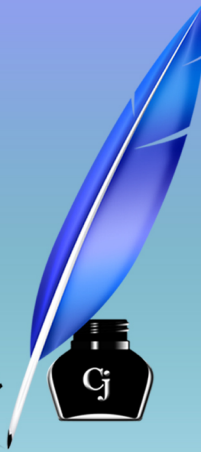


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Ambedkar Movement and Dalit Autobiographies

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The empirical interest of the European continent has witnessed the two World Wars in the 20th century. These massacres have brought 'human' at centre; but still the race, gender, caste, class, language and culture have remained as the means of exploitations. Various emancipator movements are pursuing these issues under different banners. The Dalit movement is struggling against the caste discriminations and economic exploitation. Dr. Ambedkar is the mile stone of this 20th century movement. The change in the lives of the Dalits is evidenced through their literature particularly, autobiographies. In this paper I have tried to look at the changes in their lives after their confrontation to Ambedkar Movement. The two authors i.e. Dr. Narendra Jadhav and Baby Kamble reflect the inculcation of Ambedkar movement in to their autobiographies. Their life experiences in the context of contemporary struggle of assertion shapes their 'self'. The first section deals with the out spring of Dalit causes in Indian politics and its moldings in to political force through Ambedkar Movement. The second section deals with inculcation of the movement on the part of the authors for the assertion of different identity.

Section-I

The 150 years of the British Raj had prepared the ground for emancipator movement. To live in the British India was a mental state of slavery for the upper caste people but for the lower castes it was long back engagement to untouchability on the basis of their caste identity; similar to the Black Africans-Americans who fought the War of Independence. The end of the Sipoy mutiny of 1857 has annexed India to Britain and the native leadership sprouted in the form of the National Congress party with the intension of modest participatory politics and the social reforms.

'The Indian National Congress was founded at Bombay in 1885, it was felt by the leaders of the movement that the National movement should not be exclusively political but that side by side with the consideration of political questions, questions affecting Indian social economy should

also be discussed and that the best endeavours of all should be put forth for vitalizing Hindu Society by removing all social evils and social wrongs.¹

The Congress party engulfed Hindus of different castes, Mahomedans, Christens, Parsis, Sikhs, Brahmos etc. The India National Social Conference discussed the matters of the sea-voyages, the age of marriage, the remarriages, the inter-caste marriages etc. up to 1895 when the Anti-social Reform section stopped to entertain social reform in the party. They argued that the social reforms needed for each individual was impracticable to be discussed there². As well as this notion of social reform was restricted to class and community; so that the party was restricted only to the political aspirations of the Indians to counter the British rulers.³ Even these social reforms were far away from the issues that Phule had addressed as 'shudratishudras' in the mid 19th century. The social evil of caste system was not noticed for the discussion on the political agenda up to late 19th century. The promise of the self-government located the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the Depressed Classes as the major political parties. The Depressed Classes formed one-seventh of the Indian population; and was important to give the status of a National Demand to the 'Congress-League scheme'. The Depressed Classes negotiated their support to the Congress party for passing a resolution for the removal of the social disabilities.⁴ In this way for the first time in 1917 the caste cause was framed on the political agenda. Afterwards Gandhi approached the problem of untouchability as religious dogma where he could only give status to the work of the 'Harijans'; but could not be able to relive them from their destined life for which he had utter sorrows. The 'nationalism' was about to suppress the caste issue; but the Government of Bombay and the secular socialists among the Congress gave some space to the Depressed Classes in 1920s. At the same time Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar emerged as the leader of the Untouchables. He was belonging to Mahar⁵ community from Maharashtra. He had a Ph.D. from Columbia and a D.Sc. from London University. In short

¹ With this view, Dewan Bahadur R. Raghunath Rao and Mr. Justice (then Rao Bahadur) M.G. Ranade delivered addresses on Social reform on the occasion of the meeting of the First Congress at Bombay'.—Dr. Ambedkar

² For them social reform means widow remarriages, child marriages, wives and daughters drive with them visiting their friends and sending the daughters to Oxford or Cambridge.

³ Mr. Dadabhai Naoroji in his presidential speech at the Second Session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in the year 1886

⁴ the resolution passed: 'This Congress urges upon the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting those classes to considerable hardship and inconvenience.'

⁵ One of the untouchable communities in Maharashtra

he was equal in education to the other nationalist leaders of his time. The untouchable disabilities and rights was a problem for him; he heralded for the mute sufferings of the depressed castes and molded the national freedom struggle movement to the social one with the participation of the downtrodden masses in the movement. His was a counter attack to the Gandhi's ghettoizing the downtrodden as 'Harijan' which was a sophistication of the basic problem. The happenings in the contemporary society become the life struggle of Dalit people who tried to assert themselves through the various mass movements. In short the caste issue was brought back with much force in the national struggle in the early half of the 20th century.

Dr. Ambedkar took effort to build the Dalit's identity different means. He arranged the Mahad agitation and Nashik temple entry agitation to attack Hindu hypocrisy. Both these agitations had the law at the base which was denied to the Dalits in the practical sense. Through these agitations he brought the awareness among downtrodden regarding their depressed state in the Hindu religion. His participation at the Round Table conference was remarkable for the demand of political representation. He asked separate constituencies for the Dalits to represent them in proper way after the separation of Muslims. He framed the political parties to gather the force of the downtrodden. He amended communal award as 'reservation' in the Indian constitution. He asked Dalits to abandon the villages and the caste occupations and to get resettle at cities and inculcate modernity. He advocated the philosophy of 'educate, unite and agitate'. His religious conversion was an assertion of religious identity. He was backed up and followed by millions of Dalits all over India. They walked the talk of Dr. Ambedkar. The philosophy has attributed them a new identity-their chin up, and looked everyone in the eye. The present Dalits narratives deal with the loss of their former servility of caste identity. Their struggle for the same frames the contemporary history through Ambedkar Movement.

Section-II

The Marathi language has proved an effective medium to lead Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts direct to the downtrodden. It increased their strong participation in the national as well as social movements during the 20th century. Dr. Ambedkar's urge- to bring the Dalit issue in literary flow by the Dalit authors-created many Dalit activists who wrote in 1960s. After his demise the literary cult is recognized as Dalit Literature first of all in Marathi language. The denial for the space of Dalit literature from the very beginning made it more aggressive and forceful.

Particularly, its autobiographical tune appealed the readers. The literature is dealing with social realities of the recent past through the perspectives of the Dalits. The authors are the witnesses of such facts in their autobiographies. Interestingly enough, these autobiographies are dealing with the changes that took place in the authors' lives due to their confrontation to Dr. Ambedkar in reality either, or through his philosophy. Generally, autobiography deals with the gradual evaluation of the author's 'self'; but the Dalit autobiographies deal with the community of the protagonist as the 'self' of the author emerges through the community. It stands for 'We' and not for 'I'. Dr. Narendra Jadhav's autobiography '*Amach Baap an Ahmi*' is translated as 'Outcaste: A Memoir' and Baby Kamble's autobiography '*Jina Amuch*' is translated as 'The Prisons We Broke' describe the changed lives of the protagonists due to their participation in Ambedkar Movement. Actually these are not the life narratives of the authors but the lives narrated here include the whole community which participates in the emancipator movement in the 20th century India, more particularly Maharashtra. The study of these two autobiographies in the context of Ambedkar Movement will deal with the inculcation of the latter.

The consciousness of Dalithood⁶ is evidenced in Dr. Jadhav's autobiography. Damodhar Runjaji Jadhav-Damu had realized the untouchability in his childhood when he had to quench his thirst with his cupped hands. His father satisfied his logic with the argument that being Mahar, their 'touch' pollutes the water. Even at village tea shop his identification of 'Mahar' restricted his entry. But at the age of 12, he ate samosa in a hotel at Chowpatty. And at the Gora Saheb's house in the city, he is treated as human being without any caste prejudiced identity.

*'...he gave me a hand to stand up and made me sit on the couch next to him. I was very uncomfortable and felt totally out of place.'*⁷

These contradictory experiences helped him to understand that the arbitrariness of untouchability is based in the caste system and village structure. Afterwards he confirms the awareness of 'self', when he participates in the Mahad satyagraha in 1927.

⁶ The people exploited in the caste system

⁷ Up Against Bondage: Damu page 92 Damu was selling newspaper on railway station.

*'I was now imbued with new courage and self-realization. It had given me the power to question, reason and act.'*⁸

In the state of joblessness and emotional pressure from his mother Damu grudgingly went to Ozar to accept the *yeskar* duty⁹. He has to guard a dead body in a well outside the village till the Fauzdar arrives, at the cost of abuses and threat to life by a constable. He is not let eat the *bhakris* but asked to fetch the dead body out of the well on the former's arrival. When he is reluctant to touch (pollute!) the dead body; he is rewarded by the lashes of the whip. Damu never bows in front of the Fauzdar; on the contrary, he retorts with self-respect:

'I spit on these inhuman traditions. ... I am a man of dignity....'

He refuses to be a sacrificial lamb and not to accept tyranny of inhuman, caste-based traditions. He leaves the *yeskar* duty and Ozar village to resume modernity at Mumbai where he accepts job in railway department in search of self-respect.

As a true devotee of Ambedkar movement, it has become a ritual for Damu to read *Janata*¹⁰ surrounded by a group from the locality. Damu never likes that his wife is gossiping with neighbourhood women on some trivial issues like cooking, their daughters' marriages, dowry and approaching festivals. He starts to inculcate the teaching in his wife. He always makes her to read about the Ambedkar Movement. He encourages Sonu to go to school and do social work like Savitribai¹¹. He is of the opinion that both men and women need to be educated. He would begin reading out, in his broken way, from a book written by Babasaheb for Dalits or a book on some social worker and expect Sonu to repeat every sentence after him. Whenever there is nobody to listen, he would repeat the same to Najuka or to his mother. He vows to give his children the highest possible education as a mission of his life.

⁸ Towards Freedom: Damu page 25

⁹ Traditionally, every Mahar householder took turns performing this duty for three months. As a village servant, a Yeskar went from house to house, bearing news of the village. He announced deaths, and tended to the carcass of cattle. He ran as a human pilot in front of the carriage of government officials, singing their praises and announcing their arrival. Any odd job that came up was assigned arbitrarily to the Yeskar, who never dared question the practice. In return, he was given a handful of grain and was allowed to go begging from house to house for leftovers.

¹⁰ a Marathi fortnightly started by Babasaheb

¹¹ Savitribai Phule

*'I want my children to grow up and have dignified life. I am sending them to school...'*¹²

Damu accepts the principles of democracy and rationality while taking decision of changing the religion. With the spirit of liberty, Sonu argues that their ill-treatment as untouchables at the hands of touchables is a result of their bad deeds in the past lifetime. It is a conflicting matter for her to leave the religion and follow another. But at last, she remembers her mother's words, 'Soney, your man is like your God. Obey him always, unquestioningly.' The couple followed conversion to get equality and to deny religious hegemony of the priestly class.

The self-respect, rationality, humanity, cleanliness, egalitarianism and justice all these principles of identity are the legacy of Ambedkar Movement to Chhotu, Damu's last among the six children. This legacy helped Chhotu to develop his 'self' through the hard corners in his life. He maintained his self respect whenever he is commented 'despite coming from a lowly caste', 'government's son-in-law' -a different version for the practice of untouchability! His egalitarianism backs up him at Vitthal temple in Pandharpur when he concludes, 'Dignity, after all, rests in the mind and heart... and soul. I have to reclaim it not from outside, but from within.' His 'self' is developed fully when he looks back to the journey from his excellence in Sanskrit at school to the declaration as 'Best International Student'. Even the third generation 'Apoorva' is not tied down by race, religion or caste. Her Dalit identity remains an additional jargon for her identity as an Indian. She holds the global humanitarian perspective for the incidents like Gujarat earthquake.

Baby Kamble's 'The Prisons We Broke' is another illustration of Ambedkar Movement to indicate that how it helped Dalits to construct their identity while participating in the political history of Maharashtra.

'I am a product of the Ambedkar movement.I grew up in that charged atmosphere. Ambedkar taught us that character is the foundation of his edifice called the human society when compassion and morality follow character, society achieves its real strength. He wanted to transform the society in the light of this philosophy.'

¹² Outcaste: A Memoir- III Struggle page 174

Babytai¹³ heard Dr. Ambedkar at Jejuri¹⁴ in the fair¹⁵ of God Khandoba. He challenged the rationality regarding the duty of the family towards its God and vice-versa¹⁶. He appealed to notice their basic needs in respect of their complete devotion to Khandoba. The appeal challenged innumerable arguments regarding their belief on God and the false religious practices such as *Murali* and *Jogtin*¹⁷. Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts were blowing among the community to create an awareness of their 'Dalithood'. The several activists were organizing meetings during *Jatras*¹⁸ and addressing people to bring about a change in their perspective.

Dr. Ambedkar asked not to clean the filth and not to eat carcasses; as this is against their self-respect and loss of identity of being human. He was ready- that let the three-fourth of our people die, only the remaining to live with dignity. Even the Dalits left the villages and caste occupation and moved towards cities to grab the opportunities of modernity. Once Babytai's *mavashi*¹⁹ desired to eat liver, thigh and other such coveted parts of the dead animal where *aaji*²⁰ went to claim her share. She requested for the same to feed her daughter but she was denied to have them. Then she proclaimed, '*Anybody who eats a dead animal today will eat a pig!*' The religious intervention of the pig solved the problem for ever. Nobody desired to eat the flesh, on the contrary all of them resolved not to eat dead animals with the slogan, '*Bhimrao Ki Jai!*'²¹ Such incidents created 'self-respect' among the Dalit masses.

Dr. Ambedkar asked the Dalit women to educate their children. He believed that once they educate, they can organize themselves and find out various ways of directing the struggle. Pandharinath Kakade²² enrolled his both the children Babu and Baby to the school. Even Baby Kamble is inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts and got her children educated with degrees like

¹³ 'tai' is salutation for an elder lady in the context of Maharashtra

¹⁴ A village, 48 KM away from Pune

¹⁵ There is an annual fair of the deity Khandoba who is considered a family God of in Maharashtra and it is a binding of every family to visit the deity once in a year, particularly attend the fair

¹⁶ If the family is responsible to see its god then the god has to take care of the welfare of that family.

¹⁷ A girl offered to God Khandoba in marriage is Murali; for Ambabai as her worshipper is Jogtin

¹⁸ Fairs in the name of different Gods of downtrodden people

¹⁹ Maternal aunt-mother's sister

²⁰ Grandmother of either side of lineage

²¹ Hail to Babasaheb Ambedkar

²² Babytai Kamble's father

M.Sc., L.L.M., B. A. etc. Not only this, but she has opened an ashram²³ school for orphans from the backward castes. She was²⁴ the president of 'Mahatma Phule Dnyana Vikas Prasarak Sanstha' where two hundred children study.

Dr. Ambedkar's word has become law for Baby Kamble but she never worshipped his image with sandalwood paste, flowers or *dhoop* sticks. She has not made public displays of her reverence for him instead she stood for the principles that Dr. Ambedkar advocated through his conversion to Buddhism. She had faced several adversities in her life with the weapons of *sheel*²⁵ and *satwa*²⁶. She thought that the happiness of her family lies in the truth that she followed in her life. She has kept *sheela*, *pradnya*²⁷ and *karuna*²⁸ as the founding principles of her life.

Babytai always replace her mother to participate at Mahila Mandal in Phalatan as the later was restricted to the house by her father Pandarinath Kakade²⁹ who was an activist of Ambedkar movement. Once, the Ranisaheba³⁰ invited all the women from Manglawar Peth to attend a meeting. The Dalit women leaders i.e. Thakubai Kakade, Mathubai More, Fattabai Kakade and Vithbai Kakade enter a hall with white saris, nine yards long along with Dr. Ambedkar's photograph pinned in front! All the chairs were acquired by Brahmin and Maratha women in the hall. These women aware of self-respect, were not ready to seat on the floor without chairs. On the contrary, one among them asked the host, "*Your women are not allowing our women to seat on the chair. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. I am going to remove your women from the chair and seat my women there.*" Then immediately the chairs were arranged.

To conclude, it can be said that distinguished environment is not required to be cultured and civilized as per the perspective of the upper castes; on the other hand the alternative civilization and culture can be observed among the downtrodden. But in the absence of self recognition their generations after generations had demarked as 'filthy'-where impure occupations were imposed on them, 'unclean'-where water resources were denied to them, 'ignorant'-where knowledge was

²³ Lodging and boarding school

²⁴ Recently, she died on 21st April, 2012

²⁵ Stainless character

²⁶ Utter devotion for certain principles

²⁷ knowledge

²⁸ passion

²⁹ Scope for Dalit feminism!

³⁰ Queen of former state of Nimbalkar Sansthan

denied to them. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for the first time found the causes of such demarcation in the caste system which was dominating economic system in India. With his highest degrees from the foreign countries, he challenged the educational hegemony of the upper castes and at the same time asked his community to die for dignity. During his limited life span he exposed the religious hypocrisy, logic of caste hierarchy and status, economic attachment to it; at the same time struggled for their political participation, religious emancipation and reservation. Through his different strategies, he spread the awareness of Dalithood among them, politically gathered them to frame their identities. Fortunately, the ongoing freedom movement provides him a base to create Dalit discourse which would be difficult to imagine in another context of history.

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