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Author(s): Sarah Beth

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*Hindi Dalit Autobiography: an Exploration of Identity**

SARAH BETH

University of Cambridge

Abstract

Several powerful constructions of Dalit social and political identity are now circulating in very influential ways within the public sphere in North India, as various groups including both the Bahujan Samaj Party as well as Hindutva organisations compete to assert their influence over how these identities are defined, who they include, and what they mean. In this context, the rise of Hindi Dalit autobiographies as a source of Dalit cultural identity becomes especially important in North India, as they contest traditional conceptions of the Dalit community as ‘untouchables’ and attempt to re-inscribe Dalit identity in positive, self-assertive terms. However, Dalit autobiographies retain certain ambivalences, as the authors struggle to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status, and more recently, as their claims to represent all members of the Dalit community are challenged by Dalits of the younger generation.

It was Tau Sarupa’s daughter Romali’s wedding day. There was a lot of hustle-bustle in the locality. They had a feast for the *barat* and their own relatives for which they had killed a pig. I can still hear the painful shrieks of the pig until today... Everyone in the village and all the relatives were competing with each other to catch the pig. Catching a pig was also an art. Anyone could break their limbs... That pig at the wedding was not letting anyone catch it... Tau Sarupa was pleased with the effort of his pig. After some time, Tau said—“How can I marry my daughter to such weak people. All of you should be ashamed and drown yourself

The author is a Ph.D. Candidate and Temporary Lecturer at University of Cambridge, Faculty of Oriental Studies. email: sbw24@cam.ac.uk, address: Trinity Hall CB2 1TJ, UK.

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in a handful of water. That so many strong people are standing here and no one has caught the pig. Shame on you! And you call yourself Bhangis!¹

This quote from Hindi Dalit writer Surajpal Chauhan's autobiography reveals a conception of Dalit identity in sharp opposition to the traditional notion of this community as 'untouchables'.² As a socially-marginalized group, Dalits have struggled against the externally-ascribed 'untouchable' identity in an effort to redefine their caste community in positive and self-assertive terms, and the character Tau Sarupa's interpretation of what it means to be a Bhangi, associating it with both strength and skill, challenges traditional ways of defining Dalits in terms of their impurity, social inferiority, helplessness and unskilled labor.

The Dalit community has stepped squarely into the center of public debate in contemporary India, particularly since 1990 when the Mandal Commission extended the facilities of positive discrimination to a greater portion of low-caste groups (i.e. Other Backward Castes), stirring up violent protest and throwing a negative light onto the whole system of Scheduled Caste reservation. In addition, the electoral successes of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a self-proclaimed Dalit party, have further politicized Dalit identity and have fundamentally altered the political landscape of North India.

Thus, several powerful constructions of 'Dalit' social and political identity are now functioning in very influential ways within the public

¹ Surajpal Chauhan, *Tiraskrit* (Anubhav Prakashan: Gaziabad, 2002), pp. 21–22. All translations from Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* are my own. In the case of Omprakash Valmiki's *Tiraskrit*, I have, for the sake of simplicity and cross-referencing, used the excellent English translation by Arun Mukherjee published by Samya: Calcutta in 2003. The original reference is as follows: Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan* (Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi), 1997.

² There are a variety of appellations used for the group of what were originally called 'untouchable' castes. The Bhangi *jati* is an untouchable caste, which traditionally worked as sweepers. The community previously known as 'untouchables' is divided into numerous caste communities called *jatis*, often characterized by their traditional caste occupation such as the Bhangi sweepers or the leather-workers known in North India as Chamars or Jatavs. The term 'Dalit' is the most recent, a self-ascribed appellation meaning 'oppressed' or 'downtrodden' and inferring a certain political consciousness and assertion. In the mid-20th century, Gandhi promoted the name 'Harijan' meaning 'child of God' in an attempt to move away from the idea of 'untouchable' and promote a new, positive ascription to the community. However, the majority of the contemporary Dalit community now views this term with contempt, perceiving it as demeaning as well as apolitical. Finally, the colonial ascription 'Scheduled Caste' or SC is still very much in use as an official bureaucratic term and identity enacted in order to receive state benefits such as reservation facilities.

sphere in North India, with various groups including both the BSP as well as Hindutva organizations fighting to assert their influence over how these identities are defined, who they include, and what they mean. It is in this social environment that the rise of Dalit literature as the source of a Dalit cultural identity becomes especially important, particularly regarding its influence on the growing Dalit middle-class' self-perception of what it means to be Dalit outside of the political context. Furthermore, as Dalit writers enter the mainstream Hindi public sphere, publishing autobiographies through some of the biggest Hindi commercial publishers and writing articles in Hindi national dailies, this Dalit cultural identity is also increasingly informing the general North Indian urban middle class' imagination of Dalit identity. Dalit autobiographies' role in informing public perception of Dalit life has meant that the dramatic increase of this autobiographical literature in Hindi since the 1980s has in turn led to an important shift in the conceptualization of Dalit identity. While the first Dalit autobiographies in Hindi were translations from the vibrant stream of Marathi Dalit literature,³ Dalit writers in the Hindi belt began to write their own life-narratives from in the mid-1990s. The most influential of these include Mohandas Naimisharay's *Apne Apne Pinjare* (1995), Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), and Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* (2002).

The Dalit cultural identity expressed by Hindi Dalit writers, as we have seen from Surajpal Chauhan's quote above, contests traditional conceptions of the Dalit community as 'untouchables'. However, the description of catching the pig for the Dalit marriage feast is also significant for several other reasons. Functioning as a counter-symbol, the image of the pig is re-interpreted in Dalit autobiographical narratives from an object of filth and uncultured practices to a symbol of prosperity, celebration and most importantly, a separate and unique cultural tradition of the Dalit community. The pig is also a symbol which reveals certain tensions and ambivalences implicit in the Dalit identity expressed by the Dalit writers. For example, how does the

³ For more on Marathi Dalit literature and the Dalit Panthers see: Prahlad Gangaram Jogdad, *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra* (Kanak Publications: Delhi, 1991); Barbara Joshi (ed.), *Untouchable!: voices of the Dalit liberation movement* (Zed Books: London, 1986); Lata Murugkar, *The Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: a sociological appraisal* (Popular Prakashan: Bombay, 1991); Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: the anti-caste movement and the constructions of an Indian identity* (Orient Longman: New Delhi, 1995); Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics* (Sage Publications: New Delhi, 2001); Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Manohar: Delhi, 1992).

urban middle-class Dalit autobiographer feel about such events from his past and how does he relate to the majority of the rural Dalit community which continues to engage in such practices? As we shall see, it is not simply a process of straightforward identification, but rather one fraught with tensions as the autobiographer attempts to maintain links with the rural Dalit community while also distancing himself from practices which are perceived to be inappropriate to his urban middle class social position.

The rise of Dalit autobiography as new genre in Hindi has created an important literary space for the expression of Dalit cultural identity. For this reason, a study of Hindi Dalit autobiographies will lend clarity to how Dalit identity is being reformulated and reconceived in social and cultural terms by members of the Dalit community themselves. This paper will first look at the way Dalit autobiographers narrate the story of their lives, including what incidents or key spaces come to define their experiences as a member of this marginalized community. It then explores the formation of subjectivity, particularly the relationship between individual and communal identities. Returning to the image of the pig, Dalit writers attempt to redefine their identity in positive terms through Dalit cultural symbols, yet a deeper exploration of this process reveals deep-seated ambivalences in the Dalit writers' attempt to redefine the meaning of Dalit identity. In addition, the process of defining what it means to be Dalit inevitably leads to the construction of a certain normative Dalit identity, and therefore it becomes necessary to examine who is not represented by this particular formation of Dalit identity. Finally, the genre of Dalit autobiography has become increasingly important outside the literary sphere by giving previously marginalized Dalit writers access to the public sphere and thus, the capacity to debate and assert an influence over the public perception of their own Dalit identity.

The Dalit Autobiographical Narrative

Dalit autobiographies begin in the village, the location of the autobiographers' childhoods as well as a symbolic space of the most severe levels of traditional caste oppression and untouchability. From here, the narrative progresses through a series of painful experiences of caste discrimination punctuated by certain spatial shifts—from the childhood home in the Dalit *basti* to the village school, then to the

college in a nearby town, and finally to an urban government office. The broader move from the village to the city depicts an unexpected continuation of untouchability as the protagonist continues to face the 'ghost of caste'. It is this narration of continuing oppression which has inspired literary critics, both Dalit and non-Dalit alike, to define Dalit autobiographies as 'narratives of pain.'

Dalit autobiographies in Hindi begin by immediately establishing the social position of Dalits relative to the rest of Indian society through poignant metaphors. For instance, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* begins by describing the Dalit *basti* (locality), separated from the rest of the village by a filthy pond which villagers used as a sewer. In *Tiraskrit*, Surajpal Chauhan invokes the memory of his mother laboring at her caste occupation of cleaning the upper caste *mohalla* (neighborhood) in exchange for a few rotis (bread). The rotis are of such poor quality that they are painful even to chew, and the delicious wheat rotis enjoyed by the upper castes become a startling and symbolic contrast to the *matar* (pea flour) rotis passed off to the lower castes in exchange for their hard labor.

The narrative continues with the protagonist's progression through school and is punctuated by incidences of caste discrimination and violence inflicted on the Dalit child by his teachers and classmates. The period of childhood is also interspersed with events of social significance for the Dalit community—Valmiki's narrative emphasizes experiences of collecting *joothan* (leftovers) from the upper castes in the village or the rituals of *bhakti* healers, while Chauhan's autobiography describes Dalit weddings and the experience of killing a pig for the marriage feast as well as the laborious caste occupation of sweeping the upper caste *mohalla*. Through these various reflections on Dalit socio-cultural life, the Dalit community is not only portrayed as an oppressed group, but is imbued with new favorable characteristics such as hardworking, industrious, economical, skilled, playful, even joyous and festive. As one of the key spaces in the Dalit autobiography, the school functions as a transitional space between childhood in the village, portrayed as a place of unchanging oppression and minimal opportunity, and adulthood in the town where there is the possibility of a government job and the hope of moving beyond one's caste identity through urban anonymity and modernity. Hence, while the first part of the narrative is largely driven by the protagonist's arduous progress through school, the second half of the narrative tends to focus on the workplace, raising new issues of reservation and casteism in the hiring or transferring of employees.

Urban spaces, particularly the office, also invoke the new experience of anonymity, placing the Dalit writer in a position of having to decide whether to hide or reveal his caste identity. Chauhan's narrative describes this experience thus: "I gained the appreciation of the administration managers. They both often patted me on the back. It felt very good getting this praise . . . Everything was going well until one day a carpenter worker Bir Singh disclosed my secret in front of Mathur [the office manager] . . . S.S. Mathur was shocked to know my caste. His behavior towards me now began to change. In the office work, he began to make obstacles in my path. Knowing that I was the son of a cleaner, he began to doubt my integrity. He began to watch me like a hawk to catch me doing something wrong".⁴ Chauhan also relates an incident in which there was confusion over the ordering of a desk and he is blamed through no fault of his own. On this occasion, he was further accused of seeking the support of another high ranking Dalit officer. The incident ends with Chauhan's transfer from the office, and his discovery that the transfer order was signed by the very same high-ranking Dalit officer. This common urban experience of attempting to hide one's Dalit identity or to 'pass' as upper caste and the consequences of being discovered throws an interesting light on the process of self-assertion. Rather than proudly proclaiming one's Dalit identity, at times the individual is compelled to hide his/her caste identity. Autobiographical narrative, unlike political discourse or critical debate, is uniquely able to reveal, for example, the tensions between the contemporary practice of caste discrimination at the office as well as the obstacles to forming relationships with other Dalit colleagues in modern secular spaces of the state, and thus the narrative brings out the contradictions implicit in the claim that the secular state is blind to caste.

Throughout the autobiography, the narrator's voice continually cuts into the narrative, interpreting past events in light of the author's present political consciousness. Obstacles in the narrative such as difficulty in school or disagreements between friends are interpreted almost solely as the result of caste discrimination, while progress is conceived as struggling against this continuing practice of untouchability. Amongst the narrative strands of progress and struggle, the autobiographer continues to grapple with the question of Dalit identity. What does it mean to be Dalit? Is the experience of caste

⁴ Chauhan 2002, pp. 54–6.

discrimination an adequate basis on which to imagine Dalit identity? Should Dalit identity incorporate other, more positive characteristics, and if so, what should these be?

Subjectivity and the Construction of Dalit Identity

A closer look at the construction of Dalit identity in Dalit autobiographies reveal the complex ways Dalit writers have tried to address these questions. Central to these discussions of Dalit identity is the relationship of the individual and the larger community. Since Dalit autobiographies are meant to be the life-story of an ordinary Dalit, to symbolically represent the experiences of every Dalit, the Dalit protagonist is established as the representative of the Dalit community and Dalit identity.

Who, then, is the protagonist of Dalit autobiographies? Senior Hindi scholar, Manager Pandey goes as far as to claim that, "if it is an autobiography, then it is not of an individual but of a community. Putting community in place of the individual . . . the past and present of the community itself becomes the plot of the story."⁵ Subjectivity is certainly complicated by this deep connection between the individual and communal self, and this relationship provides the Dalit individual with a sense of power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. However, I would argue that both Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* give a much more complex picture of Dalit subjectivity where the protagonist ('I') and the Dalit community ('We') are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning, yet without the loss, as Manager Pandey would claim, of either the individual or the community.

The protagonist's perception of his own identity is closely bound to that of his caste community. He faces personal discrimination due to his caste identity and is also deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits with whom he identifies to such a great extent that he seems to experience their pain himself. The 'communal' experience of the pain of untouchability is revealed as Valmiki recalls an instance when the young men in the Dalit *basti* refused to do *begari* (unpaid labor) and the police were called in at the behest of the upper castes. "Those who had been captured from the *basti* were being made to

⁵ See Manager Pandey's preface to the Hindi translation of Baby Kamble's *Jivan Hamara*, Lalita Asthana (transl) (Kitab Ghar: Delhi, 1995).

stand like a rooster, a very painful crouched-up position. Moreover, they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. . . . The women and children of the *basti* were standing in the lane and crying loudly. . . . My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. Then an adolescent, a scratch had appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still.”⁶ For Dalits in the *basti*, it is thus not only a time of communal pain and mourning but an experience which permanently scars the individual. Though he was not beaten himself, Valmiki bears the scars of that pain into adulthood. Further connection between the individual and community is revealed as Valmiki’s personal success in education is also interpreted as a success for the entire Dalit community. “When the high school results were announced in the paper, I was very happy to see my name. Pitaji had invited the whole *basti* to a feast to celebrate my results. The *basti* wore a festive look that day. It was the first time someone from our *basti* had passed high school.”⁷ Valmiki’s father repeats that it is Valmiki’s *personal* responsibility to ‘improve his caste’ through his individual achievements. Furthermore, Valmiki’s own progress as an individual—options that are open to him and obstacles that come in his way—is largely affected by the progress of the Dalit movement as a whole. Valmiki writes, “Gandhiji’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government school had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor.”⁸ Thus, Valmiki’s entrance into the school system is both aided by steps made in an early Dalit assertion movement as well as restricted by the movement’s own limited successes.

The pain of caste discrimination plays a very important role as the initial basis of Dalit identity. Whether experienced as humiliation, as exclusion, or as actual physical violence, the various descriptions of pain serve a similar purpose in the narrative to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability, which is otherwise ignored in public discourse. For the Dalit audience of these autobiographies, by exposing the continuation of untouchability, pain becomes a uniting phenomenon. As Valmiki writes, ‘Dalit readers had

⁶ Valmiki 1997, p. 38.

⁷ Valmiki 1997, p. 59.

⁸ Valmiki 1997, p. 2.

seen their own pain in those pages of mine,' and Chauhan comments, 'I realized that only those who have also felt the pain of Dalits can understand.' However, the pain of caste discrimination is meant to both shock and shame the non-Dalit reader in order to inspire change, as well as to invoke a sense of constitutional justice and social responsibility.⁹

Yet although the individual subject of the Dalit autobiography is portrayed as inseparable from the Dalit community, his individuality is not wholly stifled. Valmiki, for instance, is still able to assert his own personal agency in opposition to the traditions of his community during his marriage by rejecting the community-chosen bride and instead marrying the girl of his own choice, and that too without conforming to the community's traditions during the marriage ceremony at the expense of offending many members of his family.¹⁰ In *Joothan*, the protagonist's individuality is additionally valued in the face of the upper castes who see him only as a faceless member of his community. Valmiki writes, "They did not call us by our names. If a person was older, then he would be called 'Oe Chuhre'. If the person was younger or of the same age, 'Abey Chuhre' was used."¹¹ A similar preoccupation with individuals' names can be seen in *Tiraskrit*. As Chauhan recalls, "It was the customary practice of the village savarns to call us by altered and spoiled names. My Bhupsingh Chacha was Bhopu, Svarup Singh Tau was Sarupa, my Chachi Radha Devi was Radhiya and Kiran was Kinno. And my father, Rohan Lal was called Rona. When these savarns didn't like our good names, well then why would they like us?"¹² The emphasis on the importance of one's individual 'good' name shows a continuation of individuality within Dalit subjectivity. When Valmiki writes, "Everyone called my mother *Khajooriwali* ("seller of dates"). Perhaps she [Fauza Tyagi's mother] too had forgotten her real name,"¹³ he is asserting that his mother has a 'real name', an individual identity apart from both her caste and her daily occupation. This element of individuality plays an important role in the formation of a new, self-assertive Dalit identity, as it contests the perceived upper-caste assumption that, as members of a socially inferior community, Dalits are all the same in their illiteracy, their

⁹ The practice of untouchability was outlawed in the Constitution of India in 1950.

¹⁰ Valmiki 1997, p. 103.

¹¹ Valmiki 1997, p. 2.

¹² Chauhan 2002, p. 41.

¹³ Valmiki 1997, p. 58.

impure and uncultured social practices etc. By reinforcing a certain presence of individuality, emotional interiority and intellectual life, Dalits claim their status as equal human beings without threatening their simultaneous claims to a communal cultural identity.

Dalit Cultural Symbols: Ambivalence in the Process of Renaming

The process of imagining a new Dalit cultural identity involves a move beyond the negative tones of pain and suffering reminiscent of the traditional 'untouchable' identity and toward an exploration of positive characteristics of Dalit identity. This involves a complex process of 'renaming'—imbuing old objects or even socio-cultural practices with new meaning. However, Dalit writers express a certain ambivalence with this process as they attempt to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status. In his Hindi Dalit autobiography *Tiraskrit*, Surajpal Chauhan describes the capturing and killing of a pig for a marriage celebration. He relates the festive atmosphere of the *mohalla* (neighborhood), depicting the process of catching the pig as a game with a cheering crowd. Despite interruptions by the shrieks of the pig and the wailing of Chauhan's Aunt Chameli (who had raised the pig), celebrations resume as the children gather to watch the cutting of the meat, snack on pieces of pig's skin, and catch the bladder which could be blown up as a balloon and used as a toy. He writes, "While cutting the meat into small pieces, the kids were given the fatty part of the pig's skin known as 'tika'. All the kids of the village used to chew those pieces. My uncle Guffan was an expert in this cutting process. He used to give me more 'tika' than the other kids whenever he got the chance, and I used to relish them."¹⁴ He also emphasizes the skill necessary to catch the pig and the expertise needed to carve the meat without puncturing the organs.

Through these descriptions, Chauhan is able to take an event which would ordinarily be interpreted as evidence of uncultured and vulgar activities and reinterpret it as an act of celebration and prosperity.

Omprakash Valmiki also associates the pig with Dalit cultural life in his autobiography *Joothan*. He writes, "Pigs were a very important

¹⁴ Chauhan 2002, pp. 26–27.

part of our lives. In sickness or in health, in life or in death, in wedding ceremonies, pigs played an important role in all of them. Even our religious ceremonies were incomplete without pigs. The pigs rooting in the compound were not the symbols of dirt to us but of prosperity and so they are today."¹⁵ Here too, the pig is reinterpreted as a positive symbol, signifying celebration, a sense of tradition and a state of plenty in the midst of habitual poverty and want. Through the example of the pig, both Dalit autobiographers attempt to give alternative meanings to their community's social traditions. They assert that Dalit society is not inferior, as is claimed by the upper castes, but has its own traditions and customs which are full of joy, skillful play, and inventiveness despite extreme exploitation and poverty.

The political significance of renaming an object and thus redefining its inherent meaning should not be underestimated. It is not simply a literary exercise, a play with words within the Dalit autobiography, but a real challenge to a dominant discourse which continues to define Dalits, like pigs, as polluting and socially inferior. Janice Morgan has argued that, "to be marginalized to a dominant culture is also to have had little or no say in the construction of one's socially acknowledged identity."¹⁶ The struggle against the socially dominant 'untouchable' identity is a fundamental battle for Dalit writers, as they attempt to undermine old definitions with new imaginations, a process Margo Perkins has called 'rewriting the self.' The process of renaming the pig 'prosperity' rather than 'filth' represents a renegotiation of power-relations, which emphasizes the right to name objects and culminates in the right to name and thus define the self. Therefore, through their life-narratives Dalit writers are able not only to describe the pain of caste discrimination, but also reassert control over the right to conceptualize their own identity beyond the experience of common oppression and suffering.

However, while Dalit autobiographies invoke Dalit cultural symbols such as the pig in an attempt to conceptualize Dalit identity beyond the experience of pain and caste oppression, the autobiographers themselves express a certain ambivalent vis-à-vis these symbols. In *Tiraskrit*, even in the midst of his festive description of catching the pig for the marriage feast, Chauhan's narrative voice distances him from these past events. He writes, "Today, remembering those days

¹⁵ Valmiki 1997, p. 13.

¹⁶ Quoted from Margo Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: three Black Women of the Sixties* (University of Mississippi Press: Jackson, 2000). p. 30.

fills me with hate. Eating raw pig's meat is such an uncivilized and repulsive thing. Our hands and mouths used to be covered with fat. A lot of flies used to swarm around my face and hands. Yuk! Thinking about it now makes me nauseous."¹⁷ This second re-interpretation of the pig's meat from delicious food to a symbol of uncultured behavior emphasizes the oppressive conditions under which Dalits are forced to live (a meaning still very different from the upper caste interpretation of inherent inferiority). Valmiki also extols the pig as a symbol of prosperity integral to Dalit cultural practices, yet he himself rejects worshipping the pig at his own marriage ceremony, much to his father's clear consternation. Later, in his description of the significance of the pig to Dalit cultural life, Valmiki writes, "Yes, the educated among us, who are still very minute in percentage, have separated themselves from these conventions. It is not because of a reformist perspective but because of their inferiority complex that they have done so."¹⁸ While Valmiki reinforces the important value the pig holds for Dalit cultural traditions, this unusual statement raises several questions regarding the ambiguous relationship members of the Dalit middle class experience vis-à-vis the majority of the rural and poor Dalit community. Is this the inevitable condition of Dalits who have left their village communities? Is Valmiki also speaking about himself? Or is it only certain 'educated' Dalits lacking in a particular political consciousness who separate themselves from these Dalit cultural traditions?

In addition, not all so-called 'traditional' socio-cultural practices of the Dalit community are eagerly embraced by the Dalit autobiographers. Chauhan, for instance, is a severe critic of Dalit *bhakt* healers. He recalls, "When my ma did not get better from the *bhakts*, then my father took her to Chara town to the rural doctors, but it was too late. Ma's illness became very dangerous. The Bhangi *bhakts* swallowed my mother's life with the meat of pigs and bottles of wine" [used as payment for their services].¹⁹ Valmiki describes, "When anybody got sick in the basti, instead of treating them with medicine, people tried things like getting rid of the evil spirit that was deemed to be the cause by tying threads, talismans, spells, and so on. All the ceremonies were performed at night. When the disease was prolonged or got serious, then *puchha* or exorcism would be performed by calling

¹⁷ Chauhan 2002, p. 27.

¹⁸ Valmiki 1997, p. 13.

¹⁹ Chauhan 2002, p. 10.

a *bhagat*, a kind of sorcerer, who would be accompanied by a drummer who played the *dholak*, and two or three singers.”²⁰ After Valmiki’s own experience with the *bhakts*, he writes, “My opinion about all these things being a fraud had been further strengthened. Who knows how many people these *bhagats* had killed. Two of my brothers had died without any proper treatment or medication . . . Every year a couple of deaths occurred in the *basti* in this way. Even then people’s faith in these gods and *bhagats* did not diminish.”²¹

Work is an unavoidable commonality among Dalits due to traditional caste occupations, which are both extremely exploitative and are often considered to be at the root of their low social status. As with other aspects of Dalit identity, Dalit autobiographers are also forced to grapple with the reality and meaning of hereditary caste occupations. In his book *Why I am not a Hindu*, Dalit writer Kancha Ilaiah interprets Dalit work in a positive light, redefining their physical labor as creative, productive and life-enhancing—the agricultural laborer grows food, the leather worker makes shoes and bags etc.—while he deems upper-caste work to be consuming, exploitative and unproductive. However, the narratives of Hindi Dalit autobiographers, who previously engaged in these hereditary jobs but have since entered middle-class employment express important tensions in regard to these occupations. While extolling the arduous nature, strength and creative productivity that characterizes Dalit work, Dalit writers also condemn these caste-based jobs as a source of exploitation and oppression. Chauhan, for example, writes, “In today’s times will any Brahmin agree to work as a cleaner? Never. Yes, if there are wages of Rs. 1000 instead of Rs. 20–25, then perhaps the Brahmins and so-called savarns of this country will be prepared to do this work of cleaning. There is both economic and social exploitation of Dalits.”²² Yet Dalits continue to fight over reserved positions in these traditional and exploitative occupations.²³ Chauhan claims that the security of these reserved jobs is a curse because this security

²⁰ Valmiki 1997, p. 40.

²¹ Valmiki 1997, p. 43.

²² Chauhan 2002, p. 52.

²³ Vijay Prashad’s work on the Bhangi *jati* shows how this community became hereditary sweepers for the Delhi Municipal Government, and since a percentage of these positions as sweepers were reserved for Scheduled Castes, members of the Bhangi community have fiercely competed with members of other Dalit communities to maintain a monopoly on these jobs. Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: a social history of a Dalit community* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000).

represses the urgent desire for struggle and the capacity for rising. He explains, "Whenever a bit of problem comes in education, Bhangis accept the work of sweeping. In childhood, this thing was set in their minds, that if there is a lack of work, then we can always get work sweeping. For the people of my society, this work is their birth-right. It is obvious that in this situation, birth-right becomes birth-duty."²⁴ Yet the fact that the majority of Dalits continue to work in their caste occupations means that Dalit autobiographers do not devalue the labor these occupations involve. Consequently, they must balance a fine line between condemning exploitation and rejecting the idea of certain occupations being hereditary on the basis of caste, while at the same time, continuing to show solidarity with the rest of the community involved in this work.

What is especially important about this communal identity is its newness. The identity put forth in Hindi Dalit autobiographies is not the community *jati* identity, nor is it the traditional 'untouchable' identity. It is neither the Dalit identity propagated by the BSP, nor is it linked to the appropriative claim by Hindutva forces that Dalit identity is a Hindu one. It is a new cultural identity, where a community is originally formed along the lines of untouchability and discrimination, but moves beyond that initial commonality of oppression and imagines itself in terms of a new political consciousness and a re-embracing of certain Dalit cultural symbols. It is a community identity, which must be forged out of old scheduled caste *jati* identities—one which must be imagined anew. However, re-imagining Dalit identity involves an ambiguous process of invoking Dalit cultural symbols and rejecting other customs deemed to be holding the Dalit community back and preventing Dalits from achieving political consciousness. These tensions in the narrative reveal the complex position of the middle-class Dalit writer in attempting to represent the experience of the rural Dalit poor and shows that it is not always easy to return to one's traditions. Incidents of self-criticism arise as ruptures in the text due to the Dalit autobiographers' awareness of his non-Dalit audience and the resulting difficulties in engaging in self-criticism as a member of a socially oppressed group. Consequently, Hindi Dalit autobiographies retain various tensions in their expression of Dalit identity, revealing that Dalit writers themselves are still in the process

²⁴ Chauhan 2002, p. 52.

of exploring what it means to be Dalit outside of the experience of caste discrimination.

A Normative Dalit Identity: Who is Still Marginalized?

Reader-responses have shown how important these autobiographies have been to their Dalit audience as reflections of common Dalit life-experiences. For instance, after Valmiki's short autobiographical essay was published in a 1995 journal he attests that, "responses came even from far-flung rural areas. The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine. They all desired that I write about my experiences in more detail."²⁵ However, there have been other members of the Dalit community who have expressed dissatisfaction with the efforts to create a single, representative Dalit identity. Kavindra Indu, a Dalit postgraduate student of Hindi at Jawaharlal Nehru University writes, "Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan are both members of the Bhangi community, but there is a big difference between the autobiographies of each. So we should recognize that only being Dalit, a person's experience is not the same. Feelings can be different, and they are."²⁶

Indu's comment raises questions regarding the inevitable normativization in the process of identity formation. While Dalit autobiographies explore what it means to be Dalit in Indian society today, certain boundaries also exist in the conceptualization of that Dalit identity. Since all individuals hold multiple identities including class, caste, gender, occupational, regional, religious etc., no one individual can represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community he claims to represent. Hence, while discussing the 'representative' nature of the subject in Dalit autobiographies, it becomes important to look closely at instances in which the subject 'I' has difficulty representing the 'We', either of another Dalit individual or the Dalit community, particularly in terms of intersecting class, *jati*, and gender identities.

Tension, for instance, often arises between the autobiographer's lower-caste and middle-class identities. Since Dalit autobiographies conceptualize Dalit identity in terms of the story's protagonist,

²⁵ Valmiki 1997, vii.

²⁶ Kavindra Indu, 'Aatmalochna ki ek koshish' (An attempt at self-criticism) in *Apeksha* July–September 2003.

claiming that the experiences of this individual Dalit is representative of the experiences of the entire Dalit community, the disparity between the autobiographer's membership in the urban middle class and the experiences of the vast majority of the poor, rural Dalit community come into sharp relief. The autobiographers themselves clearly sense this tension as they attempt to negotiate between their various individual identities. Having begun their life in one of the poorest and most marginalized communities in rural India, these Dalit writers struggled against all odds to gain an education and a better future for themselves outside the confines of the village. The autobiographical narrative expresses this aspiration by juxtaposing descriptions of the village and the city, an opposition which the autobiographer first elaborates and upholds, then eventually watches disintegrate in his hands as caste oppression continues in the city. The village is continually described as the site of the most base forms of caste oppression, where everyone's caste identity is openly acknowledged and thus caste oppression is inescapable. It is a place where an individual's future is pre-determined on the basis of this caste identity. In the village, physical violence against Dalits is the norm, and denying SCs the opportunities of education not only customary but viewed as the natural order. At the beginning of the autobiography, the Dalit protagonist views the city as a space of modernity, anonymity and an escape from caste. However, the idea of 'progress' from the superstitious village to the enlightened and modern city bursts apart towards the end of the narrative, as the Dalit protagonist continues to face caste discrimination despite his educational achievements, his high government post, and his new socio-economic position in the urban middle class. Thus, the Dalit autobiographers have written their life story under a strong sense of disillusionment. Having escaped the confines of the village, availed of reservation and experienced a rise in class status, they continue to experience similar instances of caste discrimination. As Valmiki recalls, "[Pitaji] kept saying repeatedly, 'At last you have escaped caste.' But what he didn't know till the day he died is that caste follows one right up to one's death."²⁷

While Dalit writers continue to feel that they are defined almost solely by their caste identity, they also feel a strong sense of alienation from their caste community which they left behind in the village. Valmiki, for instance, notes, "As my studies advanced, I began to lose

²⁷ Valmiki 1997, pp. 77–8.

touch with those companions of my age group in the neighborhood who did not go to school."²⁸ Valmiki also discusses his sense of alienation from his family as he moved farther and farther away from his natal home. When he was given the opportunity for more training at an ordnance factory in Madhya Pradesh, Valmiki describes his family's reaction. "Ma was concerned about where was I going to live, what would I eat. What sort of language did the people of Jabalpur speak . . . Jabalpur was a foreign country for all the members of my family."²⁹ Looking back on his parents' death, Valmiki writes, "I hadn't been granted the privilege to carry Ma's and Pitaji's biers. He whom they had struggled so hard to make something of had become so distanced from them. It is a grief that I hide deep inside my heart."³⁰ The process of narrating one's life-story in terms of caste identity perhaps also stems from the Dalit autobiographers' desire to repair this feeling of alienation and allows him to re-establish the link between himself and the rest of his Dalit community.

This in turn shows the political significance of imagining a new Dalit identity under which Dalit writers are able to unite with the larger Dalit community and together contest the continued practice of untouchability. Dalit autobiographers blur the tension between these two conflicting caste and class identities, first through an emphasis on their childhood memory of the rural Dalit experience. Over half of Dalit autobiographical narratives are taken up by childhood memory and experiences in the village. Dalit writers also emphasize their continuing experience of caste oppression, even in modern urban spaces such as government offices.

The influence of *jati* identity also makes the process of imagining a unified Dalit identity problematic. While many members of the Chamar community have been able to avail of the economic and social benefits of reservation, for example, the Bhangi community remains largely poor, a marginalized group within Dalits. Thus, individuals from the Bhangi community often accuse Chamars of discriminating against them as well as of monopolizing the benefits reserved for SCs. The social tensions between the Bhangi and Chamar *jatis* in the Dalit community are an important focus of *Tiraskrit*, though they remain largely unaddressed in *Joothan*, despite the fact that both autobiographers are from the Bhangi community. In his

²⁸ Valmiki 1997, p. 17.

²⁹ Valmiki 1997, p. 81.

³⁰ Valmiki 1997, p. 111.

autobiography, Chauhan makes the startling claim that Dalits, too, are divided along caste lines. In an important sequel to Chauhan's experience in 1987 when he faced severe discrimination by a zamindar at the village well. Chauhan returns again to the village in 1990 with his family to attend the wedding of his cousin Rakesh. Instead of taking the long journey from the bus stop to the village on foot, Chauhan decides to hire a tonga, and on the way, picks up a couple who, exhausted from the heat, are also traveling to the same village. Chauhan and his wife fall into easy conversation with the couple, but after the man discovers who Chauhan is going to visit (and thus discerns his caste identity) he angrily calls for the tonga driver to stop, and he and his wife quickly get off. For a while, Chauhan feels confused, but when the Muslim tonga driver reveals the caste identity of the man, Chauhan is shocked. The man was a Chamar. Chauhan relates, "Hearing the driver's words I was stunned. 'Brahmanism in Dalits too!' Six years ago we had faced the old Thakur and knowing my caste, he was shocked. Now I had faced insult by the son of Bhudeva of the same Dalit community."³¹ Within the narrative, Chauhan occasionally associates himself with the 'Bhangi' community in opposition to the Chamar community. Yet why does Valmiki's autobiography gloss over inter-jati conflict between the Chamar and Bhangi communities? One likely explanation is that a Dalit autobiography is understood to be part of a larger movement of Dalit assertion, and in this context, focusing on the divisions within the Dalit community is often perceived as counter-productive to the larger movement and thus is often silenced within the Dalit autobiographical narrative. Because he deviates from this stance, Chauhan concedes that his autobiography has made many Dalit writers uncomfortable. In his preface, he writes, "I have been additionally accused of spreading casteism in Hindi Dalit writing."³²

Finally, if we are to understand Dalit autobiographies to be representative life-stories of the Dalit community, then the 'We' meaning 'all Dalits' appears a decidedly masculine identity. Dalit women are, in fact, almost entirely absent from these texts. When they do appear, they are often portrayed without personal agency. One example is the case of Valmiki's wife Chanda. Chanda only appears for brief moments in the narrative, once when she responds to Valmiki's marriage

³¹ Chauhan. 2002, p. 73.

³² Chauhan. 2002, p. 7.

proposal by asking, 'you're not joking, are you?' and again when Valmiki condemns Chanda for attempting to hide her caste identity and refusing to embrace the caste-denotative surname 'Valmiki'. While interpreting this as an act of submission or weakness, he gives us no insight into his wife's own perspective or her own struggles against caste discrimination which are perhaps radically different to those faced by her husband. In other instances, women are portrayed in the autobiographies almost as an intrusion into the main narrative of the text. For example, in *Tiraskrit*, the incident where Chauhan and his wife face such shocking discrimination from the village zamindar becomes a significant instance where Chauhan's wife powerfully asserts her own self-worth. Yet in this instance her agency and, more specifically, her emotionality are portrayed as transgressive rather than politically assertive, and Chauhan's response is to quickly silence her outburst.

Neither of the Dalit autobiographical narratives discussed in this essay question the gender-bias in their reformulation of Dalit identity.³³ Thus, Hindi Dalit autobiographers' descriptions of the typical Dalit lived-experience and Dalit cultural symbols and traditions have contributed to a certain normativization of Dalit identity. The Dalit cultural identity expressed in these narratives is, firstly, influenced by the middle-class perspectives and aims of the autobiographers. Because these are narratives written by Dalits who left the village, successfully pursued higher education and now work in urban offices, their portrayal of the meaning of progress and success is colored by these experiences. For instance, the ability to bypass inter-*jati* tensions among Dalits is perhaps only possible for a Dalit of the urban middle-class. Furthermore, from the perspective of gender, the Dalit cultural identity projected by these texts seems limited. The blatant silence of the Dalit woman's voice raises new questions about the experiences in being both a Dalit and a woman but gives the reader little with which to answer them. Thus, within the Dalit autobiographers' imagination of Dalit identity, there remain certain boundaries which challenge the autobiographer's ability to be wholly representative and thus to define the identity of all Dalits.

³³ This is less true of Marathi Dalit autobiographies where writers have over time begun to directly address questions of gender.

Autobiography and Discourses of Oppression

There have been many efforts at comparison between Dalit autobiography and the autobiographies of other socially oppressed groups such as African-Americans or women. The Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra, which was most active during the 1970s and early 1980s, took the American Black Panthers as their model, naming their movement the Dalit Panthers and adopting the autobiographical form from the vibrant African-American literary movement. Marathi Dalit writer, Raosaheb Kasbe's asserts, "Following the emergence of Dalit literature, we were introduced to the literature of the Blacks. It was Principal Waghmare and Dr. Wankhade who painstakingly acquainted us with this literature through the periodical *Asmitadarsha*. Black literature began to influence our short-stories and poetry and we began claiming relationship with the literature of the Blacks."³⁴ Dalit writers have frequently compared their work to African-American literature and several articles have come out on the subject including Janardan Waghmare's 'Black Literature and Dalit Literature,'³⁵ Raosaheb Kasbe 'Some Issues Before Dalit Literature'³⁶ and Mohandas Naimisharay's English work *Caste and Race* comparing Ambedkar and Martin Luther King.³⁷ However, understanding the relationship between these two literary movements involves not only tracing the historical influence black literature had on Dalit writers, but also illuminates the theoretical possibilities of considering Dalit literature in the context of other discourses of oppression.

³⁴ See Raosaheb Kasbe. "Some issues before Dalit Literature" in Arjun Dangle, "Dalit literature: Past, Present and Future" in A. Dangle (ed) *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Orient Longman: Bombay, 1992) p. 292. Eleanor Zelliot, who originally claimed that "there seems . . . to be no imitation of Black literature and its two strongest fields, autobiography and drama, are not yet developed in Dalit literature," adds in an addendum, "In Maharashtra, the very areas which I reported little progress have become among the most active." She does not comment in this addendum whether this is a result of the influence of Black literature, but certainly this is a possibility. See Eleanor Zelliot *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. (Manohar: Delhi, 1992), p. 281, addendum p. 332.

³⁵ Janardan Waghmare, 'Black Literature and Dalit Literature' in Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread: translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Orient Longman: Bombay, 1992).

³⁶ Raosaheb Kasbe, 'Some Issues Before Dalit Literature' in Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread*.

³⁷ Mohandas Naimisharay. *Caste and Race: Comparative Study of BR Ambedkar and Martin Luther King* (Rawat Publications: New Delhi, 2003).

Stephen Butterfield has written, "The 'self' of black autobiography... is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members... In black autobiography, the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition."³⁸ As we have seen with Dalit autobiography, the complex relationship between the individual protagonist and the larger community is a way both Dalits and American blacks have used autobiography as a means of making a broader political statement by emphasizing their marginalized identity position in relation to the dominant society.³⁹ And just as Valerie Smith has claimed that, "Black American writing, arising as it does from an experience alien to mainstream American culture, has tended by and large to articulate the writer's experience of *de jure* or *de facto* subordination,"⁴⁰ we have seen how the narrative strategies of Hindi Dalit autobiographies serve to expose continuing caste discrimination and Dalit oppression.

However, considering Dalit autobiography in relation to the autobiographical literature of other marginalized communities raises important questions regarding to what extent we can compare categories of caste and race. I would argue that in the context of wider discourses of oppression, the comparison is both valid and important in showing how many marginalized groups are first given access to the larger literary sphere and attain a certain narrative authority by writing their life-stories. The comparison has also shown how autobiographies may act as a powerful social critique and an act of political resistance for marginalized communities in their own right. However, as far as descriptive understanding of the texts including aesthetics, narrative strategies etc., Dalit autobiographies are unique expressions of a particular kind of social oppression specifically located in the Indian caste system. Autobiographies of

³⁸ Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, Mass., 1974), p. 3.

³⁹ Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999), p. 51. For more on autobiographies of marginalized groups see: Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America*; Robert Folkenflik (ed.), *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, Calif., 1993); Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (University of Indiana Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 1991); Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

⁴⁰ Valerie Smith, 1987, p. 6.

African-Americans and Dalits vastly differ in their descriptions of the experience of 'passing' (as white or upper-caste), which are liminal (although important) to the African-American experience but fundamental to the common Dalit experience of moving from the village to the city. Themes of physical violence including the black experience of 'lynching', the female experience of sexual exploitation, and the Dalits' experience of being beaten at school or by the upper-castes must all be considered separately. Finally, the aesthetics of the body, which Leigh Gilmore rightly points out is often absent from textual analyses, is fundamental to the *habitus* of women, African-American and Dalit autobiographies.⁴¹ For instance, the obsession with physicality in Black autobiographies—being 'too black' or having what is considered 'negroid' facial features—is quite distinct from Dalit life-narratives, where the lack of distinctive physical features between Dalits and upper castes means that rather than a sense of self-hatred based on physical difference which dominates black autobiographies, Dalits are easily able to 'pass' as upper caste, and tendencies towards self-hatred are much more internalized and based on the sense of an abstract mental or even spiritual deficiency. In addition, whereas it is possible to re-inscribe 'blackness' or 'femininity' with new, positive characteristics outside of the normative identity based on fundamental physical differences, this becomes difficult for members of the Dalit community who must highlight differences based on socio-cultural traditions or political stance.

Dalit Autobiographies and the Public Sphere

This essay began with the assertion that Dalit autobiographies conceptualize Dalit identity based on the common painful experience of caste discrimination as well as on a reinterpretation of certain cultural symbols, and that this conceptualization in turn informs a public imagination of Dalit identity. This final section considers how Dalit autobiography informs public Dalit identity.

There is, firstly, a deep relationship between socially marginalized groups and the autobiographical genre. This connection is illustrated by a statement made by Rajendra Yadav, a respected Hindi literary figure and editor of the progressive Hindi journal *Hans*, who explained

⁴¹ Quoted from Barbara Rodriguez, *Autobiographical Inscriptions: Form, Personhood and the American Women Writer of Color* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), p. 17.

in an interview, “early Dalit writing has been in the form of autobiography because this is the only authentic experience they [Dalits] have since they have been separated from the experiences of the world.”⁴² Statements such as this emphasize the reality that not all groups have equal access to all literary genres, and confirms for Dalit writers what Sidonie Smith has recognized in her study on women’s autobiographies, that, “the autobiographer’s identity as a woman within the symbolic order of patriarchy affects her relationship to generic possibilities, to the autobiographical impulse, to the structuring of content, to the reading and the writing of the self, to the authority of the voice and to the situating of narrative perspective, to the problematic nature of representation itself.”⁴³ There is a common assumption that members of a marginalized group will both *want* and *need* to write autobiographical literature in order to express their experiences of oppression. In the eyes of the mainstream literary field, this is their one (and only) legitimate life experience. In this sense, autobiography is considered by some to be an oppressive genre, as it allows Dalits, for instance, to participate in the literary field only in a limited and predetermined way.

However, Dalits have adeptly negotiated a space within this dominant discourse by reinterpreting the authority gained from personal experience and self-perception. In fact, as the ‘right’ or ‘ability’ of the marginalized group to write literature is challenged by dominant groups, Dalit writers fight back for the right to speak as well as to redefine the boundaries of what can be said. The struggle for the ‘right to speak’ is one Dalits have in common with many other marginalized groups. Sidonie Smith, for example, has noted about women’s autobiographies that in the process of writing, authors of marginalized communities are forced to renegotiate narrative authority, which had been originally defined and continually policed according to the interests of the dominant (male or *savarna*) community. Autobiography, in particular, is a useful genre for establishing narrative authority since, as Dalit writer Shyauraj Singh ‘Bechain’ points out, unlike poetry or fictional narratives, Dalit autobiographies can only be written by a Dalit. However, Dalits have taken this claim a step further, and have constructed a powerful counter-discourse emphasizing the authority of *svanubhuti* (self-perception) and discrediting literature

⁴² Interview in English with Rajendra Yadav, 10 March 2003, Dariyaganj, Delhi.

⁴³ Sidonie Smith, *Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: marginality and the fictions of self-representation* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1987), p. 17.

based on *sahanubhuti* (sympathy) as elitist and oppressive, concluding that only Dalits can write Dalit literature.

Writing about one's life as the subject of a narrative gives the autobiographer ultimate authority not only to speak, but to determine authentic and 'true' experience, and thus autobiography provides two important things for Dalit writers: First, it provides a space within the literary field that Dalits can definitively call their own, can possess and inhabit freely, and which they can use as a springboard to gain access to the rest of the Hindi literary field while at the same time excluding non-Dalits from entering their own literary space (i.e. Dalit literature).⁴⁴ The importance of writing one's autobiography as a first step towards becoming a successful Dalit writer and moving on to other genres can be seen from Dalit writer Shyauraj Singh Bechain's description of his experience approaching a commercial publisher in Delhi for one of his books. He recalls, "This one publisher said, 'first give me your autobiography, then I'll publish your other books. Otherwise your books will not sell.' Then one has to do these things. We are not that independent from the publisher."⁴⁵ Although this is much more the case with respect to commercial publishers than with Hindi literary journals or Hindi national newspapers, it is significant to note how much authority Dalit writers gain in the literary sphere once they have published their autobiography. Two of the most well-established Hindi Dalit writers, Mohandas Naimisharay and Omprakash Valmiki first interacted with mainstream Hindi commercial publishers through the publication of their autobiographies. Since then, mainstream publishers have brought out several collections of short-stories and a book on literary criticism by Omprakash Valmiki, and Mohandas Naimisharay has published a historical novel through these mainstream Hindi commercial publishers.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Autobiography has been a common way for Dalit writers to first enter the literary field. Similarly, Valerie Smith notes that slave narratives were the "earliest genre in which large numbers of Afro-Americans wrote and the common point of origin of much black fictional and nonfictional prose." See Valerie Smith 1987, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Interview with Shyauraj Singh 'Bechain, 15 January 2004, Delhi.

⁴⁶ Though both their autobiographies were published by the large Hindi publisher, Vani Prakashan, other literary works have been published by the other giant in Hindi commercial publishing, Radhakrishna Prakashan. Omprakash Valmiki's collections of short-stories include: *Salaam* (Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi, 2000); *Ghuspaitiya* (Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi, 2003); *Ab aur Nahin* (Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi, 2005). His book on literary criticism is entitled *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*

There is also a heated debate currently taking place in progressive Hindi as well as Dalit-run journals regarding who can write Dalit literature.⁴⁷ There is a general consensus among Hindi Dalit writers today that Dalit literature is based on 'self-perception' (*svanubhuti*) and thus can only be written by a Dalit. This strong stance is taken in the context of a greater antagonism between Dalit writers—who as members of a socially marginalized community, have had to struggle to gain narrative authority within the literary public sphere—and the entrenched Hindi academic establishment as well as the mainstream Hindi journal and newspaper editors and commercial publishers who held much of the authority to give or withhold literary legitimacy. The argument that only Dalit writers can write 'Dalit literature' is an important strategy which Dalit writers use to reassert control over a certain sphere of literary production—it is an act which clearly says 'we also have the power to exclude'. In an article entitled 'The concept of Dalit literature', Dalit writer Kanval Bharti expresses a position typical of most Hindi Dalit writers on this issue. Bharti writes,

"The purpose of Dalit literature is for Dalits to describe their own pain . . . For this reason, it could be said that, in reality, only literature written by Dalits comes into the category of Dalit literature. Taking this achievement, there is the objection from non-Dalit writers over why writing of non-Dalits on Dalit literature is not considered Dalit literature . . . There isn't any such restriction that only Dalits can write on Dalit problems. Of course [non-Dalits] can write. They have written and they are writing. But it is a question of experience and reflection. Being a Dalit, one has experienced the pain of Dalit life, just as one doesn't have the experience of being savarn."⁴⁸

Here, pain becomes an important tool which links narrative authority to *svanubhuti*, self-experience, and thus emphasizes the legitimacy (cultural capital) of Dalit writers alone.

Secondly, the genre of autobiography gives the Dalit writer the authority to decide what is true even in realms of the state or Indian social life. This raises the contradictions between the institutional discourse that caste no longer functions in the social sphere of modern India, or that the modern state is blind to caste, and allows Dalits to exploit this new opportunity to make a broad social critique using one's

(Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi, 2001). Mohandas Naimisharay's historical novel is entitled: *Jhalkari Bai* (Radhakrishna Prakashan: Delhi, 2003).

⁴⁷ Quoted from Tapan Basu, 'Narratives of Suffering: Dalit Perspectives' in *Translating Caste* (Katha: New Delhi, 2002), p. 184.

⁴⁸ Bharti, Kanval, 'Dalit Sahitya ke Avadharana' (The concept of Dalit literature) in *Uttar Pradesh* special issue on Dalit literature, September–October 2002, p. 12–13.

individual life-experiences. As previously discussed in the context of Dalit subjectivity, the Dalit autobiography is not limited to the story of an individual life, but is meant to be representative of the Dalit community as a whole. In this sense, the Dalit autobiographer becomes the spokesperson for the entire Dalit community in describing 'Dalit life' to the greater public. Dalit autobiographers point to letters from readers to confirm that they write not for personal recognition but in response to requests from the Dalit community for representation. Thus, the genre of autobiography gives Dalit writers access to the public sphere, and allows Dalits to participate in public debate through narrating the story of their own life.

Furthermore, the dominance of the autobiographical genre as the primary way Dalit writers connect with a non-Dalit readership further emphasizes the perception that Dalit writers must write about Dalit issues. Kenneth Mostern notes the prevalence of this phenomenon among black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, and comments that, "In spite of all Hurston's . . . claims that she is tired of writing about the race question, she is formed by the same paradox as everyone else: she has to write, incessantly, about the problem of being a Negro who does not care to write about being a Negro . . . [Her autobiography] *Dust Tracks* is simply another example of the phenomenon . . . [that] black people have to write political statements in the form of autobiographies."⁴⁹ While most Hindi Dalit writers seem completely committed to their writing as a means of political assertion in a struggle for equality and an end to caste discrimination, there is a group of younger Dalit writers emerging who are both contesting the dominant 'Dalit' identity constructed by these established Dalit writers and who desire to be writers, not simply 'Dalit' writers. One such individual is Kavitendra Indu, a Hindi graduate student at Jawaharlal Nehru University. In an article entitled, 'If you raise it, it will go far . . .' (*Bat nikalegi to phir dur talak jayegi*), Indu begins, "I start with the question: Who am I? I am a Dalit. Didn't you recognize me? Is my introduction not complete? Or did it [make you] feel a bit uneasy (*atpata*)? I want you to feel this uneasiness."⁵⁰ In clear opposition to what is perceived as a monolithic and even oppressive Dalit identity, Indu emphasizes the importance of individuality and criticizes Dalit literature's use of identity politics. He claims that 'Dalit' identity is

⁴⁹ Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, pp. 105–6.

⁵⁰ Kavitendra Indu, 'Bat nikalegi to phir dur talak jayegi' (If you raise it, it will go far) in *Kathadesh* October 2003, p. 79.

itself tyrannical in its negation of both a person's other identities (gender, class, occupational, location-based, religious, familial etc.) and a person's individuality. He ends his article by writing, "I would like to end with this hope, that you feel that the meaning of 'I' is not only Dalit ... !" In an interview regarding this controversial piece, Indu re-emphasized—"I am not a Dalit writer, and I don't want to be!"⁵¹

Despite these challenges, a specific Dalit cultural identity pervades the Dalit autobiography, as we have seen, and the popularity and commercial success of Hindi Dalit autobiographies has been unmistakably influential in the process of disseminating Dalit cultural identity in the Hindi public sphere. For instance, Mohandas Naimisharay's *Apne Apne Pinjare* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* were published by two of the most successful commercial publishers in Delhi and have run into several editions.⁵² Dalit autobiographies translated from Marathi have also been very popular among the Hindi reading public. However, the development of the Dalit autobiography as a literary genre was not a straightforward adoption from Marathi with similar guarantees of success. Rather a Hindi readership of Dalit autobiographies was explored and consciously cultivated by Hindi Dalit writers through shorter autobiographical articles in published in journals and anthology collections. Omprakash Valmiki, for instance, published his first autobiographical narrative 'Ek Dalit ke Aatmakatha' (Autobiography of a Dalit) as an article in 1995 in the book *Harijan se Dalit* (From Harijan to Dalit), an issue of a popular series called *Aaj ke prashan* (Questions of the day) edited by Raj Kishor. He published *Joothan* in 1997. Surajpal Chauhan has similarly written several short-stories based on his own life experiences which were published in journals such as *Hans*, *Aam Aadmi*, *Dalit Sahitya* etc. and later provided the basis for *Tiraskrit*. Interestingly, these autobiographies now provide a blueprint for what has become standard ways of talking about one's life as a Dalit. The development of a generalized formula for any Dalit autobiographical narrative in Hindi (similar but more narrowly defined at the moment than Marathi Dalit autobiographies due to the smaller number) has meant that Hindi Dalit writers have now begun

⁵¹ Interview in Hindi with Kavindra Indu, February 2004, JNU, Delhi.

⁵² Mohandas Naimisharay's autobiography was published by Vani Prakashan in 1995, and Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography was published by Radhakrishna Prakashan in 1997. Surajpal Chauhan's autobiography published by Anubhav Prakashan in 2002 has received slightly less visibility.

describing their lives in a similar manner even in oral interviews, placing emphasis on the same events, and marking time in analogous ways.

In addition, while Dalit autobiographers emphasize the letters of support they received from their Dalit community, the popularity of Dalit autobiographies within the wider Hindi literary field and their publication by commercial presses such as Vani Prakashan suggest the presence of a significant non-Dalit audience for these texts. Writing, then, for a mixed audience, the Dalit autobiographer negotiates his position between the Dalit and non-Dalit readers. A Dalit readership is cultivated based on identification, an echoing of the reader's own lived experiences and an understanding of the injustice inflicted on all members of this caste community. For the non-Dalit audience, however, the experience of reading a Dalit autobiography invokes a sense of shame. Arun Mukherjee expresses this well in her article 'The Emergence of Dalit Writing'. She writes, "When I read the Dalit texts . . . I felt overwhelmed by their power. And yet, they were also very uncomfortable to read since the dehumanizing deprivations described in them confronted my complicity with the status quo. It was extremely painful to read about Valmiki's experiences: his savarna teacher compelling him to sweep the school all day rather than attend his class; the police beating up his family; or his erstwhile friends and colleagues suddenly changing their attitudes towards him upon learning about his caste."³³

Dalit autobiographies have experienced stunning success in the sphere of Hindi commercial publishing and the rapidly expanding field of Dalit literature has come to include Dalit poetry, short-stories, and drama as well as literary criticism and ongoing intellectual debates. Since the mid-1980s, Dalit writers have struggled against a hostile Hindi literary academy as well as against hesitant, unreceptive and often discriminatory Hindi editors and publishers. Nonetheless, Hindi Dalit writers have succeeded in establishing an alternative Dalit public sphere through Dalit-run journals and literary organizations and have made significant inroads into the mainstream Hindi public sphere through autobiographies, articles published in progressive Hindi journals such as *Hans*, *Aam Aadmi*, or *Kathadesh* and an increasing number of articles in Hindi national dailies. However, an intense power struggle continues between Dalit writers and Hindi literary

³³ Arun P. Mukherjee, 'The Emergence of Dalit Writing' in *The Toronto Review* Winter 1998, p. 38.

figures and academics, the traditional guardians of the Hindi literary canon. Dalit writer Vimal Thorat claims in her article 'Dalit Jivan ka Dastavez: Dalit Aatmakathan' ('Document of Dalit Life: Dalit Autobiography'), that mainstream Hindi literary figures have continued "to guard against giving entry in such a particular field of literature to those established as outcasts."⁵⁴ Thus, despite the clear delineation of narrative authority provided by autobiography, numerous Dalit writers continue to feel a clear hostility towards Dalit literature in the Hindi literary sphere.

Conclusions

Dalit autobiographies are not written for the purpose of personal reflection but are overtly meant for public consumption. In an interview, Surajpal Chauhan spoke about writing a second autobiography. He explained, "I had never in my life thought that I would write an autobiography. So now I am collecting stories I now remember which I had missed before. I had to rush to write the first one *since the movement needed it*."⁵⁵ (emphasis added) Chauhan's claim that his autobiography was not written for personal but for public reasons—for the movement—is a significant political statement, placing his narrative as part of a greater movement of resistance.

The importance of Dalit literature in the creation of a new cultural form of Dalit identity and its additional role in informing public perception of what it means to be 'Dalit' cannot be underestimated and suggests the inadequacy of confining the study of Dalit autobiographies only to their effects within the literary field. Dalit autobiography is not simply a literary work, but a powerful political statement. In an interview, Jayprakash Kardam, a widely published Hindi Dalit writer and editor of the annual *Dalit Sahitya*, has explained, "If you have the power to write, and I don't have the power to write, then they will listen to you. They will look at me, clap their hands and go away. This is why Dalit literature has the biggest and most important role in this movement."⁵⁶ His words speak to a sentiment common among marginalized groups in many communities—that is, the deep

⁵⁴ Vimal Thorat, 'Dalit Jivan ka Dastavej: Dalit Aatmakathan' ('Document of Dalit Life: Dalit Autobiography') in *Dalit Sahitya* 2001.

⁵⁵ Interview in Hindi with Surajpal Chauhan, 22 March 2003, Delhi.

⁵⁶ Interview in Hindi with Jayprakash Kardam, 26 January 2004, Delhi.

and urgent desire to 'have a voice'. The act of writing is often conceptualized by Hindi Dalit writers as a way to project a 'representative voice' of the Dalit community into mainstream public debate, or rather to construct their own stream of debate which can engage with and contest the authority of certain dominant social narratives (particular those related to caste). More than this, the process of gaining 'a voice' is perceived as an act of autogenesis, a process of coming into being, from silence into sound and from marginalized invisibility into central view. Vivek Kumar, a Dalit writer, BSP activist and lecturer at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University asserts, "If all Dalits are subsumed under one identity of Hindu, they remain only as untouchable, and you treat them as an appendage. Rather, you don't even take note of them. But once they become a separate identity, an entity, then you are forced to address them. You are also forced to recognize their presence."⁵⁷

The overtly political Dalit identity propagated by the BSP has, without a doubt, had a powerful influence over the Dalit community's conception of Dalit political power, as the BSP has infused the meaning of Dalit identity with notions of political assertion and self-respect. However, for conceptions of Dalit identity beyond the narrow confines of the political process, Dalit literature provides a powerful voice, which negotiates a mixed Dalit and non-Dalit audience to inform public perception of a new social and cultural meaning of Dalit identity. Dalit autobiographies, as the most popular and widely-read genre of Dalit literature, has had a profound influence over both the Dalit community's own self-perceptions as well as the wider public perception of Dalit identity in its construction of Dalits as a separate cultural community.

⁵⁷ Interview in English with Vivek Kumar, March 2004, Delhi.