

The Outcaste: An Intersectionality of Self, Community and Nation

Provakar Palaka

Abstract

It is significant to note that autobiography is a popular genre in Dalit literature. Unlike the non-Dalit autobiography Dalit autobiography is more than the story of an individual. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a representative Dalit autobiography. I have taken this as a case study to deal with a few important questions: in what way Dalit autobiography dismantles the very definition of autobiography? Is Dalit autobiography limited to the narration of an individual's lived experience? How is it the life story of more than just an individual? How does an individual's story intersect with the story of a community and the nation at large?

Keywords: autobiography, Dalit autobiography, caste, community, nation, self, intersectionality

Dalit Autobiography

What is an autobiography? Simply speaking, an autobiography is writing about self by the individual himself/herself. Autobiography constitutes three important components: auto (self), bio (life) and graphy (writing). Philippe Lejeune, a French critic defines autobiography as "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune, as quoted in Kumar, 2010, p. 3). Autobiography is traditionally known as the act of writing a conscious individual self. The subjecthood of 'self' is the main focus in every autobiography. But individual self cannot be removed from the community (society) or even nation. It is in relationship with the community that an individual self is

shaped. Therefore, writing an autobiography is an act of situating one's individual self vis-à-vis the communal self.

In the West, autobiography as a writing had its origin in the fourth century AD. However, in India, the development of autobiography as a writing is a late phenomenon. In this context, Raj Kumar explains that "the act of writing an autobiography is possible only when the individual identity of a member of a community or country is valued and respected" (2010, p. 6). Indian society does not allow an 'individual self' to grow. Since the caste system is a fact of life, every individual becomes part of a greater community, thus losing one's individual identity. It has been generally believed that the traditional Hindu worldview is hostile to the autobiographical mode because it does not recognize the existence of individual self/soul. Instead, it believes that every individual self/soul is a part of the universal soul personified by God, who is supposed to be the creator of this universe. According to this belief, an individual is never an independent 'being'; she/he is part of the whole. The Hindu worldview could be a reason behind it. According to the Hindu worldview, individual self (Atman) is only a small particle of the greater or universal self that is (Brahman). Therefore, in the Hindu worldview individual identity is not possible. However, it is only with the advance of education and social reformation that some enlightened Hindu minds began writing about their individual self.

What do the autobiographies talk about? Roy Pascal (1904-1980), a German scholar and theoretician of autobiography, cites two important characteristics of an autobiography:- 'worthwhile life' and 'great experience' which can influence the ordinary vast majority of people is necessary to write an autobiography (Pascal, 1960, p. 17). In this sense, some special people with worthwhile life and great experiences only can write an autobiography. Subscribing to this definition, autobiography has become a stereotyped medium of mere self-exaltation.

It is true in the Indian context as well. Autobiographies were written by well-known Indians within the prescribed style, content and form of the genre. Whether we talk about Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* or Nehru's *Discovery of India*, they glorify themselves while talking about their 'great experiences' and 'worthwhile life'. What surprises one is that though caste plays a vital role in the Indian context, there is no mention of caste in these accomplished autobiographies. The success

and failure of an individual is determined by one's caste. Yet caste has been completely absent in those autobiographies. Rather Gandhi boasts about his birth in the *Bania* caste. He writes, "The Gandhis belong to the *Bania* caste and seem to have been originally grocers. But for three generations, from my grandfather, they have been Prime Ministers in several Kathiawad states" (Gandhi, 2008, p. 1). While on the one hand he boasts that he was born in the *Bania* caste or maybe it is very natural for him to mention his caste but on the other hand, he seems to be quite silent about his association with the people of marginalized sections. His silence disturbs the readers.

Going by Pascal's definition there is no scope for Dalit autobiography because the Dalits in India can hardly have 'worthwhile life' or 'great experiences'. However, with the arrival of modernity and some access to education, the conscious Dalits started talking about themselves in the form of life narratives. Thus, the emergence of Dalit autobiographies in India is definitely the product of the Dalit Panthers Movement of the 1970s in Maharashtra and the philosophy of Phule and Ambedkar.

Dalit autobiography is one of the most successful genres of Dalit literature. This broke the mainstream trends in terms of language, content and conception. It broke the long lasting silence in terms of Dalit representation. This paved the way and gave a new perspective to Dalit writing. Instead of celebrating the self, the Dalit narrator has to record a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system. Since Dalits in India live marginalized lives, their autobiographies are bound to be different from others. Therefore, Dalit autobiographies are stories of ordinary men and women who do not hold any prominent position in social history. They keep aside the established style of writing autobiographies. Sarah Beth gives some insightful comments on Dalit autobiography in Hindi. She states, "Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability".

The Outcaste

The Outcaste is an autobiography of Sharankumar Limbale narrating his life journey from childhood to his late 20s (27 to be specific) in which he narrates his birth, childhood, education and his marriage. Limbale's pain and angst of life get converted into his voice of resistance in his autobiography. The title *The Outcaste* is an English translation of

Akarmashi (the original title) which actually means (illegitimate, impure or incomplete). However, his life story does not remain limited to his own story but goes beyond it. This autobiography is equally the story of his community and the nation at large. Therefore, the narrative style takes the mode of communal self 'we' more often than the individual self 'I'. What the self of Limbale goes through is very much true about everyone of his community.

Writing Self

At the beginning of the narrative, we see Limbale as timid, fearful and traumatized. He was considered as inauspicious by the family. From his childhood he grew with several questions in his mind:

Who am I? Where is my umbilical cord connected? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar. Hence I am also a Mahar. But I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. So am I a Muslim as well? Who am I? (Limbale, 2008, p. 39)

A man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste or his father. But Limbale had none. So, he says, "I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all" (Limbale, 2008, p. 59). By bringing in the imagery of Jarasandh and pointing out the mixed upbringing of the Muslim grandfather, Dalit grandmother and mother and fathered by an upper caste, he questions the ascribed identity of caste and religion. As a representative of Dalit self, he identifies himself as a self which is completely broken, trampled down and crushed.

Education develops consciousness which helps to assert one's identity. Things became very different when young Limbale began to study at a boarding school at Chappalgaon and later in Sholapur for his college education. Buddhism began to cast its spell on him. He came in contact with Dalit activists involved in the Dalit Panthers Movement. He came to know Ambedkar's philosophy. Thus, he became a more enlightened and conscious being. He along with a few others got involved in working for his village people in small ways. They educated their people not to eat meat of dead animals. Whenever an animal was being skinned, they deliberately went there and grabbed its legs. When it was skinned they pissed on it, threw soil and dung on it so that no one would eat the meat (Limbale, 2008, p. 19).

Limbale and his friends protested against Shivram, tea stall owner, who used separate cups for the Dalits. They lodged a police complaint against Shivram. Of course, they had to bear the brunt of it. But what mattered was Limbale and his friends did not accept exploitation and discrimination just by lying down. They protested and spoke against the perpetrators. He stopped saying 'namaskar', and instead started saying 'Jai Bhim'. He confesses, "My youth had assumed a new meaning and significance. The blood flowed like hot lava through my body. My mind burned with myriad thoughts in silent protest. Baba Sahib filled me with reverence" (Limbale, 2008, p. 86). His refusal to marry according to Hindu rituals is another milestone in his consciousness and newer identity which he had discovered for himself. One could see the emergence of a new conscious self of Limbale.

Writing Community and Nation

In an interview with Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu, a scholar in English at Acharya Nagarjuna University, Limbale said:

The span of my autobiography is my childhood, I want to write about my pain and pangs. I want to write about the suffering of my community. So, I cannot give importance to my personal life. I am writing for social cause. My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice. (<http://www.the-criterion.com>)

Similarly, Om Prakash Valmiki writes, "Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrong doers. Dalit autobiography will provide inspiration to our future generations" (Valmiki, 2003, p. xxviii).

Dalit autobiography reflects the self of the community on the whole. Scholars like Susie Tharu consider that Dalit autobiography is the biography of its community. It is not only writing about one's own self, but it is also about the story of his community. Dalit autobiographies are good material for social history. Community is given more importance than the 'self' in Dalit autobiographies.

Limbale's experiences are not just his own but other Mahar boys whether Mallya or Harya or even about the Dalit readers, who read, can relate with Limbale. This story could be the same for all of them as far as social discrimination, hunger and exploitation are concerned.

Therefore, Limbale's story is the same as the story of a Dalit community. That is why we get to see Limbale often using the plural form 'we' as the narrator's voice.

Autobiographies or other life narratives can be said to be the archives of history. Therefore, autobiographies can also be said to be the story/history of the nation of that particular period. While reading Limbale's *The Outcaste* we get to know about the untouchability practised even at the school. The image of a teacher seen in other mainstream texts is debunked in the Dalit texts. Once the students were asked to write an essay on a 'picnic'. Limbale was reminded of his bitter experience of the school picnic. He could not have written it down in an essay. So, for some time he could not write anything. When the teacher noticed him not writing anything, the teacher got annoyed and shouted at him saying, 'You son of a bitch, come on, start writing. You like eating an ox don't you?' (Limbale, 2008, p. 15). One does not see the picture of a teacher, experienced by Gandhi in his autobiography. The teacher was over generous to Gandhi. When Gandhi did not want to study Sanskrit as his language, he was persuaded by his teacher telling him, "How can you forget that you are the son of a Vaishnava father? Won't you learn the language of your own religion? If you have any difficulty, why not come to me? I want to teach you students Sanskrit to the best of my ability" (Gandhi, 2008, pp. 33-34). On the other hand, when Ambedkar wanted to study Sanskrit, he was discouraged to study the language as he was a Dalit (Shahare, 1987, p. 16). Similar discriminations are felt by Om Prakash Valmiki as well as we come to know from his autobiography *Joothan*.

We get to know the story of the temples where the Dalits were not allowed to enter. Limbale writes, "Though branded as untouchables we too are Hindus by faith. We too are human beings. High caste children from the village may visit the temple, yet we are forbidden. There is a saying, 'Children are the flowers of God's abode', but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out" (Limbale, 2008, p. 5). Young Limbale sees a contradiction in Hindu religion which claims Dalits as belonging to its fold yet denies them the entry into temples. He recalls his school days when he was asked by his teachers to regularly sweep the school and smear it with cow-dung. One day as he was sweeping, inadvertently he reached the middle of the temple. He considers himself fortunate because no one saw him there, otherwise he would have been harshly

punished because of it. One recalls the temple entry movement initiated by Ambedkar. But the objective was not because that would make them feel happy but because of self-respect of the Dalits. However, Limbale describes another incident where a Mahar boy named Parshya urinated on God. Through this somehow Limbale records his protest against the gods by the event of urinating on a god by a Dalit boy. It was as good as saying they would urinate on the gods who would not accept them. Towards the end of the autobiography, we witness Limbale's marriage which is symbolic in the sense that the marriage was conducted not by the ceremonial rituals of Hinduism and its customs but by Buddhism, a religion for which brotherhood of humanity is of prime importance. By then we see a conscious and enlightened self of Limbale. He says, "My youth had assumed a new meaning and significance (Limbale, 2008). Therefore, what the Dalits and other marginalized people of this nation need is not the temples but self-respect and dignity.

One comes to know about the miserable life lived amidst hunger and exploitation. The Dalit women are sexually exploited by the Patils. "A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils" (Limbale, 2008, p. 38). The readers are also apprised of the story of resistance put up by the conscious Dalits once education was made available to them in independent India because of the constitutional provisions.

Conclusion

Thus, *The Outcaste* is an autobiography, an individual life story, which intersects with the self of the community and biography of the nation. Dalit autobiographies do not indulge in self-glorification. Their stories of suffering and angst are the way to voice their protest against caste practices. Dalit autobiographies like *The Outcaste*, have called for redefining of the genre called autobiography. More such autobiographies should be written to bring in social change in society and the nation.

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Provakar Palaka teaches English at Swami Shraddhanand College, University of Delhi. His areas of interest are Dalit Literature, Odia Literature, Post-colonial Literature and Cultural Studies among others. His books are *Politics of Writing: A Study of Dalits in Odia Literature*, Authorspress, 2015 and *Reading the Margins: History, Culture, Literature*, People's Literature Publications, 2020.

prabhakarpalaka11@gmail.com