
Literary Voice: A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies (ISSN 2277-4521) Number 25, Volume 1, September 2025, <https://literaryvoice.in>
 Indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I2OR, CiteFactor, InfoBase

Life Writing: A Study of History and Historiography *

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.42>

Abstract

Autobiographies of/by the downtrodden ('dalits' in the Indian context) are a study in chronicling both history and historiography of the said caste, with the avowed aim of revealing the baneful hierarchizing of humans as also incorporating their chronicle into the Indian social mainstream. Such writings shore up their erasure in social history, as also see them as examples of engagement with construction of the Dalit chronicle to stand alongside the narrative of 'higher castes' in the oriental context, since erasure of dalit narrative has been deliberate and arbitrary. It is a form of class struggle, whose prognosis has been presented, in a different context, by scholars like Ernest Mandel (in Late Capitalism) and its cultural correspondences by acclaimed authors like Fredric Jameson (in Postmodernism). Dalit oeuvre celebrates their life as also their struggles and authenticity as courageous people who strive and exhibit their fortitude and never-say-die attitude. These autobiographies reveal their writers' comprehension of gradual evolving of the power dynamics of class, ethnicity and social identity, and their much-needed rupturing of the flawed social fabric. This essay will critically analyze the socio-political and historical causes and consequences of Dalit struggles, and the possible solutions as envisaged by influential thinkers, social reformers, and grass root movements. It also tries to analyze how the struggles have influenced modern-day Dalit identity, confronted institutionalized oppression, and added to the debate on social justice, equality, and constitutional provisions in India.

Keywords: Proletariat, Organic Intellectual, Historiography, Dalits, Episteme, Neocolonialism, Egalitarianism, Indologist

Introduction

The founding fathers of modernism (at least in the West) have been Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (to keep the list short). They interrogated Christianity, the socio-economic superstructures, *homo sapiens* and their mind, as also the nature of existence vis-a-vis essence. Their aim, in general, was to broaden epistemic horizons, usher the sociological egalitarian and to critique existentialist problematics. Their research was within the field of ethics and reforms required to better the lives of ordinary citizens and industrial laborers, or the proletariat, as Marx described them, by eliminating exploitation, promoting fair distribution of resources, and advancing social justice through institutional change. Indeed, the consequence was not anticipated. Coercion prevailed instead of egalitarianism. Postmodern vies for retrieving the usurped space of the *Other* and to interrogate its submerged narrative, with a view to uphold it for articulation by the *Other*. More important is that the marginalized minoritarian must be able to speak for himself/herself as also for his community/collectivity and be a Gramscian Organic Intellectual. If this plethora of ideas is scrutinized in the context of Indian culture and heritage, then we begin to comprehend the significance of Life Writings by the downtrodden (dalits), in the centuries old hierarchized

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Indian Caste System, where an individual is born as a 'high' or 'low' caste. The shackles have been there for centuries, since people from these lower castes were unlettered and lacked awareness. It is imperative for them to become conscious/aware of their plight and strive to break the adamant of caste hierarchy.

Evolution of the Dalit Awareness and Empowerment in India from 1920 to date

Periyar's Self-Respect Movement (Inspires early resistance), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Legacy and ideological influence movement), Dalit Literature (sparks literary activism), Emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (Political presence strengthens rights enforcement), Constitutional & Legal safeguards (Access to education, visibility and voice), Dalit NGOs and digital platforms (Modern tools amplify awareness and voice).

Since 1920, Dalit awareness has grown gradually. In this long struggle, the role of dalit leaders and thinkers has been immense. There is no doubt that Ambedkar and Periyar played a pioneer role in asserting Dalit identity through activism. Periyar's 'Self-Respect Movement' (1920-1930) in Tamil Nadu defied Brahminical domination, religion and prevalent caste based social discrimination by paving the way for an ideology which promoted equality, Dravidian identity and social justice. Ambedkar founded All-India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISC) in 1942 for Dalit Rights. Ambedkar and Periyar emerged as the iconic figures of Dalit identity and awareness. In *Up Against Caste*, Debi Chatterjee highlights that as compared to Ambedkar, Periyar had more radical views regarding the question of gender equality and even challenged the "the institution of marriage" (155).

In *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault explains that there is such a nexus between knowledge and power that they co-exist and sustain together (51-52). Dalit authors repudiate mainstream writings, describing them as an amalgam of Foucauldian power/knowledge. With initiation of Dalit literary movement (1960) in Maharashtra, literature became a powerful medium of Dalit writers' agony, grief and dilemmas. In *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, Limbale states that work of a Dalit writer cannot be simply considered a form of fiction only, but it should be evaluated with balanced attitude and objective perspective because for the Dalit writer, his literature is his life, and he writes for humankind (339). The relationship of the artist to his work and the society becomes clear once one understands why it is essential for a Dalit writer to write. Dalit writers validate the fact that 'equality, freedom and solidarity' are the essence of their life and writing.

Kanshi Ram initiated political mobilization by founding Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984. Kanchan Chandra, in *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*, explains that although the BSP is the single chief political party devoted for the cause of Scheduled Castes and tribes, yet it has not been able to obtain equal support from the "SCs across Indian states" (23). This variation is seen due to certain reasons such as the disparity in opportunities given by BSP to its party members/followers to represent themselves, competition among Scheduled Caste elites, language and regional barriers, division of SC caste into further "sub-categories" (Chandra 25-26).

Legal Empowerment [Article 17 – Abolition of Untouchability, Article 15(4) and 15(5) – Protective Discrimination, Article 338 – National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act, 1989, Reservation Policies (Articles 16 (4), 330, 332] has also positively impacted the representation of SCs in politics, education, and administrative services of India. In modern India, contributions of some NGOs (*Navsaran Trust* and *Sakhi Trust*) and social media platforms (*Dalit Camera* and *The Dalit Voice*) for spreading awareness cannot be denied. In contemporary times, some media platforms (*Dalit History Month*, *Dalit Camera*, *Round Table India*, *Velivada*, *Voice of the Dalit*) have been giving visibility to dalit issues, literature and historical moments.

Persistent Challenges - Historical Displacement: Aryan Occupation & Dalit Subjugation

In *India's Silent Revolution*, French political scientist and Indologist Christophe Jaffrelot studied 'Adi Hindu Movement' of 20s and 30s in the last century. His narrative is that India was home to various tribes and castes. They were invaded, defeated and enslaved by warlike Aryans, who usurped their "land and wealth" (Jaffrelot 200-205). This implies that such tribes and castes were free in the past and were even possessed of good lineage, and the invading 'higher castes' took away what rightfully belongs to them. Czech Indologist Pavel Hons in his contributions to *Studia Orientalia Slovaca* (2020) informs that earlier on in the 19th and 20th century dalits wrote genealogies of their castes. This was done to "reconstruct their caste histories and rediscover their glorious past" (Hons 95). Here, they could bask in the glory of being once a part of kshatriyas. This also revealed their ambition of caste ascension. Sara Beth Hunt also arrives at a similar conclusion, in her study entitled *Hindi Dalit Literature* (26). Tiwari in "Inventing Caste History" (2004) also shares how various sources (colonial gazetteers, archaeological data, legends, maxims, sayings, music, literature in oral and written form, traditional celebrations, rituals, and memorials) validate the "caste histories" (Tiwari 218).

Anti Caste Sentiment

It must be noted that if the Indian caste system is centuries old, then the anti-caste sentiment has also been there for centuries now. Saroj Kumar Mahananda, in his study *Towards Dalit Historiography*, explains that the Indian society has very tenaciously nullified all efforts of democratization by devising an autocratic edifice of caste along with the modern system of advancement (Mahananda vii). Thus, contemporary writings by dalit writers are anti-status quo. They are exercises in theoretic and aimed at enlargement of the Indian domain vis-a-vis caste restrictions, elaborating upon the concept of democracy as one that has to be revisionist and inclusive, so as to enhance its representational nature. In "The Politics of Dalit Literature," Ravi Shankar Kumar presents a helpful explanation of the phenomenon. He explains that the gesture of representation in Dalit works accomplishes its "politicality" by displaying the prevalent precise partialities and disparities of the Indian societal framework (Kumar 57). Kumar asserts that novel arenas of perceptibility are opened when Dalits are brought into public sphere which is the more democratic extension and reinterpretation in its "form and working" (Kumar 57).

The Diversity within Dalit Communities: Local and Regional Variations

Although followers of collective Dalit movement have been trying meticulously to follow the philosophies of visionaries like Periyar and Ambedkar, yet there is dearth of sturdy union and harmony among the deprived and socially excluded who ironically are again rifted amidst numerous castes and sub-castes (Michael, *Dalits in Modern India* 128). Dalits are a conglomeration of diverse communities, home to local, regional disparities. Their different locales also determine their socio-economic status and politico-cultural underpinnings. Just as higher castes created hierarchies, in the similar manner dalits too have social divisions, wherein some groups are ostracized and looked down upon. Here, the case of manual scavengers may be cited. Such schisms have thwarted unity among them and hindered their cause. This also determines their political affiliations. British colonial masters comprehended this and treated them accordingly. This policy has been followed, by and large, by the Indian state, who join their cultural festivities to appease them and garner their votes, since their number is large, and a deciding factor in most electoral constituencies. These inter-intra divisions and contradictions have disabled them from attaining long term goals, as also to gain progress and prosperity.

Pathways to Dalit Empowerment

Jurgen Habermas in his essay "Theory of Communicative Action" discusses the importance of the participation of worthwhile intellectuals in the public sphere, where articulation and communicative expression are important for a civilization that is democratic by being participatory, since it brings awareness of issues that will gradually lead to their resolution through a consensual mode. Such rational public sphere debate is endowed with emancipatory potential. In "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Nancy Fraser opines that 'public sphere' is that aspect of civil society that moulds "public opinion" (75). Of course, such a sphere has to be accessible to all citizens to indulge in free and candid expression. Such a deliberation can meaningfully mediate between the citizens and the state, or between upper and lower castes, in the case of the Indian society. Fraser writes that everyone cannot access an equal opportunity to participate in a society which is divided into different hierarchical levels, yet some provisions can be approached that allow "contestation among a plurality of competing publics than by a single, comprehensive public sphere" (68). Herein lies the significance of dalit expression in various genres like autobiographies, poems, essays as well as online posts. Unity among downtrodden can be achieved by Dalit writings as these have the potential to generate massive influence on society and pave the way for awareness and revolution. Bama believes that literature can play an imperative role in building unity and solidarity by developing a collective consciousness among Dalits. She asserts that Dalit liberation needs revolt in the social and cultural domain as his personal experience authenticates the vast role played by "Dalit paintings, sculptures and literature" in that fight (*Karukku* 74).

Empowerment through Digital Activism

Dalit writers and activists have now-a-days become familiar and comfortable using newer online technologies. Moreover, these sites are democratic and there is no hierarchization or ostracizing. Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce is one such platform. Its advisor, Chandra Bhan Prasad is vocal about these social sites and uses it for articulation of Dalit cause, since he finds emancipatory potential in such expression. According to him, Twitter can be simple discovery for upper caste people, but for Dalits can use this as a tool for revolution as no hurdle can prevent them from entering here. "Nobody will filter your words here or chop your thumb for daring to write what you feel (qtd. in Lakshmi 2016, *The Washington Post*, 05.11.2016). Akin, in *Coming Out As Dalit*, Yashica Dutt explains the usefulness of expression by dalits on social media sites, among others. She says that with passage of time, Dalit social media and websites have become so powerful discourse that press and media are left with no option but to "broadcast it" (*Coming Out As Dalit* 172).

Dalit Autobiographies: Reclaiming History and Voice

Jennifer Jensen Wallach, in "Building a Bridge of Words," describes the genre of autobiography as a peculiar kind of writing which signifies both literature and history but it can be considered wholly "one or the other" (446). Wallach explains that autobiography can be considered the most effective medium of world's description because it emerges from diverse validated perceptions and assists historians to reconsider and rekindle past experiences. She explains that autobiography should not be considered a simple source material or personal narrative, rather it should be treasured as a deep historical vision based on interaction between thoughts and passions of the writer. Three key components of Wallach's analysis are: first, the full impact of past cannot be understood until all the dimensions (personal, social, political and psychological) of historical truth are recognized, second, factual reporting is unable to convey empirical or emotional aspects of historical reality. Third, a well-written memoir captures the tone, pressures, and individual narratives of a historical context through "literary techniques" (497).

Dalit literature like life-writing (autobiographies by Baby Kamble, Bama, Laxman Gaikwad, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Sharan Kumar Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki to name a few) is especially authentic, since it incorporates the corporeality of lived life and the candidness of individual experiences leading the writers to avidly believe in the emancipatory potential of such lived literature. Individual's chronicle is also community's chronicle. Debjani Ganguly, in "Pain, Personhood and the Collective," observes that the corpus of Dalit writing is an essential part of an unresolved conflict within the precincts of Indian democracy for the dynamics of diverse castes and its presence/absence in the society. With it also becomes visible the non-acceptance of the marginalized and falsified "civilizational claims of Indian nation-making while at the same time embracing its liberating potential" (Ganguly130). These narratives showed Dalits as oppressed, which according to Ganguly, challenged the projected joyful image of modern Indian democracy, and demanded for due inclusion and acknowledgement of dalits. Even political philosophers induce that the foundation of democracy is built on "absolute extension of personhood to everyone" (Ganguly 130). Sheoraj Singh Bechain, in *My Childhood on My Shoulders*, recalls many incidents from his childhood when he was discriminated because of his low caste; he was denied entry into courtyard, his supervisor gave him an additional duty of "daily massage" after knowing that he was Dalit (23).

Life writings of/by dalits are more complicated, since they are individual tales of the downtrodden, underprivileged, who pour unmitigated pain into their descriptions. These first-person narratives do embody the ambience and environment of their dwelling places and communities, amidst shared sufferings of exclusivity. Julia Swindells, in her book *The Uses of Autobiography*, writes that people take recluses in autobiography when they want to be heard, or they speak for themselves. It is the "assertion of a 'personal' voice which speaks beyond itself" (Swindells 7). Her comments are particularly pertinent to life writings by dalits. Here, the 'personal' voice of the 'powerless' expresses itself candidly and powerfully. It is their way of 'releasing' pain and loosening their constricting caste shackles. Ravi Shankar Kumar, in his paper "The Politics of Dalit Literature," elucidates that Dalit autobiographies are not merely a life record of lower caste people, but are the archetypal of the socially excluded communities and their shared suffering. There is a challenge in bringing equation between an account of "individual and a community," as both have some important fundamentals that do not fit specifically into the genre of traditional autobiography (Kumar 60).

Saroj Kumar Mahananda, in *Towards Dalit Historiography*, notices that acceptance of Dalit literature epitomizes a progress that arises across the entire nation, bridging all boundaries (regional/ linguistic/cultural/state) in what was earlier ignored and inexpressible. Literature is a kind of discussion about culture, community and history, but Dalit writing illustrates new place of history called "Dalit history" (Mahananda viii). Here, Wallach presents a word of caution. According to her, life writings by dalit authors may be read as cases of their community's history and the making of history at our own peril, since these writers have "... emotionally charged relationships... to their texts" (447). This implies that these autobiographies lack objectivity. They are overtly subjective, and hence of limited use as descriptions of the dalit community's chronicle. They are first- person narratives, and must be read between-the-lines to derive requisite historical information and insights.

Sharan Kumar Limbale says that authentic dalit writing is about "Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (18). Undeniably, he is speaking in the context of Marathi literature, but this is true of all dalit authors and their writings. Sudhakar Ghatak, in "Dalit Literature: My Own Experience," states that Dalit writing rejects the traditional literary categories of spiritual reflection, subjective narration, and modernism, rather, it appears with unvarnished, unpolished realism that is embedded in "social consciousness" and critique (5-7). It can be said that the visibility (at the level of writing and publication) of dalit literature from the last decade onwards of the last century has been one bright spot in the history of Indian literature to which many

Westerners have also avidly contributed. It has also led to the writing of history of dalit literature as it arose in the states, in vernacular languages, gradually leading to translation and publication in English, providing it much needed wider audience and publicity.

Om Prakash Valmiki, in autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, notices a transformation in dalit writings with the passage of the times. Valmiki observes that collective Dalit awareness, the real heritage of the Dalit movement, is dynamic and constantly changing its “forms with time” (50). Spiritual/Bhagti consciousness turned into the form of political disapproval, gradually it took the colour of mass movement of resistance and activism working through literary and digital platforms. This attests to the fact that modern dalit literature is abreast of the times. Such subtle understanding speaks for their comprehension of the politics of caste ridden society. Now, they understand the ruling class ideology spread with a purpose. Dalit authors now deliberate upon the place of their writings in history, and also the making of history. Mahananda in *Towards Dalit Historiography* (2017) deliberates upon these issues. He visualizes an emergence of new Dalit historiography that doesn't just document struggle and vehemence but rejoices “never-say-die spirit” in all cultures (31).

Conclusion

By a careful study of Dalit literature and its historiography, we can conclude that Dalits can reclaim their social inclusion, empowerment and identity by tracing their roots in cultural pride and social transformation. In *From a Shepherd Boy to an Intellectual*, Political theorist Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd seems to offer a clear roadmap for action when he invokes to take pride in caste-based occupations that have long been stigmatized: “Our lifestyle is more democratic than the Hindu way. Our gods are more just. Our knowledge systems are scientific and humane” (50). Revolt against elitism can be a powerful tool for social change as it will help to disempower the prevalent hierarchies based on caste, status, gender and creed. But there is need to revive the disparaged and obliterated Dalit rich cultural heritage and traditions preserved in literature, oral histories, music, festivals, and folk traditions. It is high time for Dalit communities to reclaim pride in their indigenous cultural wisdom and narratives of protest such as lived experiences of Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Baby Kamble. Education, self-representation and activism will help the coming generations to break the complex web of this deep-rooted systemic discrimination. Dalit identity needs to be affirmed through discernable and symbolic acts of self-assertion, like taking pride in reclaiming dignity, accepting Ambedkarite ideology and organizing Dalit literature festivals. Higher self-esteem is the pre-condition towards gaining respect from others. This may sound utopic today, in the short term, but surely this is the ultimate ambition, achievable in the future, provided there is sincere holistic involvement and candid cooperation.

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