Revathi and Laxmi throw light on the guru-chela relationship-the most important aspect of hijra community. The guru-chela relationship in hijras has both familial and economic dimensions. It substitutes the family relationship that the hijras have renounced. It has also spiritual dimension of traditional guru-chela relationship. The guru is a mother of the chela who is expected to behave as an obedient child. One cannot become a hijra without a guru. Without a guru and gharana, a hijra cannot get respect in society. Guru is an idealized being for the chela. It is joining the community and guru-chela relationship that gives economic security to the hijras, both in young age and in old age. Such quality of dependence on family during life-time gives hijra community its true Indianess. Ideas of independence and individuality are not much avowed ideas among the hijra community, though Revathi and Laxmi in their narratives show that hijras too can cherish and realize the ideals of independence and individuality in their lives.

In India dalits are stigmatized by their castes; the hijras by their sex and gender. But the narratives of Revathi and Laxmi show both stigmatization of hijras in Indian society and the volition to transcend the stigmatization by asserting individuality by carving economic and philosophical niche in existing hijra cultural structures. By refusing to be a part of the traditional occupational and hierarchical structures of hijra community, both Revathi and Laxmi at the end of the narrative offer quite liberative and egalitarian hijra world view to the readers.

As far as the idea of narration is concerned, both the texts are involved with the process of narrating gender fluidity. The process of narrating gender fluidity also influence the creation of the gender. It is only through the process of narration, third gender is created. Though both the texts use the known forms and techniques of narratives-first person narrative technique- the

depiction of self and gender is based on subaltern, marginalized conceptions of sexual-gender reality. The texts' location in the contemporary postmodern epistemological world also make the narrative structure and technique more flexible. They challenge any given generic formats for any particular narrative material. Here, the narrative process is more self-reflexive and flexible. The idea of literary values also get transformed in a text based on gender fluidity. Though the narratives of both the texts "operate within a familiar categories and constituents", they include "the insistence on the need to defamiliarize and politicize them" (Cohen 2016: 136). As it is evident that postmodern genre theory is not prescriptive, but descriptive and does not limit the number of possible kinds but rather encourages mixing of genres. Though both the texts do not explore the idea of mixing of genres, they certainly contest the conventional expectations from an autobiographical genre by introducing third gender subjectivity. By doing so they make the "rules of the game varid, extended, corrected and as also transformed, crossed out or simply reproduced" (Jauss 1982:88). Both the texts in their different attempts of narrating hijra self and fluidity of gender widen the scope of the genre of autobiography and restructure it.

Both the autobiographies in their titles (*Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi and *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxminarayan Tripathi) foreground hijra identity using 'Me' which is associated with the public self rather than 'I' which is more private. By doing so the writers strategically place their works under the genre of 'testimonio' that claims to record the collective trauma of the community. Such a hijra text in the words of Pamele Caughey can be described as "transgenre" that "disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression. It thereby demands a new genre, a transnarrative" (Caughey 2013: 503). The transnarratives of Revathi and Laxmi prioritize personal narrative which plays an important role in celebrating hijra identity. Both the texts in their own ways are basically concerned with the idea of hijra body and transgender

subjectivity. Both of them challenge the stability of binary sex and the cultural constitution that ‘men’ will comply with the bodies of men and ‘women’ will construe only female bodies. Hijra identity that emerges in these narratives subverts gender binaries and demands inclusion and acknowledgement within the heteronormative traditions of patriarchy. The self-narratives of Revathi and Laxmi stress the point that in hijra it is the “felt sense” of the body that determines “material body” and the other way round. In ‘normal’ people, it is the “material body” that determines the “felt sense” of body. Both Revathi and Laxmi arrive at their subjectivities through the complex process of self-determination, irrespective of whether either of them chooses to undergo castration. As seen above Revathi is a castrated hijra, while Laxmi is not. In the case of Revathi her being castrated identifies herself with a woman, while in the case of Laxmi the performativity of her hijra identity is exhibited in sartorial terms as seen in Laxmi’s pictures before and after being inculcated into hijra community.

To conclude, both the hijra narratives present historically unprecedented hijra voice in Indian literary tradition and culture that helps the entire hijra community to cultivate consciousness of hijra self.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to share a few observations based on my thesis. The present study “Contemporary Indian Dalit Women and Hijra Autobiographical Narratives: A Study of Subaltern Identity” is a humble attempt to understand two different subaltern identities- Dalit women and hijras- expressed in the form of autobiographical narrative. The categories of ‘Dalit women’ and ‘hijra’ belong to the most subaltern groups among the subaltern subjects-‘the most subaltern among the subalterns’. They are the victims of caste and gendered subalternity that exists in, what can be termed as, ‘Brahmanic, patriarchal, heteronormative hierarchized caste and gendered structures’ of our society. The categories of ‘Dalit woman’ and ‘hijra’ are historical categories that take place within hegemonic caste and gendered structures of our country. There is one to one relationship between hegemony and subalternity. Different kinds of hegemonic structures develop different kinds of subaltern positions. The autobiographical narratives of Dalit women and hijras are narratives of those people who have no histories, hence their narratives (oral or written) become helpful to those readers who do not have ‘lived experience’ of a particular historical reality, but can develop ‘moral authenticity’ after reading them.

The study explores different levels of subalternity and treats the term ‘subaltern’ as a relational term. The term is used here to refer to spatiotemporal, economic, socio-cultural, educational, religious, sexual/gendered, ontological and epistemological exclusion and powerlessness that Dalit women and hijras experience in their lives. The word ‘Dalit’, though it is primarily used to express the caste and gender plight of untouchable women of India, it is also used here to refer to ‘the broken, divided, split, otherized, and scattered self’ of the subaltern subjects. In the case of Dalit identity, it may also refer to the ‘pancham varna’ within Indian caste system. At the same time, the word ‘Dalit’, following the rise of Ambedkarite counterpublics and

the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in the 1970s, also possesses inbuilt resistance against the Brahmanic hegemony and hope for new Dalit vision. The word ‘Dalit’ possesses enough elasticity to embrace all marginalized, and subalternized groups in history.

The major observation of the thesis is that there does exist an autonomous subaltern literary tradition- mainly Dalit subaltern tradition- that needs to be thoroughly historicized in sharp contrast to the mainstream, upper caste Brahmanic literary tradition to develop pluralistic view of Indian literary tradition. The subaltern Dalit tradition is distinct in a sense that it offers a more democratic, egalitarian, epistemological and ontological understanding of caste and gender relations. The subaltern Dalit tradition originates from the Buddhist shramanic tradition and extends up to Jotirao Phule, and Dr. Ambedkar in western India; and from Iyothee Thass to Periyar in southern India, while incorporating the medieval bhakti protest movements initiated by many saints-poets belonging to the lower caste strata of society. These multi-faceted non-brahman democratic movements for the liberation and emancipation of the subaltern people have very often been overlooked in mainstream history. An attempt is made here to take a historical perspective of the entire process of Dalitization or casteization in Indian cultural sphere. Similarly, in the wake of The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill (2015) granting ‘third gender’ identity to hijras, there emerges a new subaltern subject to be studied with all its complexities. An attempt is made, here, to locate hijra identity in Indian mythological and historical past.

The emergence of Subaltern Studies as a special branch of studies in India can be seen in light of the light of postcolonial, postmodern understanding of different structures available in our world. The main objective of subaltern studies is to reclaim history and give voice to those people whose voice had not been previously heard. Hence, a critique of the elitist historiography and epistemology becomes a sine qua non in Subaltern Studies. This novel approach to history invites

many marginalized, subordinated groups to come to the forefront and express their voices. The subalterns in terms of class, caste, gender, race, sexuality, language and culture emerge with their own narratives in humanities and social sciences. But the subaltern studies in its initial phase largely focuses on the peasant uprisings in India, and connives at Dalit and sexual/gender subalterns that too form very large groups. Later Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws on many theoretical positions and takes up the issue of historiography and the idea of agency to the common people. For her, all histories reconstruct imperialist hegemony and deny power to the common people. The subaltern narratives encourage us to read all positions “against the grain”- to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase. To understand the hierarchies of caste and their importance in Indian Hindu social structure, a diachronic view of India history is taken. The works of Indian socio-political thinkers like Ambedkar, M.M. Srinivas, Gopal Guru, Sundar Surukkai, Gail Omvedtt, Eleanor Zelliot, Kancha Illiah, Sharmila Rege etc. have been referred to chart out the subaltern Dalit historiography and epistemology. Similarly hijra identity emerges as an important subaltern identify with the rise of hijra autobiographical narratives and theories of sexuality and gender in recent years.

The thesis locates the formation of Dalit identity in Brahmanic ideology of *varnashram dharma* and the formation of *pancham varna*, the untouchables, in history as historical process. This includes the study and understanding of the emergence of brahmanical supremacy from the Vedic-Upanishadic period to the present time with subaltern resistance movements in between. At the same time, it also asserts the fact that, though the caste system as such has undergone significant changes for the last several decades, the role of the caste system is still prominent in Indian society. Though present India is greatly affected by modernization, urbanization and westernization, there is no denying that caste system is still a governing principle of the Hindu

social order. All the autobiographical texts written by Dalit women foreground the incessant role played by the caste system in Hindu and Christian socio-religious orders, especially in agrarian village economy.

An attempt is made in the thesis to understand Dr. Ambedkar as a subaltern social thinker, who shows his theoretical and practical commitment to the Dalit-subaltern issue. In recent years, Dalit studies has witnessed, what can be termed as, 'Ambedkarization of social sphere'. In the Ambedkarite discourse the term 'Dalit' emerges as a liberative category and has its own relevance in contemporary Dalit movement. It is understood that the socio-political condition of untouchables/Dalits in India largely reflects the historical, social and cultural characteristics of subalterns as described by Gramsci in his writings. The thesis takes a holistic view of the issue of subalternity in the context of Indian Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives. In Ambedkar, and in many other pre-Ambedkarite and post-Ambedkarite thinkers, religion is a crucial dimension of politics as it creates its own epistemology in which certain groups are otherized on the basis of caste and its inherent purity-pollution binarism. In the case of Dalits, the Brahmanic religious epistemology becomes the major source of creating the binarism of 'us' and 'them'.

The thesis underscores the need to building up subaltern historiography that includes the voices of Dalit women and hijras. The idea of building up Dalit and hijra historiography as a project of subaltern historiography also means altering or discussing the facts or aspects of the past not known or studied before in relation to caste and sexuality; it also means understanding them in the light of new approaches or modes of analysis. It is also an attempt to interrogate the mythical or semi-mythical narration of Dalit and hijra communities and the mythologization of caste and sexuality/gender in the texts available in the mainstream literary tradition. Caste as cultural and

political category has always been contested with different resistance movements in Indian history.

It has met with the process of contestation and revolt in different periods of Indian history. The major thrust of all these Dalit movements excluding Gandhian Dalit movement is to contest aryaniization and homogenization of culture existing at a particular historical time. Here, it is acknowledged that though India has entered into twenty-first century, our social and political relationships are still governed by caste and gender based concerns and the traditions of purity and pollution, inferiority and superiority, and heteronormativity. Thus, Dalit women's studies with special reference to caste and patriarchy, and hijra studies with special focus on sexuality, form an essential part to understand Indian cultural configurations.

The second important subaltern category studied in the thesis is 'hijra' identity. The thesis studies hijra (transgender) identity with the use of contemporary postmodern perspectives on transgender discourse in relation to the categories of sex and gender. In recent years, with the rise of many identity movements, issues related to sex and gender have been contested and revisited. In a country like India, hijra discourse of identity has emerged in opposition to normative heterosexual identity. The emerging hijra phenomenon including hijra literature can be looked at as critical discourse that investigates questions of sexual-gender differences and their transformation into social hierarchies.

One of the objectives of the thesis is to understand hijra identity in relation to the dominant culture which enforces heteronormative epistemic structure, and does not acknowledge hijra selfhood as a distinct one and relegates it to the margin. Within heterosexual word, hijra-transgender body appears as anachronism. But, in the postmodern times the hijra way of life may be looked as subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, and a different form of representation of sexuality and body. The hijra body contests the heterosexual understanding of

body aims at newer understanding of time and space. In our culture constructions of time and space get hegemonized and are uniquely gendered and sexualized. Both domestic and public time and space are gendered and sexualized. Hijras with their unique sharing of both male and female categories inhabit a very distinct idea of time and space which needs to be acknowledged.

The hijra texts under study take up the question of peripheral identity. They have been seen as postmodern expression of subaltern identity. Since postmodernism rejects any grand narratives of identity, it encourages the construction of new identities to challenge the hegemony of the dominant identities. The question of identity formation becomes an important issue for the peripheral groups like hijras who have always grappled with the issue of identity. The rise of hijra autobiographical narratives in India and across the world plays a very important role in numerous postmodern debates that include space and sexuality, subcultural production, literature and gender ambiguity, the politics of auto/biography, historical conception of sex and gender roles, gender and genre, idea of natural body, and above all, the formation of hijra self.

The emerging transgender critical intervention problematizes the binarism of sex and gender, once historicized through different cultural means, both in patriarchy and feminism. The previously distinct reality of sex/gender gets hybridized in the postmodern period. The postmodern period announces the end of gendered metanarrative and opens up a space for the transgendered narrative. The autobiographical narratives of Revathi and Laxmi create their own *Bildung* of the hijra subject and liberate it from the shackles of tradition and culture and proliferate it as autonomous, and postmodern self. The emergence of hijra phenomenon poses challenge to the established category of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and treats sex and gender as floating signifier.

The thesis draws a gender-genre relation with special reference to Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives under study. The genre of autobiography is understood as a form that

encourages cultural quest, especially the cultural quest of the subalterns in our time. There emerges a logical correlation between the rise of subaltern studies and the revival of the genre of autobiography as voicing the subaltern lived experiences across the world. The basic assumption, here, is that the subaltern autobiographical narratives of Dalit women and hijra together present a voice of those who have been historically, culturally and literarily subjugated in the regime of power- Brahmanic, casteist, patriarchal, and heterosexual. Since they represent different categories of subalternity, caste and gender in particular, they are important voices to be heard and understood in our time. On the other hand autobiography, though a very important genre in itself, has also been subalternized in various literary traditions until its rise in our time with the rise of our developing interests in marginalized, subaltern subjects in postmodern-poststructural-postcolonial era. Thus, a link can be ascertained between the rise and development of autobiography as a literary genre in a country like India, and the arrival of subaltern voices like Dalit women and hijras through autobiographical narratives. The present study affirms the genre of autobiography and its basic relationship with the issue of ‘self’ and ‘identify’ – in our case subaltern identities.

The thesis offers a contemporary reading of the genre of autobiography while deconstructing the conventional understanding of autobiography as a genre that aims at depicting the gradual development of the narrator-protagonist’s self, reaching some closure, and attaining a unified self. As a literary genre autobiography has passed through three different phases: the depiction of ‘self’ (mostly patriarchal), and ‘life’ (bourgeois and elite life) to ‘the act of writing’ (the postmodern understanding of ‘écriture’). The contemporary genre of autobiography includes different subaltern groups and gives literary space to hitherto suppressed groups like Dalit women

and hijras. The emerging dissenting voices from the subaltern groups deconstruct the conventional ideas of ‘auto’ and ‘bios’ associated with the genre of autobiography.

The analysis of various definitions of the genre of autobiography proposed by eminent critics of autobiography show that today there exists humanistic, romantic, modern and postmodern definitions of autobiography. Autobiography very often seen as a story about one’s own self, a narrative about one’s own life--its joys and sorrows, its trials and tribulations has many other social, economic and political ramifications. Overtly looking a very simple narrative, autobiography poses very serious, fundamental, epistemological, and ontological questions about self, the narration of self, and the aesthetics of self- narrative. It also open up new horizons of references and understanding of self, representation, authorship etc. with umpteen theoretical possibilities. Though the genre of autobiography has existed for centuries, it has become canonized only in the eighteenth century and only during the twentieth century, and again, during the postmodern age, it has attained popularity among common readers, critics of literature and the marginalized groups like Dalit women and hijras in the context of India.

The genre of autobiography develops intricate relationship with the questions of self, truth, imagination, memory, and history from postmodern point of view. The ‘I’ of present time is in search of the ‘I’ of the past and in this constant dualism life gets created in narrative. The self, in postmodern times, can be understood as a creation of different ideologies like colonialism, postcolonialism, capitalism, casteism, transgenderism, and varied economic ideologies. The self ultimately becomes a construct, not isolated or monolithic but multiple, self-effacing, fluid, and creating itself out of multiple interactive discourses available in society.

The ideas of truth, imagination, memory, and history weave a complex pattern of autobiographical narrative. The genre is basically associated with — the truth of events (historical

truth), truth of life (philosophical truth), and the truth of form (aesthetic truth). The autobiographical narrative largely depends on choice based on memory. The self of the autobiographer is transported from wider life situations of the past to the play of restricted signifiers in the present. Every act of transcribing the past into present time narrative does not remain an act of mimesis, but a creative reconstruction of past in present. The autobiographical narrative enters into three different “times”: the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual’s historical context. The postmodern idea of autobiography negates the idea of ‘metanarrative’ and gives space to ‘fragmented poetics’ which includes ‘little or mini narratives’. The postmodern/poststructural understanding of self contests the conventional understanding of ‘unified self’ and makes into play the understanding of ‘multiple selves’ or ‘fragmented self’. The postmodern critics have treated ‘tradition’ as being shaped within political/patriarchal cultural matrix. The subaltern criticism deconstructs the patriarchal, colonial, Brahmanic, sexual tradition of culture and assesses the absence of women, Dalits, and hijra people and their narrative voice in it. The rereading of conventional self is prioritized in such subaltern narratives.

The rise of Dalit feminism, Dalit women’s autobiographical tradition and the emergence of Dalit feminist autobiographical aesthetics together form a subaltern response to the mainstream Indian feminism, women’s autobiographical tradition and aesthetics. The basic claim, here, is that feminism in India has never been a unified movement with unified, monolithic aesthetics. The emergence of women’s multiple affiliations to caste, community and the state, and the new visions of women’s empowerment and identity have drastically challenged any monolithic understanding of feminism and the genre of women’s autobiography. The emergence of cultural and interdisciplinary studies in our time has also encouraged the subaltern groups like Dalit women and hijras to voice their self. The subaltern reading of Dalit women’s autobiographical writings

and hijra narratives presents a critique of hegemonic historiography which presents the Dalits and hijras in Indian history as continuous and homogeneous subjects in terms of life experiences. Within subaltern studies Dalit and hijra subjecthood emerges as a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. The emergence of Dalit feminism in recent years can be viewed as a very powerful resistance movement in the field of Indian feminism. The relationship between Dalit feminism and culture can only be thought of in terms of protests and struggles. It represents resistance politics and poetics of its own kind.

Since Dalit women are collectively affected by issues of constant hunger, labour, oppression, sexual exploitation by the caste people, impossibility of justice in everyday life, Dalit feminism demands new orientation and theorization that makes it distinct from the mainstream Brahmanic upper caste feminism. Unlike the mainstream upper caste feminism, Dalit feminism derives its strength and moral support from Phule-Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra, and from the writings of Itohee Thass, Periyar, and Narayan Guru in South India. The historical overview of the Dalit feminist movement in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu shows that Dalit feminism originates along with the mainstream feminism during the nationalist period of India. The understanding developed about Dalit women and their selfhood within Phule-Ambedkarite tradition later extends up to Gopal Guru, Anand Teltumbde, Sharankumar Limbale, Raj Kumar, Gail Omvedtt, Eleanor Zelliot, Sharmila Rege to name a few.

The thesis introduces the emerging genre of hijra autobiography which can be termed as 'transgenre'. The genre of hijra autobiography develops its own subalternity and marginality within the tradition of autobiographical writings. When most of the autobiographical narratives quite 'naturally' become a part of heteronormative sexual tradition of culture, the transgenre of hijra autobiography challenges such a fixed understanding of genre and encourages fluidity. The

word ‘hijra’ being a collective noun represents the entire community. The narratives of A. Revathi and Laxmi bring forth some fundamental questions not only about themselves, but also about the whole structure (social, religious, political) in which their identities are formed or deformed. Their autobiographical narratives open up a space in which the idea of hijra self (third gender self) can be circulated against the dominant gendered self. The hijra life narratives inaugurate a new literary, cultural tradition within the dominant autobiographical tradition occupied by men and women. They sketch out the silenced history of the forgotten third gender of our society and their lives in the symbolic autobiographical act of self-appropriation and self-determination. In doing so a very confident self, a multi-dimensional and multifaceted images of hijra identity comes.

The basic argument made here is that Indian transsexual autobiographical narratives construct a narrative space in which gender identity predicated on anatomical difference is contested. The hijra autobiographical narratives fight for self-justifications that seek social acceptance for the identity emerging out of body and mind cluster. Their writing opens up a space for future hijra narratives to contest the questions of socio-political and economic condition of hijras in Indian society and the philosophical questions of hijra body and subjectivity. As any autobiographical narrative offers an opportunity of rewriting of self, hijra autobiographical narratives, too, offers different representations and modes of transsexual subjectivity. The hijra subjectivity that emerges in the narratives is alternative, multifaceted, and very much subversive account of heteronormative idea of gender and sex.

The genre of subaltern autobiography differs from the general notion of autobiography in a sense that the latter is generally viewed as the story of a person written by himself or herself, while the subaltern autobiography deals not with an identity of a single person but of the entire class or caste that he or she belongs to, thus creating a group based identity. The subaltern

autobiographical literature is a literature of marginalized people in a major language. Such literature aims at creating new space in literary canon and tradition with its unconventional use of language and subverting treatment of epistemology of dominant groups.

The present study offers a reading of mainly four Dalit women's autobiographical narratives located in different regional contexts of India, but they certainly share the lived experiences of caste subalternity experienced within Hindu Brahmanic epistemological structure, and Roman Catholic Christian fold. At the same time, these autobiographical narratives do not offer any homogenized, essentialist view of Dalit life and Dalit woman's subjectivity. The narrative of each autobiography differs from each other in terms of deployment of literary style, and projection of Dalit experience in general and Dalit women's experience in particular. The Dalit women's autobiographical selves that emerge in these narratives are located in different socio-cultural-religious milieu of India society.

The emerging autobiographical selves of Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* are located in the subaltern Mahar community of Maharashtra, the community which has been hegemonized within Brahmanic social fold for centuries; while the autobiographical self of Bama in *Karukku* offers a newer understanding of Dalit Christina woman's self within the Christian religious fold dominated by caste prejudices and patriarchy. The narrative of Viramma et.al's *Viramma* unfolds a Tamil Pariah woman's self and its cultural embeddedness with the upper caste Reddiar community in Indian agrarian economy. On the other hand, the autobiographical writings of A. Revathi and Laxminarayan Tripathi alias Laxmi offer a very distinctive emerging voice of hijra narrative in contemporary subaltern studies. Like Dalit women's self-narratives, Revathi's *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* and Laxmi's *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* also do not offer any homogenized, monolithic, and essentialist narrative of hijra

condition in Indian cultural setting. Despite their differences emerging out of their socio-cultural locations, the autobiographical selves of Revathi and Laxmi certainly pose a challenge to the heteronormative understanding of sexuality that patriarchy possesses. They have been clubbed together with Dalit women's narratives because they represent a very different idea of gendered subalternity which has now started to be discussed and is becoming a part and parcel of the extending boundaries of subaltern literature and feminist discourse.

The Marathi women's autobiographical narratives studied here are closely tied with the Ambedkarite movement and the rise of Ambedkarite counter-public in which Marathi Dalit women participated and played an important role. The autobiographical narratives of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar are socio-biographies of the community. The individual self of the narrator-protagonist merges with the collective self of the community. They together challenge the conventional poetic demand of the genre of autobiography that assumes narration of an individual self as *bildungsroman*, by 'writing self' to resist and claim the collective past and lost histories. In both these narratives, Ambedkar emerges as the real protagonist. It is he who enables real transformation in Mahar community. It is he who inaugurates the historic struggle for self-respect and social recognition by challenging the undemocratic relationships within Hinduism. As far as Tamil Dalit women autobiographers are concerned, the influence of Ambedkar is not felt much in a direct way, though they certainly appear with the steady rise of Ambedkarite philosophy in Tamil Nadu. Even though, there are no direct references to the social reforms of Iyothee Thass, Periyar, and Narayan Guru, but their influences can be seen operating unconsciously. In her later writings, Bama does affirm the influence of Ambedkar, while Viramma in her narrative makes a sparse reference to Gandhi and his reformist ideas.

These Dalit women's autobiographies together challenge the mainstream male and female autobiographical traditions for their nationalist and bourgeois orientations. They have the awareness that they are rooted in a distinct literary culture and society. They passionately articulate cultural and caste discrimination and foregrounds the question of humiliation, injustice, otherness, and marginality. To achieve the goal, they subvert the conventional canon and the categories of aesthetics, assert their affiliation with the Ambedkarite movement, challenge both brahmanic and Dalit patriarchies, promote orality in narrative, employs dialects in narration, explore Dalit ways of life, rites, rituals and mythology, witness female bodily desires, personalize history, reflect collective association with the community, search out democratic, egalitarian values, and propose a distinct Dalit vision before the reader. The Dalit women autobiographical narratives together present Dalit household, food, hunger, humiliation, violence, resistance, community, caste, culture, labour, education and collective struggle. They from aesthetic and poetics of their own in sharp contrast to the mainstream aesthetics and poetics of autobiography. Certain spheres of Dalit male autobiographical tradition also get challenged in Dalit women's autobiographies. One of the important characteristics Dalit women writers' narratives is that they are full of auditory details of Dalit life. In male Dalit writers' narratives, we find more accent on the olfactory images, and the auditory images are totally neglected. Moreover, Dalit patriarchy also emerges forefront in Dalit women's autobiographies.

The hijra autobiographical texts like *Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, and *Me Hijra*, *Me Laxmi* share many hikra concerns in the narratives- gender fluidity, the constant battle between 'the material body' and 'the felt sense of the body', condition of hijras in Indian socio-economic structure, identity construction of the third gender, and the idea of literary in transgenre narrative.

A. Revathi and Laxmi in their narratives challenge the colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative

ideologies in which a hijra self is excommunicated. They try to locate the hijra self as a ‘third gender’ with her own unique sexuality and gender so that it gets respect in the dominant heteronormative world. These autobiographical accounts reveal sexual/gendered subalternity faced by the hijras in the patriarchal, heteronormative world. The entry of a hijra narrative into the field of mainstream autobiographical writings should be seen as a challenge posed to the epistemological and aesthetic structure of the mainstream autobiographies including women’s autobiographies.

The importance of translating Dalit women and hijra autobiographical narratives as subaltern writings has come to be recognized only in the wake of Dalit feminist and other subaltern movements in our time. The rise of translation of Dalit, hijra and other marginalized narratives is a part of the growing interest in the subaltern subjects in recent times. Very often such narratives first appear in oral form and then are translated into a regional language and then into English. All the six autobiographical narratives are important contributions in Indian bhasha literatures. They have later been translated into English to appeal the larger groups. Barring the narratives of Urmila Pawar, Bama, and Laxmi, who have got higher education, the narratives of Baby Kamble, Viramma, and Revathi are the narratives from semi-educated or illiterate persons. With their entry into the sophisticated literary world, they challenge many age-old foundations of literary canons. The hijra autobiographies with their own aesthetics of transgenre contest the sphere of heteronormativity in autobiographical tradition. For the Dalit women and hijras, the very act of writing their ‘experience’ reconstitutes their subjectivities in radically new ways. All the autobiographical narratives together are acts of memory through which both past and present are assessed, contested and reconstructed. They save their narrators and the entire community of being amnesiac of cultural past. This further saves them from cultural aphasia.

To conclude, defining the identities of Dalit women and hijras in literature, history, politics, and culture is a challenging task, and disturbing in many respects. In order to achieve political and social modernity, one has to address the issues of ‘untouchability’ and ‘humiliation’ arising out of Indian caste system with regard to Dalit women, and patriarchal heteronormativity with regard to hijra community. For Dalits and hijras, the past is a means to confront the present in order to imagine a better, prosperous future. Since subaltern studies encourages ‘historical inquiry from below’, the arrival of Dalit and hijra discourses and the emerging understanding of Dalit and hijra subjectivities therein help us to redefine and widen the boundaries of subaltern studies. Within the framework of the thesis, the idea of subaltern subjectivity gets reconfigured, reimagined, re-theorized and re-historicized. All epistemologies within which identities are constructed and shaped come under scrutiny within the domain of subaltern studies. Thus, an attempt is made here to read autobiographical narratives of Dalit women and hijras as subaltern categories along the line of new subaltern understanding of history which tries to incorporate the subaltern voices to provide them historical agency.

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