

**MAEN402CCT**

**Dalit Literature: An Introduction**

**M.A. English**  
**(Fourth Semester)**

**Centre for Distance and Online Education**  
**Maulana Azad National Urdu University**  
**Hyderabad-32, Telangana- India**

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Course: Dalit Literature: An Introduction

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**Dalit Literature: An Introduction**  
for  
**M.A. English**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Semester**

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## Message

Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) was established in 1998 by an Act of the Parliament. It is a central university with NAAC accreditation and the mandate of the university is: (1) promotion of Urdu language, (2) accessibility and availability of professional and technical education in Urdu medium, (3) providing education through traditional and distance learning mode, and (4) a specific focus on women's education. These are the points that distinguish this central university from all other central universities and give it a unique feature. It has been emphasized even in the National Education Policy 2020 to achieve education in mother tongues and regional languages.

The very objective of promotion of knowledge through Urdu is meant to facilitate the accessibility of contemporary knowledge and disciplines to Urdu knowing community. For a long time, there has been a dearth of course material in Urdu. The non-availability of books in Urdu is a matter of concern and Urdu University considers it a privilege to be part of the national process of providing course material in mother tongue/home language as per the vision of NEP 2020. Further, the Urdu speaking community is at a disadvantage in gaining updated knowledge and information in emerging areas or newer knowledge in existing fields due to non-availability of reading material in Urdu. The unavailability of content related to the above domains of knowledge has created an atmosphere of apathy towards attaining knowledge that could significantly affect the intellectual abilities of the Urdu knowing community. These are the challenges that Urdu University is confronted with. The scenario of Self Learning Materials (SLM) is also not very different. The unavailability of course books in Urdu at school/college level comes under discussion at the commencement of every academic year. Since the medium of instruction of Urdu University is only Urdu and it offers almost all the courses of important disciplines, the preparation of books of all these subjects in Urdu is the most important responsibility of the University. To achieve these objectives, MANUU makes available course material in the form of Self Learning Material (SLM) to the students of Distance Learning. The same is also available for sale to anyone interested in gaining knowledge through Urdu. To further provide access to learning, eSLM in Urdu is available for free download from the University website.

I am immensely pleased that due to the hard work of the concerned faculty and full cooperation of the writers, the process of publications of books has begun on a massive scale. To facilitate the students of Distance Learning, the process of preparing and publication of Self Learning Material (SLM) is of paramount importance to the University. I believe that we will be able to meet the requirements of a large Urdu knowing community through our Self Learning Material and will fulfill the mandate of this University and justify our presence in this country.

With best wishes,

**Prof. Syed Ainul Hasan**  
*Vice Chancellor*  
**MANUU, Hyderabad**

## Message

In the present era, distance education is recognized as a very effective and useful mode of education all over the world and a large number of people are benefiting from this mode of education. Maulana Azad National Urdu University also introduced the distance learning mode since its establishment in view of the educational needs of the Urdu speaking population. Maulana Azad National Urdu University started in 1998 with the Directorate of Distance Education and the regular programmes commenced from 2004, and subsequently various departments have been established.

The UGC has played a vital role in efficiently regulating the education system in the country. Various programs running under Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode at DDE are approved by UGC-DEB. The UGC-DEB has emphasized on synchronizing the syllabi of distance and regular mode to enhance the level of distance learning students. Since Maulana Azad National Urdu University is a dual mode university catering to both distance and traditional mode of learning, to achieve its goal in line with the UGC-DEB guidelines, Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) was introduced and Self Learning Materials are being prepared afresh for UG and PG programmes containing 6 blocks with 24 units and 4 blocks with 16 units respectively.

The Directorate of Distance Education offers a total of seventeen (17) programmes comprising of UG, PG, B.Ed., Diploma, and Certificate programmes. Along with this, programmes based on technical skills are also being started. A huge network of nine Regional Centers (Bengaluru, Bhopal, Darbhanga, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Patna, Ranchi, and Srinagar) and six Sub-Regional Centers (Hyderabad, Lucknow, Jammu, Nooh, Varanasi, and Amravati) was established to facilitate the students. Apart from this, an extension center has also been established in Vijayawada. More than one hundred and sixty Learner Support Centres (LSCs) and twenty Programme Centres are run simultaneously under these Regional and Sub-Regional Centers to provide educational and administrative support to the students. The Directorate of Distance Education makes full use of ICT in its educational and administrative activities, and offers admission to all its programs through online mode only.

The soft copies of Self Learning Material (SLM) for students are made available on the website of the Directorate of Distance Education and the links of audio and video recordings are also made available on the website. In addition, facilities of E-mail and WhatsApp groups are being provided to the students through which the learners are informed about various aspects of the program such as course registration, assignments, counselling, examinations, etc. In addition to regular counseling, additional remedial online counseling is being provided from the last two years to improve the academic standards of the students.

It is expected that the Directorate of Distance Education will play a vital role to bring educationally and economically backward population into the mainstream of contemporary education. In near future, changes will be made in various programmes under the New Education Policy (NEP-2020) in view of the educational needs and it is hoped that this will help in making the Open and Distance Learning system more efficient and effective.

**Prof. Mohd. Razaullah Khan**  
*Director, Directorate of Distance Education*  
MANUU, Hyderabad

## Introduction to the Course

The M.A. English programme is designed to give a sound knowledge of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory so as to empower the prospective students for higher studies and employment, apart from helping them prepare for competitive exams. It is spread over two years (four semesters) minimum duration. The objectives of the programme are as follows:

- a. to provide a sound base in the English language
- b. to provide insights into the development of English and the phonological, morphological, syntactical and stylistic aspects of language
- c. to provide knowledge in the teaching of English
- d. to explore the various literatures in English
- e. to provide exposure to the different genres, movements and periods of English literature
- f. to facilitate critical and analytical abilities
- g. to introduce literary theory and criticism
- h. to build confidence among learners with language skills in English
- i. to enable the working target group to enhance their qualifications and
- j. To facilitate higher education in the open distance learning mode.

At the end of the two-year post graduate programme in M.A. English, the learner would have mastered the theoretical knowledge of the English language and literature. The learners would be able to appreciate literatures in English, take up critical analysis, understand the different movements, periods and concepts in the study of English language and literature. The two-year programme will prepare the learner for competitive examinations, for employment and for research by developing their skills, apart from leading to refinement.

The course “**Dalit Literature: An Introduction**” aims to introduce the learners to the Dalit literature. Apart from gaining an understanding of Dalit literature, Dalit poetry in English, Dalit novel in English, Dalit autobiography in English, and Dalit drama in English will also be studied in this course. It also introduces them to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Muktibodh, Pawde, Nimbalkar, and others. The course is divided into four Blocks and each Block has four Units.

This SLM is supplemented by audio-video lessons. You may visit IMC MANUU YouTube channel <http://youtube.com/u/imcmanuu> for the complete list of AV lessons in English.

With you in your journey through the fields of English language and literature!

**Dr. Gulfishaan Habeeb**  
*Programme Coordinator*



# **Dalit Literature: An Introduction**

DRAFT

# **Unit-1: Sharatchandra Muktibodh: ‘Introduction: What is Dalit Literature?’**

## **Structure:**

**1.0** Introduction

**1.1** Objectives

**1.2** Sharatchandra Muktibodh: ‘Introduction: What is Dalit Literature?’

**1.2.1** About Sharatchandra Muktibodh

**1.2.2** Summary of the Text

**1.2.3** Themes

**1.2.4** Let Us Sum Up

**1.3** Learning Outcomes

**1.4** Glossary

**1.5** Sample Questions

**1.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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## **1.0 Introduction**

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Dalit literature is the voice of the Dalit community, expressing their struggles and hopes. It is rooted in the desire for freedom and equality, challenging the discrimination and humiliation faced by Dalits due to the caste system. This literature is a response to the historical and ongoing injustices against Dalits, fuelled by a spirit of rebellion and a strong commitment to change. While it seeks to transform social consciousness, Dalit literature is not just about individual experiences, but about the collective pain and suffering shared by the community.

The essence of Dalit literature lies in how it presents life from the Dalit perspective, highlighting the social realities and the aspiration for transformation. It not only seeks to portray the hardships faced by Dalits but also aims to present a vision for a better, more just society. This perspective is crucial for understanding Dalit life in its true sense. However, simply having a Dalit point of view is not enough to create great literature. A deeper insight, gained through lived experiences, is essential for a writer to capture the full complexity of Dalit life.

In literature, a point of view is not the same as a complete experience of life. It is like looking at a map of a city rather than living in it. Life is complex, with joys and sorrows, and a

writer must capture this totality to truly express a vision. Dalit literature becomes powerful when it goes beyond just a point of view and reflects the real experiences of Dalit individuals, presenting a complete and nuanced picture of their lives.

While some critics argue that focusing on a specific viewpoint can limit artistic quality, this is not necessarily true. Many great writers, like Dickens, Gorky and Tolstoy, were committed to their views, but their literature still resonated deeply because it was grounded in real experiences. Similarly, Dalit literature has the potential to create powerful and meaningful art when it draws from the lived experiences of Dalits, presenting a vision of human life that yearns for true freedom.

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## **1.1 Objectives**

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The objectives of this Unit are as follows:

- to examine how Dalit literature reflects the collective struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community within the framework of social injustice and discrimination.
- to analyse the role of Dalit consciousness in shaping literature that is both rebellious and optimistic, aiming for social transformation.
- to explore the distinction between a Dalit point of view and a deeper Dalit insight, emphasizing the importance of lived experiences in creating impactful literature.
- to evaluate the role of a Dalit perspective in producing authentic literary works that depict the full complexity of Dalit life, including both suffering and resilience.
- to investigate how Dalit literature, through its concrete experiences, can offer a powerful vision for societal change and true human freedom.

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## **1.2 Sharatchandra Muktibodh: ‘Introduction: What is Dalit Literature?’**

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### **1.2.1 About Sharatchandra Muktibodh**

Sharatchandra Muktibodh, a Sahitya Academy Awardee, was a Marathi poet, novelist, and literary critic from Maharashtra, India, born in 1921. He pursued his education at Nagpur University, where he completed a Master of Arts degree in 1947. After finishing his studies, Muktibodh started working as a deputy director in the language department of the government. In

1957, he took up a teaching position at Nagpur Mahavidyalaya, where he worked as a lecturer until his retirement in 1979.

Muktibodh was also a talented writer. He wrote several novels, including Sarahadda, Jan He Wolatu Jethe, and Kshipra. Besides novels, he was known for his poetry, with collections like Nawi Malawat, Satyachi Jat, Yatrik, and Muktibodhanchi Niwadak Kavita. His works are appreciated for their deep understanding of human emotions and social issues.

Sharatchandra Muktibodh passed away on 21 November 1984. His elder brother, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, was also a well-known poet and writer in Hindi literature. The two brothers made significant contributions to Indian literature in their respective languages.

***Check your progress:***

1. Dalit literature is not just about individual experiences, but about the collective pain and suffering shared by the community. (True / False)
2. Marathi poet Sharatchandra Muktibodh, a Sahitya Academy Awardee, was born in 1921. (True / False)

### **1.2.2 Summary of the Text**

Sharatchandra Muktibodh's essay "What is Dalit Literature?" was originally written in Marathi and is a significant piece in the history of Dalit literary discourse. This essay was published in the anthology *Poisoned Bread*, which was edited by Arjun Dangle, a renowned Marathi scholar, activist, and founding member of the Dalit Panthers. The anthology, published in 1992, was the first of its kind, bringing together short stories, poems, speeches, and essays under the banner of Dalit literature. It marked a major milestone in both Dalit literature and protest writing.

Anil Raghunath Kulkarni translated Muktibodh's essay into English for this volume. The essay itself is a profound reflection on the nature of Dalit literature, written during a time when the Dalit literary movement was still in its early stages. Muktibodh's essay was one of the first texts to establish a connection between Dalit literature and Dalit consciousness. It provided a strong defense of literature that arises from a specific standpoint or point of view, arguing for the importance of political literature.

Dalit literature is born out of the experiences and struggles of the Dalit community. It expresses the pain, suffering, and humiliation they have faced over centuries due to the rigid caste

system. This literature is driven by a desire for freedom and equality, challenging the social structures that have oppressed Dalits.

The central theme of Dalit literature is rebellion against the injustices faced by the community. It carries a strong psychological commitment to change and seeks to inspire societal transformation. Despite focusing on past and present struggles, Dalit literature is also optimistic, offering hope for a better future.

Dalit literature is deeply connected to collective experiences. While individuals experience pain and pleasure personally, the struggles of the Dalit community stem from common causes. This makes Dalit literature a social expression, highlighting the shared suffering of the Dalits rather than focusing solely on individual stories.

The Dalit perspective presents a clear understanding of the social reality faced by the community. It is not just about depicting oppression but also about showing a vision of how society can change for the better. Dalit literature reflects the hope for a more just and equal world through the lens of Dalit consciousness.

A Dalit point of view, while important, does not automatically result in great Dalit literature. A deeper insight is necessary. A Dalit writer must go beyond a basic viewpoint and develop an understanding of the Dalit experience on a personal and collective level to create meaningful literature.

A Dalit point of view can be expressed by many, such as speakers, essayists, or social workers, but a true Dalit insight requires experiencing life in its totality. Writers need to transform their viewpoints into a broader vision by living and understanding the realities they describe, which goes beyond simple intellectual positions.

There is a difference between merely having a point of view and gaining a real insight into life. A point of view is like looking at a map, while insight comes from actually living in the city. For Dalit writers to achieve this insight, they must engage with the full complexity of Dalit life—its joys, sorrows, and struggles.

Some critics argue that focusing too much on a specific point of view can limit artistic expression. For example, in Marathi literature, life is often simplified to prove a particular point, which can lead to a shallow representation of real experiences. This oversimplification can weaken the depth and quality of the literature.

Formalists, who focus on the technical aspects of literature, claim that artistic quality is diminished when a writer is too focused on a specific viewpoint. However, they too are not free

from limiting their artistic scope, as they often ignore the social dimensions of literature, believing that anything detached from society is inherently artistic.

In individualistic literature, the focus is often on the inner struggles of individuals, where they are caught between uncontrollable forces like fate and their own deep desires. This viewpoint also tends to oversimplify life in order to prove its point, showing that even literature not focused on social issues can limit itself.

Commitment to a point of view, whether social or individual, is not necessarily a problem. Many great writers like Dickens, Tolstoy, and Gorky wrote from a strong social perspective, yet their works are considered great because they were grounded in real human experiences, not just abstract ideas.

Dalit literature, when rooted in real experiences, can achieve similar greatness. The key to creating powerful Dalit literature lies in transforming the Dalit point of view into a broader insight that encompasses the full complexity of life. This transformation is necessary for the literature to resonate deeply with readers.

A viewpoint, by itself, is limited. It is just a way of interpreting life, but life itself is much more complex and varied. A Dalit writer must experience and depict the full reality of Dalit life, rather than just trying to prove a point. This will allow for a more complete and truthful representation of the Dalit experience.

Haribhau Apte, a notable Marathi writer, is used in the essay as an example to highlight how a point of view can limit the artistic depth of literature. In his novel *Pan Lakshat Kon Ghetto?* (Who Cares to Heed?), he portrayed the suffering of a woman trapped in the old joint family system. While Haribhau's work effectively communicates the struggles of feminine bondage, it is argued that his artistic quality was limited because he simplified life to make his point. By focusing narrowly on a specific issue, Haribhau reduced the complexity of life and confined his characters' minds to a set of predefined circumstances.

This example shows that when literature is created solely to serve a particular viewpoint, it can result in an oversimplification of life, which diminishes the overall artistic merit. In contrast, great literature requires an understanding and representation of life in all its complexity, going beyond just proving a point. Haribhau's work, while important, is seen as not reaching the artistic level of writers like Sharatchandra Chatterji because of this simplification.

Great literature, including Dalit literature, does not come from simply holding a point of view. It is born when that viewpoint is lived, felt, and transformed into a deeper insight. The

literature becomes powerful when it connects the writer's vision with the full experience of life, including both struggles and joys.

In conclusion, Dalit literature has the potential to offer a deep understanding of the human desire for freedom and equality. When Dalit writers express their lived experiences through their work, it not only reflects the struggles of the Dalit community but also serves as a powerful tool for social change. True Dalit literature is born from this insight, and it has the ability to reveal the deeper truths about Indian society.

### 1.2.3 Themes

**Dalit Struggles and Oppression:** The essay highlights how Dalit literature is rooted in the collective experiences of oppression faced by the Dalit community due to the caste system. It portrays their long history of suffering, exclusion, and humiliation, aiming to give voice to their struggles.

**Rebellion and Desire for Freedom:** A central theme is the rebellious spirit of Dalit literature. It challenges the established social order that has oppressed Dalits for centuries. The literature not only protests against injustice but also carries the aspiration for equality, freedom, and dignity.

**Dalit Consciousness:** The essay explains how Dalit literature is driven by Dalit consciousness, which connects individual experiences with the collective reality of the Dalit community. This awareness helps in shaping literature that is both deeply personal and socially significant, reflecting the common struggles of Dalits.

**Social Transformation:** Dalit literature is not just about recounting suffering; it also focuses on the hope for change. The essay discusses how Dalit writers use their work to inspire social reform, encouraging a transformation in society's views on equality and justice. It shows a vision for a better future where Dalits can live freely and equally.

**Artistic Limits of a Point of View:** The essay explores the idea that literature focusing too narrowly on a specific viewpoint, such as Haribhau Apte's work, can oversimplify life. When writers prioritize proving a point, they may reduce the complexity and richness of life, which limits the depth and quality of their artistic expression.

**Distinction Between Viewpoint and Insight:** The essay makes an important distinction between holding a Dalit viewpoint and gaining true Dalit insight. A point of view is an intellectual position, but to create great literature, a writer must go beyond that and experience life in its full



complexity. This transformation from viewpoint to insight is necessary for creating literature that truly captures the Dalit experience.

**Commitment to Social Causes in Literature:** The essay points out that many great writers, like Dickens, Tolstoy, and Gorky, wrote from strong social commitments. Their works became powerful because they were grounded in real human experiences, not just abstract ideas. Dalit literature, similarly, can reach great artistic heights if it is rooted in lived experiences.

**Potential of Dalit Literature:** Finally, the essay explores the potential of Dalit literature to reveal the deeper truths about Indian society. By providing a vivid picture of Dalit life and struggles, this literature can act as a powerful force for social change. It has the ability to penetrate Indian life and inspire a more just and equal society.

***Check your progress:***

1. Anil Raghunath Kulkarni translated Muktibodh's essay "What is Dalit Literature" into English. (True / False)
2. The author of the novel *Pan Lakshat Kon Ghetto?* (Who Cares to Heed?) is \_\_\_\_\_ .

#### **1.2.4 Let Us Sum Up**

In this Unit, we learned about Dalit literature, which tells the stories of the Dalit community, focusing on their struggles, pain, and hopes for freedom and equality. It is a powerful form of writing that challenges the unfair caste system and aims to inspire change. Dalit literature shows both the difficulties and the dreams of Dalits, offering a vision for a better, more just society.

We explored the importance of Dalit consciousness in shaping this literature. Dalit writers use their understanding of the community's struggles to create works that go beyond personal stories and represent the collective experiences of Dalits. This connection between personal and community experiences gives Dalit literature its strength and significance.

We also looked at the difference between simply having a Dalit viewpoint and gaining a deeper insight. While anyone can hold a point of view, true Dalit literature comes from lived experiences and understanding life's full complexity. This depth is needed to create literature that truly reflects the reality of Dalit life.

The unit discussed how focusing on a single point of view can sometimes limit the artistic quality of literature. However, when a writer draws from real experiences, like Dickens or Tolstoy

did, they can create powerful and meaningful works. Dalit literature has the same potential if it remains grounded in true experiences. Finally, we saw that Dalit literature has the power to reveal the deeper truths about society. By sharing the real stories of Dalit life, this literature can be a strong force for social change, pushing for a fairer and more equal world.

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### 1.3 Learning Outcomes

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After studying this Unit, you should have learned the following:

- **Understanding Dalit Literature:** Learners will grasp the essence of Dalit literature, its role in reflecting the struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community, and how it is tied to social justice.
- **Exploring Dalit Consciousness:** Students will learn the importance of Dalit consciousness in shaping literary works that aim for societal transformation.
- **Insight vs. Point of View:** Learners will differentiate between a Dalit point of view and a deeper Dalit insight, recognizing the value of lived experiences in literature.
- **Role of Rebellion in Literature:** Students will explore how Dalit literature embodies rebellion against the caste system and the desire for freedom and equality.
- **Evaluating Artistic Depth:** Learners will assess how a narrow point of view can limit artistic quality and understand the importance of presenting life's complexity in literature.

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### 1.4 Glossary

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- **Artistic Quality:** The value and depth of literary works, which can be diminished if a writer focuses too narrowly on a specific point of view.
- **Caste System:** A traditional social hierarchy in India that divides people into rigid groups based on birth, often resulting in discrimination.
- **Dalit:** Refers to the oppressed and marginalized communities in India, historically subjected to discrimination under the caste system.
- **Dalit Consciousness:** Awareness of the shared experiences of Dalit oppression, shaping the collective voice in Dalit literature.

- **Formalists:** Critics who focus on the technical aspects of literature, often disregarding the social and political context.
- **Insight:** A deeper understanding or awareness that goes beyond surface-level observations, essential for creating powerful literature.
- **Lived Experience:** The personal experiences of individuals, especially those related to suffering and resilience in the context of Dalit life.
- **Perspective:** A specific point of view or angle from which a writer presents their story, often tied to their experiences and beliefs.
- **Rebellion:** The act of resisting authority or social norms, central to Dalit literature's challenge against oppression.
- **Social Transformation:** The process of significant change in society's values and structures, aiming for equality and justice.

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## 1.5 Sample Questions

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### 1.5.1 Objective Questions

1. What is the primary focus of Dalit literature?
  - a) Personal stories of success
  - b) Social change and justice**
  - c) Romantic love stories
  - d) Historical events
2. Which concept is central to understanding the struggles reflected in Dalit literature?
  - a) Caste system**
  - b) Gender equality
  - c) Economic growth
  - d) Environmental issues
3. Dalit literature is primarily driven by which of the following?
  - a) Political agendas
  - b) Artistic experimentation
  - c) Dalit consciousness**
  - d) Globalization
4. Who translated Sharatchandra Mukhibodh's essay "What is Dalit Literature?" into English?

- a) **Arjun Dangle**
  - b) Anil Raghunath Kulkarni
  - c) Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh
  - d) Haribhau Apte
5. What does the term "Dalit Consciousness" refer to?
- a) Awareness of economic issues
  - b) **Awareness of the oppression faced by Dalits**
  - c) Awareness of environmental degradation
  - d) Awareness of Western culture
6. According to Muktibodh, what makes great Dalit literature?
- a) A detailed point of view
  - b) Artistic quality
  - c) **Lived experience and insight**
  - d) Focus on individual stories
7. What is the key theme of Dalit literature, as discussed in Muktibodh's essay?
- a) Economic growth
  - b) **Social rebellion**
  - c) Love and relationships
  - d) Scientific innovation
8. Which of the following best describes the role of rebellion in Dalit literature?
- a) It advocates for maintaining tradition.
  - b) **It protests against caste-based oppression.**
  - c) It focuses on environmental issues.
  - d) It avoids controversial topics.
9. Why is Dalit literature considered a collective social expression?
- a) It focuses on individual success stories.
  - b) **It reflects the shared experiences of Dalit communities.**
  - c) It emphasizes artistic experimentation.
  - d) It avoids discussing social issues.
10. What is the key difference between a Dalit point of view and Dalit insight in literature?
- a) **Point of view is intellectual, insight is lived.**
  - b) Insight focuses on politics, point of view on culture.

- c) Point of view focuses on happiness, insight on suffering.
- d) Insight is based on history, point of view on imagination.

### 1.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. What is Dalit literature and why is it significant?
2. Describe the role of Dalit consciousness in shaping Dalit literature.
3. How does Muktibodh distinguish between a point of view and insight in literature?
4. Explain the significance of rebellion in Dalit literature.
5. Why is it important for Dalit literature to reflect lived experiences?

### 1.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the central themes of Dalit literature as outlined in Muktibodh's essay and explain how they contribute to social change.
2. Analyze the role of Sharatchandra Muktibodh in the development of Dalit literature and his impact on literary discourse.
3. Describe how Dalit literature reflects both individual and collective experiences of oppression and hope for transformation.

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## 1.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Anand, Mulk Raj. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. Gyan Books, 1992.

Muktibodh, Sharatchandra. "What is Dalit Literature?" In Arujun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Orient Longman. Hyderabad, 1992.

Joshi, Barbara R. *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. Zed Books, 1986.

Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications, 1994.

Samaddara, Ranabira, and Ghanshyam Shah. *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Sage Publications, 2001.



## **Unit-2: Baburao Bagul: ‘Dalit Literature is but Human Literature’**

### **Structure:**

**2.0** Introduction

**2.1** Objectives

**2.2** Baburao Bagul: ‘Dalit Literature is but Human Literature’

**2.2.1** About Baburao Bagul

**2.2.2** Summary of the Text

**2.2.3** Themes

**2.2.4** Let Us Sum Up

**2.3** Learning Outcomes

**2.4** Glossary

**2.5** Sample Questions

**2.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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### **2.0 Introduction**

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The essay "Dalit Literature is but Human Literature" provides a deep exploration of the origins and persistence of social inequality in human history, especially in the context of India. It argues that suffering began when people started claiming property and creating systems to justify their ownership and control over others. The ruling class, in their pursuit of power, established structures like caste and religious practices that divided society into rulers and the oppressed. This division not only created inequality but also served to maintain the power of the elites over the lower classes. One significant aspect of the essay is the role of religious figures like Buddha in attempting to challenge these systems of inequality. Buddha, through his teachings of compassion and selflessness, sought to address the root causes of human suffering. He encouraged people to seek liberation from materialism and greed, which he believed were the main causes of inequality and conflict. However, despite his efforts, Buddha's teachings could not completely dismantle the social structures of exploitation. His Sangha (community of monks) was a small haven of equality, but the broader society continued to be driven by inequality and division.

The essay also highlights the nature of the exploitative state, explaining how governments and ruling classes have historically protected their interests by promoting ideologies that maintain

their control. The caste system is a prime example of this. By dividing people based on birth and justifying it through religious doctrines like karma, the ruling class ensured that the lower castes could not challenge the system. These ideas were reinforced by the state and religion, making it nearly impossible for people from lower castes to improve their social standing. Hinduism's focus on war and power is another key aspect of the essay. The glorification of warriors and the celebration of victories as divine events created a culture where violence and domination were celebrated. Hindu mythology is filled with stories of war, which contributed to the development of a warlike character in society. This war-centric outlook marginalized values like love, compassion, and equality. Consequently, social values and literature were shaped by a culture that favored power over empathy, leaving little space for the oppressed to be heard or seen.

In contrast, the essay emphasizes the teachings of Jesus Christ, who promoted ideals of love, compassion, and service to the poor. Unlike the Hindu gods who often showed disdain for the lower castes, Christ embraced the downtrodden and advocated for their upliftment. His message of love for all, regardless of their social status, laid the foundation for a literature that recognized the humanity of even the most marginalized members of society. This approach stood in stark contrast to the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of Hindu literature. The essay critiques Sanskrit literature, pointing out its narrow focus on the lives of the ruling classes, particularly Brahmins and Kshatriyas. In these texts, the struggles of lower castes and marginalized communities were largely ignored. Sanskrit literature became repetitive, glorifying the same themes of power and divine rule, without offering any representation to the oppressed. As a result, this literature failed to provide a platform for Dalit voices or address the reality of inequality that pervaded society.

During the period of Islamic rule in India, saint literature emerged, but even this literature did not break free from the caste system. The saints who preached devotion and faith continued to uphold the varna system, which justified caste-based discrimination. Though they promoted devotion (bhakti), they did not challenge the social hierarchies that kept the lower castes oppressed. The essay argues that this literature, while significant in its religious and cultural contributions, failed to bring about social change or challenge the injustices faced by the Dalits.

With the arrival of the British, Indian society experienced a wave of new ideas, particularly with the introduction of science and technology. This period marked the beginning of intellectual movements that challenged the old systems of inequality. However, even during this time, the literature produced by most writers did not fully capture the struggles of the lower castes. The



essay suggests that this failure was not due to a lack of talent but rather because of the writers' deep-seated cultural conditioning, which prevented them from truly understanding the suffering of the oppressed.

The essay also brings attention to the emergence of Dalit literature, which differs from traditional Indian literature in its focus on the lives and struggles of the oppressed. Dalit literature aims to highlight the injustices of the caste system and gives voice to those who have been historically marginalized. It is not just about portraying the harsh realities of Dalit life but about challenging the structures of oppression. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a central figure in Dalit literature, inspires this movement with his revolutionary ideals of equality and justice. The essay presents Dalit literature as a powerful tool for social transformation. By embracing the identity of the oppressed and highlighting the injustices they face, Dalit literature challenges the systems that perpetuate inequality. It draws inspiration from global revolutionary literature and advocates for a future where equality, justice, and fraternity are not just ideals but realities. The essay calls for a reevaluation of Indian society and its literature, urging a move away from the oppressive traditions of the past toward a more inclusive and just future.

***Check your progress:***

1. The essay critiques Sanskrit literature, pointing out its narrow focus on the lives of the ruling classes, particularly Brahmins and Kshatriyas. (True / False)
2. Dalit literature aims to highlight the injustices of the caste system and gives voice to those who have been historically marginalized. (True / False)

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## **2.1 Objectives**

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The Objectives of the Unit are to:

- explore the historical roots of social inequality and suffering, tracing how systems of property ownership, caste, and religious practices contributed to the oppression of marginalized groups, particularly Dalits.
- highlight the failure of traditional literature in representing the oppressed, critiquing how classical Indian literature, especially Sanskrit texts, has ignored or misrepresented the struggles of lower castes, reinforcing social divisions.

- compare different religious and cultural responses to inequality, contrasting the teachings of figures like Buddha and Jesus Christ, who emphasized compassion and equality, with Hinduism's glorification of war and power.
- promote Dalit literature as a voice for the oppressed, establishing it as a vital movement that challenges caste-based oppression and represents the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities.
- advocate for social justice and equality, inspiring readers to rethink traditional systems of inequality and support a future guided by principles of equality, justice, and fraternity.

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## **2.2 Baburao Bagul: 'Dalit Literature is but Human Literature'**

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### **2.2.1 About Baburao Bagul**

Baburao Ramji Bagul (1930–2008) was a significant Marathi writer from Maharashtra, India, and a key figure in the evolution of modern Marathi literature and the Indian short story. Born on July 17, 1930, in Nashik, Bagul worked in various manual jobs after completing high school, while simultaneously contributing stories to magazines. His first collection, *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (1963), stirred Marathi literature with its raw portrayal of societal issues and became a seminal work in the narrative of the oppressed. This collection, often regarded as an epic of the downtrodden, was later adapted into a film by Vinay Apte. His subsequent works, including *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (1969) and *Sahitya Ajache Kranti Vigyan* (1970), further established his reputation as a pivotal voice in Dalit literature. The latter collection earned him the Harinarayan Apte Award from the Government of Maharashtra.

Bagul was an Ambedkarite Buddhist and his writings vividly depicted the struggles of marginalized communities. Influenced by the thoughts of B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and Karl Marx, he became an influential radical thinker within the Dalit movement. His 1972 publication, *Manifesto of Panther*, and his role as president of the 'Modern Literary Conference' at Mahad underscored his impact on the literary and socio-political landscape. Bagul continued to write about the lives of the marginalized until his death on March 26, 2008. In recognition of his contributions, the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University established the Baburao Bagul Gaurav Puraskar Award, honoring outstanding debut works in short fiction.

### 2.2.2 Summary of the Text

**Origins of Suffering:** The essay begins by explaining that suffering in society originated when humans started to claim property. Those in power used their authority to create rules and systems that justified oppression, such as inequality, slavery, and meaningless religious practices. These systems served to maintain the ruling class's power, creating a deep divide between those who ruled and those who were oppressed.

**A Comprehensive Vision:** During the rise of the autocratic state, Buddha emerged as a compassionate teacher who observed the accumulation of wealth and power, which led to wars and inequality. Buddha tried to show people where suffering came from and offered ways to eradicate it through his teachings. However, his efforts to dismantle the exploitative social structures were not successful. Instead of improving, society saw increased inequality, slavery, and wars. Buddha's Sangha, a community of monks, was one of the few places where people could experience equality and peace, but the larger state continued to favor inequality.

**The Nature of the Exploitative State:** The exploitative state, or government, is structured in a way that only supports ideas that help it maintain its power. Any ideas or movements that challenge the state's authority are suppressed or distorted. Inequality and untouchability were essential for the ruling class to keep control, so they promoted these concepts. Any ideas that opposed these values were destroyed or silenced. The state relied on religion and the concept of a divine hierarchy to justify these inequalities, keeping the lower castes oppressed and unable to rise.

**Property Rights: Varna and Caste:** The caste system became deeply rooted in society as a way to ensure that wealth, power, and social status remained in the hands of the ruling class. This system was justified by the concept of karma, or deeds from past lives, which explained that one's caste was determined by actions in previous lifetimes. This belief kept people trapped in their social status, unable to improve their situation. The ruling class maintained its control by ensuring that lower castes could not challenge the system, using religion and birth as the ultimate determinants of one's place in society.

**War-like Character:** Hinduism glorified warriors who fought for power, turning their victories into divine events. Many Hindu festivals celebrate these wars and the heroes who emerged from them. The mythology of Hinduism is filled with stories of war and violence, where negative traits such as jealousy, hatred, and revenge are elevated. This warlike nature became a central part of Hindu culture, shaping both social values and literature. As a result, love,

compassion, and equality were pushed to the margins of society, while war and domination were glorified.

**Christ: Different Ideals:** In contrast to Hinduism's glorification of power and war, Jesus Christ taught ideals of love, compassion, and service to the poor. He embraced the weak and rejected the notion that people should be judged by their birth or social status. Christ's teachings became the foundation for a society and literature that recognized the worth of even the most unfortunate members of society. Unlike Hindu gods, who often showed contempt for the lower castes, Christ offered love and redemption to everyone, regardless of their background.

**Sanskrit Literature:** The heroes in Sanskrit literature largely belong to the ruling classes, specifically the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. These characters and their lives are glorified in religious texts and literature, while the lives of other castes are largely ignored. As a result, Sanskrit literature became repetitive and narrow, focusing only on the upper classes and their concerns. This kind of literature was deeply committed to the varna system, making it an unsuitable foundation for Dalit literature, which seeks to represent the lives of the oppressed.

**Literature of the Saints:** During the period of Islamic rule in India, saint literature emerged to defend Hindu society. This literature, while significant, continued to uphold the varna system. Even though society was in a state of chaos, the literature remained committed to the oppressive caste system. The saints' teachings of devotion (bhakti) did not lead to social equality. Instead, they reinforced the idea that one's place in the caste system was divinely ordained, encouraging people to accept their suffering as a part of their fate.

**Advent of the British and of Science:** When the British arrived in India, they brought with them new knowledge, science, and technology. This began to change the social structure of Indian society. As the old systems started to collapse, new intellectual movements emerged. Writers, inspired by Western enlightenment, began to focus on social issues rather than just religious or spiritual matters. This period also saw the emergence of literature that portrayed the lives of women and the lower castes, who had previously been ignored in Indian writing.

**Who is a Shudra?** The author discusses how Shudras (members of the lowest caste) and Atishudras (the outcastes) began to appear in literature after being ignored for centuries. Prior to British rule, the Peshwas (a Brahmin-led ruling class) held control, and during their reign, Shudras were hardly ever mentioned in literature. When the British came to power, a lot changed. They brought new jobs, technologies, and ideas that began to weaken the rigid caste system, and as a result, the Brahmins were no longer as dominant as before.

For the first time in history, the Brahmin class began to split into two factions: reformists, who wanted to modernize society, and orthodox Brahmins, who wanted to stick to the traditional caste system. This division gave Shudras a bit of breathing space and allowed them to finally appear in literature. In this period, English novels, influenced by Christian ideas of compassion and love for the poor, began portraying the lives of weak and poor people. Indian writers were also beginning to explore similar themes. There was now some room for portraying the lives of the oppressed.

However, despite these changes, Shudras and Atishudras were still largely ignored by most Indian writers. Why? It wasn't because the writers lacked skill or talent. They certainly had the ability to write about the social issues of their time. The real problem was their deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and the religious systems they were brought up in. Writers of the time were conditioned by centuries of caste-based thinking, and this made it difficult for them to understand or relate to the pain and suffering of the lower castes.

There was also the issue of aesthetics, or "art for art's sake." Many writers of the time were focused on creating beautiful, refined literature. They believed that certain themes, like the suffering of Shudras, were too harsh or unpleasant to fit into their idea of what literature should be. As a result, the struggles of the lower castes were not seen as worthy of artistic representation. This explains why, even when the conditions were ripe for change, writers failed to notice or highlight the problems faced by the Shudras and Atishudras.

The contrast with English literature is clear. Christian writers were able to see and write about the weak and the poor because Jesus Christ, the son of God, had embraced the poor with love and compassion. Christ didn't see the poor as lesser beings. He didn't view poverty or suffering as punishment for sins from a past life. In contrast, Hindu religious literature had always justified the suffering of the lower castes as a result of their karma, or bad deeds in past lives. This belief system made it difficult for Hindu writers to show sympathy or compassion for the lower castes in their stories.

Thus, while English literature began to reflect the struggles of the poor and weak, Indian literature largely remained blind to the suffering of the Shudras and Atishudras. Hindu mythology, religious texts, and cultural values simply did not allow room for the idea that the lower castes deserved compassion or justice. As a result, the Shudras remained invisible in much of Indian literature, their suffering unacknowledged by the writers of the time.

**Ideals:** Christianity, influenced by Christ's teachings, allowed its writers and intellectuals to perceive the weak and poor with compassion. Christ didn't view the poor as inherently sinful, but rather embraced them with love and compassion. This allowed Christian writers to include the downtrodden in their literature. In contrast, Hindu writers were blinded by their religious and cultural values, which treated the lower castes with contempt. Hindu gods and saints never recognized the suffering of the Shudras and Atishudras, which is why these castes were excluded from Hindu literature.

**Blindness:** Hindu mythology and heroes failed to acknowledge the suffering of the lower castes. Since the gods and saints of Hinduism showed enmity toward the oppressed, Hindu literature had no place for the Shudras and Atishudras. Love, compassion, and fraternity were absent in the Hindu varna system, which kept the lower castes out of society and literature. Because of this, no efforts were made to uplift the Dalits or to inspire them to fight against their oppression.

**Had There Been Buddhism!** If Buddhism had remained a significant influence in Indian society, love, compassion, and rationalism would have played a more central role. Buddhist teachings would have fostered the development of institutions that served the poor and weak, similar to Christian schools and hospitals. Buddhism's rejection of spiritualism and its focus on rationality would have encouraged the growth of science and social progress. The spread of Buddhist ideals could have led to a society based on equality and democracy much earlier.

**National Enlightenment:** The author talks about a critical moment in India's history known as the national enlightenment. This was a period when various caste groups began to challenge the Hindu varna (caste) system. At the time, Indian society was becoming more aware of the injustices and inequalities caused by the caste system, and many movements arose to address these issues. However, while the Brahmins were often criticized, the Kshatriyas (the warrior caste) were just as responsible for maintaining the oppressive social structure because they held political power.

The Indian intelligentsia (the intellectual and educated class) should have been at the forefront of these movements. They should have united the different caste-based struggles into a larger movement for national liberation. This larger movement would have been focused not just on political independence but on social, economic, and political reform to create a more equal society. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Instead of leading the way toward a unified struggle, the intelligentsia divided the national movement into two separate parts: a political movement for independence and a social movement for caste reform.

Those who fought for social reform were often branded as traitors or accused of being aligned with the British colonial government. This division weakened the overall movement for change and slowed the progress of social reform. The national liberation movement became more focused on political independence than on addressing the deep social inequalities within India.

Instead of focusing on solving the real issues of inequality, caste, and poverty, the national movement became obsessed with glorifying the past. The intelligentsia started worshipping historical heroes and ancestors, turning the movement into something that celebrated India's past wars and victories. But this focus on the past was misguided. In ancient times, the common man was a slave, and the victories of kings and rulers didn't benefit ordinary people. The real identity and power of the common man only emerged in modern times, thanks to science, technology, and democracy.

The reason the Intelligentsia clung to the past was that it upheld the caste system, where they had power and privilege. In the past, Brahmins and Kshatriyas held all the religious and political power, and the intelligentsia (who often came from these castes) wanted to preserve this system. The industrial and scientific revolutions of modern times gave power to laborers and ordinary people, pushing the old ruling classes into a weaker position. But instead of accepting this new reality, the intelligentsia longed for the days when their ancestors were powerful rulers and gods.

Thinkers like Phule, Agarkar, Gokhale, and Ranade, who criticized the caste system and fought for the rights of the Shudras and Atishudras, were seen as enemies by the intelligentsia. These reformers demanded social, economic, and political change, but the dominant intellectual class pushed them aside, ensuring that their ideas remained secondary to the broader nationalist movement.

This was in stark contrast to Europe, where the intelligentsia had fought against oppressive religious and political authority to establish new ways of thinking, new science, and new technology. European intellectuals embraced revolutionary ideas, even at the cost of their lives, because they believed in progress and equality. They had no system like the caste system that gave them privilege based on birth, so they fought for a more equal society. In India, however, the intelligentsia was closely tied to the caste system, which benefited them, so they had no desire to fight against it.

The Indian intelligentsia wanted the benefits of modern science and technology but rejected the revolutionary ideas that came with them. They preferred to reform the caste system rather than

destroy it. This is why they resisted social democracy and kept the struggles for social reform separate from the national freedom movement. By doing this, they ensured that the freedom movement remained focused on political independence rather than on creating a more just and equal society.

The result of this division is that while India eventually gained political independence, many social problems, like untouchability and caste inequality, remain unsolved. The national movement failed to bring about true social, economic, and political reform. Dr. Ambedkar understood this and launched his own movement for social revolution and democracy, knowing that the mainstream national movement would not address the real issues of inequality and oppression.

Ambedkar's movement was an inevitable response to the suffering experienced by Dalits and other oppressed groups. His struggle represented the merging of deep compassion for the oppressed and righteous anger at the injustice they faced. This fusion of emotions gave rise to a new kind of revolution, one that sought to completely transform Indian society. Ambedkar's movement gave voice to the Dalits, who had been silent for centuries, and inspired them to rise up and ask, "Where is the enemy?" The answer, of course, was that the enemy was everywhere: in Indian traditions, customs, books, words, and minds.

At the same time, the national movement was losing momentum. Socialists and communists tried to make the national movement more focused on labor and the working class, but they failed. The movement remained dominated by feudal and capitalist forces, and many revolutionaries, like Manavendranath Roy, fell by the wayside. It was during this time that, for the first time, Shudras and Atishudras began to appear as heroes in Indian literature, though these characters did not fully express Ambedkar's radical ideas.

The problem was that the nationalist movement had not rejected the caste system. Caste continued to shape Indian society and literature. Even Marxist writers, who should have been more progressive, found it difficult to create characters that reflected Ambedkar's vision of a scientific and rational hero. Instead, they often depicted characters like Karna and Ekalavya, who fit more comfortably within the Hindu value system. These heroes, though courageous, were still tied to their fate and suffering within the caste system, unable to challenge it directly.

The national enlightenment was a missed opportunity for India to unite social and political movements into a powerful force for change. The Indian intelligentsia, bound by its ties to the caste system, failed to provide the necessary leadership to create a truly just and equal society.



Instead, they clung to the past and divided the movement, ensuring that many of India's most pressing social problems remain unresolved to this day.

**Negation and Affirmation:** In India, Hinduism has been the dominant force shaping society and culture. Its concepts from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other religious texts have influenced the minds of the majority of Indians, including non-Hindus. However, modern philosophies like democratic socialism, which promote liberty, equality, and fraternity, have no roots in Hinduism. Dalit literature, on the other hand, rejects the past traditions of inequality and draws inspiration from revolutionary world literature that advocates for socialism and the common man.

**Dalit Literature:** Dalit literature is not just about portraying the lives of the oppressed; it is about challenging the systems that create oppression. The caste-ridden society has historically viewed Dalits as contemptible, but Dalit literature embraces the identity of the oppressed to highlight the injustices they face. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the central figure in Dalit literature, embodying the fight against untouchability, caste distinctions, and inequality. His revolutionary ideals continue to shape Dalit literature, which aims to transform Indian society and create a future based on equality and justice.

### 2.2.3 Themes

**Social Inequality and Oppression:** The essay explains that social inequality began when people started owning property and created systems to control others. Those in power made rules that allowed them to keep control, making life unfair for the poor and marginalized. Dalits, the lowest group in the caste system, were especially affected by this, as they were treated as outcasts and oppressed for centuries.

**Caste System and Untouchability:** It discusses how the caste system divided people into fixed social groups, with some born into higher, more respected castes and others into lower, untouchable castes like the Dalits. This system was justified through religious beliefs, such as karma, which made people think their social position was a result of past actions, trapping them in their roles without a chance to improve.

**Religion and Power:** The essay shows how religion was used to support the power of the ruling class. For example, in Hinduism, the caste system was tied to religious beliefs, making it hard for people to challenge it. Any ideas that questioned the authority of the rulers or the caste system were often suppressed. Religion, therefore, played a key role in keeping people in their place and maintaining inequality.

**Glorification of War and Violence:** It explores how Hinduism often glorified war and warriors, turning their victories into religious celebrations. Many Hindu stories and festivals focus on battles, making war and power seem heroic and divine. This focus on violence and domination made it hard for society to embrace love, compassion, or equality, which were pushed aside in favor of war-like values.

**Failure of Traditional Indian Literature:** The essay critiques traditional Indian literature, especially Sanskrit texts, for focusing mainly on the lives of the ruling classes, such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The struggles of lower castes, like the Dalits, were ignored. This literature was narrow in its focus and did not represent the hardships faced by most of society, making it irrelevant for Dalit voices.

**Buddha's Compassion and Equality:** It highlights how Buddha tried to teach people to live with compassion and equality. Buddha saw the suffering caused by greed and inequality and tried to show a better way of living. He created communities where everyone was treated equally, but outside these groups, society continued to be unfair. His efforts to change the larger system of inequality did not succeed.

**Christianity's Focus on Compassion for the Poor:** The essay contrasts Hinduism with Christianity, showing that Jesus Christ's teachings were different. Christ embraced the poor and weak, treating everyone with love and compassion. Unlike Hindu gods, who often ignored or looked down on lower castes, Christ's message was one of equality, which influenced Christian literature to focus on the worth of all people, regardless of their background.

**The Emergence of Dalit Literature:** Dalit literature is highlighted as a powerful way for the oppressed to tell their stories. Unlike traditional Indian literature, Dalit literature focuses on the experiences and struggles of the marginalized, especially Dalits. It challenges the caste system and aims to bring about social change by giving a voice to those who have been ignored and oppressed for generations.

**Impact of British Colonialism on Indian Society:** The essay touches on how British rule introduced new ideas, such as science and technology, which started to change Indian society. Although these changes created new opportunities and ways of thinking, many writers still failed to represent the lower castes. However, this period also inspired some to focus on social issues, including the lives of the oppressed.

**Social Justice and Equality:** The essay ultimately advocates for a society where everyone is treated equally, without caste-based discrimination. Inspired by figures like Dr. Babasaheb

Ambedkar, Dalit literature fights for justice and a future where liberty, equality, and fraternity are the guiding values. It calls for the end of old traditions of inequality and the creation of a more just and compassionate society.

#### **2.2.4 Let Us Sum Up**

To sum up, the essay explains how social inequality and oppression began when humans started claiming property and establishing systems to maintain control over others. These systems, particularly the caste system, ensured that the powerful could dominate while the marginalized, especially Dalits, remained in a state of suffering. The structure of society was built to benefit the ruling class, and religion played a key role in justifying these divisions, making it difficult for those at the bottom to challenge their position.

Religion, especially Hinduism, reinforced these inequalities by linking them to spiritual beliefs like karma, which made people accept their social position as their fate from past lives. Traditional Indian literature, particularly Sanskrit texts, reflected this mindset by focusing mainly on the lives and concerns of the upper castes, ignoring the harsh realities faced by the lower castes. As a result, the struggles of the Dalits were left unrepresented, and inequality continued to thrive in society.

The essay also draws a comparison between Hinduism and other belief systems like Buddhism and Christianity. While Buddha's teachings emphasized compassion and equality, they didn't succeed in changing the broader social structures that upheld inequality. On the other hand, Christianity, through the teachings of Jesus Christ, embraced the poor and weak, promoting ideals of love and equality. This contrast helped shape Christian literature in a way that focused on the lives of the marginalized, unlike Hindu literature, which often glorified power and war.

Dalit literature arose as a voice for the oppressed, offering a stark contrast to the traditional Indian literary canon. It speaks from the perspective of those who have been marginalized, particularly Dalits, and challenges the caste system and other structures of inequality. Dalit writers aim to bring awareness to the injustices faced by the oppressed and advocate for a more equal and just society.

The essay calls for a future where society is based on principles of social justice, equality, and fraternity. It rejects the old traditions of caste-based oppression and looks towards a more just world, inspired by revolutionary thinkers like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dalit literature, with its focus on the lives of the marginalized, is seen as a crucial force in pushing society toward this ideal future.

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## 2.3 Learning Outcomes

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After studying the Unit, the learners should be able to:

- understand the historical origins of social inequality and oppression, recognizing how property ownership and power dynamics have shaped societal structures.
- explain the significance of the caste system and how it has contributed to the marginalization of groups, particularly Dalits, throughout history.
- gain insights into how religion, particularly Hinduism, has been used to justify social hierarchies and maintain the status quo of inequality.
- analyze traditional Indian literature, recognizing its limitations in representing the experiences and struggles of lower castes.
- differentiate between various religious and philosophical responses to social inequality, specifically contrasting the teachings of Buddha and Jesus Christ with those of Hinduism.
- appreciate the emergence of Dalit literature as a vital movement that challenges oppressive social systems and gives voice to the marginalized.
- identify key figures, such as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and understand their contributions to the fight for social justice and equality in India.
- evaluate the impact of British colonialism on Indian society and how it influenced new ideas about social structure and representation.
- recognize the importance of advocating for social justice, equality, and fraternity, and how these principles can lead to a more inclusive society.
- develop the ability to engage with and discuss contemporary issues related to caste, inequality, and social justice, informed by historical and literary perspectives.

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## 2.4 Glossary

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- **Bhakti:** A devotional form of worship in Hinduism that emphasizes love and devotion to a personal god, often associated with the teachings of saints.
- **Brahmin:** The highest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system, often associated with priests and scholars.

- **Caste System:** A social hierarchy in India that divides people into different groups based on their birth, occupation, and social status.
- **Compassion:** A deep awareness of the suffering of others, coupled with a desire to alleviate that suffering.
- **Dalit:** A term used to describe people from the lowest castes in India, historically marginalized and oppressed within the caste system.
- **Karma:** A belief in Hinduism that a person's actions in this life or previous lives determine their social position and future fate.
- **Revolutionary Literature:** Writings that challenge existing social norms and advocate for significant changes in society, often inspired by social movements.
- **Sangha:** A community of monks in Buddhism that represents equality and compassion, offering an alternative to the societal norms of oppression.
- **Social Justice:** The concept of creating a fair and equal society where individuals have equal rights and opportunities, free from discrimination.
- **Untouchability:** A practice within the caste system that discriminates against Dalits and others considered "unclean," often leading to social exclusion.

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## 2.5 Sample Questions

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### 2.5.1 Objective Questions

1. What is the main focus of Dalit literature?
  - a) The lives of upper castes
  - b) The experiences of marginalized groups**
  - c) Historical events
  - d) Religious rituals
2. How did the caste system justify inequality?
  - a) Through scientific evidence
  - b) By linking it to karma**
  - c) By promoting democracy
  - d) Through education
3. Which figure is central to the fight against untouchability in Dalit literature?
  - a) Mahatma Gandhi

- b) Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar**
  - c) Buddha
  - d) Jesus Christ
4. What does the term "untouchability" refer to?
- a) A practice of embracing all castes
  - b) Discrimination against certain groups**
  - c) A form of social equality
  - d) A religious celebration
5. Which religion is contrasted with Hinduism in the essay for its focus on compassion for the poor?
- a) Buddhism**
  - b) Jainism
  - c) Sikhism
  - d) Islam
6. What is the significance of the Sangha in Buddhism?
- a) A place for warriors
  - b) A community promoting inequality
  - c) A community emphasizing equality and compassion**
  - d) A religious text
7. How did British colonialism impact Indian society?
- a) It reinforced traditional structures
  - b) It introduced new ideas and intellectual movements**
  - c) It ended the caste system
  - d) It had no significant effect
8. What does "social justice" aim to achieve?
- a) Increased wealth for the upper class
  - b) A fair and equal society for all**
  - c) Support for religious traditions
  - d) Preservation of caste distinctions
9. In traditional Indian literature, which groups were often overlooked?
- a) Upper castes
  - b) Women and lower castes**

- c) Wealthy families
- d) Religious leaders

10. What is the main theme of Dalit literature?

- a) Celebration of the caste system
- b) Representation of oppressed voices and social change**
- c) Exploration of historical events
- d) Promotion of war and violence

### **2.5.2 Short Answer Questions**

1. What role did religion play in maintaining the caste system in India?
2. How does Dalit literature differ from traditional Indian literature?
3. Who was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and what was his significance in the fight against untouchability?
4. What is the concept of karma, and how did it affect people's views on social status?
5. How did British colonialism influence new ideas about social structure in India?

### **2.5.3 Long Answer Questions**

1. Discuss the historical origins of social inequality in India as presented in the essay. How did property ownership and power dynamics contribute to the caste system?
2. Evaluate the role of Dalit literature in challenging oppressive social structures. How does it give voice to the experiences of the marginalized?
3. Explain the significance of the caste system in shaping Indian society. How has it affected social relationships and opportunities for different groups?

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## 2.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Anand, Mulk Raj. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature*. Gyan Books, 1992.

Bagul, Baburao. "Dalit Literature is but Human Literature." In Arujun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Orient Longman. Hyderabad, 1992.

Joshi, Barbara R. *Untouchable: Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. Zed Books, 1986.

Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications, 1994.

Samaddara, Ranabira, and Ghanshyam Shah. *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Sage Publications, 2001.



## **Unit-3: Bandhumadhav: ‘The Poisoned Bread’**

### **Structure**

**3.0** Introduction

**3.1** Objectives

**3.2** Bandhumadhav: ‘The Poisoned Bread’

**3.2.1** About Bandhu Madhav

**3.2.2** An Overview of the Mahar Community

**3.2.3** Summary of the Text

**3.2.4** Critical Analysis

**3.2.5** Significance of the title ‘The Poisoned Bread’

**3.3** Learning Outcomes

**3.4** Glossary

**3.5** Sample Questions

**3.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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### **3.0 Introduction**

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Bandhu Madhav's "Poisoned Bread" is a short story that was originally written in Marathi and later translated into English. This powerful story is taken from the collection "Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature," edited by Arjuna Dangle. It vividly portrays the struggles of two generations who are trapped in a rigid caste system. The stench of injustice permeates the air as we delve into the harsh realities of social injustice in India. "The Poisoned Bread" is a poignant tale that boldly sheds light on the struggles of the Dalit community. The story narrates the plight of the Dalits through the two central characters, Mhadava, a young Mahar Dalit boy, and his grandfather Yetalya. It portrays the hardships they face due to their caste, including forced labour and exploitation.

"The Poisoned Bread" effectively portrays a generational divide by presenting contrasting perspectives of two characters, Mhadava and Yetalya. The author skillfully illustrates the differences in thought, beliefs, and opinions of these two characters, which helps to highlight the challenges that arise due to the generational gap. The story is about people who are affected by the caste hierarchy, and their experiences are set against the backdrop of forced labour.

"The Poisoned Bread" is a story of two servants, Mhadeva and Yetalya, who work for an upper-caste landlord and receive stale bread barely fit for consumption. Mhadeva rebels against this treatment, while Yetalya accepts it with resignation. The title serves as a metaphor for oppression and represents the dehumanizing treatment that plagues the Dalit community. Yetalya's death serves as a turning point for Mhadeva, who decides to fight for a better future, free from the burden of the "poisoned bread." His rebellion hints at the potential for change and the importance of education in breaking free from the shackles of oppression. The story is a call to action, compelling us to confront uncomfortable truths about social inequality and igniting a fire for social justice.

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### **3.1 Objectives**

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The objectives of this Unit are to:

- comprehend cultural awareness.
- recognize symbolism and literary techniques employed in the lesson to enhance the reader's understanding of literature and its role in social commentary.
- scrutinize empathy and social justice by analyzing the characters in the story, their motivations, and responses to adversity.
- evaluate the significance of education in breaking free from the vices of poverty due to caste discrimination.
- explore Dalit consciousness and awakening by examining the conflict between new awakening and traditional belief systems in Indian society.
- analyse and understand the historical context of Dalit movements.

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### **3.2 Bandhumadhav: 'The Poisoned Bread'**

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#### **3.2.1 About Bandhu Madhav**

Madhav Dadaji Modak, also known as Bandhu Madhav (November 3, 1927 - October 7, 1997), was an influential Marathi writer whose work focused on the lives of Dalits in India. His stories were specifically crafted to raise awareness and ignite the consciousness of Scheduled Castes in the country. Modak's work was published in periodicals founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, including Janta and Prabuddha Bharat.

From a young age, Bandhu Madhav was passionate about writing, and he eventually quit his job to dedicate himself to empowering oppressed communities and educating them about their rights. To achieve this goal, he established 'Kala Pathak,' a troupe of artists who actively worked in the Sangli, Kolhapur, and Satara districts.

Madhav's powerful and uplifting literature was recognized in 1956 by the Maharashtra Dalit Literature Association, and he continues to be celebrated today for his unrelenting commitment to social change.

Madhav has written over a hundred stories, here are a few of his published works:

1. Aamhihi Manasa Aahot (We too are humans!)
2. Petlele Aakaash (A Sky on Fire)
3. Shahir Bhahu Phakkad (Poet Bhau Phakkad)
4. Ramai
5. Vagsamrat
6. Vatani Katha
7. Dharmatrasambandhi Katha

#### **Bandhu Madhav's contribution to literature:**

Several figures, including Annabhau Sathe, Bandhu Madhav, N. R. Shinde, Kisan Baguji Bansod, Namdev Vatkar, C. B. Khairmode, and the poet Deenbandhu, were pioneers and celebrities in Dalit literature. But among them, Bandhu Madhav stands out. He was a highly active, intelligent, and influential supporter of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's fight for social change.

Throughout his literary work, Bandhu Madhav has consistently been guided by the motto, "Tell a slave that he is [a] slave, and he will revolt...". His unwavering commitment to disseminating Ambedkarite principles among Dalit households is evident.

Bandhu Madhav is renowned for his skillful storytelling, which sought to bring attention to the challenges faced by Dalits. His writing was characterized by a strong aversion to injustice, a dedication to amplifying the voices of the oppressed, and a commitment to empowering the Dalit community. Drawing from the real-life experiences of Dalits, including those of his own family, his stories were both captivating and thought-provoking. Bandhu Madhav aimed to inspire Dalits to take action and have faith in their own abilities through his writing.

Bandhu Madhav's literature inspires Dalits to demand their rightful place in society. His unique perspective and dedication to self-respect and dignity make his work a source of pride. It empowers his community to stand up against oppression and take control of their destiny. Despite

facing criticism, he remained steadfast in his mission to empower his community through literature.

Bandhu Madhav is a talented writer who captures the challenges faced by the Dalit community through his genuine and poignant narratives. He amplifies the voices of the marginalized and sheds artistic light on their daily experiences. His contributions to Marathi literature are invaluable and deserving of greater recognition.

Bandhu Madhav is considered to be the founder of Marathi Dalit literature as he was the first to create and popularize it. On December 16, 1956, he was scheduled to be honored by the Dalit Sahitya Sanghatana as a distinguished writer, in the presence of Dr. Ambedkar himself. Unfortunately, Dr. Ambedkar passed away on December 6 of that same year, leading to the cancellation of the event. However, the fact that Dr. Ambedkar had planned to attend shows how highly regarded Bandhu Madhav's literature was during that time.

Bandhu Madhav's literary contributions aimed to empower the oppressed and inspire them to stand up for their rights. His work teaches the value of humanity to the oppressed and undoubtedly will be recognized and celebrated for his timeless literary works. In short, Bandhu Madhav's writing has had a lasting impact on the Dalit community, empowering them and inspiring generations to come.

***Check your progress:***

1. Marathi writer Madhav Dadaji Modak is also known as Bandhu Madhav. (True / False)
2. Bandhu Madhav was scheduled to be honored by the Dalit Sahitya Sanghatana as a distinguished writer, in the presence of Dr. Ambedkar himself. (True / False)

### **3.2.2 An Overview of the Mahar Community**

#### **i. Origins and Early Settlement:**

The Mahar community are indigenous people of Maharashtra, a state located in western India. Their rich historical and cultural legacy is worth exploring in detail. According to legend, Goddess Parvati rescued Mahamuni from the banks of the Ganga River, and the Mahar community traces their lineage to him. Despite facing displacement due to invasions by the Aryans, the Mahar community has made significant contributions to the history of Maharashtra, which deserve recognition. The term "Mahar" likely signifies greatness or significance in ancient times,

emphasizing their importance in society. The origin of their name is debatable, with various theories suggesting it could be derived from "Maha Rashtra" (people of the great country), "maha ari" (great enemy), or "mrit har" (he who takes away the dead animals). Historically, Mahars played significant roles, and their myths reinforced their status as "sons of the soil," implying original ownership of the land. Therefore, gaining an in-depth understanding of the Mahar community's history and culture can help us appreciate their significant role in shaping Maharashtra's past and present.

The Mahar community is believed to be divided into twelve and a half-castes, but according to Reginald Edward Enthoven, there are fifty-three endogamous divisions. The Somvanshi clan is the largest and considers themselves superior. Hindu tradition explains that Mahars were originally night rovers, whom Brahma transformed into humans. In the Nasik region, Mahar's founder is believed to be Svarup Somaji from Brahma's footsole.

#### **ii. Cultural Significance:**

The Mahar community is believed to be among the earliest inhabitants of the Marathi-speaking region, with a long and rich history. The term "Mahar" has been associated with various meanings, including "great warrior" or "big house," but it primarily signifies their connection to Maharashtra. Chokhamela, a fourteenth-century poet-saint, was an Untouchable Mahar who played a crucial role in the devotional religious tradition and composed hymns that are still popular today. Eknath, a Brahman poet in the sixteenth century, wrote poems as if he were a Mahar, highlighting their importance in everyday life and their contributions to society. In the seventeenth century, Mahars served in the armies of Maratha king Shivaji, and later, they joined the British armed forces, where they faced discrimination and segregation.

#### **iii. Conversion to Buddhism:**

Most members of the Mahar community followed Bharat Ratna Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and converted to Buddhism in the mid-twentieth century as a form of protest against the caste system and discrimination. This conversion to Buddhism was a significant event that marked a rejection of their previous social status and a commitment to equality and human rights. Mahars also worked as village watchmen, messengers, and removers of cattle carcasses, a hereditary role that was often stigmatized.

#### **iv. Historical Contributions:**

The Mahar community has made significant contributions to literature, religion, and social justice movements in India. Chokhamela and other Mahar poets have composed hymns and songs

that reflect their religious beliefs and social struggles, inspiring generations of activists and artists. During the era of Islamic rule, the Mahars demonstrated their unwavering commitment as soldiers by serving in various armies, including those of the Deccan Sultanates, Bahmani Sultanate, and the Mughals. Their contributions were invaluable and played a significant role in the success of these armies. During the British colonial period, Mahars played a crucial role in the Indian nationalist movement, advocating for equal rights and representation. In the post-independence era, Mahars have continued to fight for social justice and human rights, challenging caste discrimination and working towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

The Mahars, an oppressed Indian community, have contributed to literature, religion, and social justice despite discrimination. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Mahar, was vital in India's independence and constitution. Their commitment to equality and human rights is shown by their conversion to Buddhism.

#### **v. The life, food, and work culture of Mahars:**

The Mahars are a significant caste among the untouchable castes in Maharashtra, although they have always held a low status within the Hindu caste structure. Despite this, the Mahars have played an important role in the socio-economic and religious aspects of the caste structure over the centuries. It was once said "Wherever there is a town, there is a Mahar quarter," according to Robertson. Regrettably, the social status of the Mahars was one of severe degradation. They were considered impure and forced to live in Mahar quarters (Maharwadas) outside of the village. The village barber would not shave them, and they were prohibited from using the village well. They were also required to drag thorns to erase their footprints and carry an earthen pot for their spittle.

Even their shadow was thought to be unclean, and their touch was considered defiled. The Mahars were relegated to menial occupations and begging for leftover food. The temple authorities persecuted them, and everyone kept their distance from them. Any food touched by them was deemed impure. The poems of the Mahar poet Chokhamela, who lived in the fourteenth century, offer insight into the lives of the Mahars during that time.

Jayashree Gokhale shared a powerful quote from Chokhamela's 14th-century poem, which boldly challenged the oppressive caste system. The poem goes like this: "Johar maybap johar/I am your Maher's Mahar/I am hungry/for your leftovers/I am hopeful/I am the servants of your slaves/For your leaving/I have brought the basket". The greeting 'Johar maybap johar' was used by the Mahar community to assert their identity to their masters and landlords. For them, it was a statement of defiance against the unjust caste system. It was a punishable offense for a Mahar to

enter a temple, which highlights the deep-rooted social inequalities and discrimination based on birth.

**vi. Work culture:**

The Mahars were treated as slaves by the Marathas and were forced to work in the fields. In Maharashtra, the Mahars had social and religious duties to perform, and they were also entitled to certain rights and privileges in connection with those duties. To better understand these rights and duties of the Mahars, it is best to examine the Jajmani system, which was widely practiced throughout northern India. The system in Maharashtra was similar to the Balutedar system, where the Mahars were accommodated in the form of village servants with various duties to perform. As an important part of the Balutedar system, they were entitled to certain rights and privileges, including a share of the agricultural produce called baluta or hak. In some cases, they were rewarded with Vatan land for their services, but the extent of their freedom to hold the land is uncertain.

The Mahars were a community of lower caste in a village who served the people in various ways. They assisted the village Patil with official and personal tasks, acted as personal servants to the villagers, and helped the smaller cultivators. Men from the community served as watandars or village servants, and carried out various tasks such as settling land disputes, carrying wood to the burning ground, disposing of dead animals, and so on. It was a custom for the Mahars to eat the flesh of the cattle carcasses they dragged from the village, which later became an issue of concern for Mahar reformers.

The Mahars were known for their expertise in boundary matters, which was highly valuable in preventing land disputes. According to Jayashree Gokhale, their proficiency in boundary issues suggests that the Mahars were the original inhabitants of the land. The Mahar community also performed a variety of duties as village watchmen, called Vesakara. They were responsible for protecting the village and its crops, as well as carrying out various tasks such as delivering official government messages to different villages, conveying death notices, sweeping village roads, and repairing village wells. Whenever a stranger arrived in the village, they would first encounter a Mahar, who acted as a gatekeeper.

The Mahars were considered outcastes and deprived of entry into Hindu temples, socially untouchable, and economically dependent on others. The conditions they lived in were oppressive, and they suffered from indignity, injustice, and deprivation. The higher castes suppressed them in every way possible, and their treatment was inhuman.

### 3.2.3 Summary of the Text

"The Poisoned Bread" is a short story originally written in Marathi by Bandhu Madhav. The story is translated into English by Ramesh Dnyate. The story follows the narrator's reflection on a past encounter with their grandfather, Yetalya Aja, during the harvest time. The duo visits a threshing floor where they witness the scene of birds flying in the sky and ears of corn scattered on the ground. Yetalya Aja hopes to find work winnowing and treading corn or perhaps beg for food from nearby farms. However, their encounter takes an unexpected turn when they meet Bapu Patil, a man who is tidying a pile of corn. Despite Patil's insolence and derogatory remarks about Yetalya Aja's lower caste status, the grandfather remains humble and refers to Patil as his master. Yetalya Aja asserts the importance of caste and religion even as the narrator challenges Patil's beliefs.

As tensions rise, Patil belittles the narrator's education and status. Fearing Patil's anger, Yetalya Aja pleads for forgiveness, emphasizing the narrator's youth and inexperience. Alone and contemplative, the narrator obeys Patil's commands, suppressing their anger as they labour.

The story beautifully captures themes of caste, pride, and resilience, leaving readers with much to ponder. The story revolves around a heated argument between the narrator, who hails from Sangli, and Patil, a landowner. Their disagreement centres on the caste system. The narrator firmly believes in the equality of all people, while Patil insists that the caste hierarchy is divinely ordained. Despite the narrator's grandfather's attempts to calm the situation, the narrator remains angry.

Suddenly, Bapu Patil arrives along with Tuka Magdoom, taking the narrator by surprise. Patil starts scolding the narrator and asking why their grandfather, Yetalya Aja, is not present. Insults are exchanged as Patil and Magdoom blame Grandpa, and the narrator tries to intervene. Patil's anger intensifies, and despite Grandpa's emotional plea, he refuses to acknowledge their efforts. The group continues working under Patil's harsh supervision.

After a tiring day, Patil refuses to give Grandpa any jowar, which leaves him disheartened. On their way home, they come across stale bread crumbs near the oxen's pen, which Grandpa excitedly collects. Despite the difficult circumstances, Grandpa blesses Patil before leaving. The narrator, who is bitter, mocks their situation, but Grandpa reflects on their plight. The narrator suggests giving up their hereditary land rights as a way out, a decision that Grandpa recognizes as challenging yet potentially transformative. Grandpa also expresses concern for the survival of the Mahars without it.



The narrator's maternal uncle brings a doctor from Sangli to examine Grandpa, who is suffering from dysentery and vomiting. The doctor carefully examines Grandpa and identifies the cause of his illness as the toxin from the rancid crumbs of bread mixed with cow dung that he consumed. Despite the doctor's best efforts, Grandpa's condition worsens, and he feels hopeless about his situation. In his final moments, he imparts valuable advice to the narrator, urging them to seek education and reject the poisonous bread associated with their caste. Grandpa's death triggers a collective outpouring of grief from the family, who mourn the loss of their beloved patriarch. Remembering Grandpa's words about the harmful effects of the bread, the narrator vows to fight against the injustices faced by their community. Reflecting on Grandpa's wisdom and the pain of his loss, the narrator's heart still aches during harvest time, recalling the events of twelve years ago.

### **3.2.4 Critical Analysis**

"The Poisoned Bread" is a poignant literary masterpiece that delves into the struggles faced by individuals who are trapped in the web of hereditary land rights. The story revolves around the Mahar family, and it revisits a haunting incident from their past that left an indelible mark on their lives. The narrative explores the complex relationships between the characters, and how their lives are intertwined with the land they call home.

One of the central themes of the story is the significance of land in an individual's life, as it stands for dignity and necessity. The author sheds light on the plight of Dalits, who are often denied access to land and livelihood due to their social status. The issue of landlessness remains a deeply entrenched problem that has far-reaching consequences on the lives of Dalits.

The narrator reflects on this memory, which continues to cast a shadow over the present. The following passage eloquently captures the emotional weight of that moment:

"The memory of that incident still haunts me to this day. The smell of the poisoned bread, the look of horror on their faces, and the feeling of helplessness that engulfed us all. It was a moment that changed everything, and I often wonder what would have happened if we had acted differently. But the truth is, we were all trapped in a system that was designed to keep us down. And until we address the issue of landlessness, we cannot hope to empower Dalits to break free from their circumstances and attain equality, freedom, and development."

"...and the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest..." (p.175, "The Poisoned Bread")

The bird serves as a powerful metaphor, evoking both freedom and restlessness. It whirls in the sky, much like the Dalits' prolonged wait for liberation—a yearning to soar unencumbered and nourished. "The Poisoned Bread" resonates with the struggle for emancipation and the quest for a better future.

The story tells the tale of Yetalya Aja, a Mahar who faced prolonged oppression from the upper caste. Despite his difficult circumstances, Yetalya Aja silently accepts his fate, without showing any signs of dissent. He resigns himself to a submerged existence, keeping his aspirations at bay. He also refrains from involving his city-bred grandson, Mhadeva, in the difficult tasks of winnowing and treading on the threshing floor. As members of the Dalit community, they lead marginalized lives and are often subjected to social ostracism. Encounters with them are seen as a bad omen, as reflected in Babu Patil's response. Yetalya Aja does not resist this insult, showing the passive acceptance that has been ingrained within the Dalit community due to societal conditioning. This passivity stems from deeply ingrained false notions that have permeated their consciousness, inhibiting their inclination towards resistance. The story also highlights the unjust blame placed on Dalits for the drying of the Chandrabhaga River, likening them to mere footwear. Babu Patil's response reinforces the rigid social hierarchy, suppressing their right to rebellion. Mhadeva, however, questions the legitimacy of the hierarchical order, challenging the concept of fixed societal positions. "...even if a Mahar or a Mang gets educated, no one will ever call him a Brahmin. A Mahar is a Mahar even if he passes L.L.B and becomes a barrister" (p.169, "The Poisoned Bread")

This text sheds light on the oppressive social order enforced by religious decrees, perpetuating caste-based discrimination and inequality. "The Poisoned Bread" delves into the awakened yet suppressed consciousness of Dalits, revealing their struggle against upper-caste dominance and exploitation. Although education has empowered a new generation of Dalits, their efforts are often thwarted by individuals like Babu Patil, who dismiss their education, asserting that even an educated Mahar or Mang will never be considered a Brahmin. The protagonist, Mhadeva, attempts to challenge Patil but ultimately succumbs to his grandfather's admonishment. Despite his strong inclination to revolt, Babu Patil's intolerance stifles any retaliation. This story portrays the distressing reality faced by Dalits, highlighting their hunger and lack of freedom. "But after we had toiled throughout the day Babu Patil did not give Grandpa even a few measures of jowar. Grandpa was crestfallen." ("The Poisoned Bread")

The denial of food by Bapu Patil has exacerbated the plight of the laborers, who are now resorting to consuming stale and contaminated bread to satisfy their hunger. The Dalit community, who have long been marginalized and discriminated against, are constantly subjected to social and political insensitivity, resulting in their sustained oppression. Despite some indications of resistance, the lack of internal backing makes the pursuit of a caste-free society appear unachievable. The absence of internal support serves as a stark reminder of the marginalized and oppressed status of the Dalit community, depriving them of the opportunity to envision a society that is free of caste divisions and achieve real freedom.

The psychology of passive submission to the prevalent situations faced by Dalits stems from the deeply ingrained custom of deeming them as “untouchables.” Despite the passage of time, these accursed customs persist. Notably, Yetalya Aja could have resisted Bapu Patil’s mistreatment, but his pessimism held him back. He expressed: “I too want to retaliate and fight against the humiliation and injustice they heap upon us. But, my boy, I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering.” (p.172, “The Poisoned Bread”)

This sense of helplessness arises from a lack of recognition as human beings and the entrapment caused by hereditary land rights. It remains unrealized that Dalits could also serve as vehicles for revolution, change, consciousness-raising, struggle, and social commitment: “...never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of Mahars. The poisonous bread will finally kill the humaneness of man...” (p.174, "The Poisoned Bread")

The protagonist of the story has grown up and received an education in an urban setting, allowing them to understand the struggles and challenges that their community faces. They advocate for their grandfather to break free from the bondage of land ownership and cease relying on the upper class for sustenance. They believe that accepting scraps perpetuates their enslavement. Unfortunately, when the family is forced to consume bread contaminated with dung and urine, Yetalya Aja dies from food poisoning, symbolizing the toxic societal conditions created by the privileged. Nonetheless, the grandfather's final words to his grandson offer a glimmer of hope, urging him to prioritize education and strive to liberate the Dalit community from their oppressive circumstances.

Yetalya Aja, a Mahar, understood the predicament faced by his community due to hereditary land rights. Despite having an education and an urban background, he felt helpless. His grandson, Mhadava, awakened a new perspective—they should break free from land bondage and

stop relying on upper-class sustenance that perpetuated their servitude. The family even resorted to consuming dung and urine-smear bread discarded by oxen. Tragically, Yetalya Aja died of food poisoning, metaphorically representing the poisonous conditions created by societal privilege. His final words to Mhadeva offered hope: “Never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Seek education and liberate the Mahars from this cursed bread. The poisonous bread will ultimately erode humanity”

The key to change in the situation and consciousness of Dalits lies in realizing their dreams and transforming their visions into reality. Inspiration and persuasion alone cannot promise this transformation. The act of passively accepting hopelessness and submitting to existing circumstances is symbolized by the consumption of poisonous bread, which perpetuates their suffering.

However, recognizing these issues can lead to liberation. It not only saves them from victimization but also guides society towards a necessary tradition of tolerance and acceptance for Dalits. By challenging the tradition of social exclusion, we can preserve humanity and help Dalits achieve their rightful place in society.

***Check your progress:***

1. "The Poisoned Bread" is a short story originally written in Marathi by Bandhu Madhav, and translated into English by Ramesh Dnyate. (True / False)
2. Yetalya Aja died of food poisoning, metaphorically representing the poisonous conditions created by societal privilege. (True / False)

### **3.2.5 Significance of the title ‘The Poisoned Bread’**

In literature, the metaphorical meaning of "poison bread" can vary depending on the context of the story. However, 'poison' often symbolizes betrayal, deceit, or manipulation. Just as bread is a staple food that nourishes and sustains, Poisoned bread symbolizes the perversion of something wholesome, leading to harm. This statement delves into the dual nature of seemingly ordinary objects, using bread as a metaphor for both nourishment and corruption.

#### **1. Bread as Nourishment:**

Bread has been a dietary staple across cultures for centuries. It represents sustenance, comfort, and basic survival. Whether it's a warm loaf fresh from the oven or a simple slice in a sandwich, bread provides essential nutrients and energy.

Metaphorically, bread embodies the simple pleasures of life—the everyday moments that sustain us emotionally and physically. It symbolizes stability, routine, and the familiar.

## **2. Poison Bread as Symbolism:**

The notion of bread contaminated with harmful substances, whether literal poison or metaphorical toxicity, introduces a darker twist.

Symbolically, poison bread represents the corruption of something inherently good. It signifies betrayal, deceit, and hidden dangers. Just as a seemingly harmless loaf can harbor poison, aspects of life that appear bounteous may conceal harmful consequences.

The spoiled bread in the tale serves as a symbol of the sustenance offered by the caste system, providing no genuine nourishment or hope. Eating poisonous bread is a metaphor for surrendering to existing circumstances and losing hope. The story serves as a warning about passively accepting negative situations. The characters struggle to survive and are denied opportunities and dignity. The protagonist's grandfather was unable to recognize that submitting to the upper caste would never promise him a better future but would instead jeopardize his life.

## **3. Metaphorical Interpretations:**

**Symbol of betrayal:** Within the narrative, the toxic bread serves as a symbol of the betrayal of trust from those we hold close. The narrator and his grandfather both experienced this betrayal at the hands of Patil, who refused to share even a small portion of food despite their deserving it after working hard. This metaphorical representation of food poisoning highlights the creation of a harmful environment by the privileged class in society.

**False Promises:** In the story "Poisoned Bread", the poisoned bread symbolizes false promises and illusions. The protagonist, Yetalya, hopes to receive some extra grain for his hard work, but instead is met with humiliation and ridicule. Eventually, he is killed by the poisoned bread. The story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of trusting in promises that are too good to be true.

**Moral Decay:** "When institutions or values that are meant to sustain society become corrupted, they can be compared to poison bread. In the story, the Dalit characters are stuck in a vicious cycle of oppression, which is perpetuated by the upper castes who keep them reliant on the scraps of bread they provide. This is a clear example of how the caste system perpetuates inequality and prevents individuals from achieving their full potential. The moral decay is evident through the characters of the upper caste, who fail to provide even the necessities of life to the Dalits.

The portrayal of poison bread has been a recurring theme in literature, appearing in fairy tales such as Snow White's poisoned apple and allegorical works. This symbolism prompts reflection on the duality of existence, reminding us that even the simplest things can harbour hidden depths. Our perception and discernment determine whether we encounter nourishment or poison.

The metaphor of poisoned bread sheds light on the psychological toll of the caste system on those trapped within it. The characters in the story have resigned themselves to their fate, internalizing their oppression to the point where meager scraps of bread are their only option. This tragic depiction reflects how the caste system strips individuals of their dignity and self-respect.

Overall, "The Poisoned Bread" offers a powerful critique of a system that perpetuates oppression and inequality. This metaphor underscores the hopelessness and despair that the characters experience and serves as a call to action to dismantle the caste system and create a more just and equitable society. We must work together to break the cycle of oppression and ensure that everyone has equal opportunities and access to resources, regardless of their caste or social status.

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### 3.3 Learning Outcomes

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After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- recognize social injustice and oppression within communities.
- empathize with and understand the perspective of the Dalit community.
- analyze power dynamics and their impact on marginalized groups.
- explore themes of resilience and resistance in the face of adversity.
- consider ethical implications of societal issues.
- recognize the metaphorical significance of literature.
- appreciate the importance of education in promoting social justice.
- develop a determination to fight against social injustice and oppression.

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### 3.4 Glossary

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- *Johar Maybap Johar* is the synonym of Hayat, it is how the low-caste people used to greet the high-caste and high-class people by bowing down before them and offering a namaskar using their right hand. Maybap refers to mother and father.

- *Balutedar system*: the village servants in medieval Maharashtra were known as balutedars and the wages or grain-share which they received for their services to the members of the village community was called baluta.
- *Chokhamela* was a poet and saint from Maharashtra, India who lived during the 14th century. He belonged to the lower Mahar caste and is known for his devotional poetry in Marathi language, primarily addressed to Vitthal, a form of Vishnu. Chokhamela's compositions challenged social norms and caste discrimination, earning him respect despite facing oppression.

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### 3.5 Sample Questions

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#### 3.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Who is the author of the story "Poisoned Bread,"? \_\_\_\_\_ . (**Arjun Dangle**)
2. What are the two main characters in the story? \_\_\_\_\_ . (**Yetalya and Mhadava**)
3. Were the grandfather and the grandson given grain for their hard work? (**No**)
4. What is the primary setting of "The Poisoned Bread"?
  - a. A bustling city
  - b. A remote village**
  - c. A dystopian future
  - d. A fictional kingdom
5. What is the central conflict of "The Poisoned Bread"?
  - a. The protagonist's struggle to find employment
  - b. The community's fight against a corrupt authority
  - c. The moral dilemma surrounding poisoned bread**
  - d. The protagonist's romantic relationship with another character
6. What is the significance of the poisoned bread in the story?
  - a. It serves as a symbol of hope and prosperity
  - b. It represents the greed and corruption of those in power**
  - c. It acts as a cure for a deadly disease affecting the village
  - d. It symbolizes the protagonist's journey towards self-discovery
7. How does the poisoned bread affect the protagonist's life?
  - a. It brings them fame and recognition in the community

- b. It leads to their arrest and imprisonment
  - c. It improves their financial situation significantly
  - d. None of the above**
8. How do other characters in the story react to the discovery of the poisoned bread?
- a. They ignore it and continue with their daily lives
  - b. They blame the protagonist for the situation
  - c. They rally together to find a solution**
  - d. They exploit it for personal gain
9. How does the story's resolution impact the reader's understanding of its themes?
- a. It reinforces the theme of justice prevailing in the end
  - b. It highlights the consequences of the protagonist's actions
  - c. It leaves the reader questioning the morality of the characters**
  - d. It offers a clear resolution to all conflicts presented in the story
10. Which of the following best describes the narrative style of "The Poisoned Bread"?
- a. Stream-of-consciousness
  - b. Third-person omniscient**
  - c. Epistolary
  - d. First-person perspective

### 3.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. What is the significance of the title, "Poisoned Bread?"
2. Who are the two central characters in "Poisoned Bread?"
3. What is the generational divide presented in the story, and how is it portrayed?
4. What is the significance of education in the story, and how does it relate to the theme of social justice?
5. Explore the character development of the protagonist throughout the story?

### 3.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Analyse the theme of societal injustice as depicted in "The Poisoned Bread." How do the characters' actions and the author's narrative choices contribute to the exploration of this theme?



2. Discuss the significance of the poisoned bread as a symbol in the story. How does it represent larger societal issues and moral dilemmas faced by the characters?
3. Discuss the author's commentary on power dynamics and oppression in "The Poisoned Bread." How do these themes manifest within the narrative, and what commentary does the story offer on systems of control and resistance?

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### 3.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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## **Unit-4: Kumud Pawde: ‘The Story of My Sanskrit’**

### **Structure:**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

#### **4.1 Objectives**

#### **4.2 Kumud Pawde: ‘The Story of My Sanskrit’**

##### **4.2.1 About Kumud Pawde**

##### **4.2.2 A glimpse of Sanskrit history**

##### **4.2.3 A historical overview of Caste System in Indian context**

##### **4.2.4 Dalits and Sanskrit Education**

##### **4.2.5 Dalit women writings in India**

##### **4.2.6 Summary of the Text**

##### **4.2.7 Critical Analysis**

##### **4.2.8 A Feminist Examination**

#### **4.3 Learning Outcomes**

#### **4.4 Glossary**

#### **4.5 Sample Questions**

#### **4.6 Suggested Learning Resources**

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### **4.0 Introduction**

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"The Story of My Sanskrit" by Kumud Pawde is an excerpt from her autobiography, titled "Antasphot" (meaning ‘Outburst’ or ‘The Explosion within’). It delves into her complex relationship with the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit. The central theme of the story explores the struggles of a Dalit woman, Kumud Pawde, in accessing education, particularly Sanskrit, due to the rigid caste system in India. It is a social commentary that sheds light on the persistence of caste discrimination even after India's independence. It challenges the notion that Sanskrit is solely for the upper castes. Pawde's journey with Sanskrit highlights education as a tool for breaking caste barriers. Despite achieving academic success, she faces unemployment, showcasing the limitations of education alone in dismantling social hierarchies. It promises a story of resilience, challenging social norms, and the pursuit of knowledge despite societal limitations. It is a groundbreaking work in Dalit literature, particularly within the domain of Dalit feminist autobiography. In this work, Pawde narrates her personal experiences, illustrating her life from childhood into her professional

career as an academic. She provides a candid account of the discrimination and challenges she faced due to her caste and gender. “The Story of My Sanskrit,” is a story of a Dalit woman’s indomitable mettle and courage to overcome numerous hurdles and challenges to become a Sanskrit Pandit and Teacher at the times when Sanskrit was considered to be the language and pride of upper castes, and was largely inaccessible to lower castes.

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## 4.1 Objectives

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The objectives of this Unit are as follows:

- Understanding social issues and the quest for identity
- Analysing the challenges faced by Dalit communities in India, particularly regarding access to education
- Examining the concept of caste and its impact on social mobility in India
- Exploring the intersection of caste and gender through Pawde's experiences
- Identifying the importance of Language and Power
- Identifying themes of courage, perseverance, and defiance in Pawde's story
- Analysing the relevance of Pawde’s story to broader themes of social justice and overcoming oppression.

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## 4.2 Kumud Pawde: ‘The Story of My Sanskrit’

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### 4.2.1 About Kumud Pawde

Kumud Pawde is a Dalit scholar and activist. She is a founder member of the National Federation of Dalit Women. This organization fights for the rights and empowerment of Dalit women in India. Kumud is the first Ambedkarite scholar of Sanskrit.

Her maiden name was, Kumud Somkuvar. She was born on 18th November, 1938 into a Mahar Dalit family in Nagpur, Maharashtra, in pre-independent India. Even though she was born into a Mahar Dalit family, that is usually culturally, historically oppressed; but did not suffer from dire poverty, unlike most of the community. Her parents were admirers of Jyothi Rao Phule and Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar. As a child she witnessed the historic mass conversion, Dhamma Deeksha ceremony (conversion to Buddhism) on October 14, 1956 as her parents were part of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Dalit Buddhist movement. She discovered that Ambedkar was not allowed

to study Sanskrit, and inspired by him she determined to study Sanskrit. Kumud's parents encouraged her to study her own choice of field, Sanskrit. Despite her family's relative economic affluence, Kumud had to face persistent hardships and discrimination as a student. She faced ridicule both from teachers and neighbours. Kumud received M.A in Sanskrit from Morris College. Kumud's grit and determination made her to overcome all the hurdles, and she became the Head of Department of Sanskrit from Government College, Amravati, Maharashtra.

Kumud's autobiography: *Antasphot* (1981), is her most famous work. It chronicles her struggles as a Dalit woman and her fight for education, particularly in Sanskrit. Her autobiography provides a valuable perspective on the experiences of Dalit women in India. Kumud Pawde is a remarkable figure who carved her path in Indian society, defying both caste and gender barriers. Kumud Pawde's life and work continue to inspire social change in India. Her story demonstrates the power of education and resilience in overcoming caste and gender-based discrimination.

***Check your progress:***

1. Pawde's journey with Sanskrit highlights education as a tool for breaking caste barriers. (True / False)
2. Pawde's maiden name was Kumud Somkuvar. She was born on 18th November, 1938 into a Mahar Dalit family in Nagpur, Maharashtra. (True / False)

#### **4.2.2 A glimpse of Sanskrit**

Sanskrit is one of the world's oldest languages. Sanskrit boasts a rich and long history, stretching back to thousands of years. Here is a glimpse into its fascinating journey:

**Origins:** Sanskrit belongs to the Indo-European language family and is considered the mother of many modern Indian languages. Its origins can be traced back to around 2000 BCE, with the ancient Indo-Aryan tribes who migrated into the Indian subcontinent. The Devanagari script is most used for writing Sanskrit, although other regional scripts were employed historically.

**Sanskrit in Vedic Period (1500 BCE - 500 BCE):** Sanskrit was primarily a spoken language during this time. The Vedas, ancient religious texts of Hinduism, were composed in early forms of Sanskrit. The Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedas, is written in a poetic form known as Vedic Sanskrit. These texts were most likely passed down orally for a long period.

**Standardization:** Around 500 BCE, a renowned Sanskrit Philologist, logician, grammarian and a revered scholar in ancient India named Panini, made a significant contribution. He codified

the grammar of Vedic Sanskrit, creating a more refined version known as Classical Sanskrit. His work, the Ashtadhyayi ("Eight Chapters"), is considered a masterpiece of linguistic analysis. Classical Sanskrit became the language of scholars, philosophers, and literature. Important literary works such as the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as many Puranas and other texts, were composed during this period.

**Vedic to Classical Sanskrit (1000 BCE onwards):** Over time, Vedic Sanskrit gradually transitioned from a spoken language to a language primarily used for religious and scholarly purposes. Classical Sanskrit emerged as the standardized form for literature, philosophy, and scientific discourse. **Sanskrit Literature Flourishes:** A vast corpus of literature blossomed in Sanskrit, encompassing religious texts, epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, philosophical treatises, and scientific works on diverse subjects.

**Medieval Sanskrit (500 CE - 1500 CE):** Despite the decline of Sanskrit as a spoken language, it continued to be used extensively in religious and scholarly contexts. Commentaries on earlier texts, philosophical treatises, and scientific works were produced during this time.

**Impact on Languages & Culture:** Sanskrit influence extended beyond India. It deeply impacted the development of many languages across Southeast Asia, leaving its mark on vocabulary, grammar, and literary styles. Sanskrit has had a profound influence on many languages, especially those in the Indian subcontinent. Many modern Indian languages, such as Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi, have borrowed extensively from Sanskrit vocabulary and grammar.

**Global Recognition:** Sanskrit grammar and structure have fascinated linguists worldwide, leading to its study and admiration in academic circles globally. It has also influenced Western thought, particularly during the European Renaissance, when scholars rediscovered Sanskrit texts and found parallels between Sanskrit and classical European languages.

**Sanskrit Today:** While not a widely spoken language today, Sanskrit continues to be studied and used in religious ceremonies, scholarly pursuits, and efforts to revitalize the language.

Throughout its history, Sanskrit has been more than just a language; it has been a vehicle for preserving and transmitting ancient Indian culture, knowledge, and wisdom. Today, while Sanskrit might not be as widely spoken as it once was, its cultural and linguistic legacy continues to endure.

### 4.2.3 A historical overview of caste system in Indian context

In the early Vedic period (roughly 1500 BCE to 600 BCE), the caste system as it is known today had not fully crystallized. Instead, society was organized along a more fluid system of social classes known as varnas.

The Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedas and one of the earliest religious texts of Hinduism, mentions Chatur Varna. Varna, which translates to "colour, class, or order" in Sanskrit, divided society into four hereditary social classes:

The four varnas are as follows:

1. Brahmins: The priestly class responsible for performing rituals, studying, and teaching the Vedas, and providing spiritual guidance. They were considered the highest varna due to their knowledge and sacred duties.
2. Kshatriyas: The warrior and ruling class responsible for protecting society, administering justice, and governing. They held power and authority, often serving as kings, princes, or warriors.
3. Vaishyas: The merchant and agricultural class engaged in trade, commerce, and farming. They were responsible for economic activities and trade.
4. Shudras: The labouring class who served the other varnas. Their duties included agricultural labour, domestic service, and other forms of manual work.

Initially, varnas were conceptualized as functional categories based on one's occupation or role in society rather than as rigid, hereditary castes. It is important to note that the Varna system in the Vedic period was likely more flexible than the later caste system. There may have been more social mobility, and the duties associated with each Varna may have been less rigid. Social mobility was possible, i.e.; people could shift their occupation and obviously it could mean that individuals could change their varna based on their occupation or achievements.

Additionally, there were groups outside of the varna system known as "Dasas" or "Dasyus," who were often depicted as enemies or adversaries in Vedic texts. The interactions between these groups were complex and cannot be neatly categorized into a modern understanding of caste.

Over time, however, the varna system became more rigid, and social hierarchy became more closely tied to birth and lineage. This evolution led to the emergence of the caste system as we know it today, characterized by strict social stratification and hereditary occupation.

The concept of untouchables, who fell outside the Varna system altogether, emerged later in Indian history. Understanding the Varna system in the Vedic period is essential for understanding the development of Hinduism and Indian society.

The Purusha Sukta presents an anthropomorphic view of society by metaphorically describing the creation of the four varnas (social classes) from different parts of Purusha's body: *Brahmin* - emerged from and represents the mouth or voice (symbolises the importance of oration and transfer of knowledge in the tribe), *kshatriya* - emerged from and represents the arms of society (symbolises the idea of protecting the society from enemy attacks and administering law and order), *Vaishya* - emerged from and represents the thighs (signifies the supporting system, represents the scaffold structure of the society), and *Sudra* - represented as the feet (represents and reflecting the new comers or strangers to the land or Society or tribe, and other resulted transitional changes).

The equivalent modern expression to the word Sudra, is Alien in English (newcomer, outsider, or stranger to the tribe), Ajnabi in Arabia. According to Purusha Sukta of Rig Veda – book 10: hymn 90), the mobility of the strangers to aboriginal tribes of our land, was represented in andromorphic form, as to the feet of the society. However, the representation of Sudras as feet is not the unique symbol used in purusha Sukta. There are many; say Purusha Sukta considers the world in humanlike form, the word feet are used in relation to Earth and all other parts of body represent other heavenly bodies. And there are many hymns dedicated to the worship of Earth.

*Sudra is a migrant rather than a servant:*

In the Purusha Sukta, it is clearly mentioned that Sudras are migrating outsiders but not servants. ‘Padabhyam sudro ajayat’ (using or with the feet Sudra appeared) is a reference to an alien or a migrant (transmigrating by using the feet) and not a servant who would be using his hands (‘hasta’) to provide service to others. A Sudra, could change his verna by procuring education or by business or agriculture, but not limited to become a mere servant. One can trace references of great sages from ancient texts, like Valmiki and Satyakama, who were non brahmins, turned to Brahmins and sages. And there are great Brahmins and Kshatriyas, whose one or both the parents are Sudras, that are mentioned in the ancient texts.

One can study the story of Pandavas exile. In this incident, during the exile, Pandavas (Kshatriyas) from their kingdom Hastinapura, travelled by foot (hence became Sudras literally) to Matsya Kingdom of King Virata. Pandavas all sorts of works like cooking, cleaning the stables, etc.

There is nothing here about the hierarchy or superiority of mouth over feet, and Brahmin superiority over Sudra was not really practiced in Vedic period. It is only later, the fifth varna that is the Panchama (untouchable) is introduced and stratified into the caste system. All the skilled and unskilled types of labourers were considered Vaishyas.

#### **4.2.4 Dalits and Sanskrit Education**

In traditional India, Sanskrit education largely happened in two settings:

- Gurukulas: These were residential schools where students lived with their teacher, or guru. The guru would impart not just knowledge of Sanskrit but also religious teachings and life skills. The guru imparts knowledge on various subjects, including Sanskrit, religious texts, and philosophy.
- Brahmins: Belonging to the highest social caste in Hinduism, Brahmins traditionally held a monopoly on scholarly pursuits, including teaching Sanskrit. Their knowledge of scriptures and the language made them natural choices for educators. This was because they were seen as the custodians of religious knowledge and Sanskrit was the language of many sacred texts. However, this does not mean only Brahmins could learn Sanskrit. Kshatriyas (the warrior caste) and Vaishyas (the merchant caste) also received Sanskrit education.

It is important to note that the caste system restricted access to education, and Sanskrit learning was mostly limited to upper castes.

The relationship between Dalits and Sanskrit is complex and multifaceted, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics in Indian society. Dalits, historically referred to as "untouchables" or "Scheduled Castes" in India's caste system, have faced social discrimination and marginalization for centuries.

- Historical Exclusion: Traditionally, access to Sanskrit education and religious scriptures was limited to the upper castes, while Dalits were often excluded from formal education and religious institutions. Sanskrit texts were predominantly preserved and transmitted by Brahmins and other upper-caste communities, contributing to a sense of exclusion among Dalits.
- Cultural and Religious Significance: Sanskrit is the language of many ancient Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These texts hold significant cultural and religious importance in Hinduism.



- **Symbol of Oppression:** Others see Sanskrit as a symbol of historical oppression and advocate for promoting their own languages and cultural heritage.
- **Limited Access:** This exclusion limited Dalits' ability to not only learn the language but also understand the religious and philosophical knowledge it held.
- **Religious Texts:** Many religious texts, written in Sanskrit, reinforced the caste system, with some texts like Manu Smriti even prescribing punishments for lower castes attempting to learn Sanskrit.
- **Dalit Perspectives:** Some Dalit intellectuals and activists have critiqued Sanskrit as a symbol of Brahminical hegemony and caste oppression. They argue that the language has been used to perpetuate caste discrimination and justify the social hierarchy, relegating Dalits to inferior social positions. Sanskrit has been associated with the caste-based social hierarchy that has historically marginalized them; thus, Sanskrit education was reserved for upper castes, particularly Brahmins.

#### **Modern Developments:**

**Education System:** The modern Indian education system provides access to Sanskrit for all castes, including Dalits.

**Challenges and Reinterpretations:** Despite historical exclusion, there have been efforts by Dalit scholars and activists to reclaim Sanskrit and reinterpret its texts from a Dalit perspective. These efforts aim to challenge Brahminical interpretations and highlight elements of social justice and equality within Sanskrit literature. Additionally, some Dalit writers and poets have begun to compose literature in Sanskrit, reclaiming the language as part of their cultural heritage.

**Reclaiming Knowledge:** Some Dalit scholars, like Kumud Pawde, view Sanskrit as a gateway to lost knowledge and cultural heritage. They advocate for reclaiming the language and using it to challenge upper-caste dominance.

The relationship between Dalits and Sanskrit is evolving. Modern education provides access, but social challenges remain. Dalit scholars are paving the way for a more inclusive understanding of the language.

#### **4.2.5 Dalit women writings in India**

The history of women Dalit writings in India is a profound narrative of resilience, resistance, and the assertion of voice against the intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and class. Indian Dalit women's writings are a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging in the 1960s, but carry a powerful message.

Social reformers like Jyothi Rao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, who championed Dalit rights, laid the groundwork. Their writings inspired Dalit literature. The broader movement of Dalit literature, focusing on the experiences of the oppressed castes, provided a platform for women's voices.

Overall, the history of women Dalit writings in India is a testament to the resilience and agency of Dalit women in the face of systemic oppression. Their writings not only document their lived experiences but also serve as powerful tools for advocacy, empowerment, and social change.

**1960s Onwards: Pioneering Dalit women writers like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and others began publishing autobiographies and testimonies.**

**Focus:** These writings highlighted the intersection of caste, class, and gender. They exposed the brutal realities of caste discrimination faced by Dalit women, including manual labour, sexual violence, and social exclusion.

**Dalit Feminism:** These works also contributed to the development of Dalit feminism, a vital strand of Indian feminism that recognizes the unique experiences of Dalit women.

**Voice and Agency:** Dalit women's writings provided them with a powerful voice and agency to challenge the oppressive social structures.

**Understanding Social Issues:** Their work sheds light on the complex social issues of caste, gender, and poverty in India.

**Continuing Movement:** Today, Dalit women writers continue to be a vibrant force in Indian literature, producing a diverse range of work, including poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Dalit women writers in India have played a significant role in challenging social norms, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, and bringing attention to issues of caste, gender, and intersectionality. Here are some key aspects of their contributions:

1. Representation of their experiences, perspectives, and struggles, through their writings.
2. Breaking Stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalit women. They have portrayed them as complex individuals with diverse experiences, talents, and ambitions.
3. Political and Social Activism Many Dalit women writers are also activists who use their literary works as tools for social and political change.
4. Building Solidarity: Through their writings, they forge connections with other oppressed communities, fostering alliances and collective struggles for social justice.

5. Challenging Patriarchy: Dalit women writers critique not only caste-based discrimination but also patriarchy within their own communities and society at large.
6. Literary Contributions: Their works encompass various genres such as fiction, poetry, memoirs, and essays, enriching the literary landscape with diverse voices and narratives.

Overall, Dalit women writers in India have emerged as powerful agents of change, challenging dominant narratives, advocating for social justice, and inspiring generations with their resilience and creativity.

#### **4.2.6 Summary of the Text**

“The Story of my Sanskrit” is a selection from Kumud Pawde's journal, *Antasphot* (1981), originally written in Marathi and was translated by Priya Adarkar. This excerpt is written in First person narration. The speaker is the author herself.

This individual history sheds light on the challenges confronted by an untouchable lady who was challenged to enter society's open circle. This content talks about the author's self-awareness as a Mahar and society's inclination towards her because of her caste. By considering Sanskrit, she challenges segregation based on her sex and caste. A fight against caste generalization. It takes us to a gathering point where Sanskrit, the dialect of the Vedas, and an untouchable Shudra woman, having the lowest place in the Hindu caste system, come together for the first time in centuries. Within the story, the author is mindful of her lower caste despite being way better than the so-called noteworthy people. Her caste has reliably caused her mortification and confinement since childhood. This isolation was so predominant that she got to be acclimated to it. As a child, she was manhandled by upper-caste mothers who claimed to be instructed and civilized.

The author dislikes being praised, especially for their knowledge of Sanskrit. This is because in Indian society, Sanskrit learning is associated with upper castes. The Author belongs to a "low" caste, and their ability to learn and teach Sanskrit is seen as an anomaly. This anomaly makes them a curiosity to both their caste fellows (who are proud) and traditional society (who are confused).

The author continues to describe the negative aspects of being praised for their knowledge of Sanskrit. Some people's praise feels fake and insulting, like "hot spears" or "betel-stained spit."

The tone of their voice implies the speaker is not good enough to learn Sanskrit. This makes the author feel like they are being judged and looked down upon.

On the other hand, some people are genuinely impressed by the speaker's knowledge and lifestyle. They see a Brahminical level of culture in the speaker, which is surprising because of their caste. This constant attempt to reconcile the speaker's caste with their achievements makes the speaker feel like a novelty.

Despite trying to forget their caste, the speaker cannot escape it. They find solace in the admiration of their students. The students are innocent and lack the caste prejudices of their elders. Their admiration is pure and unspoken, which makes it even more meaningful to the speaker. The speaker, a woman from a lower caste in India, excels at learning and teaching Sanskrit, a subject traditionally associated with upper castes. This creates a complex situation for her. Praise is a double-edged sword for her:

- Rejection: Some people's praise feels fake and insulting, implying the speaker doesn't deserve to know Sanskrit. This is hurtful and makes her feel judged.
- Acceptance: Others are genuinely impressed, but their constant attempts to reconcile her caste with her achievements make her feel like a curiosity.

Despite the challenges, the speaker finds true appreciation from her students. Their admiration is pure, untainted by caste prejudice, and expressed subtly through their respectful gaze. This is the most meaningful validation for her.

The text highlights the struggles of someone excelling in a field outside their social standing and the yearning for genuine acceptance.

The speaker continues to describe the negative aspects of being praised for their knowledge of Sanskrit. Some people's praise feels fake and insulting, like "hot spears" or "betel-stained spit." The tone of their voice implies the speaker is not good enough to learn Sanskrit. This makes the speaker feel like they are being judged and looked down upon.

On the other hand, some people are genuinely impressed by the speaker's knowledge and lifestyle. They see a Brahminical level of culture in the speaker, which is surprising because of their caste. This constant attempt to reconcile the speaker's caste with their achievements makes the speaker feel like a novelty.

Despite trying to forget their caste, the speaker cannot escape it. They find solace in the admiration of their students. The students are innocent and lack the caste prejudices of their elders. Their admiration is pure and unspoken, which makes it even more meaningful to the speaker.

The woman in the story faces conflicting reactions to her success as a lower-caste Sanskrit teacher.

- Insincere praise: Some people offer her excessive compliments, dripping with sarcasm. They imply she does not deserve her position and it pollutes their culture.
- Confused admiration: Others are genuinely impressed by her knowledge and lifestyle. They cannot reconcile this with her caste and constantly try to understand it.
- Student admiration: The woman finds solace in her students' pure, unbiased respect. They haven't absorbed the caste prejudices of their elders.

Despite wanting to forget her caste, it constantly defines how others react to her. The story highlights the complex emotions that arise from achieving success while facing societal bias. The speaker, a lower-caste woman scholar of Sanskrit, describes the discomfort she feels with public recognition.

- Official praise feels hypocritical: When government officials praise her knowledge of Sanskrit at a public event, it reminds her of her caste and feels like a show of supposed progressiveness rather than genuine appreciation.
- Reactions expose social divisions: The audience's mixed response - applause from some, hostility from others - highlights the ongoing social conflict around caste.
- Memories of childhood discrimination resurface: The public praise triggers flashbacks of childhood experiences where upper-caste children were forbidden to play with her due to her caste, fuelling feelings of inferiority and a desire to prove herself.

The harm and disrespect of mortifying experiences are now and then as well profound to mend. In such circumstances, resistance is ordinarily incomprehensible, but Pawde rises as a warrior. She battles back and shows her strength against segregation.

She had abruptly reacted to a Brahmin woman when she was advertised laddoo and inquired to take off the put- “What do you take me, for a beggar?

Can you see wounds on anybody fair since I observed them?” She appears cognizant and mindful of the upper caste society who freeze on the nearness of a moo caste untouchable on such favourable ceremonies, coming about from that long profound established idea of 'impurity'.

The narrator, a young girl from a lower caste, describes her experience of being discriminated against. She is upset by the hypocrisy of upper-caste girls who consider her unclean

despite her cleanliness. An incident where she is mocked for watching an upper-caste ceremony deepens her confusion and sparks a curiosity about the Vedic mantras that are forbidden to her caste.

The refutation she gets from the woman to observe the ceremony is in truth one of the means to refuse lower castes the opportunity of being interested in Vedic mantras and ceremonies which had been the space, available as it were to upper castes.

In this way, the whole and isolation hold on between Sanskrit, the upper caste, and the lower castes or untouchables.

The narrator's father encourages her to learn Sanskrit, a language forbidden to her lower caste, despite discouragement from neighbours. Her father, though not formally educated in Sanskrit, knows the Gayatri mantra and sees Sanskrit as a right for everyone in independent India. The neighbours mock her for wanting to learn such a difficult language, but her father's support strengthens her resolve. In high school, the narrator faces prejudice from the school system that tries to dissuade her from taking Sanskrit. Her teacher, Mr. Hatekar, recognizes her potential and encourages her to pursue Sanskrit despite her choice of arts subjects.

Kumud was highly inspired by the kind and humanistic behaviour of Gokhale Guruji and his family members. The narrator, eager to learn Sanskrit, describes her first encounter with her teacher Gokhale. He is a dedicated teacher who cares deeply about his students' learning. The narrator feels apprehensive because Gokhale is a Brahmin and she is from a lower caste. Despite her fear, she is welcomed warmly by Gokhale's family and offered food. Her anxiety stems from the potential social repercussions of being a lower-caste person in an upper-caste Brahmin household. The narrator overcomes her fear and learns from her Brahmin teacher Gokhale despite their caste differences. Gokhale treats her with kindness and respect, and the narrator feels a deep respect for him in return. This positive experience motivates her to excel in her studies. Despite discouragement from upper-caste and even lower-caste people, the narrator remains determined to pursue her education in Sanskrit. Her goal is to study at the renowned Morris College known for its professors and library.

The narrator persists in her studies despite facing discouragement. Even people from her own lower caste mock her ambition to pursue a Masters in Sanskrit. Upper-caste Hindus taunt her for attending college. However, the narrator finds fairness from her professors who judge her based on merit, not caste. She faces one annoyance: sarcastic remarks about the scholarship that supports her studies. The narrator feels this criticism is hypocritical as the scholarship money comes from

the government, funded by taxes everyone pays. Kumud achieved a high mark on her Bachelor's degree in Sanskrit. Her professors treated her fairly, which made her happy. During her Master's program at the university, the head of the department, a renowned scholar, disliked the narrator's studies and constantly belittled her. This harassment caused the narrator a great deal of emotional distress.

Despite this adversity, the narrator graduated with distinction. She received a congratulatory bouquet from a former university chancellor, which symbolized his pride in her accomplishment and her own sense of triumph. The narrator's dream of becoming a Sanskrit lecturer is shattered by discrimination. Despite her qualifications, government jobs do not materialize, with excuses ranging from her high marks to her caste. Private colleges mock her or express prejudice against a lower-caste teacher. Even "progressive" lower-caste reformers find the idea unacceptable. Frustrated and unemployed two years after graduation, the narrator writes a powerful letter to a government minister. The letter reaches high levels, and she is called for a meeting with the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister, however, offers empty promises and discourages her from seeking a job, suggesting research instead. Dejected by the hypocrisy and her dire situation, the narrator confronts the Chief Minister, demanding a clear answer and expressing her need for immediate work. While waiting for a Sanskrit lecturer job, the narrator gets a Master's degree in English Literature to stay busy. She then marries someone from a different caste, a story she leaves for another time. Ironically, two months after her marriage (which changes her last name and presumably her caste in the eyes of some), she lands a government college lecturer position. She credits her success to her new last name and perceived higher caste status, not her own qualifications. This highlights the enduring power of caste prejudice in Indian society.

Wherever she went her character as a Mahar came into her way to victory and individuals addressed her position. The exceptional sentence- "so presently these individuals are to educate Sanskrit! Brahmins, aren't they?" strengthens us to expect the lack of care and silliness of traditional minds of which lower castes were moreover the holders. Individuals were jealous of a young lady, who had a lowest place in the caste hierarchy, instructing Sanskrit.

***Check your progress:***

1. "The Story of my Sanskrit" is a selection from Kumud Pawde's journal, *Antasphot* (1981), originally written in Marathi and translated by Priya Adarkar. (True / False)

2. Kumud was highly inspired by the kind and humanistic behaviour of Gokhale Guruji. (True / False)

#### 4.2.7 Critical Analysis

Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit" is a powerful indictment of untouchability in India, revealing its pervasive influence on social, economic, and political spheres. Here is how the story reflects these issues:

##### *Social Reflections:*

- **Exclusion from Knowledge:** Sanskrit, traditionally associated with upper castes, becomes a symbol of the knowledge denied to Dalits. Pawde's struggle to access and excel in this language highlights the social barriers that restrict educational opportunities for Dalits.
- **Internalized Oppression:** Pawde's conflicted emotions about mastering Sanskrit reveal the psychological impact of untouchability. The fear of being seen as betraying her community reflects the deeply ingrained sense of inferiority imposed by the caste system.
- **Limited Social Mobility:** Despite her academic achievement, Pawde's narrative doesn't portray a complete victory. Untouchability creates a glass ceiling, limiting her social mobility and potentially hindering career prospects.

##### *Economic Reflections:*

- **Unequal Access to Resources:** The story implies that Dalit families lack the economic resources to access quality education, particularly in specialized fields like Sanskrit. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty and reinforces the economic dominance of upper castes.
- **Limited Employment Opportunities:** Even with a Sanskrit education, Pawde might face discrimination in the job market due to her caste. This reflects the economic exploitation inherent in untouchability, where Dalits are often relegated to menial jobs with limited upward mobility.

##### *Political Reflections:*

- **Silence of Authorities:** The story doesn't mention any government intervention to address Pawde's struggles. This suggests a potential failure of affirmative action



policies or a lack of political will to dismantle caste-based discrimination in education.

- Caste as a Political Tool: Untouchability allows political parties to exploit caste sentiments for electoral gains, further hindering social and economic reforms.

*Beyond Personal Narrative:*

"The Story of My Sanskrit" transcends Pawde's experience. It serves as a microcosm of the larger struggle against untouchability in India. The story compels us to consider:

- The Need for Educational Reform: Education systems need to be revamped to address caste biases and ensure equitable access to knowledge for all communities.
- Importance of Affirmative Action: Affirmative action policies require proper implementation to ensure Dalits receive the necessary support to overcome social and economic disadvantages.

Pawde's story is a powerful reminder that untouchability's reach extends far beyond social interactions. It has deep-rooted economic and political implications that perpetuate inequality. By critically analyzing "The Story of My Sanskrit," we can understand the complex challenges faced by Dalits and advocate for a more just and equitable society in India.

#### **4.2.8 A Feminist Examination**

Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit" offers a rich tapestry for a feminist critique. Here is how the story can be examined through a feminist lens:

*Double Marginalization:*

Pawde's narrative highlights the concept of intersectionality. As a Dalit woman, she faces marginalization based on both caste and gender. The story exposes how these systems of oppression often work in tandem. Dalit women like Pawde face additional challenges within the education system due to prevailing patriarchal norms. They may have limited family support for pursuing higher education. Sanskrit, traditionally an exclusive domain of upper-caste men, becomes another barrier. Pawde's mastery disrupts this patriarchal control over knowledge.

*Education and Empowerment:*

Pawde's pursuit of Sanskrit can be seen as an act of feminist resistance. By excelling in a male-dominated field, she challenges the notion that intellectual pursuits are solely for men. Her achievement becomes a source of empowerment, not just for herself but for Dalit women in general.

Does education alone dismantle caste and gender hierarchies? The story doesn't necessarily answer this question. Pawde might still face discrimination based on her caste and gender even with her academic credentials.

The story doesn't delve into the experiences of other Dalit women. Their educational opportunities or lack thereof might offer a broader perspective on the intersection of caste and gender in education.

"The Story of My Sanskrit" offers a valuable perspective on the struggles of Dalit women in education. While Pawde's story is one of resilience and resistance, it also exposes the limitations of education alone in dismantling caste and gender hierarchies. By applying a feminist lens, we can appreciate Pawde's achievement while recognizing the need for broader social transformation to ensure equal opportunities for all.

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### 4.3 Learning Outcomes

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After completing this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the historical context of Sanskrit and its connection to the caste system
- Identify the challenges faced by Dalit students, particularly those pursuing Sanskrit education
- Analyse how Pawde's story exemplifies themes of resilience and defying social norms
- Discuss the significance of language in perpetuating or challenging social structures
- Interpret the message Pawde conveys about education and its role in achieving equality.
- Formulate an argument about the importance of access to education for all social groups.
- Compare and contrast Pawde's experience with other narratives of overcoming social barriers.

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### 4.4 Glossary

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- **Adversity:** a difficult or unlucky situation or event
- **Affluence:** the state of having a lot of money or owning many things

- **Ridicule:** unkind words or actions that make someone or something look stupid
- **Defying:** to refuse to obey a person, decision, law, situation, etc.
- **Grit and determination:** (informal) courage
- **Delve:** to reach into something or under the surface of something trying find an object
- **Persist:** If an unpleasant feeling or situation persists, it continues to exist
- **Ground-breaking:** it is very new and a big change from other things of its type
- **Candid:** honest and telling the truth, especially about something difficult or painful
- **Indomitable:** used to say that someone is strong, brave, determined, and difficult to defeat or frighten
- **Mettle:** ability and determination when competing or doing something difficult
- **Intersection:** an occasion when two lines or objects cross, or the place where this happens
- **Implications:** an occasion when you seem to suggest something without saying it directly
- **Empower:** to give someone official authority or the freedom to do something
- **Exclusion:** the act of not allowing someone or something to take part in an activity or to enter a place
- **Discrimination:** treating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way from the way in which you treat other people, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc.

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## 4.5 Sample Questions

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### 4.5.1 Objective Questions

1. The story mentions many specific challenges the narrator faces in accessing Sanskrit education due to their caste? (**True/False**)
2. Can you identify any emotions the narrator expresses throughout the story related to learning Sanskrit?
  - a. Frustration
  - b. Joy
  - c. Defiance
  - d. **All of the Above**
3. When the author was praised, she used to feel happy? (**True/False**)

4. Name the college from where Kumud Pawde received her Sanskrit degree? (**Morris College**)
5. What was the maiden name of Kumud Pawde? (**Kumud Somkuvar**)
6. Understanding the \_\_\_\_\_ system in the Vedic period is essential for understanding the development of Hinduism and Indian society. (**Varna**)
7. Author says 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying - that is caste'? (**True/False**)
8. 'What language are the Vedic mantras composed in?' (**Sanskrit**)
9. Does Kumud's father encourage her to learn Sanskrit? (True/**False**)
10. Kumud Pawde got a job after her marriage. (**True/False**)

#### 4.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. Write a brief note on Kumud Pawde's family.
2. Why do you think many of the lower caste people converted to Buddhism?
3. What are the feelings of the author, when she was praised?
4. What are the situations when Kumud Pawde must deliver an Inaugural speech at college?
5. Explain briefly the feelings of Kumud Pawde when she got a job.

#### 4.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Apply relevant theoretical frameworks from critical pedagogy, feminist theory, or Dalit studies to analyse Pawde's experiences.
2. Discuss the intersection of caste, gender, and education within a postcolonial framework.
3. Discuss the role of education in achieving social justice in India.

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### 4.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Gail, Omvedt. *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011.

Ghose, Sagarika. "The Dalit Girl Who Became a Sanskrit Pandita: The Incredible Story of Dr Kumud Sonkuwar Pawde." *The Times of India*.

## **Unit-5: Introduction to the Dalit Novel**

### **Structure:**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

#### **5.1 Objectives**

#### **5.2 Introduction to the Dalit Novel**

##### **5.2.1 Meaning and Derivation of the Word Dalit**

##### **5.2.2 Roots of Caste Oppression**

##### **5.2.3 Consequences of Caste Oppression**

##### **5.2.4 Meaning and Origin of the Novel**

##### **5.2.5 Development of Novel**

##### **5.2.6 The Dalit Women Novels**

##### **5.2.7 Salient Features of Dalit Women Novels**

##### **5.2.8 Features of Dalit Novel**

##### **5.2.9 Criticism against Dalit Novel**

##### **5.2.10 Criticism against Non-Dalit Writers**

##### **5.2.11 Ambedkar's Ideology as the Bedrock of Dalit Novels**

##### **5.2.12 Impact Dalit novel on tribal literature**

##### **5.2.13 Dalit novel and colonial literature**

##### **5.2.14 Dalit and Black Novels**

##### **5.2.15 Future of the Dalit Novel**

#### **5.3 Learning Outcomes**

#### **5.4 Glossary**

#### **5.5 Sample Questions**

#### **5.6 Suggested Learning Resources**

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### **5.0 Introduction**

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As literature is said to be the epitomic embodiment of humanity and accumulative achievement of centuries of human evolution and magnum opus of human species, its chief aim is to be the powerful sharpener of conscience and path breaker in bringing revolutionary changes in human history. Among all genres, novel holds a special place as it meticulously records both personal and collective experiences. Throughout its journey, from its origin to the present state of enjoying, one of the best sources of aestheticism, the novel, undoubtedly, is the true source for studying history across the centuries.

Although the novel as a literary genre originated in the hands of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding in England in the eighteenth century, it has been rapidly exploited by non-British countries like Russian, African and Asian countries. The British colonial education in India paved the way for the advent of novel. Early Indian novelists imitated the style and the framework of the British novelists. However, the novel before independence was exploited to orient the socio-political consciousness. It is argued that Indian mainstream English novelists before and after independence did not take Dalit issues seriously. It is to be noted that the caste system instituted primarily by Manusmriti has been detrimental to the Indian subcontinent.

A few mainstream Indian novelists are appreciated for addressing Dalit issues. However, they deal with Dalit concerns from Gandhian perspective rather than Ambedkarian point of view. Dalits feel that they are neglected, which triggers the emergence of Dalit literature in general and Dalit novel in particular. Dalit writers believe that non-Dalit writers cannot authentically represent Dalit suffering because they don't undergo the pain that Dalits undergo. Dalit novel is one of the emerging literary genres which emphasizes the authenticity of experiences. Dalit writers use experience as a raw material in producing literary works.

Some theorists believe that Dalit literature should not be rejected but honored on par with Marxist's because both have some points in common. Indian Dalit literature has some similarities with Black literature too. Dalit literature neither advocates revenge nor spreads hatred. It strongly condemns the irresponsibility and intellectual immorality in the name of aestheticism. First and foremost, it advocates the significance of humanity and liberation. Therefore, it is a historical necessity. It is the literature of life - blood, bones and flesh. Dalit literature is but a human literature.

***Check your progress:***

1. The novel as a literary genre originated in the hands of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding in England in the eighteenth century. (True / False)

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## **5.1 Objectives**

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The objectives of this Unit are to:

- trace the historical development of the novel from its origins in ancient epics to its modern form.

- describe the emergence of Dalit literature as a response to caste discrimination and identifying key figures such as B.R. Ambedkar.
- explore the multifaceted discrimination faced by Dalit women.
- recognize and assess the role of social realism in Dalit literature.
- estimate the futurity of Dalit novel and its relevance.

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## **5.2 Introduction to the Dalit Novel**

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### **5.2.1 Meaning and Derivation of the Word Dalit**

The term "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit word "*Dalita*," which means "oppressed" or "broken." It also means "of the soil" in Marathi. It suggests, "that which has been ground down." In the context of the Indian caste system, it is used to refer to people who have been historically marginalized and oppressed, often falling outside the traditional four-caste structure. The word is now widely used in India and other parts of South Asia to describe those who are part of the historically disadvantaged and underprivileged groups. Therefore, Dalit literature emerged as a powerful voice against caste-based discrimination in India, offering first-hand accounts of marginalization and resistance. Rooted in the experiences of Dalit communities, this literary genre challenges social hierarchies and highlights the struggle for dignity and justice.

### **5.2.2 Roots of Caste Oppression**

The roots of caste oppression in South Asia can be traced to ancient Hindu scriptures, particularly the *Manusmriti* and other *Dharmashastras*. These texts codify a hierarchical social order, dividing society into four main varnas (classes): Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and agriculturists), and Shudras (laborers). These scriptures institutionalized caste roles and justified social inequalities, shaping the social structure and perpetuating caste-based discrimination throughout history.

### **5.2.3 Consequences of Caste Oppression**

Caste oppression has led to numerous severe consequences, impacting various aspects of life for those affected: Caste oppression has severe consequences, including social exclusion, economic disparity, and barriers to education. This discrimination leads to poor health outcomes due to limited access to healthcare and sanitation. Members of lower castes often face violence and abuse, contributing to mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Additionally, caste-based

marginalization results in cultural alienation and identity loss. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive social, economic, and legal reforms to ensure equality and justice.

#### **5.2.4 Meaning and Origin of the Novel**

The word "novel" in English literature originates from the Italian word "*novello*," which means "a little new thing" or "a short story." It is also derived from the Latin word "*novus*," meaning "new." The use of "*novella*" in Italian literature referred to a brief, fictional narrative. In the early 16th century, English writers began adopting the term to describe a new form of extended prose fiction. By the 17th century, "novel" had become the standard term in English to denote a longer narrative work of fiction, distinct from shorter stories or tales. Over time, the novel evolved into a major literary genre, encompassing various forms and styles. It became distinct with works like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), marking the rise of the novel as a major literary form.

#### **5.2.5 Development of Novel**

William J. Long highlights England's pivotal role in the novel's development, noting that the modern novel originated in England. The novel has evolved significantly over centuries. Its roots trace back to ancient epics like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, blending storytelling with myth. By the 18th century, the novel emerged as a distinct form with works like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Other significant works include Lodge's *Rosalynde* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, each contributing uniquely to the genre. The 19th century saw the rise of literary giants like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, who refined character development and social commentary. In the 20th century, modernism and postmodernism pushed boundaries with experimental styles from James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Today, novels continue to diversify, incorporating digital and multimedia elements, reflecting ongoing changes in society and technology.

Novels reflect individual emotions, experiences, and aspirations. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, emphasizes that novels like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* highlight individualism and personal freedom. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, identifies seven key elements: story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm, with plot being central. Novels also integrate various literary genres.

#### **5.2.6 The Advent of Novel in Indian Context**

British rule significantly impacted Indian writing. T.W. Clark notes that British educational reforms, including missionary schools and financial support, spurred literary activity and the rise of prose in regional languages. The 1857 revolt marked a turning point, leading to increased novel



production by political activists and thinkers. This trend parallels developments in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In this context, Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umarao Jaan Ada* emerged with a surge in novels across local languages and continued political engagement in literature into the 20th century.

Nineteenth-century Indian novelists were initially influenced by British Victorian novels rather than Russian or American ones. Early Indian novels often imitated English styles and frameworks, reflecting a colonial nature with limited social realism. Meenakshi Mukherjee in *Early Novels in India* views the novel as a borrowed genre shaped by Indian religious and secular traditions, colonial context, and Western literary influences. Indian novels evolved by integrating local, cultural, historical, and social dynamics, which influenced their development and distinctiveness.

Western and Indian novels differ fundamentally. Western authors enjoy greater freedom to explore any subject and draw logical conclusions. In contrast, Indian authors are often influenced by family, community, or caste identity. Non-Dalit Indian writers typically model their work on British fiction, while Dalit writers draw inspiration from Afro-American novels, emphasizing social realism.

Influenced by Gandhi, non-Dalit writers like Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, and others address Dalit issues but often portray them through a Gandhian lens without challenging the caste system. For example, Anand's *Untouchable* depicts the protagonist Bakha as a submissive figure and Gandhi as a benefactor, yet offers no concrete solutions, reflecting sympathy rather than Ambedkar's reformist approach. Pre-independence literature tends to depict Dalits with pity rather than providing solutions aligned with Ambedkar's ideology.

Philosophical thinkers like Sree Narayana Guru, Jyothiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, and others identified social evils and inspired Dalit writers to challenge oppressive structures. Influenced by Ambedkarian ideology, young Dalits launched the Dalit Panther movement in 1972 Maharashtra to assert a distinct Dalit identity and advocate anti-caste discourse. This period marked the rise of Dalit literature as a unique genre in Indian languages.

Significant works include *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* (edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot) and *Poisoned Bread* (edited by Arjun Dangle), which brought global attention to Dalit literature. Dalit novels began to emerge across various regional languages. For example, Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat* (1986) addresses caste dynamics in Gujarat, Kalyan Rao's *Antharani*

Vasantham (2000) explores caste issues in Andhra Pradesh, and Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu* (2005) critiques caste and political dynamics in Maharashtra.

### 5.2.7 Reasons for the Emergence of Dalit Literature

Raj Kumar in his essay "Dalit Literature: A Perspective from Below" opines that Indian mainstream literature has never shed light on the problems and issues of Dalits. Indian mainstream literature has historically neglected Dalit issues for several reasons:

- ***Dominance of Upper-Caste Perspectives:*** Sreenivas Iyengar, a prominent scholar in Indian literature, has faced criticism for excluding B.R. Ambedkar from his works. This exclusion reflects a broader issue within certain literary and academic circles where significant figures like Ambedkar and Phule who are central to Dalit activism and thought, are marginalized or overlooked. For instance, while anthologies such as *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* include diverse poets, Dalit poets are often underrepresented or included in a way that does not fully engage with their unique perspectives on caste and social injustice.
- ***Caste Bias and Exclusion:*** Early Indian English literature largely focused on themes and narratives from the upper-caste perspective. Notable figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand, though influential, often portrayed Dalits through a sympathetic lens rather than as central protagonists with agency. Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), for instance, presents Dalits through a lens of pity and victimhood rather than offering a robust critique of caste oppression or solutions aligned with Ambedkar's reformist vision.
- ***Representation through Stereotypes:*** In many mainstream novels, Dalits are often secondary characters or marginalized figures. For example, in *The Guide* (1958) by R.K. Narayan, the character of the Dalit community is mentioned but remains peripheral to the main narrative. The primary focus is on the upper-caste protagonist, with Dalit characters existing mainly to highlight the protagonist's moral or social dilemmas rather than as fully developed individuals with their own stories and agency. Mukherjee, in *Early Novels in India*, points out that the representation of Dalits often lacks depth and fails to capture the full spectrum of Dalit experiences, contributing to a narrative that simplifies rather than fully engages with their realities.
- ***Lack of Diverse Voices:*** Canonical texts and critical anthologies of Indian literature, such as *The Norton Anthology of Indian Writing* or *The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary*

*Indian Writing*, have historically underrepresented Dalit writers. This exclusion in major anthologies has perpetuated the invisibility of Dalit perspectives within the broader literary canon.

- Dalit literature has emerged to fill these gaps by offering genuine, nuanced portrayals and critiquing systemic injustices faced by Dalit communities.

### 5.2.8 Development of the Dalit Novel

Dalit literature in Maharashtra after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's influence reflects a significant evolution in thematic depth, narrative form, and political engagement. Post-Ambedkar, Dalit literature in Maharashtra has developed through several key phases: Dalit literature is often viewed as a response to the indifference of progressive writers in Maharashtra. The first major Dalit conference was organized by the **Dalit Sahitya Akademi** in 1958. It took place in **Nagpur**, Maharashtra. Baburao Bagal, an influential figure in the realm of Dalit literature, played a significant role in shaping its direction and impact.

The Little Magazine Movement played a crucial role in the proliferation of Dalit literature by providing a platform for Dalit writers to publish their work and reach a broader audience. Magazines like "*Kritika*" and "*Meri Zindagi*" became crucial in showcasing Dalit voices and fostering dialogue about caste and social justice. *Armitadarsh Quarterly* was established in the early 1980s to provide a platform for Dalit writers and intellectuals to showcase their work and to critique the existing socio-political and literary norms.

Another breakthrough is the *Dalit Panthers* founded in 1972 in Maharashtra which is a radical Dalit movement inspired by the Black Panthers of the U.S. They aimed to combat caste discrimination, uplift Dalit communities, and assert Dalit identity through activism and literature, significantly influencing Dalit writing and political discourse in India. As a result in almost all regional languages, the Dalit literature started to flourish across the India.

### 5.2.6 The Dalit Women Novelists

Dalit women experience "suppression within suppression" as they face both caste-based and gender-based discrimination. This dual oppression marginalizes their voices and exacerbates their struggles, making their plight more severe compared to Dalit men and upper-caste women, thus compounding their socio-economic and cultural exclusion.

- Pawar's memoir, "*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*" (2016) blends personal and political narratives to highlight the dual oppression faced by Dalit women.

Her writing addresses both caste-based and gender-based discrimination, detailing how societal structures marginalize Dalit women at multiple levels.

- Bama's semi-autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) portrays the harsh realities of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. The narrative reveals how Dalit women endure suppression from both the caste system and patriarchal norms within their communities, focusing on their struggle against social and economic marginalization.
- Kamble's work *The Prisons We Broke*" (1986) is a pioneering account of Dalit women's experiences in Maharashtra. For instance, Baby Kamble in her novel *The Prison We Broke* paints the devastating picture of male domination on Dalit women. The author views that consuming alcohol is one of the major factors of destruction of many Dalit families. Owing to consuming alcohol many fall sick, lose jobs, lose properties, die early and the rest of the members of family lead miserable lives. She shows ill effects of polygamy, patriarchal structures and domestic violence. She depicts the excruciating pain of Dalit woman who is tormented by her own father, brother, husband and father-in-law.
- Bhatt's novel *A Life Less Ordinary*" (2008) explores the lives of Dalit women in the context of contemporary India. It highlights the systemic inequalities and the added burden of being both a Dalit and a woman, shedding light on the compounded nature of their struggles. In this line, similar one is Meena Kandasamy's novel *Koogai: the Owl*.

The novels of Dalit women expand and supplement Indian main stream literature. Dalit women's literary works recall their past and reconstruct history. Some of the prominent Dalit Women Novels are as follows: Kumud Pawade in her book *Antasphot* examines that caste system and patriarchal system are the causes of both physical and psychological sufferings of Dalit women. Shantabai Kamble's *The Kaleidoscopic View of My Life* argues that Dalit men escape all responsibilities whereas Dalit women have to shoulder all responsibilities and remain sleepless and restless throughout their lives. P. Sivakami in her book *The Taming of Women* presents the blatant reality that the Dalit women are the worst and direct victims of superstitions, patriarchal norms, and sexual exploitation and certain religious norms and rituals.

### **5.2.7 Salient Features of Dalit Women Novels**

Dalit women writers use literature as a proper channel to affirm their identities. Issues like emotions, domestic violence, bewilderment, rage, poverty, suffering and patriarchal structures, caste discrimination and gender inequalities are discussed in Dalit Women's novels. For instance,

Bama in *Sangati* remarks that Dalit women continue to experience multifaceted caste discrimination based on caste, class, religion and gender. Bama presents the four-fold painful experiences of Dalit women both within Dalit family structure and society at large. Bama exposes atrocities committed on Dalit women, both within her community and outside her community. So, Dalit woman is a Dalit among Dalits. She cherishes her Dalit identity in all phases of her life history. She strongly feels that empowerment of women is possible only through education and taking pride in their identity. We find the similar theme even in Meena Kandasamy's novel *Koogai: the Owl*. The novels of Dalit women expand and supplement Indian mainstream literature. Dalit women's literary works recall their past and reconstruct history.

Dalit writers choose the novel as a proper channel to express their sufferings, articulate thoughts and feelings in their own words. The important factors that lead Dalits to choose the literary genre i.e. novel are: nomadic communities seeking status of human being, faith in education as the key to progress, identity consciousness and desire to attain educational, political and economic growth.

Jasbir Jain's *Beyond Postcolonialism: Dreams and Realities of a Nation* envisions bright future for Indian novel which would include different regional languages, various subject matters and a rainbow of ideas and perspectives. According to her, the new aesthetics i.e. Dalit novel is born from the reality of caste discrimination, alienation, subjugation and exploitation. She propagates that Dalit novel unveils unprecedented experiences that are unheard, unsaid and unsung.

Dalit novel exploits almost all the devices experimented by the main stream literature.

- They are highly self-reflective and retrospective narrative in nature. They are analytical and critical in examining the nature of people and society.
- The individuals in the novels are War-like characters. Their struggles are no less than classical or epic characters in Indian context.
- They use simple but powerful language that reflects the ruthlessness of society and psychology of dominant sect.
- The final call of Dalit novel is to uphold an Ambedkarite and pro-Buddhist world view that offers English education, religious conversion, urbanization and rational thinking as the ultimate solution.

### 5.2.8 Features of the Dalit Novel

**Dalit Novel: A Rugged Language of Rustic Lives:** Dalit literary aesthetics often eschew romantic fantasy, employing the local dialect used in daily life to vividly depict real experiences. Dalit writers use this rugged, natural language to portray their communities authentically, countering the view of non-Dalit writers who deem it undignified. For example, Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* integrates local art forms like music and folk songs to reveal caste discrimination and assert Dalit identities.

**A Document of Social Realism:** Social realism is a key feature of Dalit novels, reflecting the deep connection between individual experiences and broader social and historical contexts. Non-Dalit writers often struggle to present this realism accurately due to their lack of firsthand experience with caste-based suffering. For example, in Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and *Bharathipura*, Dalit characters are depicted as passive and marginalized, with the dominant castes being portrayed as the main actors in social change. This contrasts with Dalit literature, which authentically captures the lived experiences and struggles of Dalits, offering a genuine depiction of their realities and traumas that mainstream novels often miss.

**A Document of Dalit History:** Dalit writers utilize the novel as a means to present history from their perspective, documenting their pain and struggles as a form of social history. Mainstream literature often overlooks or distorts Dalit history, presenting it from the dominant caste viewpoint. Dalit novels challenge this by offering alternative histories and perspectives. For example, Joseph Macwan's *The Step Child* explores the socio-political and cultural life of the Vankaras in Gujarat, while Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* details the experiences of Malas and Madigas (Malas and Madigas are Dalit communities) in Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, Bama's *Sangati* highlights the Dalit experience and interactions with dominant castes in Tamil Nadu, thus reconstructing an alternative history through authentic representation.

**A Paradigm Shift from Pain to Protest:** Dalit Novel is not a mere passive narration of pain, rather it is a literary protest against oppressive structures in society. Firstly, it is active in shifting the narration of pain to that of protest. Secondly, it is proactive in transferring the narration of protest to attaining equality, justice, freedom, dignity and identity. It is a literary form of social protest. Arjun Dangle in his Introduction to *Poisoned Bread* "Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future" shows Dalit literature as a symbol of retaliation. He argues that Dalit novel presents itself as a counter literature to the hegemonic mainstream literature. According to him, hope for the

emancipation of suffering people from all oppressive structures is the heart and soul of Dalit literature.

**Anti-Caste Narrative:** Non-Dalit writers, far from dismantling the reality of caste, stereotype the identity of Dalits and reinforce caste in their literary works. For instance, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* depicts the predicament of India (owing to Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi) between 1975 and 1984. Though he highlights the brutality of the reality of caste system, he takes the side of the dominant caste characters in his literary work. However, Dalit novel elevates the identity of Dalits wherein Dalits start to affirm their identities. It uses Ambedkar's ideology and offers itself as a counter literature thereby challenging the reality of caste system. Vemula Yellaiah's *Kakka* is the first novel on Madiga community (a Dalit community in Telangana state). The author hails from the same Madiga community. Echoing Kancha Ilaiah, he proposes *Madigaization (Dalitization)* in every aspect to contest caste ideology.

**A Celebration of Dalit Life:** Dalit novels actively celebrate and preserve Dalit identity by exploring aspects such as food habits, culture, traditions, belief systems, festivals, and historical figures like Buddha and Ambedkar. They address both individual and communal hopes and aspirations within the Dalit community. For instance, Bama's *Sangati* and *Karukku* not only depict the vibrant culture and traditions of Tamil Nadu Dalits but also employ folk language to challenge and resist oppressive structures. Her works emphasize the affirmation of Dalit identity against dominant caste ideologies that have historically taught Dalits to despise their heritage and feel inferior. Bama argues that lacking a strong sense of identity is akin to being a tree without roots, leading to the loss of self-worth and history. Bama motivates Dalits to transform self-hatred into pride and reconnect with their cultural roots. Thus, Dalit novels foster a renewed awareness and pride in Dalit identity.

**A Question to Indian Democracy:** Dalit novels critically challenge the mainstream portrayal of India as a great Hindu and democratic nation. They expose how ruling castes collaborated with colonial powers before independence and embraced capitalism and feudalism post-independence, reinforcing caste hierarchies. Kancha Ilaiah, in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, argues that ruling castes have used democracy to perpetuate caste dominance, with political democracy failing to get transformed into social democracy. He asserts that Indian democracy remains a regime of dominant castes. Dalit novels contend the notion that mainstream literature authentically represents Indian society, criticizing its failure to address caste issues seriously. Dalit literature

envisions a truly secular, inclusive, and democratic India where all ethnic identities receive equitable resources and live by principles of equality, freedom, and fraternity.

**A Critique of Modernity:** Dalit novel does not yield to the idea of modern India or to Gandhian concept of ideal village. It rather throws light on the burning issues of Dalits like cultural deprivation, economic exploitation, deplorable conditions owing to landlessness and social alienation in Indian village context. Dominant castes prioritize caste identity over other sub identities or secular identities. To the claim that India is a modern country, Dalit novel focuses on the influence of caste which is felt in all walks of village life i.e. like in marriage, people are segregated geographically and socially. For instance, Chilakuri Devaputra in his novel *Panchamam* argues that reality of caste system in India questions the idea of modernity. He opines that modernity has to realize by liberating Dalits from the clutches of social alienation and economic exploitation. Caste is an existing and predominant reality. Dalits continue to face caste discrimination in modern India. Therefore, Dalit novel deconstructs the idea of modernity in India.

**A Self-Criticism:** Dalit novels often explore internal conflicts within Dalit communities, highlighting issues such as caste discrimination among different Dalit sub-groups. P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* addresses the tensions between the Udayars, a dominant caste, and the Paraiyars, a Dalit community, in Tamil Nadu, revealing internal conflicts and contradictions within Dalit society. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* delves into conflicts among Dalit sub-castes, exposing how sectarianism and internal divisions perpetuate the caste system. Kandasamy argues that such intra-Dalit conflicts undermine collective resistance against social injustices and strengthen the dominant castes' hegemony who use *divide and rule* tactics. She advocates for overcoming internal divisions and unification for challenging entrenched caste system.

***Check your progress:***

1. Meena Kandasamy is the author of *Koogai: the Owl* and *The Gypsy Goddess*. (True / False)
2. Kancha Ilaiah, in *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, argues that ruling castes have used democracy to perpetuate caste dominance. (True / False)

### **5.2.9 Criticism against the Dalit Novel**

In general, Dalit literature has been criticized as being propagandist, unsophisticated,



univocal and negative. Dalit Novel is critiqued for excessive resentment. It has been charged that it expresses the frenzy of a movement and doesn't possess neutrality and objectivity. It has been alleged that the literature lacks artistic finesse.

However, Dalit scholar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* argues that Dalit literary work is propagandistic because it is written to bring about a social change. Another Dalit writer Valmiki argues that certain Dalit literary works might express anger because it is impossible to represent the never-ending torments of Dalit life in mellifluous poetic stanzas. He opines that Dalit literary works do not provide enjoyment because they are written out of the Dalit writers' confrontation with their agony which is born of exploitation. In response to the critics who argue that Dalit literature lacks an aesthetic sophistication, he affirms that equality, freedom, justice and love are basic sentiments of people and society and they are more important than pleasure and beauty.

#### **5.2.10 Criticism against Non-Dalit Writers**

Pradeep K. Sharma in his book *Dalit Politics and Literature* believes that Non-Dalit writers cannot authentically represent the suffering of Dalits as they do not undergo caste discrimination. The Dalit writers argue that the humiliation of Dalits cannot be explained by non-Dalit writers. Non-Dalit writers are not sufferers of untouchability. They are more concerned about economic inequality whereas Dalit writers are concerned about social justice. Dalits argue that dominant caste writers can't reach the bottom of Dalits' trauma, sufferings and sensibility. There is no exaggeration in saying that only those who have suffered the pain can give the faithful presentation of that pain. However, Dalit writers acknowledge, welcome and sincerely appreciate any sincere effort of Non-Dalit writers in eradicating social maladies.

#### **5.2.11 Ambedkar's Ideology as the Bedrock of Dalit Novels**

Ambedkar's arguments against caste suppression are foundational in understanding his critique of the caste system. Firstly, Ambedkar argued that caste suppression is inherently unjust, asserting that it denies individuals equal rights and opportunities (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*). Secondly, he criticized the caste system for perpetuating economic inequality, stating, "The caste system is not only an economic arrangement but a social one" (*Thoughts on Linguistic States*). Thirdly, he highlighted its detrimental impact on education, arguing that caste restrictions hinder intellectual and personal growth. Fourthly, Ambedkar emphasized the social fragmentation caused by caste, which he believed obstructed national unity and progress. Lastly, he condemned the religious sanction of caste, arguing that religious texts like the *Manusmriti* upheld and justified

caste-based discrimination (*The Problem of the Rupee*). His critiques laid the groundwork for advocating social reform and equality.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's solutions to caste suppression, reflected in Dalit novels, include: Firstly, **social reform** through education, as Ambedkar emphasized: "Educate, agitate, and organize" (*Thoughts on Linguistic States*). Dalit novels like **Bama's** *Karukku* and *Sangati* illustrate this by showcasing the transformative power of education in empowering Dalit individuals. Secondly, **political participation** is advocated, with Ambedkar stating, "Political power is the key to social power" (*Annihilation of Caste*). This is echoed in **Chilakuri Devaputra's** *Panchamam* which highlights the importance of political engagement. Thirdly, **inter-caste marriages** are promoted to break social barriers, a theme explored in **Kalyan Rao's** *Untouchable Spring*. Fourthly, **constitutional rights** are essential for equality, as Ambedkar argued: "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment" (*The Problem of the Rupee*). Finally, **conversion to Buddhism** as a means of escaping caste oppression is illustrated in **Sree Kumaran's** *Kaalakottam*. These novels integrate Ambedkar's solutions, advocating for systemic change and individual empowerment.

### **5.2.12 Impact of Dalit novel on tribal literature**

Dalit literature has significantly impacted tribal literature in India by providing a model for addressing systemic oppression and marginalization. Influential Dalit authors like Bama and Mahasweta Devi have demonstrated how personal and collective narratives can challenge social injustices, inspiring tribal writers to adopt similar strategies. For example, Mahasweta Devi's "*Hajar Churashir Maa*" (1974) and "*Aranyer Adhikar*" (1978) vividly depict tribal struggles, reflecting Dalit literature's focus on marginalized voices. This approach is mirrored in works like Gopinath Mohanty's "*Paraja*" (1964), which addresses the exploitation of tribal communities. Additionally, Dalit literature's exploration of intersectionality has encouraged tribal writers to examine the interconnectedness of caste, gender, and tribal identity, enriching their narratives and enhancing their socio-political critique.

### **5.2.13 Dalit novel and colonial literature**

Dalit literature should be considered part of postcolonial writings because it addresses the profound impact of colonial rule on caste systems and social structures in India. During the colonial period, British policies often reinforced and institutionalized caste discrimination, exacerbating existing inequalities. Dalit literature critically explores these enduring legacies, revealing how colonial and postcolonial dynamics continue to shape the lives and struggles of marginalized

communities. It challenges dominant narratives by exposing systemic injustices and providing a voice to those historically oppressed. By incorporating Dalit literature into postcolonial studies, we gain a deeper understanding of how colonialism and its aftermath affect social hierarchies and identities, ensuring that the diverse experiences of all marginalized groups are acknowledged and addressed.

#### **5.2.14 Dalit and Black Novels**

Dalit and Black novels offer profound insights into systemic oppression, yet they stem from distinct historical and cultural contexts. Both genres illuminate the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities, with Dalit novels focusing on the caste-based discrimination prevalent in India, and Black novels addressing racial oppression within Western societies. Each genre serves as a powerful tool for resistance, using literature to critique societal norms and advocate for justice. Dalit novels, such as those by Bama and Joseph Macwan, often highlight the intersection of caste and class, revealing deep-seated social hierarchies and violence. In contrast, Black novels, like those by Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, explore racial injustice and the complexities of identity within predominantly white societies. While Dalit literature frequently emphasizes caste-specific struggles, Black literature delves into the ramifications of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism. Both literatures enrich our understanding of marginalized experiences and contribute to broader conversations on equality, offering valuable perspectives on overcoming entrenched societal inequities.

#### **5.2.15 Future of the Dalit Novel**

The future of Dalit novels promises several key advancements. Firstly, they will increasingly explore diverse narratives, reflecting varied experiences within Dalit communities. Secondly, they are likely to integrate more contemporary issues, such as technology and globalization, affecting Dalit lives. Thirdly, there will be a greater emphasis on intersectionality, addressing how caste intersects with gender, class, and other identities. Fourthly, Dalit novels are expected to gain wider readership and critical recognition, influencing mainstream literature. Finally, these works will continue to drive social change, challenging existing power structures and advocating for justice and equality in evolving socio-political contexts.

Dalit Novels facilitate to understand that they are vibrant in their structure, eloquent in their voice and challenging in their spirit. They are actual records of their authors' intentions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Those are not superficial in any aspect but a faithful portrayal of blood and bones of their creatures and co-inhabitants.

Dalit Novels offer themselves as mementos and manifestos of universal man and woman and pleads to draw attention for its content and communication. They assist the literary community to study and understand the realism of Dalits in an optimistic manner. They serve as a lighthouse to the other genres of literature to probe into the past history for Dalit consciousness. Thus, everybody could commit themselves to the Dalit cause and work to eradicate social maladies in the society. Dalit novel is a treasure box of humanism. Dalit literature continues to contribute to Indian literature in terms of expansion of language, thought and activity. Indian literary criticism has also been stimulated to introspect. The future of Dalit literature depends upon the fact that as long as the caste system prevails, Dalit literature expands.

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### 5.3 Learning Outcomes

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After studying this Unit, you should have:

- learnt that "Dalit" derives from "Dalita," meaning "oppressed," explore how ancient Hindu texts like the Manusmriti institutionalized caste-based discrimination.
- grasped how Dalit novel emerged as a response to caste discrimination, influenced by figures like B.R. Ambedkar.
- examined the multifaceted discrimination faced by Dalit women and how it is depicted in their literature.
- understood the salient features of Dalit novels and how they depict caste suffering and resistance, offering a contrast to mainstream portrayals.
- come to know what are solutions suggested by Ambedkar for the liberation of Dalits.

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### 5.4 Glossary

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- **Aesthetics:** Work of art that shows great beauty
- **Alienation:** Separation
- **Conscientize:** to Educate a person about an idea
- **Egalitarian:** Believing that all people are equally important and should have the same rights and opportunities in life.
- **Frenzy:** Violent emotion and behaviour

- **Hegemony:** Domination
- **Memoir:** a Historical account
- **Mellifluous:** Having a pleasant and flowing sound
- **Monopoly:** Complete control of something
- **Perpetuate:** to cause something to continue
- **Rugged:** Rough
- **Sectarianism:** Excessive attachment to a particular group

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## 5.5 Sample Questions

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### 5.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Which regional literature has strong roots in Dalit literature?
  - a) Uttar Pradesh
  - b) Marathi
  - c) Kerala
  - d) West Bengal

**Answer: b) Marathi**

2. Which ideology is foundation to Dalit novel?
  - a) Marx
  - b) Ambedkar
  - c) Kanshiram
  - d) Phule

**Answer: b) Ambedkar**

3. What does the term "Dalit" originate from?
  - a) Sanskrit word "Dalita," meaning "oppressed" or "broken"
  - b) Marathi word meaning "of the soil"
  - c) Greek word for "excluded"
  - d) Latin term for "marginalized"

**Answer: a) Sanskrit word "Dalita," meaning "oppressed" or "broken"**

4. What significant shift occurred in the novel genre by the 17th century?
  - a) It began to focus on mythological themes.
  - b) It evolved from short stories into a longer, distinct form of prose fiction.

- c) It was primarily written in Latin.
- d) It became synonymous with poetry.

**Answer: b)** It evolved from short stories into a longer, distinct form of prose fiction.

5. What was a major influence on the rise of Dalit literature?
- a) The British colonization and introduction of English literature
  - b) The work of European Romantic poets
  - c) The Ambedkarian ideology and Dalit Panther movement
  - d) The spread of Christian missionary literature

**Answer: c)** The Ambedkarian ideology and Dalit Panther movement

6. Which novel is NOT mentioned as a significant work in the context of the development of the novel genre?

- a) Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe
- b) Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan
- c) The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
- d) Pamela by Samuel Richardson

**Answer: c)** The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

7. Which of the following statements best describes the portrayal of Dalits in early Indian English literature?

- a) Dalits were often depicted as central protagonists with significant agency.
- b) Dalits were usually portrayed through a sympathetic lens but not as central figures with agency.
- c) Dalits were portrayed as antagonists in most early Indian English literature.
- d) Dalits were largely ignored in early Indian English literature.

**Answer: b)** Dalits were usually portrayed through a sympathetic lens but not as central figures with agency.

8. What role did the Dalit Sahitya Akademi play in the development of Dalit literature?

- a) It organized the first major Dalit literary conference.
- b) It published the first Dalit novels.
- c) It was responsible for mainstreaming Dalit literature in anthologies.
- d) It was the first publisher of English translations of Dalit works.

**Answer: a)** It organized the first major Dalit literary conference.

9. How does Dalit literature challenge the portrayal of Indian democracy according to the text?

- a) By asserting that Indian democracy has been entirely inclusive and fair.
- b) By exposing how democracy has reinforced caste hierarchies and failed to provide true social equality.
- c) By ignoring the democratic aspects of Indian society.
- d) By celebrating the achievements of Indian democracy without critique.

**Answer: b)** By exposing how democracy has reinforced caste hierarchies and failed to provide true social equality.

10. What criticism is often directed at Dalit novels according to the text?

- a) They are praised for their sophisticated literary techniques and aesthetic appeal.
- b) They are criticized for being overly romantic and idealistic.
- c) They are criticized for being propagandist, unsophisticated, and negative.
- d) They are seen as too neutral and lacking in emotional depth.

**Answer: c)** They are criticized for being propagandist, unsophisticated, and negative.

### 5.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. What is the origin and meaning of the term "Dalit" in the context of the Indian caste system? Discuss major criticism against Dalit novel and the response of Dalit writers to it.
2. Explain the significance of the Dalit Panthers' movement in the evolution of Dalit literature.
3. How did Indian novel fail to address Dalit issues? Discuss.
4. What are the salient features of Dalit women novel?
5. What are the solutions to Dalit problems according to Ambedkar ideology?

### 5.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. List out the unique features of Dalit Novel.
2. Critically evaluate the role of Dalit literature in challenging mainstream narratives and promoting social change.
3. What kind of Dalit struggle is portrayed in Dalit novels? Explain.

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## 5.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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- Abedi, Zakir. *Contemporary Literature: Quest for Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: Arise Publications, 2010.
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## **Unit-6: Introduction to the Life and Works of G. Kalyana Rao & Sujatha Gidla**

### **Structure**

**6.0** Introduction

**6.1** Objectives

**6.2** Introduction to the Life and Works of G. Kalyana Rao & Sujatha Gidla

**6.2.1** G. Kalyana Rao and his works

**6.2.2** Sujatha Gidla and her works

**6.2.3** Let Us Sum Up

**6.3** Learning Outcomes

**6.4** Glossary

**6.5** Sample Questions

**6.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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### **6.0 Introduction**

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When Dalit writers started writing about themselves, Telugu Dalit literature underwent a pivotal change. Under the influence of Gandhi, Dalit writers addressed issues of caste and untouchability during the independence movement, but their style and content were largely borrowed from mainstream literature. However, Telugu literature began to reflect Dalit angst, protest, and an alternative vision from the mid-1980s onwards. Previously limited to the upper castes, writers from the Madiga caste, who are part of the Dandora movement, have started affixing their caste name to their surnames. Because of their low status, madigas are viewed as abuses of the term, and using them may result in the application of the Atrocities Act. Additionally, this group writes about the "satellite castes," who, even among the Madigas, are regarded as untouchable.

In this Unit, we shall discuss in detail about the life and works of two prominent Telugu Dalit writers G. Kalyana Rao and Sujatha Gidla. It may be noted that in this Course you will also read in detail two novels, one by G. Kalyana Rao and the other by Sujatha Gidla.

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## 6.1 Objectives

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The objectives of this Unit are to:

- explore the life and works of G. Kalyana Rao
- know about Sujatha Gidla and her life
- get an overview of Rao's work *Untouchable Spring*
- get familiar with Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*
- explore other works of G. Kalyana Rao & Sujatha Gidla

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## 6.2 Introduction to the Life and Works of G. Kalyana Rao & Sujatha Gidla

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### 6.2.1 G. Kalyana Rao and his works

G. Kalyana Rao is a novelist, short story writer, essayist and playwright. He is an active member of Virasam (Viplava Rachayitala Sangham), the Revolutionary Writers Association. Being a Dalit writer, he combines the Dalit and revolutionary perspectives in his writings. Through his works, this Telugu writer attempts to depict the harsh reality of the society and its atrocities faced by the Dalit community. The author clearly portrays the heritage and traditions of the Dalits by telling the story of “Untouchable Spring” through a Dalit protagonist. He also shows how the norms and traditions of their culture were passed on through oral means from generation to generation. Rao added a personal touch to his novel as what he wrote was a result of what he faced being a Dalit in his community. The journey of being a Dalit and how different it is from the rest of the people is strongly portrayed in his work.

Rao began his career as a playwright and wrote around fifteen plays, significant among them being ‘Tolipoddu’, ‘Satire’ and ‘Lockup’. His work *Antarani Vasantam* (2000), which is translated as *Untouchable Spring*, is a contribution to the growing body of Dalit writing. He is a Dalit Christian. He supports leftist ideology and the progressive belief system, arming liberals in the fight to spread and advance the need for Dalits to make socially responsible, politically astute, and keep up with the upper classes.

Rao furthers the development of Telugu drama as a genre with his theatrical works. Whether they are origin stories or caste puranas, the majority of the art forms created by the general public are performative and narrative in nature. Since marginalized communities are not permitted

to participate in the public domain, these performances assist them in creating a counterpublic sphere. Since they are constantly evolving and contributing their experiences based on current events, these creative forms that are founded on the subversions of traditional stories are as flexible as possible. Kalyana Rao challenges his argument by citing western literary contexts, traditional Sanskrit drama, and both classical and modern Telugu theatrical. He refers to Arthur Miller's classification of writers to say that there is a third category of writers in India that Arthur Miller does not know of. It is the one who writes from the outskirts of society, and it is the one who is an heir to the weaving culture like the writer himself. Between the ancient and the modern, there is people's art and people's art forms that belong to the marginalised.

### **6.2.1.1 *Untouchable Spring***

Set in the Telugu Dalit community, *Untouchable Spring* discusses the lives of a Dalit family through five generations. In the novel, Boodevi, Yellanna, and Subhadra, Sivaiah-Simon and Sasirekha, Immanuel, Jessie, Mary Suvarta, and Ruby are all part of the Telugu-speaking world of Ruth and Reuben. The unrecognized stream of art and culture that the mainstream upper-caste social order had mocked and suppressed is what the author has tried to capture, not a life but the course of untouchable lives.

This fictional work is both autobiographical and representative, secular and ethnic-religious. It investigates introspectively the source and extent of casteist hostility as well as the extraneous scope of such sentiments. There are no answers to the questions that are raised, and looking for ways out becomes fruitless. And from this helplessness and habitual exhaustion from centuries of torture and incrimination, comes the need to rebel and make one's voice heard.

G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* challenges the marginalisation and showcases Dalit forms of dance, music, and art that are not acknowledged by mainstream art. The book tells the story of the untouchables' never-ending battle. It acknowledges their fight for equality, empowerment, and self-respect and offers to serve as a textual portal through which outsiders can view and comprehend this community. It is a novel that is equally important to our comprehension of our country as any other.

As a memory text, *Untouchable Spring* combines elements of a novel, a family/community saga, and a historical record. Rao's use of the oral storytelling tradition has highlighted generations of Dalits' artistic expressions in addition to their social and cultural lives. We are taken on a journey into the hearts of these generations via their stories; from those who were exploited to those who, by defiance, find their humanity. Ruth's memories take us to the family of her husband Reuben in

Yennela Dinni, to the boy Yellanna, to his expulsion from his caste by those deemed "superiors," to his music, to his son Sivaiah's escape from the drought with his wife, to the latter's conversion to Christianity, to the brutality directed towards him and other Dalit Christians, to Reuben's birth at a time when everything seems to be falling apart and he is subsequently abandoned in an orphanage, and finally to Reuben's quest for his origins. This accurate translation from the Telugu highlights the growing awareness of people's rights and how it motivates them to engage in armed struggle, inspiring anger at what man has done to man and sympathy for all that is pathetic.

Besides discussing the daily hardships, tragedies and atrocities the community must endure, Rao raises the topic of emancipation at the end of the novel. Additionally, *Untouchable Spring* recounts a number of historical events—such as the famine of 1977–1978—that were left out of mainstream and upper-caste histories. Y. Sherif refers to K. Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as a "alternative history," or a subaltern history, in his essay "Text as resistance: K. Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as an Alternative History." The linear development and narrative of the history of the upper caste and upper class obscure this history. This raises the question of whether only members of the upper caste, or those in positions of power, have the ability to shape or alter history.

***Check your progress:***

1. 'Tolipoddu', 'Satire' and 'Lockup' are plays written by Kalyana Rao. (True / False)
2. Y. Sherif refers to K. Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as an "alternative history," or a subaltern history. (True / False)
3. *Untouchable Spring* combines elements of a novel, a family/community saga, and a historical record. (True / False)

### **6.2.2 Sujatha Gidla and her works**

Sujatha Gidla is an Indian-American Telugu writer. She was born in the town of Kazipet in a Dalit Christian family in the state of Telangana. Her family belonged to the Mala caste. She was raised in the town of Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh. During the period of Colonial rule, her great grandparents became Christians after hearing the Gospel preached by Canadian Baptist missionaries in the community. Sujatha's grandparents received their education at a missionary-run school in Kakinada, which is indicative of the way that missionary institutions promote social development in general through education. Gidla's grandfather, Prasanna Rao, attended a school established by Canadian missionaries. Gidla's parents taught college courses as well.

Gidla enrolled in a master's program in physics at Regional Engineering College, Warangal, following her graduation from the state-run Pithapuram Rajah Government College in Kakinada. In one of her earliest acts of activism during her second year there, Gidla took part in a strike against an upper-caste professor in the Engineering department who was purposefully failing students from lower castes. The only other woman who had taken part in the strike was her. Everyone protesting there was taken to an undisclosed location and placed in jail. Gidla suffered abuse and developed tuberculosis while being held captive for three months. To assist them, her mother Manjula got in touch with K. G. Kannabiran, a civil rights attorney. This was one of Gidla's first public acts of activism.

After passing out from the Regional Engineering College, Gidla worked as a researcher associate in the Indian Institute of Technology Madras' Department of Applied Physics, where she contributed to an Indian Space Research Organization-funded project. At the age of 26 years, she migrated to the US. She worked in the IT field until 2009 when she was laid off due to the economic recession. Afterwards, she started working as a conductor in the New York City subway. A few of Gidla's relatives have also left the country: her brother is an engineer in Canada, and her sister is a doctor in the United States.

The association of Gidla's family with Canadian missionaries facilitated her better education. She could go to prestigious schools and eventually immigrate to the United States. She became the first Indian woman to work as a train conductor in one of the world's biggest public transportation systems after accepting a position with the New York subway as a software application designer at the Bank of New York. In an interview to *The Financial Express*, she said, "Because I am a Marxist and Communist, I also have romantic feelings about being a working class person. So this job attracted me. Secondly, I wanted to do something that men are supposed to be doing."

When Sujatha Gidla immigrated to the US in 1990, she left behind prejudice, an exclusive, traditionalist Indian society, and the stigma of untouchability. She saw that in this far-off land called America, her spirit could at last be freed from the political, cultural, and traditional constraints that had weighed it down in India. It was at that moment that she realised the true scope of her family's extraordinary past. She visited India to record her mother's, her uncles', and their friends' testimonies because she was determined to learn more about that history and the social and political forces that made it possible.

In her debut novel *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, she tells their story. The novel is not only a moving portrait of love, hardship and struggle but also a rare thing i.e., a personal history of modern India told from the bottom up. In particular, she writes that caste is an abhorrent condition in India for Dalits, saying that "Your life is your caste, and your caste is your life." With the release of her book, Gidla becomes one of the many indigenous Indian writers who are utilizing their voices to be acknowledged and respected in a society that prioritizes tradition over modernity.

Gidla's journey to the US, where she presently resides with a revitalized sense of independence, is one of struggle and eventual victory.

### **6.2.2.1 *Ants among Elephants***

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* is a family memoir that depicts a dreadful depiction of casteism, corrupt politicians, and the dangers of a dark growing culture in post-modern, independent India.

The narrative of Gidla chronicles the struggles of a Dalit family spanning three generations as they attempt to overcome caste-based prejudice and discrimination while trying to make ends meet in Kazipet, a small town in Andhra Pradesh. Their birth into an untouchable caste has caused them to endure unspeakable tragedies and hardships. The lives of Sathyam, Manjula, and Gidla serve as a stage for the reenactment of systemic caste and gender inequality in the family, the workplace, and the political sphere.

The narrative follows an untouchable family's fight to break free from the social and economic constraints imposed by India's harsh caste system. This book explores the discrimination and oppression Dalits face in India as a result of their caste.

A poet and revolutionary, as well as an untouchable family, become teachers in this amazing true story. Sujatha Gidla, like one in six Indians, was born into an untouchable family. Although the majority of untouchables lack formal education, Gidla's family received an education from Canadian missionaries during the 1930s, which enabled her to attend prestigious schools and immigrate to the United States at the age of 26. She did not realize how unique, yet how common, her family history actually was until then. Born during the final days of British colonial rule were her mother, Manjula, and her uncles, Satyam and Carey. Their world was one of opportunity mixed with injustice and poverty when they were growing up.

Everyone had a political side in the slums where they lived, and protests, rallies, and arrests were frequent occurrences. Freedom was promised by the Independence movement. But not much

changed for untouchables and other working-class and impoverished people. The oldest, Satyam, became a Communist Party member. Gidla describes his amazing journey from being a labor organizer and student to becoming a well-known poet and the leader of a left-wing guerrilla group. Gidla also documents her mother's struggles against women's oppression and caste. Gidla immerses us on a page by page in a complex, close-knit family as they fervently work toward a better life and a more equitable society.

Her uncle KG Satyamurty, a Maoist activist and founding member of the left-wing militant group known as the People's War Group (PWG), is the subject of the family memoir. In addition, the book detailed her mother Manjula's life narrative, which is set against the backdrop of the peasant uprising and the establishment of a new state in India after independence. According to Gidla, the work falls under the "literary nonfiction" genre.

Gidla remembers that a movie was how she first learned about casteism. Because the girl was a wealthy Christian and her family opposed her marriage to a less wealthy Hindu boy, the film was a conflicted love story. Because most Christians in Andhra Pradesh converted from the Dalit community, she had previously thought that her Christian faith was the reason behind the caste discrimination she experienced as a Dalit, or "untouchable." "That's when I started thinking: If it's not Christianity, why were we untouchables?" she says in an interview with Slate.

Gidla claimed that the book was written by her family. Since the book was also her story, her mother was heavily involved in its writing, and her niece Anagha helped with the cover design. Gidla spent more than 15 years researching the book and traveled to India three times. Before the book was published, she apparently wrote 50–60 drafts of it. Gidla has mentioned that *Ants Among Elephants* will first have a prequel and then a sequel published.

The prequel will recount the history of her own family prior to her uncle's generation, describing how they went from being hunter-gatherers in Andhra Pradesh's forests to settling in villages and becoming members of the lowest caste in Hinduism. The autobiography-style sequel will address the current generation.

In the 1930s, Canadian missionaries taught Sujatha Gidla's Mala caste family, despite the fact that the majority of Untouchables in India are illiterate. Gidla eventually was able to pursue higher education because of these circumstances, but she and her family were constantly reminded of their status, which caused Gidla to consider the connection between caste, religion, and social standing. She was able to gain a deeper understanding of her own family history, which is both remarkable and ordinary, after relocating to the United States. She started looking for evidence of

her parents' pasts while conducting research in India, focusing on the lives of her mother, her grandparents, and a Maoist uncle who believed that caste prejudice would end with a revolution.

The New York Times claims that the novel offers readers a visceral and unsettling understanding of how prejudice, segregation, and stereotypes have persisted throughout the second half of the 20th century and even today. It is an unsentimental and deeply poignant read. She also contributed a personal narrative titled “From Malapalli to Brahmin Town” to *The Oxford Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*.

***Check your progress:***

1. Sujatha Gidla worked as software application designer at the Bank of New York (True/False).
2. Cultural translation aims to make the source culture comprehensible to the target culture. (True/False)
3. “From Malapalli to Brahmin Town” is a personal narrative penned by Sujatha Gidla and published in *The Oxford Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. (True/False)

### **6.2.3 Let Us Sum Up**

Dalit literature in Telugu underwent a significant change when writers began writing about themselves, addressing issues of caste and untouchability during the independence movement. The Madiga caste, part of the Dandora movement, began affixing their caste name to their surnames, highlighting the "satellite castes" who are considered untouchable. G. Kalyana Rao, a Dalit writer, combines Dalit and revolutionary perspectives in his writings, depicting the harsh reality of society and its atrocities faced by the Dalit community. His work *Antarani Vasantam* (2000), which is translated as *Untouchable Spring*, is a contribution to the growing body of Dalit writing.

Sujatha Gidla, an Indian-American Telugu writer, was born in a Dalit Christian family in Telangana and raised in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh. She immigrated to the US in 1990, leaving behind prejudice, an exclusive, traditionalist Indian society, and the stigma of untouchability. Gidla visited India to record her family's testimonies and realized the true scope of her family's extraordinary past. Her debut novel, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), tells their story, highlighting the abhorrent condition of caste in India for Dalits.

Gidla's journey to the US, where she resides with a revitalized sense of independence, is one of struggle and eventual victory. By utilizing their voices to be acknowledged and respected



in a society that prioritizes tradition over modernity, these indigenous Indian writers continue to challenge and inspire the Dalit community. She also contributed a personal narrative titled “From Malapalli to Brahmin Town” to *The Oxford Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*.

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## 6.3 Learning Outcomes

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After completing this Unit, you should be able to:

- appreciate the life and works of G. Kalyana Rao
- apprise Sujatha Gidla as her literary contributions
- understand Rao’s novel *Untouchable Spring*
- appreciate *Untouchable Spring* as a memory text and historical document
- comprehend Gidla’s autobiographical *Ants Among Elephants*

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## 6.4 Glossary

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- **Mala & Madiga:** Malas and Madigas are two major Scheduled Caste sub-groups or kulams in Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh; they are regarded as untouchables;
- **Untouchable:** a person disregarded or shunned by society or a particular group; social outcast
- **Virasam:** Viplava Rachayitala Sangram, popularly known as Virasam, in Telugu speaking states of India, is a Revolutionary Writers' Association. It began in 1970 after the Naxalbari and Srikakulam peasant uprisings in the late 1960s.

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## 6.5 Sample Questions

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### 6.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Sujatha Gidla was born in \_\_\_\_\_. (Kazipet)
2. The book titled *Antarani Vasantam* is written by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Kalyana Rao
  - b. B.R. Ambedkar
  - c. Sujatha Gidla

- d. Kalyana Rao
3. Gilda's seminal work *Ants Among Elephants* appeared in the year
- 2016
  - 2017**
  - 2018
  - 2019
4. Kalyana Rao is associated with a revolutionary writers' association, which is popularly known as \_\_\_\_\_ .
- Vegam
  - Varsham
  - Virasam**
  - None of the above
5. The grandparents of Sujatha Gidla converted to Christianity because of \_\_\_\_\_.
- British missionaries
  - French missionaries
  - Canadian missionaries**
  - Portuguese missionaries
6. Cultural translation is essentially a meta-level process. (**True** / False)
7. *Untouchable Spring* discusses the story of \_\_\_\_\_ generations of a Dalit family.
- One
  - Three
  - Five
  - Seven**
8. *Ants Among Elephants* discusses the story of \_\_\_\_\_ generations of a Dalit family.
- Five
  - Four
  - Three**
  - Two
9. *Untouchable Spring* mentions the famine of 1977–1978. (**True** / False)
10. "From Malapalli to Brahmin Town" is published in *The Oxford Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. (**True** / False)

### 6.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. Write a brief note on Telugu Dalit writer G. Kalyana Rao.
2. Comment on the novel *Untouchable Spring* (1986).
3. What do you understand by Dalit Writing?
4. Briefly discuss Sujatha Gidla as a novelist.
5. *Ants Among Elephants* is a memory text. Explain.

### 6.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Position and justify G. Kalyana Rao's role as a representative of Telugu Dalits.
2. Critically evaluate Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* as a Dalit story.
3. Compare Kalyana Rao and Sujatha Gidla as Dalit writers in the light of your course.

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## 6.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Dattaray, Debashree. "Book Review." *Voice of Dalit*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2014, pp. 247–49. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974354520140208>.

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Uma, Alladi, and M. Sridhar. "G. Kalyana Rao: The Origins of Telugu Drama That One Does Not Wish to See." *Critical Discourse in Telugu*, Routledge India, 2021.

#### Personal interviews:

1. I Was Born an Untouchable: This Is My Story.  
<https://www.dailyo.in/arts/untouchability-Dalit-andhra-pradesh-sujatha-gidla-communism-kg-satyamurthy-ants-among-elephants-22129>.
2. "In Her Words, and Mine: Getting to Know Ants Among Elephants' Award-Winning Author Sujatha Gidla." *Firstpost*, 24 Nov. 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/in-her-words-and-mine-getting-to-know-ants-among-elephants-award-winning-author-sujatha-gidla-5603051.html>.
3. Shobavish. "The Vulnerability of Human Dignity: Q&A with Sujatha Gidla." Bloom, 29 Oct. 2019, <https://bloomsite.wordpress.com/2019/10/29/the-vulnerability-of-human-dignity-qa-with-sujatha-gidla/>.

## **Unit-7: *Untouchable Spring*: Background, Plot, Narrative Technique**

### **Structure**

7.0 Introduction

7.1. Objectives

7.2 *Untouchable Spring*: Background, Plot, Narrative Technique

7.3.1 Background

7.3.2 Plot

7.3.3 Narrative Techniques

7.3.4 Let Us Sum Up

7.3 Learning Outcomes

7.4 Glossary

7.5 Sample Questions

7.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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### **7.0 Introduction**

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The origins of Dalit literature can be traced back to the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who is also known as a social reformer and the architect of the Indian constitution. His works, especially *Annihilation of Caste* and his autobiography *Waiting for a Visa*, lay bare the social realities of being a Dalit in India, challenge the caste hierarchy, and advocate for social justice. Similarly, Jyotiba Phule, through his writings, questioned Brahmanism and the evils of the caste system. His works *Gulamgiri*, *Brahmananche Kasab*, *Shatkaryacha Asood*, etc., vehemently criticize the British colonial government and society that enforced the *Varna* system.

The early twentieth century witnessed Dalit literature flourish through poetry and prose when literary voices from Maharashtra like Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, and Namdeo Dhasal used poetry as a tool to speak against the atrocities committed against Dalits and recount their experiences in society. Similarly, the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, a movement in Maharashtra that combined literary expression with activism through their writings and protests, also asserted the dignity and rights of Dalits and called for an end to caste-based discrimination in society.

Dalit writing is a significant literary branch of Indian writing. It is the embodiment of the resilience and struggle of Dalit communities against the caste-based atrocities and oppression inflicted upon them for centuries by society. It discusses the lived experiences, exploitation, and identity of the Dalit communities. Dalit writers question caste-based inequalities and violence, thereby asserting their dignity and rights. Some major figures in Dalit literature are Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limabale, Baby Kamble, Kancha Iliah, Meena Kandasamy, etc. Dalit literature encompasses various literary genres such as autobiographies, poems, novels, short stories, non-fiction, plays, etc., and portrays the social realities of Dalits and critiques society. Dalit writing offers a platform to fight for social change, challenge stereotypes, voice out lived experiences and promote an equal and just society. It also serves as a platform to question the caste-based atrocities committed against the untouchables and reclaim Dalit histories and identities. The Dalit autobiographical novels, which revolve around the experiences of an individual, also tell the story of Dalit communities. *Untouchable Spring* is one such novel that revolves around six generations of Dalits and depicts the lives of the Mala and Madiga communities. This unit aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the background, plot, and narrative techniques of the novel.

***Check your progress:***

1. Literary voices from Maharashtra like Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, and Namdeo Dhasal used poetry as a tool to speak against the atrocities committed against Dalits. (True / False)

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## **7.1 Objectives**

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This Unit has the following objectives for learners:

- Introduction to the novel *Untouchable Spring* by G. Kalyana Rao
- A brief overview of the background and the plot of the novel
- A study of narrative techniques used in the novel

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## 7.2 *Untouchable Spring*: Background, Plot, Narrative Technique

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### 7.2.1 Background

G. Kalyana Rao, a prominent figure in the Telugu literary circle, is an influential novelist, short story writer, essayist, and playwright. Kalyana Rao is an active member of Viplava Rachaitala Sangham (VIRSAM), or Revolutionary Writers Association. Rao played a key role in the growth of Telugu drama as a genre. His works intertwine Dalit and revolutionary perspectives and subvert classical stories in the light of the social realities of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Kalyana Rao has been a vibrant presence in the struggles of the disadvantaged in society and was incarcerated for over seven months. His writings echo his philosophy of achieving a just society devoid of prejudice and exploitation. Kalyana Rao has written around fifteen plays, and some of his notable plays are *Satire*, *Lockup*, and *Tolipoddu*. He has directed and acted in several of them. Rao contributed significantly to the critical analysis of the roots of Telugu dramas. Rao also authored *Nenevni Adiganani* (What Did I Ask?), an anthology of short stories, and a narrative poem titled “Kalam” (Time). The novel *Antarani Vasantam* first appeared in a serialized version in Aruna Taara magazine. *Untouchable Spring* was originally published in Telugu as *Antarani Vasantam* (2000). Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar translated the novel into English in 2010. Kalyana Rao describes *Untouchable Spring* as a novel written out of his life. The novel depicts the exploitation and struggles of untouchable communities in India, particularly through the lives of the Malas and Madigas in Yennela Dinni village. *Untouchable Spring* also recounts several historical events that were excluded from mainstream history, including the famine of 1977-78, and can be regarded as an alternative history. The author's reflections and personal experiences add nuances to the narrative. The characters in the novel portray marginalised communities' resilience, dreams, aspirations, and struggles.

Themes such as hunger, exploitation, untouchability, and the fight for a just and equal society are depicted vividly in the novel. The novel documents the lived experiences of marginalised communities, which were cast out of mainstream literary scenarios and history. The intertwining of personal stories as well as historical events provides an empathetic and comprehensive understanding of the evils of untouchability, caste-based discrimination, and the inhuman situations to which untouchables are subjected in their daily lives.

*Untouchable Spring*, set in a village named Yennela Dinni, revolves around the stories of six generations in a Dalit family. Through the memories of various characters, Kalyana Rao

narrates the journey of the Madiga and Mala castes, from oppression to the struggle for justice and equality. The novel also discusses issues such as the impact of land ownership, the role of Christianity in the lives of Dalits, exploitation, and discrimination within the new religion.

The depiction of Yennela Dinni sheds light on the spatial segregation of untouchables as a visible marker of caste. The author discusses the divisions between the houses of upper castes such as Reddy and Karanam and the lower castes like washermen, barbers, balija, cowherds, and potter communities. These houses were separated from the untouchable Mala and Madiga communities. The space away from Ooru where Malas lived became known as Mallapalli, and similarly, where Madigas lived became Madigapalli. Together, they formed Yennela Dinni. By discussing how the spatial divisions enforce the segregation of untouchables from touchables, the author brings attention to the horizontal lines across the lives of people in India, which separate touchable people on one side and untouchable people on the other.

Kalyana Rao portrays the lives of Dalits across several generations through the memories of the central character, Ruth. The novel is a memory text composed of Ruth's recollections of Reuben's memories. *Untouchable Spring* unfolds through the stories of Yellanna, Reuben's grandfather, father Sivaiah, Reuben's son Emmanuel, grandson Jessie, and the women in their lives. Their recollections provide the readers with insights into the life in Yennela Dinni. The novel does not restrict itself to solely discussing the caste discrimination faced by the Dalits but also talks about the daily activities, culture, habits, and art forms of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh.

The personal memories and recollections of the characters are placed against a detailed cultural and historical backdrop in the novel. The author traces the impact of political and social movements, such as the Telangana Armed Struggle and the Naxalite Movement, in the struggles for equality and justice in marginalized communities. The lives of untouchables in Yennela Dinni were constantly under the surveillance of the elder Karanam. They were forced to do bonded labour. The upper castes controlled and owned most lands. Malas and Madigas never owned land. *Untouchable Spring* also discusses religious conversion to Christianity among the Dalits as well as other pivotal social movements which influenced the Dalit community, such as Communism, Maoism, Ambedkarism, etc.

The novel also portrays strong female characters such as Ruth, Boodevi, Subhadra, and Ruby to trace the resilience of Dalit women who undergo double marginalization in society. They are strong-willed, determined, and independent characters who represent women's role in the Telugu Dalit movement across generations. Kalyana Rao portrays Boodevi, Pittodu, and Subhadra

to convey how Dalit women nurtured progressive ideas and stood up against the atrocities in the early stages of Dalit movements. Sasirekha, Ruth, and Ruby are representatives of subsequent generations of Dalit women who pursued mental liberty and social freedom in different ways. While Sasirekha follows the path of Christianity to liberation, Ruth and Ruby believe in Communism and Naxalite movements as the means to attain the emancipation of Dalits. Thus, *Untouchable Spring* can also be considered a tribute to the revolutionary women who contributed significantly to the Dalit movement.

### **7.2.2 Plot**

The novel is set in the Andhra Pradesh region and unfolds through the recollections of Ruth about Reuben, his past from pre-colonial to post-independent India, and his ancestors. Reuben, the husband of Ruth, has recently died, and Ruth recounts the events in their lives. Through her recollections, we can see that Yellanna, who belongs to the Mala caste, was the grandfather of Reuben. He was well-known in the community for his songs about hunger, untouchability, and the exploitation of Dalits by the upper castes.

Yellanna is the son of Yerrankadu and Lingalu. His father's sister, Boodevi, who is childless, raises him as her son. Boodevi pays great attention to raising her nephew. She sings songs and narrates stories to him. Together, they attend every festival that takes place in their village. Since the Dalits are not allowed to watch the plays, Boodevi and Yellanna, who are very keen on watching the performances, often watch plays secretly, risking the wrath of the upper castes. They face several atrocities from Karanam, Kapus, and Reddys in their daily lives.

Once, the upper castes of Yennela Dinni beat and chased Yellanna away when he tried to move closer to Yerra Gollalu, a street theatre group. When he moves closer, a man quickly asks him where he is from and which caste he belongs to. When they realise that Yellanna is a Mala boy, they kick the child without any compassion. Yellanna is unable to fathom the reasons for his mistreatment because he is a child. He crosses the river, injured and scared, and reaches the village of Pakkela Dinni, where the Ganga Jatara festival is happening. Yellanna participates in Urumula Nrityam and meets Urumula Naganna, who is another major character in the novel.

Naganna was born in Yennela Dinni, and his parents were Narigadu and Latchimi. His parents, along with other Malas and Madigas of the village, took shelter on top of the mound at a higher level than the upper caste, during heavy rains and storms. He left Yennela Dinni and his childhood behind after the upper castes murdered his father for crossing the ghetto. Naganna shares his story with Yellanna and teaches him Urumulu Nrityam.



Naganna brings Yellanna back to Yennela Dinni, settles in his homeland, and brings up Subhadra, the daughter of Pittodu and Chinnammi. Eventually, Yellanna marries Subhadra and has a son, Sivaiah. The lives of Malas and Madigas are pitiful, as they had no land and were working as labourers in the fields of Karanam. Elder Karanam, a cruel man from the Karanam caste, encroaches the land of Yennela Dinni and controls all the resources. Atchireddy is another cruel character in the novel who gets jealous when the younger Karanam distributes land between Madigas and Malas. Naganna and Yellanna work hard to change the community's predicament by forming and participating in a social organisation. They acquired Maladibba, a wasteland, from Karanam and Atchireddy. Together, they fought for the land, food, and their dignity. However, Naganna passes away before achieving his goals and desires.

Yellanna roams every neighbouring village, leaving his wife and child behind in search of his past and identity. He roamed around, singing songs about caste exploitation and discrimination. Subhadra waits for her husband's return. She struggles to feed her old parents and raise her son. Sivaiah, her son, grows up and marries Sasirekha. A drought hits Yennela Dinni and claims lakhs of lives. Sivaiah buries his relatives and leaves the village with his wife. With a group of migrants, they leave Yennela Dinni in search of work towards Buckingham Canal, but they are denied any job because they are untouchables, and the labourers chase them away with stones.

Tired and starved, Sivaiah meets a man who wears a cross locket around his neck while resting with his wife under a tree. They share each other's stories, and the stranger introduces himself as Martin, who has converted to Christianity. Martin takes Sivaiah and his wife to his home in Valasapadu. Martin also belongs to an oppressed caste, whose real name is Chinnodu. He recounts his experiences and how he became a Christian. He renames Sivaiah as Simon and teaches him Christianity. Sivaiah joins Martin to preach the Bible. Meanwhile, Sasirekha gives birth to a son, Reuben. Saramma, Martin's wife, brings up Reuben with love and care as she is childless.

Martin and Simon fight for the wasteland in Valasapadu against the higher-caste Christians. However, when Martin wins the case, the Reddys and Choudaries come together on Christmas Eve and brutally assassinate him. They also thrash Simon and burn the whole colony. Following Martin's death, Simon carries Martin's body to the village and witnesses his people being chased away from the land under dispute by the upper castes. Simon carries his child and flees the place upon realising that his wife and Martin's wife are dead.

Through Reuben's diaries, Ruth narrates how Reuben received his education from the orphanage and how he became a preacher. Reuben learns about his parents from Jacob, an old man

who brought Reuben to the orphanage. He also learns that Simon left Reuben with Jacob and went back to Vasalapadu on the day Martin was killed. Reuben's diary entries shed light on how he gathered every bit of his family's history while travelling from one village to another. He travels to Yennela Dinni to understand more about his past, ancestors, and culture. Reuben retrieves the complete history of his family within four or five years.

Meanwhile, he marries Ruth, the daughter of Francis, who worked at the same hospital where Reuben was a preacher. The couple moves to Yennela Dinni, builds a house, and starts living there. Ruth and Reuben actively participate in Communist movements, and they often hold meetings at their house. Ruth gives birth to their two children, Emmanuel and Rosy. Rosy gets married to Vandanam, who is an employee in the revenue department. Emmanuel marries Mary Suvarta, who is Ruth's uncle's granddaughter.

Ramanujam, another pivotal character in the novel, makes an appearance when he surprises Reuben during the wedding. He is a schoolteacher and was a close friend of Reuben. They rekindled their friendship with the meeting after years. Ramanujam was hired to teach the children of Madigas and Malas in Yennela Dinni and was aware of the problems their community was facing. Their conversation reveals the inadequacies and flaws of Mahatma Gandhi's attempts to eradicate untouchability in India and the use of the word Harijan. They feel that the term makes them a more depressed class. Through Ramanujam, the arrival of communism among Dalits is also discussed in the novel.

Ruth and Reuben's son, Emmanuel, who is a teacher, observes the discrimination and atrocities done to the Dalits based on their caste. He renounces his family and joins the Naxalite movement at Srikakulam. Ruth and Reuben are proud and show courage when he is killed in an encounter. Later, Reuben also leaves the village to become a Naxalite and gets murdered.

Emmanuel's son, Jessie, marries Ruby, who is the daughter of Rosy. Jessie follows the path of his ancestors and leaves home to fight for the rights of his people. He also joins the Naxalite movement at Srikakulam and runs the activities very effectively. Ruth eagerly waits for him and ends the novel with a letter addressed to her grandson, Jessie.

### **7.2.3 Narrative Techniques**

G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* can be classified as a memory text and a literature of protest. The novel revolves around the life of a Dalit family and community across several generations. Kalyana Rao employs a frame narrative that is centred on the protagonist, Ruth. Although the novel begins with an unnamed first-person narrator, it becomes an exploration of

memories passed down through generations. In the present, an unnamed narrator introduces Ruth, who is reminiscing about her past. Ruth thinks about Reuben and his stories about his ancestors, which he shared with her. She believes that her memory is not the past but rather an untouchable spring. Her memories belong not only to her but also to those who came before her. She observes its continuity to the present and compares it to a song or a poem. By tracing the caste-based discrimination and atrocities across generations in the novel, the author brings attention to the everydayness of caste against the dominant narrative of caste as a remnant of the past.

*Untouchable Spring* has a non-linear narrative structure. Ruth offers a chronological retelling of Reuben's family history based on his diary entries and the anecdotes he collected. The narrative abruptly changes its tone and style, often shifting from the past to the present. The complexity of the narrative can be justified as Reuben, who grew up in an orphanage, learns about his family's past from the stories, songs, and memories of other villagers. Here, Kalyana Rao questions the linear conventions of novels and historical writing through the non-linear portrayal of the past in *Untouchable Spring*. He questions the insufficiency of individualist notions of memory in documenting collective Dalit history. The narrative techniques used in the novel remind the readers how the histories and cultures of Dalits were erased from mainstream history. It also reminds us that history is composed of and by many people.

The weaving together of the Dalit past, art forms, culture, language, etc., through the recollections of multiple people, becomes an act of resistance in itself. The story of Reuben's family and community, which unfolds despite various obstacles and challenges and a lack of reliable sources to document their past, suggests that the history of untouchables cannot be repressed. The complex narrative also becomes a tool in the preservation of the past, to bring the attention of the readers to the continuity with the past and to conceive a future that has not yet come into being but is imminent in the present.

*Untouchable Spring* also questions the appropriation of Dalit culture and art by the dominant cultures. For instance, the novel discusses Urmula Nartyam, a Mala art form, that was appropriated by the upper castes as Perini dance to be performed in temples. Through characters like Yellenna and Naganna, Rao portrays how untouchable bodies housed wonderful living art forms that were later appropriated by the dominant cultures. Kalyana Rao calls Dalits conceived craftsmen with art in their veins and souls. Their art and literature safeguard their sense of pride, identity, and legacy. The caste system sanctions the segregation and exploitation of Dalits despite their inborn abilities. Dalit stories and art forms passed down the generations encompass the spirit

of their struggles, past, and culture. *Untouchable Spring* invites attention to the importance of preserving them against erasure by dominant narratives. For instance, several figures like Pedrasi Pedamma from Telugu oral tales feature in the narrative, highlighting the wisdom of lower-class rural women.

Kalyana Rao reiterates the importance of oral tradition passed down through generations and underlines that the stories accumulate rather than diminish in truth value. The author incorporates Dalit performative art forms such as Veedhi Bagotam, an incredible portrayal of the mix of tune, music, rhythm, and articulation of Dalits in rural areas, and Urmula Nartyam, as sites of resistance in the narrative. Kalyana Rao offers footnotes to assist the readers in understanding these art forms, which were seldom studied or documented in Indian folk scholarship.

*Untouchable Spring* embodies the characteristics of Dalit writings, which denounce prevalent literary traditions and assert unique folk aesthetics of their own. The use of ordinary language, words, short sentences, songs, and oral tradition in the novel reflects the lives of the characters in the novel. The art forms of Dalit communities exhibit uniqueness, like Yellanna's songs and Naganna's dance. They embody resilience and rebellion against the exclusion that persisted in the dominant cultures. The author embraces the ordinary language of Dalits, which mainstream critics often criticize for not fitting into literary traditions. The songs present throughout the narrative convey the people's pain and rage under the oppressive caste system.

The inclusion of vernacular expressions, idioms, and metaphors in the narrative is also a reminder that Dalit literature is deeply rooted in specific locations and has distinct undercurrents. Through his novel, Kalyana Rao questions the politics of language and the definitions of creativity and imagination. The novel narrativizes the recollections of Dalits across time to validate the experience of their struggle for equality and rights over centuries. Thus, *Untouchable Spring* becomes a celebration of Dalit experiences, stories, art, cultures, and identities.

***Check your progress:***

1. Kalyana Rao is an active member of Viplava Rachaitala Sangham (VIRSAM), or Revolutionary Writers Association. (True / False)
2. Kalyana Rao employs a frame narrative that is centred on the protagonist, Ruth. (True / False)

### 7.2.4 Let Us Sum Up

Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring*, originally written in Telugu as *Antarani Vasantam*, is a tale of Dalit lives that is told through the generational story of the inhabitants of Yennela Dinni village. Personal memories blend with historical events in the narrative. The novel brings to light the predicament caused by caste prejudice and the determination shown by the Dalits. The novel, *Untouchable Spring* narrativizes the recollections of Dalits across time to validate the experience of their struggle for equality and rights over centuries. *Untouchable Spring* becomes a celebration of Dalit experiences, stories, art, cultures, and identities. *Untouchable Spring* challenges traditional historical and literary approaches within India, stressing the importance of preserving Dalit tradition and keeping in mind their general interests. It is a work dedicated to men and women who have stood up for their rights throughout history.

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## 7.3 Learning Outcomes

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By the end of this Unit, you are expected to get acquainted with the novel *Untouchable Spring*. You have learned about the plot and narrative techniques used in the novel. You might have also learned the importance of language, and art forms in the novel and the role they play in asserting one's identity. This Unit might have also helped you to understand how Dalit writing embodies uniqueness and history, which mainstream literature lacks in its depiction of Dalits in India.

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## 7.4 Glossary

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- **Famine:** an extreme scarcity of food, leading to widespread hunger.
- **Nuances:** subtle differences or distinctions in meaning, expression, or tone.
- **Spatial segregation:** the physical separation of groups based on characteristics such as caste or race.
- **Memory text:** a narrative that is based on the recollections and memories of characters.
- **Communism:** a political ideology advocating for a classless society and common ownership of resources.
- **Maoism:** a form of communism based on the teachings of Mao Zedong.

- **Ambedkarism:** ideologies and movements inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, focusing on social justice and the rights of Dalits.
- **Resilience:** the ability to recover quickly from difficulties.
- **Emancipation:** the process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation.
- **Fathom:** to understand or comprehend something deeply.
- **Predicament:** a difficult, unpleasant, or embarrassing situation.
- **Reminiscing:** recalling past experiences or events.
- **Anecdotes:** short, amusing, or interesting stories about real incidents or people.
- **Repressed:** kept suppressed or restrained.
- **Imminent:** about to happen.
- **Egalitarian:** believing in or based on the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

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## 7.5 Sample Questions

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### 7.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Who is the protagonist in the novel *Untouchable Spring*?
  - (a) Naganna
  - (b) Yellanna
  - (c) **Ruth**
  - (d) Boodevi
2. *Untouchable Spring* was originally published in Telugu as
  - (a) Asamardhuni Jivayatra
  - (b) **Antarani Vasantam**
  - (c) Maha Prasthanam
  - (d) Andamina Jeevitam
3. Which village is the backdrop of the novel *Untouchable Spring*?
  - (a) Thavanampalle
  - (b) Gangavaram
  - (c) **Yennela Dinni**
  - (d) Ballipadu

4. Who is the grandson of Ruth and Reuben?
- (a) Simon
  - (b) Martin
  - (c) **Jessie**
  - (d) Ruby
5. Which character leaves Yennela Dinni and roams around, singing songs about the predicament of Dalits?
- (a) Sivaiah
  - (b) Boodevi
  - (c) Yerrankadu
  - (d) **Yellanna**
6. Which Dalit art form is appropriated as Perini dance by the upper castes?
- (a) **Urumula Nrityam**
  - (b) Yakshagana
  - (c) Kuchipudi
  - (d) Kathakali
7. Which character is brutally murdered by the upper castes for crossing the ghettos during floods in Yennela Dinni?
- (a) Yellanna
  - (b) Narigadu
  - (c) **Naganna**
  - (d) Lingalu
8. Where does Yellanna run off to after being beaten and chased away from Yennela Dinni by the upper castes?
- (a) **Pakkela Dinni**
  - (b) Buckingham Canal
  - (c) Valasapadu
  - (d) Srikakulam
9. Sivaiah embraces Christianity and changes his name to
- (a) Martin
  - (b) **Simon**
  - (c) Jacob

(d) Reuben

10. Through whose memories does the story of *Untouchable Spring* unfold?

(a) Ruby

(b) Boodevi

(c) Jesse

**(d) Ruth**

### 7.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. How does the novel address the issue of spatial segregation of Dalits?
2. What role does the character Ruth play in the narrative structure of the novel?
3. What is the original language of *Untouchable Spring*, and who translated it into English?
4. Who raises Yellanna, and what impact does this person have on him?
5. Who is Reuben, and what role does his diary play in the narrative?

### 7.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the narrative techniques used in *Untouchable Spring*. How do they contribute to the portrayal of Dalit history and experiences?
2. How does Kalyana Rao depict the impact of land ownership on the Dalit community in *Untouchable Spring*?
3. Analyse the significance of oral traditions and performative art forms in *Untouchable Spring* and their role in preserving Dalit history and culture.

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## 7.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Abraham, Joshil K, and Judith Misrahi-Barak. *Dalit Literatures in India*. Routledge, 24 July 2015.

Ahamed Mohamed Sherif, Yunush. "Text as Resistance: Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* as an Alternative History." *Literary Quest*, vol. 1, no. 3, Aug. 2014, pp. 62–69.

Kejiya, Dasari. *Translating Dalit Literature: An Analysis of Telugu Novel Antarani Vasantam and Its English Translation Untouchable Spring*. May 2013.

Thiara, Nicole. "Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 47, no. 1-2, 2016, pp. 253–280.



## **Unit-8: *Untouchable Spring*: Characters, Themes, Critical Analysis**

### **Structure**

**8.0** Introduction

**8.1** Objectives

**8.2** *Untouchable Spring*: Characters, Themes, Critical Analysis

**8.2.1** Characters

**8.2.2** Themes

**8.2.3** Critical Analysis

**8.2.4** Let Us Sum Up

**8.3** Learning Outcomes

**8.4** Glossary

**8.5** Sample Questions

**8.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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### **8.0 Introduction**

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Dalit writers have contributed immensely to Indian literature and society. They discuss issues such as untouchability, economic and social marginalization, and caste-based atrocities in their works and strive toward a better society. *Untouchable Spring* revolves around the issues of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh and their struggle for an egalitarian society. This Unit provides an overview of the major characters and themes discussed in the novel. It also offers a critical reading of the novel, *Untouchable Spring*.

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### **8.1 Objectives**

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The objectives of this Unit are to:

- understand the major characters of the novel *Untouchable Spring*
- discuss the major themes of the novel
- provide a critical reading of *Untouchable Spring*

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## 8.2 *Untouchable Spring*: Characters, Themes, Critical Analysis

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### 8.2.1. Characters

Kalyana Rao gives voice to the voiceless and oppressed marginalised communities in his novel *Untouchable Spring*. The assertion of Dalit identities, sense of pride in the past, and rebellion against the stereotypical depiction of Dalits in dominant narratives are exemplified through the characters in the novel. This section attempts to offer an overview of some important characters in *Untouchable Spring*.

**Ruth:** Ruth is the main protagonist in *Untouchable Spring*, through whose memories the story unfolds. Kalyana Rao portrays Ruth as a brilliant woman who is progressive and intelligent. She grew up in a sophisticated Dalit Christian family, has a fluent command of English, and has been inclined towards writing poetry and short stories since childhood. She is a nurse by profession, and during her days working in the hospital, she meets her husband, Reuben, who was a pastor there.

Ruth exhibits love and fascination for Reuben's stories of his ancestors. She challenges traditional beliefs and cultural norms such as Manusmriti and historical narratives, which perpetuate exclusion and discrimination. Ruth's storytelling emphasises the importance of recognising the significant contributions of Dalits to Indian culture, despite their historical neglect. Ruth, as a narrator, urges us to critically examine our treatment of others and strive for a more equitable and compassionate society where all voices are heard and valued.

**Reuben:** Reuben is the main character in *Untouchable Spring*, and the different layers of his character unfold through Ruth's recollections. He has been through a tough time surviving the tragedy of losing his family. Reuben's journey to understand who he is, his heritage, and where he belongs inspires the readers. His quest for his family's history reveals his strength and determination. He refuses to give up his heritage and stays true to himself.

Through Reuben's character, the author reminds the readers of the importance of the past and how it shapes our identity. Reuben goes to Hanumakonda in search of his ancestors and realizes that his forefathers used to sing about their lives. Even though he is a preacher, he exhibits revolutionary traits. Reuben is portrayed as a very straightforward and honest character. His life is devoted to the fight against caste discrimination.

**Naganna:** Naganna is an intriguing character in *Untouchable Spring* who paints a crucial picture of Dalit history and resistance. He exhibits knowledge and a deep understanding of Dalit

history and traditions. His knowledge holds immense power in a world where Dalit narratives are erased and appropriated by the upper castes. Naganna challenges the dominant narrative by weaving tales and interpreting religious texts, and he exposes the cracks in the upper caste's self-proclaimed superiority. His ability to outsmart any learned scholarly person with his knowledge of Puranas becomes a symbol of victory and defiance against their oppressors.

Although the novel does not show Naganna leading protests or directly confronting the authority explicitly, his presence signifies the unwavering spirit of resistance that burns within the Dalit community. Naganna's character is an embodiment of intellectual strength, a testament to the power of preserving Dalit traditions in the face of marginalization. His character is a beacon of hope, a reminder that the fight for justice and equality can be ignited with a simple act of remembering and celebrating one's history and identity.

**Lachmi:** Lachmi, Naganna's mother and the wife of Narigadu in *Untouchable Spring*, represents Dalit women's quiet fortitude and resilience. The world she encounters is harsh and defined by the rigid caste system that condemns her community to poverty and continual prejudice. Every day is a battle for her. Despite working in the fields for meagre salaries and worrying about how to put enough food on the table for her family, she remains resilient. She finds comfort in her family, and her love for Naganna nourishes her spirit. Lachmi narrates stories about their ancestors, their tales of suffering and hope passed down through centuries. Kalyana Rao portrays Lachmi as a symbol of the persistent spirit of Dalit women, who, despite hardships, continue to be the backbone of their families and communities.

**Boodevi:** Boodevi is portrayed as a strong-willed Dalit woman in *Untouchable Spring*. She is the wife of Yenkatanarasu and the sister of Yerrenkadu. Boodevi is childless and raises Yellanna, the grandfather of Reuben, as her son. Their relationship is a testament to the compassion and care her character exhibits. Boodevi's character is complex and shown as a woman who struggles with her desires, insecurities, and internal issues instead of being portrayed as just a one-dimensional symbol of victimhood. Her character acts as a mother figure for her family as well as the larger Dalit community.

Boodevi demonstrates incredible resilience and determination in the face of multiple setbacks and injustices brought on her, by the double discrimination she faces as a Dalit woman. She reclaims her voice in a culture that tries to constantly suppress her and erase her individuality. She becomes an unforgettable character in *Untouchable Spring* by personifying the fortitude,

bravery, and humanity of individuals who rebel against social conventions and pursue equality and justice.

**Subhadra:** Subhadra is another powerful female character in the novel. She rarely comes out of her house, but she is very observant about social barriers and discrimination. She struggles to support her family and raise her son Sivaiah when her husband, Yellanna, wanders from village to village, singing songs about the caste exploitation and discrimination of his community. Even though Subhadra is a docile and conservative woman, she takes a spade and walks towards the upper caste men upon hearing the brutal attack on her family and other members of her community. Her boldness and rage portrayed in the novel remind the readers of Goddess Kali.

**Yellanna:** Yellanna is one of the main characters in the novel. He is a son of Yerrenkadu and Lingalu. His aunt Boodevi raises him as her son. Yellanna is one of the first characters in the novel who goes on a search for his identity. Yelanna is talented at weaving songs. These songs influence the community and speak about the atrocities committed against the Dalits by the upper castes. He marries Subhadra and has a child, Sivaiah. In his search for his past and identity, he leaves behind his family and his native place. His character acts as a role model, especially for his grandson, who also sets out on a journey to learn more about his roots.

**Martin:** Martin's original name was Chinnodu. He has faced discrimination and violence due to the caste system since his childhood. Chinnodu believes that there is no equality in society, and he converts to Christianity. He changes his name to Martin and his wife's name to Saramma. Despite his conversion to Christianity, he realizes that Christianity is also dominated by the upper caste people who got converted, expecting benefits from whites. His life is filled with fights against discrimination and injustice. He is brutally murdered by the upper caste people at Valasapadu.

**Emmanuel:** Emmanuel is the son of Reuben and Ruth. He is also the husband of Mary Suvartha and the father of Jessie. A school teacher by profession, Emmanuel's character exhibits revolutionary traits. He fights against caste discrimination along with Ramanujam. He sacrifices his life during his involvement in the Naxalite movement.

**Ramanujam:** Ramanujam is a teacher at Yennela Dinni. He is fascinated by the communist movement and embraces a revolutionary path. He remains single throughout his life and is influenced by the Naxalite movement. As Emmanuel's colleague, Ramanujam also maintains friendly relations with Reuben and Ruth.

**Jessie:** Jessie is the son of Emmanuel. Like his father, Jessie is also attracted to the Naxalite movement and fights for a just society. He has the talent of his ancestor, Yellanna, for weaving songs.

**Ruby:** Ruby is the granddaughter of Ruth and Reuben. She is intelligent and educated. She is also the wife of Jessie, and along with him, she encourages the Dalits to fight against caste oppression. Ruby begins a women's wing at her home to mobilize women against caste discrimination. She and her husband fight for an equal and just society throughout their lives.

**Rami Reddy:** Rami Reddy is an upper-caste character in the novel who supports the rights of Dalits through his involvement in the communist movement.

***Check your progress:***

1. Boodevi is childless and raises \_\_\_\_\_, the grandfather of Reuben, as her son.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ the husband of Mary Suvartha and the father of Jessie.

### **8.2.2. Themes**

*Untouchable Spring* depicts the lived experiences of Dalits in pre and post-independence India. Kalyana Rao, a Dalit, portrays the lives of Dalit Christians and their continued subjugation at the hands of caste Hindus. The novel highlights multiple aspects of their struggle for self-respect and emancipation through its various themes. This section sheds light on the major themes of *Untouchable Spring*.

#### **a. The Caste System and Social Injustice:**

*Untouchable Spring* revolves around the lives of Dalits weighed down by the caste system that has stratified Indian society for centuries. Kalyana Rao documents how the caste system enforces social hierarchy and perpetuates violence and injustice against Dalits. The novel, which spans several generations of Dalits, shows how caste insidiously follows each generation and takes various forms across time. From the denial of basic needs such as water, shelter, and education to systemic violence and exploitation, *Untouchable Spring* critiques the enduring legacy of caste and how it impacts the daily lives, dignity, and well-being of a community. The novel also exposes how caste is omnipresent and affects every facet of life, denying opportunities and perpetuating poverty among Dalits.

### **b. Resistance and Rebellion:**

Kalyana Rao illustrates how resistance against caste oppression has evolved and has taken various forms, from passive acceptance of one's fate to active participation in political movements aimed at social reform and equality. The novel focuses on the spirit of resistance among Dalit communities. The characters embrace different ways to resist and rebel against their oppression. Their resistance ranges from personal acts of defiance to collective mobilization of the community, by asserting their rights and dignity.

### **c. Identity and Self-discovery:**

*Untouchable Spring* explores the theme of identity and the journey of self-discovery through its Dalit characters. While society continuously seeks to diminish their worth and erase their history, art, and stories, the protagonists of the novel embark on journeys of self-exploration to reclaim their identities and understand their past. Kalyana Rao also addresses the psychological impact of caste oppression, which leads to low self-esteem among Dalits. Through their journeys of self-discovery, the characters of the novel uncover and embrace their rich cultural heritage and history of resistance within the Dalit communities. They reclaim their identity and the sense of pride in their background.

### **d. The Role of Literature and Education:**

Literature and education emerge as important themes in *Untouchable Spring*, as both serve as tools for empowerment and change among Dalits. Rao illustrates the transformative power of education in breaking the cycle of oppression and opening new possibilities for the Dalit community. Literature is portrayed as a means of resistance. Dalit writings and oral traditions offer a counter-narrative to the dominant representations and stereotypes and challenge social prejudices. The novel reiterates the vital role of intellectual and cultural emancipation in the fight against caste discrimination.

### **e. Intersectionality:**

The intersectionality of caste and gender is another critical theme addressed in the novel. Kalyana Rao highlights the double marginalization faced by Dalit women, who are exploited based on both caste and gender. The novel discusses the dual burden of caste and gender through its Dalit women characters, who are more vulnerable to violence, and exploitation. Through its female characters, *Untouchable Spring* brings attention to the need to address both caste and gender injustice in the quest for equality. The novel portrays strong Dalit women who exhibit extraordinary resilience in their fight for justice and equality.

#### **f. Modernity and Change:**

The *Untouchable Spring* reflects on the themes of modernity and change and examines how urbanization, globalization, and political changes have impacted the Dalit community. Kalyana Rao problematizes the notion of progress by bringing the reader's attention to the extent to which economic development and modernization have truly benefited the marginalized. *Untouchable Spring* suggests that while certain aspects of their lives have changed, caste continues to exert a significant influence on every facet of their lives and calls for a more profound societal transformation.

#### **g. Conversions:**

Kalyana Rao depicts the role of religious conversions in the lives of untouchables in different ways. In the novel, he traces the journey from being untouchables to Christians, from Christians to Communists, from Communists into Naxalites, and from Naxalites into the Dalits. The author conveys that none of these ideologies succeeded in completely eradicating casteism and exploitation from the lives of untouchables. They find themselves subjugated and stigmatized again.

In India, Dalits have been categorized under Hinduism since the colonial period, even though they faced discrimination within the religion. In their quest for equality and dignity, some of them converted to Christianity. However, they realized that with the entry of the upper castes into Christianity, the social hierarchy, subjugation, and exploitation of the untouchables were reinstated. The untouchables who converted to Christianity were brutally attacked by the upper castes, and eventually, they turned to Communism.

#### **8.2.3. Critical Analysis**

The novel is set against the rigid social hierarchy of the caste system, where Dalits encounter violence, economic hardship, and social marginalization. Rao depicts this predicament in graphic detail, from physical violence to denial of basic needs. Thus, the central issue of the novel is the ongoing marginalization of Dalits across generations. In *Untouchable Spring*, the first two generations of the family comprise primarily agricultural labourers. They are shown as submissive and traditional, although elements of social change and awareness of discrimination exist in their generation. They spent their lives in continuous hunger as they received meagre wages for their labour and not enough food for their families to survive.

However, the third generation is riddled with tumultuous events, such as the encounter with evangelical Christianity. The characters of Martin, Simon, Saramma, and other people in the

village are representatives of this generation. Despite converting to Christianity, discrimination and mistreatment based on their caste prevail. The fourth generation begins with Simon's son Reuben, the sole survivor of the massacre. His search into the past to learn about his roots, family, and community history is poignant. His character mirrors the author's exploration of forgotten Dalit histories and stories through his novel, *Untouchable Spring*.

The third generation also witnesses and is deeply inspired by pre-independent ideological discourses such as Communism, Gandhism, and Ambedkarism. The reformations by Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule played a major role in mobilizing the Dalits against the ongoing caste discrimination. These movements paved the way for shaping Dalit consciousness. The character Emmanuel belongs to the fifth generation of the family and represents liberation theology, which principally stems from Christian humanism. Emmanuel's upbringing is rooted in Biblical stories of oppression and liberation.

The novel vividly traces the trajectory of Christianity in the Dalit experience from the colonial period to the present. Even though the church preaches egalitarianism, the work of missionaries has slowly eroded. Kalyana Rao illustrates this through the characters of Rosy and her husband Vandanam, who help to restrict the missionaries' properties to the upper castes. They represent contemporary Christianity that has deflected the gospel away from the ideals of liberation and egalitarianism towards the accumulation of wealth.

*Untouchable Spring* uncovers how Christianity, in its missionary zeal, converted Dalits, the compulsions behind the conversion, and how the Dalits were educated in Christian schools and reached a position to question the caste system. At the same time, Rao does not shy away from criticising the hypocrisy of Christian missionaries. Although Christianity does not recognise hierarchy and subjugation, the Indians who converted to Christianity brought the same habits of exploitation and subjugation into the new religion. While shedding light on the condition of Dalits in the new religion, Rao advocates for increased political consciousness and self-awareness among the Dalit communities as a means of true liberation.

Kalyana Rao narrates the predicament of Dalits in society, where caste decides their destiny, restricting them from exhibiting the knowledge and talents they possess right from birth. In the novel, the resilience of the community in the face of inequalities meted out to them takes various forms, such as music, dance, and oral stories. Through Yellanna's character, Rao discusses Veedhi Bagotam, a street play, that is a combination of song, music, and dance. He criticizes that the art forms of Dalits are not duly recognized and encouraged in society. Thus, *Untouchable*



*Spring*, in its celebration of the artistic expression of Dalit communities through songs and dance, also becomes a form of resistance and preservation of self-respect, identity, and heritage of their community.

*Untouchable Spring* invites the reader's attention to the collective erasure of the Dalit community's involvement in the freedom struggle. The contribution of Dalits to the freedom struggle, especially that of Dalit women, is hardly acknowledged and recorded by historians. Apart from the church archives, the histories of the downtrodden have been passed from one generation to another solely in oral form. The agonies and resistance of untouchables over centuries are kept under wraps, and no honest attempt has been made by historians to bring them to the forefront. *Untouchable Spring* is the author's attempt to offer an alternate history. The novel thrives on narrativizing the memories of many generations of Dalits to authenticate the experience of their suffering over centuries.

Finally, the title *Untouchable Spring* has a deeper meaning that encompasses the lives of the Dalit community, which is illustrated in the novel. Spring is a source of life-giving water, and yet Dalits are denied access to their basic needs based on their caste identity. However, the metaphor implies that their spirit as a community is never-ending. The novel, which depicts the conflicts and emergence of Dalit consciousness, highlights the hope for a day when caste discrimination is abolished and the untouchables will be granted the equality and dignity they deserve. Rao conveys that the human spirit is resilient and continues to fight for a better tomorrow, even in the face of extreme persecution.

***Check your progress:***

1. *Untouchable Spring* reiterates the vital role of intellectual and cultural emancipation in the fight against caste discrimination. (True / False)

**8.2.4 Let Us Sum Up**

*Untouchable Spring* offers a profound exploration of the Dalit experience through its characters and multifaceted themes. The novel portrays the enduring struggle of Dalits against caste-based discrimination, examining their quest for identity, resistance, and self-empowerment across generations. Through characters like Ruth, Reuben, and Naganna, Rao illustrates the interplay between personal resilience and collective resistance. The novel critiques both historical and contemporary religious and political systems for perpetuating caste oppression while

highlighting the transformative power of literature, education, and cultural expression. The novel serves as a poignant narrative that reclaims and celebrates Dalit history, advocating for a future free from caste discrimination.

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### 8.3 Learning Outcomes

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After reading this Unit, you are expected to be able to critically read and evaluate the novel *Untouchable Spring*. By the end of this Unit, you must have understood the major themes, and characters of the novel in detail.

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### 8.4 Glossary

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- **Acquainted:** familiar with or knowledgeable about something.
- **Atrocities:** extremely cruel or violent acts.
- **Docile:** ready to accept control or instruction; submissive.
- **Counter-narrative:** an alternative narrative or perspective.
- **Fortitude:** courage in facing difficulties.
- **Intersectionality:** The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
- **Liberation theology:** a movement in Christian theology that emphasizes liberation from social, political, and economic oppression as an anticipation of ultimate salvation.
- **Marginalization:** the process of making a group or class of people less important or relegated to the fringe of society.
- **Persecution:** hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race, political, or religious beliefs.
- **Social hierarchy:** a system of ranking people in a society based on various factors like wealth, occupation, or caste.
- **Stratified:** arranged or classified into different layers or levels.
- **Stereotypical:** relating to a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.
- **Stigmatized:** treated with disapproval or disgrace.

- **Systemic violence:** violence that is embedded in and supported by social systems and institutions.

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## 8.5 Sample Questions

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### 8.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Naganna in *Untouchable Spring* is known for his knowledge of which religious texts?
  - (a) Bible
  - (b) Quran
  - (c) **Puranas**
  - (d) Agam Sutras
2. What form of artistic expression does Yellanna use to address caste discrimination in the community?
  - (a) Paintings
  - (b) Sculptures
  - (c) **Songs**
  - (d) Novels
3. Who is portrayed as a strong-willed Dalit woman and the wife of Yenkatanarasu in *Untouchable Spring*?
  - (a) Ruth
  - (b) Subhadra
  - (c) **Boodevi**
  - (d) Ramulu
4. Who is the granddaughter of Ruth and Reuben and actively works to mobilize women against caste discrimination?
  - (a) Boodevi
  - (b) **Ruby**
  - (c) Subhadra
  - (d) Ramulu
5. Who among the following characters is a school teacher by profession?
  - (a) Yellanna
  - (b) Reuben

- (c) **Emmanuel**  
(d) Naganna
6. What is the primary theme explored in *Untouchable Spring*?
- (a) Rural-urban conflict  
(b) Partition  
(c) **The caste system and social injustice**  
(d) Environmental preservation
7. Which character in *Untouchable Spring* is depicted as a revolutionary figure fighting against caste discrimination and involved in the Naxalite movement?
- (a) Jessie  
(b) Yerrankadu  
(c) Yellanna  
(d) **Emmanuel**
8. Which character is noted for his intellectual strength and challenge to upper-caste superiority through religious texts?
- (a) Jessie  
(b) Yellanna  
(c) Emmanuel  
(d) **Naganna**
9. What does the character of Ruby symbolize in the novel?
- (a) The influence of foreign missionaries on Dalit communities  
(b) The modern struggle of Dalit men  
(c) **The empowerment of Dalit women and the fight against caste oppression**  
(d) The integration of Dalits into urban society
10. How does Subhadra's character challenge social norms in *Untouchable Spring*?
- (a) By leaving her village  
(b) **By confronting upper-caste men in a violent manner**  
(c) By converting to Christianity  
(d) By joining the Naxalite movement

### 8.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. What role does Naganna play in preserving Dalit history and traditions in *Untouchable Spring*?
2. How does the theme of resistance and rebellion manifest through the characters in the novel?
3. How does the novel address the intersectionality of caste and gender through its depiction of Dalit women?
4. What does the title *Untouchable Spring* symbolize in the context of the Dalit community's struggle?
5. How does Kalyana Rao explore the theme of identity and self-discovery among Dalits in the novel?

### 8.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Who are some of the strong female characters in *Untouchable Spring*? How do they contribute to the depiction of Dalit women's resilience and double marginalization?
2. Discuss how *Untouchable Spring* portrays caste-based discrimination and its impact on the Dalit community across generations.
3. Describe the role of Christianity in the lives of Dalits as portrayed in *Untouchable Spring*.

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## 8.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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- B, Shilpa. "Memory as Text: Subalternity and Dalit Identity in the Novel *Untouchable Spring*." *International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, vol. 7, no. 12, Dec. 2022, pp. 9–14.
- Kishore Y. "Portrayal of Dalit Women in the Novel *Untouchable Spring* by G. Kalyan Rao." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 58-64.
- Varadarajulu, G. "The Cause of the Dalits: An Analysis of Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 7, no. 4, Sept. 2019, pp. 38–42.

**Unit-9: *Ants among Elephants*: Background, Plot,  
Narrative Technique**

**Unit-10: *Ants among Elephants*: Characters, Themes, Critical  
Analysis**

## Unit-11: Introduction to Dalit Poetry

### Structure

11.0 Introduction

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### 11.0 Introduction

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In India, the Dalits are subjected to the discrimination on caste bases. The Indian style of writing known as ‘Dalit Literature’ emphasizes on the lives, experiences and struggles of and oppression for centuries. Even though we are in the twentieth century, India became an independent nation but it has banquet across Indian languages, challenging caste norms and testing literature. Among the prominent books from the colonial and post-colonial period is Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri*, published in 1873 and careful to be a seminal work highlighting the predicament of the untouchables in India.

Most of the writers like Shraavan Kumar Limbale, Namdev Dhasal and Bama contributed to the Dalit literary movement, each contributing a unique viewpoint on the Dalit experience and the influence of the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an activist of Dalit rights, played a significant role in the spread of Dalit literature throughout India. Most of the Dalit writing is also important in constructing the consciousness of Dalit women, the autobiographies, and testimonies of Dalit women writers emphasized the combination of caste, class and gender in social marginalisation.



The women writers of Dalit such as; Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble highlight the plight of their communities, providing a basis for thoughtful the complexities of caste, class and gender in Indian society Dalit literature existence of B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and a famous Dalit activist, who fought against caste discrimination inspired Dalit intellectuals, writers and activists along with new poets.

Early Dalit poetry dealt with subjects of social injustice, oppression and wish for equality and strongly criticized mainstream Brahmin policies that supported caste inequality and poets incorporated Ambedkar's ideas of human dignity and respect they have to use themselves to challenge religious and cultural authority. The phrase 'Dalit poetry' refers to poetry by the marginalized Dalits of India. It makes up a large percentage of Indian literature. Dalits, once called 'untouchables' under the caste system, have used poetry as a tool for their struggle, past oppression and a means of ongoing social justice.

The Dalit movement that added power in the 20th century, especially B.R. Opposing caste prejudice, Ambedkar is associated with the flourishing of Dalit poetry. Dalit poets wrote poetry to highlight adverse reality, caste-based violence against people and systemic injustice. Dalit poetry has been dealt with by many poets like Namdev Dhasal and Meenakandasami with penetrating imagery and uncompromised music. In addition to challenging the status quo, their works honour dignity, resilience, and the possibility of a more equal society.

The Dalit poetry is a strong literary movement that gives countenance to the struggles of India's most disadvantaged. The term 'Dalit' translates as 'broken' or 'oppressed' and refers to the traditionally oppressed people in Hinduism, especially in the category of 'untouchables. Dalits have undergone institutional violence, social marginalization and economic exploitation for thousands of years. Dalit poets have regained their humanity by exposing various injustices by using writing as a medium to fight in contradiction of this deeply rooted caste system.

Most of the Dalit poetry is known for its unvarnished authenticity and passion. It is usually written in different languages to appeal to a wider readership. Unlike traditional Indian poetry which can be full of metaphors or archaic allusions, Dalit poetry faces the vicious reality of caste-based discrimination and the theme of defiance, humiliation, violence and poverty dominate the issue. The struggles faced by the Dalit community-forced labour, segregation and untouchability-are well depicted in these poems.

Especially, the Dalit body which has historically been avowed 'impure' by caste society, is one of the central themes of Dalit poetry. The poets emphasize the strength and resilience of the

body, drawing attention to the cruelty they perpetrate, so recovering it transforms the writing of poetry into a very political statement, a social declaration against centuries a lot of wiping. Dalit poetry also aims to repudiate the more elaborate and refined accounts of Indian history, and culture by elite writers. These poets shatter the deception of a peaceful, caste-free India, focusing on the daily realities of Dalits and exposing the harsh reality of a deeply divided society.

Women poets of Dalit in particular have expanded in Dalit poetry by addressing patriarchy and caste relations and embracing feminism. Dalit poetry remains an important tool for social criticism and activism in contemporary India, where racial prejudice perseveres despite legal protection. Its message of a more just future, reflecting problems past and present, is why readers will find it so appealing. The ultimate goal of the Dalit poetry is a manifesto of identity, equality and resistance as well as literature. Speaking on behalf of a long-marginalized group does spur movements for justice. Dalit poetry is a reminder of the steadfastness and unwavering spirit of the worried in the face of racial violence and relentless commitment to repossess an image of identity.

***Check your progress:***

1. Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri*, which was published in 1873, highlights the predicament of the untouchables in India. (True / False)

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## **11.1 Objectives**

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The Objectives of the Unit are to:

- bring out the violence, exploitation and caste-based prejudice, Dalits endure and highlight the harsh realities of untouchability, forced labour and segregation.
- give a voice to Dalits, as it pursues to do by enabling Dalit writers to share their own narratives.
- support the identity and dignity of Dalits and face the dehumanization and ‘othering’ of people from those who justify justice, equality and respect.
- highlight the caste-based religious and cultural systems and call for a rethink of customs that sanction violence against Dalits.
- stir up fight against the oppressive caste system and promote equality and human rights by highlighting injustice.

- promote solidarity, and self-determination in Dalit communities and elsewhere by exchanging important stories of oppression and resilience.
- create a new literary aesthetic that challenges the dominant aesthetic norms well-defined by the high caste, Brahmin tradition.

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## 11.2 Introduction to Dalit Poetry

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### 11.2.1 Background

The grief and hardships of Dalits - historically excluded and oppressed by the caste system - are replicated in Dalit literature, which is fast becoming a staple of Indian literature. Inspired by social and political organizations that struggled against caste-based discrimination and promoted Dalit rights in the mid-20th century, these literatures developed in a context that historically placed Dalits at the bottom of society and they faced violence and injustices they have acknowledged.

Madara Chennai, an 11th century cobbler saint who lived during the rule of the Western Chalukyas, was one of the initial Dalit writers. He was originally a Dalit. Dohara Kakkai was another poet from the Jangam sect. Six of his confessional poems have survived. Dalit writing can also be traced back to Tamil Siddhas, or Chittaras, and Marathi Dalit devotional poets like Gora, Chokhamela and Karmamela. Many hagiographies of the Chittaras found in documents such as the 12th century Periya Purana suggest that they were Dalits.

Only after democratic and egalitarian philosophers like Sree Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Iyothee Thass, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, and others started to explain the causes of manifestations of caste oppression, modern Dalit writing became a separate genre. The larger Dalit movement, which aimed to permit Dalits and to redress their systemic marginalization, is closely associated with the growth of Dalit literature. This literary genre was greatly influenced by notable individuals who engaged for social justice and the elimination of untouchability, such B. R. Ambedkar. His support of social change and education assisted as a springboard for the themes and storylines that appear in Dalit writing.

Particularly Dalit poetry is renowned for its straightforward, unadorned language that captures the realities of oppression and struggle based on caste. In an effort to make its ideas understandable and powerful, this style of writing frequently stands in contrast to the elaborate, elitist forms of mainstream Indian literature. Prominent literary pieces and authors, such Bama's *Karukku* and Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha*, have greatly influenced and popularized Dalit literature.

The awful realities of Dalit existence are depicted in these works in a vivid manner, giving voice to those who were previously silent and challenging social conventions and biases. Dalit writing has been acclaimed and criticised in equal measure. It has drawn criticism for its emphasis on victimization but has also been commended for its honest representation of persecution and its role in promoting social justice. In spite of these criticisms, Dalit literature is nevertheless an effective tool for social criticism and cultural reclamation, making it relevant in today's debates about caste and equality. This literature propositions important insights into the ongoing battles for justice and self-respect in Indian society through its examination of Dalit identity and experience.

### **11.2.2 Historical Context**

The caste system in India, which has for generations destitute and oppressed people at the bottom of the social hierarchy-mainly the Dalit population, formerly known as 'untouchables'-is intricately entangled with the historical background of Dalit poetry. Dalits were pushed to the bottom of the social order created by the Hindu religious texts known as the caste system, which resulted in severe social marginalization, penetrating discrimination, and economic hardship. They were refused admission to public places, education, and respectable employment, among other fundamental rights. Dalit poetry arose against the backdrop of this widespread inequality.

Dalit voices were stifled or kept out of mainstream literature and culture for a large portion of India's history. The lives of Dalits were characterized by subjugating customs such as forced labour and untouchability, and the dissertation of the upper caste generally disregarded or obscured their stories. With the initiation of social reform movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular, the foundations of Dalit literary expression started to take shape as a remonstrance against this exclusion. Reformers like Jyotirao Phule and, later, B.R. Ambedkar made substantial contributions to the cause of Dalit education and empowerment by opposing the caste system.

These ingenuities laid the groundwork for the unique Dalit consciousness to emerge, which would eventually find potent expression in literature. The post-independence era saw the prosperity of Dalit poetry as a literary form, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Dalit literary expression gained stimulus from the societal upheavals that followed India's independence, as well as the founding of the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra in 1972. The Dalit Panther movement, which was flickered by the worldwide Black Panther movement, aimed to confront

caste-based injustices in India. Poetry in particular occurred as a vital medium for expressing the suffering, rage, and defiance of Dalits.

Poets such as Namdeo Dhasal utilized their art to sharply criticise the social and political systems that upheld Dalit oppression and to highlight the brutality of the caste system. The legacy of Ambedkar, whose opposition to the caste system and support of Dalit rights established the philosophical groundwork for many poets, was another source of inspiration for Dalit poetry. His focus on political engagement, social reform, and education gave Dalit writers a framework within which to write their stories of resistance. In addition to being an artistic endeavour, the poetry that arose during this period assisted as a vehicle for social and political protest, with the goal of restoring Dalit identity and dignity.

Dalit poetry has developed over time, implementation topics of intersectionality-the simultaneous discussion of caste, class, and gender-in its poetry. In contrast to the harsh realities of caste-based oppression, which were often reflected in the raw and confrontational poetry of the past, modern Dalit poets have also represented personal and cultural identities, moving beyond simple social protest to a more comprehensive examination of Dalit existence. Nonetheless, opposing the caste system and encouraging social justice continue to be the central themes of Dalit poetry. The historical development of Dalit poetry is symptomatic of the strength of Dalit voices as well as the important role literature has played in the struggle against oppression based on caste.

It is still an essential weapon for defending Dalit identity and upending India's deeply entrenched caste system. Dalits, formerly known as 'Untouchables,' have traditionally been at the bottom of the social order in India due to the caste system. They experienced life-threatening violence, exclusion, and discrimination. Rigid social boundaries were established by the caste system, which also denied Dalits entry to social mobility, healthcare, and education, and forced them into low and degrading professions. Long-standing leaders in the fight for social justice and Dalit rights, such as B. R. Ambedkar, have underwritten significantly to the fight against caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar's writings and his conversion to Buddhism in boldness of Hindu dogma had a profound impact on the Dalit cause and, consequently, Dalit literature.

The socio-political context of this movement gave rise to Dalit poetry as a mode of self-expression and confrontation. Within Indian literature, Dalit poetry became a prominent and revolutionary form that provided voice to the oppressed and disadvantaged Dalit minority. Studying the literary, social, and historical context of Dalit poetry is crucial to comprehending its history.

Poetry written by Dalits, which initiated in the larger Dalit movement in India, is a potent way for the historically oppressed Dalit group to convey their sufferings, resiliency, and resistance. Dalits, who were in the past known as ‘untouchables,’ have faced unadorned forms of social, economic, and cultural marginalization due to their historical ties to the centuries-old caste system. Deeply in-built in Hindu society, the caste system placed Dalits at the bottom, frequently depriving them of access to basic human rights, education, and even the ability to live in dignity.

Dalit poetry has emerged as a voice of protest, resistance, and self-assertion against such tyranny. Social justice and equality are demanded, and the oppressive traditions of caste-based discrimination are challenged. Dalit poets discourse the suffering, degrading treatment, and brutality inflicted upon them by the society ruled by the upper caste through their literary works.

Their poetry, which is frequently based on their personal experiences of manipulation and marginalization, is unvarnished, honest, and real. The emergence of Dalit poetry can be linked to the larger socio-political movements supporting for Dalit rights, especially following the contributions of B.R. Ambedkar, a key player in the fight against caste discrimination. A generation of writers and poets was motivated by Ambedkar’s views on social justice, equality, and dignity for Dalits to express their suffering and fight via their works of literature. Dalit poetry is therefore inherently linked to a political movement that seeks liberation from the limitations of caste and is not only about aesthetics.

Although Dalit poets have historically written in Indian regional tongues like Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Marathi, their works are now more widely known both nationally and abroad. Prominent figures in Dalit poetry include Meena Kandasamy, a writer who methods Dalit issues from a feminist and global viewpoint, and Namdeo Dhasal, one of the founders of the Dalit Panther movement.

The poetry often depicts the interplay of caste, class, and gender oppression by drawing on real-life situations. The relevance of Dalit poetry exists in its capacity to change the literary narrative from one that is dominated by upper-caste, Brahmanical viewpoints to one that incorporates the voices of Dalits. Through the introduction of themes of rebellion, grief, and optimism, it questions the established power and linguistic systems in Indian literature. Dalit poetry, which proclaims the humanity and dignity of Dalits while delivering a potent critique of the caste system, is fundamentally a monument to the human spirit's stubbornness in the face of brutal injustice.

**Literary Context:** With its roots in the larger Dalit literary movement, Dalit poetry continued to take shape in the middle of the 20th century, impacted by the political and social changes of the period. Poetry of Dalits is distinguished by its importance on identity, struggle, and oppression. Poets, who disapprove of the elaborate and elitist forms of popular Indian literature, frequently express their ideas in plain, straightforward language. Poetry often deals with topics like discrimination, untouchability, and the competition for justice and dignity. Its unvarnished, truthful depiction of Dalit life and its function as a social justice activist have won it accolades, but its ostensible emphasis on victimization and resistance has drawn criticism. Nonetheless, it remains a fundamental element of Indian literature, questioning conventional wisdom and giving voiceless voices a forum.

**Impact and Legacy:** Dalit poetry has had a significant influence on Indian politics and society. It has been crucial in organizing support for Dalit rights and social justice as well as in increasing responsiveness of caste-based oppression. The poetry acts as a vehicle for cultural reclamation since it places a strong importance on Dalit identity and experience. It affirms Dalits' position and dignity in society by challenging predominant myths and assumptions about them.

Dalit poetry is still significant in today's social justice and caste debates. Its themes are relevant in the continuing fights for equality and human rights, and it continues to inspire new generations of authors and activists. A potent literary form of resistance and oppression, Dalit poetry sprang from these historical and social contexts. It signifies the challenges and goals of the Dalit community and has grown to be a significant voice in the campaign against social injustice and discrimination based on caste.

### **11.2.3 Dalit Poetry**

A significant part of Indian literature, Dalit poetry first appeared in the middle of the 20th century as a forceful protest against the structural oppression of Dalits, a historically disenfranchised people group placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Dalit poetry's origins are meticulously linked to the larger Dalit movement, which aimed to oppose and overthrow the established caste system. Many Dalit poets were influenced by prominent individuals like B. R. Ambedkar, who fought for social justice and the elimination of untouchability.

Dalit poetry is eminent by its straightforward, uncomplicated language, which speaks to the real-life realities of its characters. Poets frequently use simple, unadorned language to portray the depth of their experiences and the savagery of caste-based discrimination. The poets' aim to

make their words comprehensible and powerful is reflected in the style, which stands in stark contrast to the elaborate and elite traditions of mainstream Indian literature.

Important authors of Dalit poetry are Bama, whose autobiographical novel *Karukku* delves into the confluence of caste and gender, and Namdeo Dhasal, whose groundbreaking work *Golpitha* provides an accurate portrayal of Dalit life. Notable poets such as Sharankumar Limbale, Sujatha Gidla, and Daya Pawar have also made noteworthy contributions by expressing the challenges, defiance, and tenacity of Dalit communities via their poetry. Dalit poetry frequently discourses themes of identity, struggle, and oppression. The Poets affirm the humanity and self-respect of Dalits while challenging social norms that uphold prejudice based on caste. They offer a complex viewpoint on Dalit lives by delving into the ways in which caste interacts with other facets of identity, such as gender and religion.

Dalit poetry has sparked conversations on social justice and caste, which has had an important influence on Indian politics and society. Its emphasis on victimization has drawn criticism, yet it nevertheless plays a vital role in promoting equality and bringing attention to caste-based injustices. Dalit poetry, which encourages a more just and equal society, never stops inspiring people with its potent and expressive words. Dalit poetry represents the lived realities and confrontation of a historically marginalized minority in India in a powerful and revolutionary way.

This genre, which sprang from the larger Dalit movement, provides an unvarnished and unadulterated depiction of the problematic realities that Dalits must contend with, such as social exclusion, untouchability, and institutionalized oppression. Dalit poetry defies established literary rules and gives voice to those who have been systematically silenced through its exclusive use of straightforward and approachable language. Dalit poetry's theme, which ranges from the harsh realities of marginalization and oppression to strong actions of resistance and empowerment, functions as a declaration against the caste system on a personal and a collective level. In doing so, it provides a nuanced view on the nuances of Dalit experiences. It tackles the junctures of caste with gender, religion, and other dimensions of identity. Poets utilize their writing to uphold their honour, denounce social injustices, and promote system change.

Dalit poetry has an impact that goes beyond literature; it affects political and social debate and adds to the continuous discussion about social justice and caste. Dalit poetry, which portrays the tenacity, and agency of Dalit people, is still an essential weapon for cultural and political advocacy even in the face of criticism for its importance on victimhood. Dalit poetry is an essential



and vibrant literary form that captures the goals, struggles, and resistance of Dalit communities. It promotes the humanity and self-respect of individuals disadvantaged by the caste system and challenges ingrained social standards through its potent storytelling and critical engagement with social concerns. Its continuing significance and influence highlight the role that literature plays in promoting comprehension, empathy, and social change.

Dalit poets from several linguistic regions have addressed caste-based prejudice and conveyed the realities of Dalit populations, resulting in a distinguished contribution to Dalit poetry across multiple Indian languages. Several authors created Dalit poetry in various Indian states to highlight issues pertaining to Dalits, such as: *Namdeo Dhasal, Sharankumar Limbale, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Bama, Perumal Murugan, Sujatha Gidla, Pothan Joseph, Ravindra Kiran, Ajeet C. K. Devanur Mahadeva, K. B. Siddaiah, Madhusree Ghosh, Jibanananda Das, mDalpatram - Kirit Rathod, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Bira Kishore Mohanty, Nathmal Bhatia, Gurbachan Singh Bhullar, K. G. Sankara Pillai, N. C. Sreekantan Nair etc.*

***Check your progress:***

1. Namdeo Dhasal is one of the founders of the Dalit Panther movement. (True / False)
2. The autobiographical novel *Karukku*, written by \_\_\_\_\_ delves into the confluence of caste and gender.

#### **11.2.4 Themes in Dalit Literature and Dalit Poetry**

Emerging from the fights of underprivileged people in India, Dalit literature and poetry cover a wide range of themes that represent the realities of the Dalits and their resistance against institutional oppression. The socio-political and cultural background of Dalit writing requires an awareness of these subjects.

**A. Oppression and Marginalization:** The systemic prohibiting and prejudice that Dalits experience is depicted vividly in Dalit literature. It depicts the severe realities of social exclusion, untouchability, and economic hardship that are characteristic to Dalit life. The literature frequently draws attention to the cruelty and violence inflicted against Dalits, including verbal and physical assault as well as structural injustices that uphold their status as marginalized people.

**B. Rebellion and Resistance:** Opposition to the caste system is a major theme in Dalit literature. Poets and authors challenge deep-seated social hierarchies and proclaim their right to equality and dignity via their works as a form of protest. The literature frequently conveys a feeling

of defiance and empowerment. By expressing themselves through their work, Dalit writers challenge the oppression narratives that are imposed upon them and promote societal change.

**C. Identity and Dignity:** Dalit literature defies the stigmatization of Dalits by examining topics of identity and self-worth. It discards the demeaning assumptions and preconceptions that the caste system perpetuates and confirms the humanity and dignity of Dalits. Dalit culture and legacy are being reclaimed via literature. It highlights how crucial it is to protect and celebrate Dalit identity in the face of widespread marginalization and prejudice.

**D. Intersections of Caste, Gender, and Religion:** Dalit literature frequently discourses the twofold oppression that Dalit women experience by combining feminist themes with Dalit themes. It investigates how gender and caste interrelate to worsen these groups' marginalization and difficulties. The literature irregularly looks at how religion either supports or opposes discrimination based on caste. It examines the ways in which Dalits' knowledges and social standing are influenced by their religious beliefs and practices.

**E. Social attack and Reform:** Dalit writers routinely attack the social, political, and economic mechanisms that support caste-based inequity. Their works challenge traditional standards and push for social reform and justice. A call for systemic change is frequently seen in the literature, accenting the necessity of legislative, social, and political changes in order to combat caste-based discrimination and advance equality.

**F. Cultural and Historical Reflection:** Historical narratives found in Dalit literature offer insights into the knowledges of Dalit communities over time. It chronicles their hardships, defiance, and historical contributions to society and culture. The rich cultural birthright of Dalit populations is reflected in the literature, which frequently includes aspects of Dalit folklore, oral traditions, and cultural customs.

**G. Individual and Group Experience:** A large number of Dalits' literary works are autobiographical, if firsthand accounts of the domination and resistance brought about by caste. These testimonies offer a firsthand and personal glimpse into Dalit being. Dalit literature also captures the common fights and ambitions of the community by reflecting collective experiences and recollections.

Dalit poetry and literature cover a wide range of topics and knowledges, from the brutality of oppression to the uplifting essence of defiance and self-affirmation. Dalit writers and poets offer a significant and transforming standpoint on the difficulties and resiliency of Dalit communities through their study of identity, social critique, and cultural reflection.

### 11.2.5 Let Us Sum Up

Dalit poetry is a potent illustration of the stubbornness and voice of a group of people who are marginalized in Indian society. Dalit poetry, which combines personal experiences with broader societal critique, occurred from the campaigns against caste-based discrimination and structural oppression. It presents an honest picture of the difficult reality faced by Dalits. The genre is distinguished from conventional Indian literature by its raw expression, straightforward language, and importance on themes of oppression, resistance, and identity. Dalit poets utilize their poetry as a platform to question established social structures, stand up for social justice, and support their own dignity. They provide a striking and moving indictment of the caste system and its belongings on people as well as communities through their poems.

Dalit poetry preserves and celebrates Dalit legacy in the face of determined oppression, acting as a vehicle for cultural and historical recovery. It offers a complex view of the Dalit experience by illustrating how caste interconnects with gender, religion, and other facets of identity. Dalit poetry continues to be an important and significant genre even if it has drawn criticism for highlighting vulnerability and struggle. It continues to stimulate discourse on social justice and caste, adding to the existing conversations in India on equality and human rights. The poetry has an impact that goes beyond literature since it may be used as a vehicle for social change and advocacy. The struggles, aspirations, and resistance of Dalit communities are encapsulated in the dynamic and revolutionary form of Dalit poetry.

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## 11.3 Learning Outcomes

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At the end of this Unit, you should have gained an understanding of Dalit poetry which aims to foster a thoughtful understanding of the struggles, histories, and experiences of India's oppressed populations.

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## 11.4 Glossary

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- **Ambedkarite** /ʌm'beɪdkə,raɪt/: Followers of B.R. Ambedkar, who stumped in contradiction of caste discrimination and for Dalit rights.
- **Atishudra** /ʌti'ʃʊd.rə/: A term for the worried castes below the Shudras in the caste hierarchy.

- **Bahujan** /'bʌhʊdʒən/: the majority people. Frequently used in the context of political movements representing marginalized groups.
- **Bhimrao Ambedkar** /bhi:m.ɪ.ə:ʊ əm'beɪdkɑ:ɪ/: The chief architect of the Indian Constitution, who wrestled for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized communities.
- **Chokhamela** /'tʃʊkʌme:lɑ:/: A 14th-century poet from Maharashtra, observed as one of the first Dalit poets.
- **Dalit** /'dɑ:lɪt/: Oppressed or broken. Mentions to the historically marginalized communities in India, previously referred to as untouchables.
- **Dalit Panthers** /'dɑ:lɪt 'pænθərz/: A social and literary movement formed in 1972 stimulated by the Black Panther Party, aimed at fighting caste discrimination.
- **Jai Bhim** /dʒɑɪ bhi:m/: A slogan used by followers of Dr. Ambedkar, meaning Victory to Bhim, denoting to Bhimrao Ambedkar.
- **Jāti** /'dʒɑ:ti/: A system of social stratification or caste system in India.
- **Kabir** /kə'bi:r/: A poet-saint whose writings surpassed caste divisions and have inspired Dalit literature.
- **Manusmriti** /mʌnʊs'm.ɪ.tɪ/: an earliest Hindu legal text, often cited as a basis for caste-based discrimination.
- **Panchama** /'pʌntʃəmə/: the fifth category of people, below the four varnas, mentioning to Dalits.
- **Sangharsh** /sʌŋ'gʌɪʃ/: Struggle; often used in the framework of the Dalit struggle against caste-based oppression.
- **Satnami** /sʌt'nɑ:mi/: A sect that rejects caste divisions and trusts in equality for all.
- **Savarna** /sə'vərɳə/: People belonging to the four varnas of the caste system, usually the upper castes.
- **Shudra** /'ʃʊd.rə/: the lowest of the four varnas in the old-style Hindu caste system.
- **Swaraj** /swə'rɑ:dʒ/: Self-rule or self-governance, a term used during India's freedom movement and in Dalit poetry to mention to freedom from caste oppression.
- **Untouchability** /ʌn'tʌtʃəbɪlɪti/: the practice of excluding a minority group by labelling them as untouchable.
- **Vanchit** /'vʌntʃɪt/: Disadvantaged or oppressed, often used to refer to communities denied basic rights.

- **Varna** /'vʌrnə/: One of the four comprehensive divisions in the traditional Hindu caste system.

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## 11.5 Sample Questions

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### 11.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Who is considered one of the key figures in Dalit literature and the architect of the Indian Constitution?

- a) Mahatma Gandhi
- b) Jawaharlal Nehru
- c) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar
- d) Rabindranath Tagore

**Answer:** c) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

2. What does the term "Dalit" mean?

- a) Upper caste
- b) Oppressed or broken
- c) Enlightened
- d) Warrior

**Answer:** b) Oppressed or broken

3. Which movement, founded in 1972, played a significant role in Dalit activism and literature?

- a) Dalit Sangharsh Samiti
- b) Naxalite Movement
- c) Dalit Panthers
- d) Bahujan Samaj Party

**Answer:** c) Dalit Panthers

4. Which ancient text is often criticized in Dalit poetry for justifying the caste system?

- a) Ramayana
- b) Manusmriti
- c) Bhagavad Gita
- d) Mahabharata

**Answer:** b) Manusmriti

5. What is a major theme in Dalit poetry?

- a) Nature's beauty
- b) Social equality and justice
- c) Romantic love
- d) Mythological stories

**Answer:** b) Social equality and justice

6. Dalit poetry often critiques the practice of \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) Patriotism
- b) Caste discrimination
- c) Industrialization
- d) Globalization

**Answer:** b) Caste discrimination

7. Which of the following is NOT a characteristic of Dalit poetry?

- a) Expression of personal experiences of oppression
- b) Use of ornate, elitist language
- c) Themes of resistance and empowerment
- d) Rejection of caste-based hierarchy

**Answer:** b) Use of ornate, elitist language

8. The Dalit movement is closely associated with which social reformer's teachings?

- a) Swami Vivekananda
- b) Mahatma Gandhi
- c) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar
- d) Sri Aurobindo

**Answer:** c) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

9. What is the central goal of Dalit poetry?

- a) To praise the caste system
- b) To express romantic sentiments
- c) To resist caste-based oppression and assert Dalit identity
- d) To celebrate mythological gods and goddesses

**Answer:** c) To resist caste-based oppression and assert Dalit identity

10. Dalit poets often reference the figure of Dr. Ambedkar as a symbol of \_\_\_\_\_.

- a) Nationalism
- b) Liberation and empowerment

c) Wealth and prosperity

d) Political power

**Answer:** b) Liberation and empowerment

### 11.5.2 Short Answer Questions:

1. Who is a key figure that influenced Dalit poetry?
2. How does Dalit poetry typically differ from mainstream Indian literature?
3. Examine the role of language and form in Dalit poetry.
4. What are common themes in Dalit poetry?
5. Which movement contributed to the rise of Dalit literature?

### 11.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the significance of Dalit poetry in Indian literature.
2. Analyse the role of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Dalit poetry.
3. How does Dalit poetry address the intersection of caste and gender?

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## 11.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. Edited by S. Anand, Verso, 2014.

Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford University Press, 2012.

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Guru, Gopal. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

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Nagaraj, D. R. *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*. Permanent Black, 2011.

Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. SAGE Publications, 1994.

Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.

## Unit-12: Waman Nimbalkar: ‘Mother’

### Structure

#### 12.0 Introduction

#### 12.1 Objectives

#### 12.2 Waman Nimbalkar: ‘Mother’

##### 12.2.1 Text of the Poem

##### 12.2.2 Structure and Form

##### 12.2.3 Critical Analysis and Commentary

##### 12.2.4 Let Us Sum Up

#### 12.3 Learning Outcomes

#### 12.4 Glossary

#### 12.5 Sample Questions

#### 12.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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### 12.0 Introduction

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The poem "Mother" is composed by Waman Nimbalkar in Marathi, and was translated into English from its original Marathi version by Priya Adarkar featured in the collection of Dalit writing titled *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Ed: Arjuna Dangale in 1992. It is also translated into English by Vidyut Bhagwat and Eleanor Zelliot. The present analysis is made based on Vidyut Bhagwat and Eleanor Zelliot’s English translation of the Marathi version of the poem, “Mother”. In this heart-wrenching poem, the speaker addresses his mother, reflecting on the intricate tapestry of emotions woven over the course of his childhood to the adulthood since the death of his mother. The poem unfolds an unprecedented death of his mother in the speaker's past, laden with nostalgia. As he recalls his childhood memories, and the daily sacrifices of his mother, themes of motherhood, community, poverty, hunger, women’s labour, sympathy, and the enduring mutual love of mother and her children for each other emerge. The poem weaves a narrative of reflection, remorse, and a son's acknowledgment of his mother's enduring sacrifices; her dearth in pursuit of her children’s survival.



***Check your progress:***

1. The poem “Mother” was originally written in Marathi by Waman Nimbalkar.  
(True / False)
2. The book *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) is edited \_\_\_\_\_.

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## **12.1 Objectives**

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The objectives of this Unit are to:

- introduce you to the poem, “Mother” by Waman Nimbalkar.
- make you understand the nuances of Dalit working class womanhood and motherhood.
- bring awareness about the challenges, struggles, resilience of Dalit working class women.
- make you understand the importance of empathy through Nimbalkar’s poem “Mother”. The affective dimension or the ability to nurture sympathetic imagination is one of the key features of Dalit literature.
- understand the socio-political and economic conditions of the Dalit community.

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## **12.2 “Mother” by Waman Nimbalkar**

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### **12.2.1 Text of the Poem**

Just as the day sank down and the dark’s kingdom came  
We would sit at the door with no light in the hut.  
In house after house the lamp would be lit,  
The fire would be started, *bhakri* kneaded.  
From somewhere the smell of lentils, of vegetables,  
Would hit our noses. In our stomachs all was darkness.  
And a stream of tears would flow from my eyes.  
The darkness was split, a dull shadow came toward us.  
As she walked, the burden on her head shook, shifted.  
Dark, dark slender body- this was my mother.

Drudged in the woods for sticks from morning on.  
All we brothers, sitting, waiting, watching for her.  
And if she didn't sell the wood, all of us slept hungry.  
One day something happened, how, we never understood.  
Mother came, foot wrapped, blood flowing down.  
A huge black snake had bitten her, two women said.  
It showed its hood, struck, then slowly crawled away.  
Mother was laid on the mat, the charmed cord tied,  
The mantras said, the village vaidya called.  
Day went, and as it went, life went from her body.  
Our wailing broke out, became thin in the air,  
Mother had gone, leaving her children in the wind.  
My eyes seek my mother, I still grieve.  
I see a thin vendor of wood, I buy her sticks.

[Translated by **Vidyut Bhagwat** and **Eleanor Zelliott**]

### 12.2.2 Structure and Form

Dalit poetry has a distinct diction, figurative language, setting, themes, etc. Some of these unique characteristics are employed in the poem, "Mother". The poem follows a free verse form, lacking a strict rhyme scheme or regular meter. This choice of form enhances the natural flow of the speaker's reflections, allowing for a more authentic expression of emotions.

#### *Check your progress:*

1. The poem "Mother" is translated by \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The poem follows a free verse form, lacking a strict rhyme scheme or regular meter.

(True / False)

### 12.2.3 Critical Analysis and Commentary

As the day light turns dark, the speaker and his siblings sit in the entrance of the hut in darkness because the speaker says that there is no light in their hut. Usually the mother lights the lamps when she returns her work. However, the mother has not returned and the hut is in darkness.

The absence of mother seems to be metaphorically suggesting darkness in the house, and after her death darkness rules the lives of the children. As the young birds/chicks eagerly wait in the nest for their mother's evening-return with prey, the children in the poem are eagerly waiting for their mother's return at the entrance of the hut. They wait for their mother with so much expectation with hunger in their bellies.

In the houses of the neighbours, the lamps are lit, and food is prepared. These houses belong to the Dalit families. Caste system in India makes the Dalits live away from the mainstream society. As the speaker underscores in the poem, the food prepared by the neighborhood families is "*bhakri*" (flat bread made of millets, eaten in Western and Central India and meager lentils and a few vegetables. Though the food is not a luxurious or high in nutrition, even the smell of such food prepared in neighbourhoods brings water in the mouths of the speaker and his siblings. However, the speaker says that their stomachs are full of "darkness" which also symbolically indicates that they are in extreme hunger. Consequently, "a stream of tears would flow from" the "eyes" of the speaker. At this juncture, the readers must pay heed to the hunger, helplessness, as well as to the suggestive dependency of the speaker and his siblings on someone, whose identity is yet to be unfolded in the following lines.

The heroic entry of a "dull shadow" is introduced as if splitting "the darkness", and coming towards them. The readers would get to know that the heroic figure is, "she" (a female) who walked shaking and shifting (in imbalance) with a heavy burden on her head. The dull shadow, whom he refers to, is none other than his "mother", who is "Dark, dark and slender body" in appearance. Why is she dark in complexion and slender in physical appearance? It is because of her constant exposure to the burning heat of the sun, whole day's restless labour, and minimal consumption of food due to poverty.

Mother works as a firewood gatherer and seller from dawn to dusk in the small forest to eke out their living. As it is mentioned earlier in the poem, while the mother goes out for hard-labour in the jungle, the children eagerly wait at home for her homecoming. The most pathetic part of their lives is that if the mother "didn't sell the wood ..." all of them "slept hungry". This situation showcases the dependency of the children on their mother for food, and mother's restless and unavoidable hard labour for the survival of her children. It also reveals the economic condition and helplessness of the Dalit community as a whole for the survival. The community is historically pushed to a hand-to-mouth situation due to caste system, and its discriminatory practices. Here, the narrative focuses on acknowledging the mother's sacrifices and hard work. The speaker paints

a vivid picture of mother's daily routine, from dawn to dusk burdened with firewood collection, carrying and selling. The vivid portrayal emphasises the mother's selfless dedication to her family and the physical toll of her hard-labour.

The climax and poignancy of the poem comes with the fall of the protagonist and the sole-bread-winner of the family; the mother. The mother who goes in search of firewood in the woods comes back with "foot wrapped, blood flowing down" as she is bitten by a black-snake. The snake and its bite symbolize the imminent dangers the Dalit working women constantly face, mostly at workplaces, for their existence. The dangers might come from the human or non-human quarters due to discursive caste and class systems.

Someone's dying bed is addressed as death-bed, but the death-bed the mother is laid on is just a "mat" on the ground. It is an indication of their economic condition. In the hope of getting rid of her snake-bite, a few ritual-chants are performed, and a ritualistic thread is also tied to her. The village medical practitioner comes and treats her. However, she succumbs to the venomous-bite. Eventually, along with the day light her life breath escapes from her body! Mantras and other ritualistic practices, which are unscientific in nature, do not have any effect in curing diseases.

As the mother passes away from this world, one cannot imagine of the inconsolable grief and heart-break of the children. One cannot imagine the destitution and vulnerability which the children would have to endure aftermath of the mother. The expression in the poem, "Mother had gone, leaving children in the wind" reminds the readers of the common Indian cultural, idiomatic and allegoric saying, 'After lightening, lamps are left to the wind'. The saying suggests that nobody can save the children from the tempests of the world after the mother's death as the lights cannot be saved from open-wind! They are left in a helpless and pathetic situation. What would have been the condition of these children in the caste-ridden society after the demise of their mother; the sole breadwinner and feeder the family?

If you keenly observe the poem, it is obvious that in the entire poem, only the penultimate and final lines are written in the present tense. The distinction in the tense usage indicates the continuity and endless love of the speaker for his dead-mother. His grief, which began in childhood, "still" remains in his heart, and his eyes seek" his mother even after many years.

In the last line of the poem, the readers learn that whenever the speaker happens to see a thin woman who sells fire-wood, he instantly buys "her sticks". The line indicates the speaker's empathetic nature which is the consequence of his own loss at the very young age! The deep-rooted empathy and sympathy a human being nurtures for other human being underscores the true

nature of literature in general, and Dalit literature in particular. The end of poetry/literature is not only giving pleasure rather to nurture humanity in people. The aim of Dalit literature is undoubtedly the same. To make readers feel the pain of caste prejudices and caste-based mental and physical atrocities and trauma.

The poem vividly portrays the mother's sacrifices and relentless hard work for nurturing her children. The detailed imagery of her daily routine of collecting firewood in dangerous forest and burdens she faces underscores the theme of maternal dedication and the challenges faced by mothers in fulfilling their familial roles. The speaker strongly expresses a desire for relieving other-mothers from their burdens, which adds a layer of compassion and empathy to the narrative at the end.

Literature is, most often, considered a representation of society. It mirrors the essence of human experiences. As mentioned earlier Dalit literature captures the lived experiences of the Dalit community. The poem, "Mother" represents the womanhood and motherhood which are different from the so-called mainstream idealised womanhood and motherhood. The poem deconstructs the mainstream understanding mother and its connotative meanings.

The maternal stereotypical construction embedded to the idea and ideology of 'mother' and 'motherhood' in the mainstream Indian literature (oral and written folktales, legends, myths, epics, cinemas, etc.) is always idealised as a state which is to be 'desired' 'respected' 'worshipped' 'divinely-treated', etc. Motherhood has also been portrayed as a state of 'joyfulness' 'contentment' 'love' 'sacrifice', and so on.. These images of mother/motherhood have been constructed by various patriarchal myths across cultures. And there is no difference in India as well for such myths. These webbed maternal stereotypes have been reinforced in people's consciousness through various literary, religious, ritualistic, mythical, folkloric, cinematic artefacts, and so on.

The Dalit motherhood is different in its own terms as it is delineated in the poem. Generally, motherhood is seen as a very serene phase, representing the sense of belonging to a child. But the Dalit mother and her existence are entirely deferent from those patriarchal constructions. Dalit motherhood is closely associated with labour and the sustainability of the family. A Dalit mother prioritizes feeding her children over her own life.

The mainstream society and literature of India portray women as subjects who live within the four walls of their houses doing the household chores. They are also represented as being protected and provided by their men. However, like many other Dalit literary texts, the poem, "Mother" by Nimbalkar portrays the challenges, struggles and plight of the Dalit working class

women. Dalit working class women cannot stay in their houses just doing their household chores like the dominant caste and upper class women. But they must go out into the fields and work along with their Dalit men or like Dalit men. Dalit feminist writers tried to emphasise the equal labour that the Dalit women perform like their men, and yet the way they are subjected to multiple discriminations within the Dalit community and outside! Dalit working class women's unconditional love for the families, their resilience and courage are illustrated in "Mother" by underscoring an alternative womanhood and motherhood!

***Check your progress:***

1. Mother works as a firewood gatherer and seller from dawn to dusk in the small forest to eke out their living. (True / False)
2. The poem "Mother" by Nimbalkar portrays the challenges, struggles and plight of the Dalit working class women. (True / False)

#### **12.2.4 Let Us Sum Up**

Dalit poetry uses free verse to convey intense emotion, departing from mainstream literature in diction, subjects, and style, especially in the poem "Mother." The speaker, together with their siblings, wait in the dark for their mother, whose absence represents emptiness—both emotional and physical. The mother, a firewood gatherer, embodies the challenges faced by Dalit women as she risks adversity and danger in order to provide for her family. The children are left defenseless and penniless after her eventual death from a snakebite. The poem highlights empathy and the long-lasting effects of loss, illustrating the wider Dalit experience, while criticizing idealized motherhood and drawing attention to the hard realities faced by Dalit mothers.

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### **12.3 Learning Outcomes**

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After studying this Unit, you should have:

- learned about the poem, "Mother" by Waman Nimbalkar.
- understood the nuances of Dalit working class womanhood and motherhood.
- become aware of the challenges, struggles, and resilience of Dalit working class women.

- understood the importance of empathy through Nimbalkar’s poem “Mother”. In addition you should have understood the purpose of Dalit literature.
- learned about the socio-political and economic conditions of the Dalit community.

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## 12.4 Glossary

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- **Bhakri** : flat bread made of millets, eaten in Western and Central India
- **Burden**: a load/weight, typically a heavy one.
- **Charmed cord**: magical or ritualistic thread believed to cure diseases and uneasy situations.
- **Drudge**: do hard menial work
- **Grieve**: feel intense sorrow
- **Hood**: elevated form of a snake’s head
- **Lentil**: pulse which is dried and then soaked and cooked prior to eating.
- **Mantras**: a word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation, and believed to have magical powers.
- **Seek**: search for, attempt to find, look for
- **Slender**: thin, slim, weak
- **Vaidya**: medical practitioner
- **Vendor**: seller, salesperson
- **Wailing**: crying with pain, anger or grief
- **Wrapped**: covered with paper or other material

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## 12.5 Sample Questions

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### 12.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Where were the speaker and his siblings sitting?

- In the kitchen
- In the entrance of the hut
- On the roof
- At a neighbor's house

**Answer:** b) In the entrance of the hut

2. What is the meaning of Bhakri?

- a) A type of vegetable
- b) A flat bread made of millets
- c) A cooking utensil
- d) A type of fruit

**Answer:** b) A flat bread made of millets

3. What was there in the stomachs of the children?

- a) Happiness
- b) Darkness
- c) Food
- d) Water

**Answer:** b) Darkness

4. What is the color of the slender body?

- a) White
- b) Red
- c) Dark
- d) Brown

**Answer:** c) Dark

5. Why was the mother drudging in the woods?

- a) To gather fruits
- b) To collect firewood for selling
- c) To fetch water
- d) To visit relatives

**Answer:** b) To collect firewood for selling

6. What would happen to the children if the mother didn't sell the wood?

- a) They would play outside
- b) They would eat well
- c) They would sleep hungry
- d) They would go to school

**Answer:** c) They would sleep hungry

7. Which snake had bitten the mother?

- a) A green snake



- b) A king cobra
- c) A black snake
- d) A rattlesnake

**Answer:** c) A black snake

8. Where was the mother laid on after the snake bite?

- a) A bed
- b) A mat on the ground
- c) A chair
- d) A couch

**Answer:** b) A mat on the ground

9. Who was called to attend the ill mother?

- a) A doctor
- b) A village medical practitioner
- c) A neighbor
- d) A priest

**Answer:** b) A village medical practitioner

10. What does the speaker do whenever he sees a thin vendor of wood?

- a) Ignores her
- b) Buys her sticks
- c) Helps her carry wood
- d) Asks for a discount

**Answer:** b) Buys her sticks

### 12.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. Critically describe why and how the children are waiting for the mother.
2. Comment on the physical appearance of the mother in the poem.
3. Based on the poem, critically discuss the economic/material situation of the family.
4. How is empathy depicted in the poem?
5. What is the structure and form of the poem?

### 12.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Discuss the themes of love, sacrifice and empathy in the poem, “Mother”.
2. Critically examine the image of the ‘Dalit working class mother’ from your reading of the poem, “Mother”.
3. Analyse the status of the Dalit working class women in India based on the poem, “Mother”.

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## 12.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Dangle, Arjun, Ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Marathi Dalit Literature*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992.

Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently”. *Economic and Political Weekly* 30. 41/42. JSTOR. 14-21. Oct. 1995. 2548-2550. Web. 6 Feb. 2015.

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Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.

Satyanarayana, K, and Susie Tharu. Ed. *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India*. Dossier II Kannada and Telugu. Noida: HarperCollins, 2013.

## Unit-13: Introduction to Dalit Autobiography

### Structure

#### 13.0 Introduction

#### 13.1 Objectives

#### 13.2 Introduction to Dalit Autobiography

##### 13.2.1 History of Dalit Autobiography

##### 13.2.2 Birth and development of Dalit Autobiography

##### 13.2.3 Crucial issues in Dalit autobiographies

##### 13.2.4 List of some Dalit Autobiographies

#### 13.3 Learning Outcomes

#### 13.4 Glossary

#### 13.5 Sample Questions

#### 13.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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### 13.0 Introduction

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The literary genre of autobiography can be in simple terms defined as a life-history written by oneself. That has taken a kind of advanced form of what is today established as autobiography from initial stages of personal writings such as letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences. William Taylor used the word ‘autobiography’ for the first time and it was used in the modern sense by Robert Southey in the *Quarterly Review* in the year 1809. However, autobiographical writings as such were quite prevalent prior to 1809. Southey’s concept of autobiography consisted of only writings of personal lives putting aside letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences.

A widely accepted critic of autobiography, a French critic, Philippe Lejeune defines it as “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” Lejeune’s definition focuses on retrospective narration in prose by a real person and chief subject matter is one’s own life and existence with specific concern with personality. Another critic, James Olney, discusses the shift of importance from life-writing to self-writing in autobiography. Defining autobiography tends to be difficult as it keeps on pushing its boundaries and taking on new shapes.

### **Types of Autobiography:**

Britannica Encyclopaedia lists four types of autobiography. They are as following in a broader sense:

- Thematic autobiography that includes autobiographies like *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920) and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925).
- Religious autobiography includes a great deal of autobiographies ranging from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (400 CE), Margery Kempe's dictated account in her old age, to autobiographical chapters in the novel *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle and John Henry Cardinal Newman's *Apologia* published in the nineteenth century.
- Nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed various intellectual autobiographies. This, to mention just two of them, includes John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1874) and Henry Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918).
- Somewhat similar to novel, written as a biography is considered a fictionalised autobiography. Examples can be rendered profusely but to mention a few are Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce, and George Santayana's *The Last Puritan* (1935).

### **Autobiography in India:**

Writing about self or self-narrative was negated in the Indian subcontinent, as a result autobiography as one of the literary genres hardly gained importance until the nineteenth century. In the initial stages, as true in any other mainstream literary genres in India, those autobiographies or autobiographical writings belonging to upper castes got momentum. For example, critical studies vastly discussed M.K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936), Mulk Raj Anand's *An Apology for Heroism* (1946), and Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951). Critical studies prove that Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is the first autobiography in the modern sense of the term; it was a product of Europe. It was written in AD 397-98, and it took more than twelve centuries to see a full-fledged autobiography in India. *Ardhakathanaka*, the first autobiography in its modern sense, was published in 1641 in India.

### **Dalit Autobiography:**

One can find an even deeper gap between writing an autobiography by an upper-caste and a marginalised within India. There is again a huge gap can be clearly identified when the first Dalit

autobiography appeared in the form of *Untouchable: An Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* in the year 1951 which is almost more than three centuries after appearance of an autobiography by an upper-caste individual in 1641 i.e., *Artdhakathanaka*. From then on Dalit autobiographies flooded Indian literary scenarios with quite shocking in both revelation of self and their surroundings and the kind of diction they have come to use in order to discuss their life-history. When it comes to Dalit autobiographies they are in a sense the real life-histories. Therefore, well-known thinkers and critics such as Arjun Dangle, Gopal Guru, and the American-born Indian sociologist and human rights activist, Gail Omvedt, demand an entirely new theory of aesthetics to critique Dalit autobiographies. However, one can find the delay in the appearance of Dalit autobiographies in comparison with autobiographies by upper-caste writers.

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### **13.1 Objectives**

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Objectives of this Unit are to:

- Provide an introduction to Dalit literature in general
- Define autobiography
- Provide an acquaintance with Dalit autobiography
- Throw light on various issues in Dalit autobiographies

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### **13.2 Introduction to Dalit Autobiography**

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#### **13.2.1 History of Dalit Autobiography**

Some scriptures of the religion of Hindu stratified Hindu society, gradually between 500 BC-AD 500, into four hierarchical categories called varnas (Raj Kumar 2012). They are in order of creation Brahmana, the priesthood, Kshatriya, the warriors, Vaishya, the traders, and Shrudra, all those who did not belong to the top most three categories. Further, another category was created called ‘Panchama’ which consisted of those who were identified as untouchables. In spite of the efforts at various stages of the history against this unnatural hegemonical and exploitative stratification of Hindu society there was hardly any improvement in the condition of the untouchables. The efforts continue to be in place to provide untouchables with an identity. Efforts have been made from the Charvakas, Buddhism, Bhakti Movements, Sharana (Lingayat)

Movement, Muslims' regime, British regime, social reform movements of pre-independence times, and Periyar to Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Thus the corpus of literature written for the cause of the upliftment of downtrodden and untouchables took birth in the form of movement, protest, agitation, and assertion. Therefore, Dalit literature and especially Dalit autobiography is a product of Dalit movement and activism. Though many thinkers and critics trace back the origins of Dalit literary movement to various stages in the history such as Buddhist period, saint-poet Chokhamela (AD 14), Mahatma Phule (1828-1890), Professor S.M. Mate (1886-1957), it was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who gave momentum in real sense.

Babasaheb Ambedkar began Mahad satyagraha in 1927. He wrote numerous articles in Marathi periodicals like *Mukanayak*, *Bahishkrut*, *Janata* and *Prabuddha Bharat*. In addition he delivered numerous speeches and published research and intellectual papers and books in English. He founded People's Education Society in Bombay in 1945 and began Siddharth College in the same city. Result is the first batch of Dalit youngsters graduated from the college. The graduates like Ghanashyam Talwatkar including others established a literary association, Siddharth Sahitya Sangh. The fruits could be seen in founding the Dalit Panthers in Bombay on 9 th July, 1972 fashioning Black Panthers. Writers such as Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Umakant Randhir, Ramdas Sorte, Prahlad Chendwankar, and Namdeo Dhasal gathered together and had rigorous discussions on Dalit movement and literature. Consequently Dalit literature took a fine shape.

### **13.2.2 Birth and development of Dalit Autobiography**

Dalit activists who were first generation beneficiaries of education wrote their self-narratives. Dalit writers chose writing to depict their inhumane life in the hands of upper caste people, to reveal their pain, insult, humiliation, destituteness which hardly found expression in the writings of mainstream writers. Dalits in a way recorded only their life in all genres of literature, that is all their writings were, in the initial stage, autobiographical in nature whether in verse or prose. Dalits intended to form their identity in this troubled society, and it was a well-thought plan to show how the 'other' had been systematically constructed. They strived to reveal how Dalits were made helpless and people of no motherland culturally, socially, and economically. Therefore, Dalits chose to write their own self-narratives thereby to protest against so-called established ethos of the society. Dalit autobiographies depict their community not just the self, in a way they focus not only on personal experiences but also the experiences of community.

Raj Kumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* (2012) rightly points out motivations and importance of Dalit autobiography:

Autobiographical narratives constitute a significant segment of Dalit literature. The Dalit writers termed these narratives as ‘self-stories’ (Atmakatha) or ‘self-reportings’ (Atma vritta). Most of these narratives are tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which they experience in a Hindu society. On the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers, with their growing perceptions and mature imagination, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between ‘loss of identity’ and ‘asserting of self.’ Thus, the very process of writing autobiography by the Dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression.

Series of Dalit autobiographies appeared for the first time in Marathi in the state of Maharashtra although interestingly the first Dalit autobiography written by Hazari titled *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* published in 1951 was in English. Aravind Malagatti’s *Government Brahmana* happens to be the first Dalit autobiography in Kannada in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, followed by Siddalingaiah’s *Ooru-Keri*, Govindraju’s *Manavilladavara Madhyadalli*, and Tumbadi Ramaiah’s *Manegera*. On the other hand, *Karukku* is the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil. Gradually, the strong desire to write an autobiography went on spreading across India and in various Indian regional languages.

***Check your progress:***

1. Babasaheb Ambedkar began Mahad satyagraha in 1927. (True / False)
2. *Karukku* is the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil. (True / False)

### **13.2.3 Crucial issues in Dalit Autobiographies**

#### **i. Authentic presentation of Dalit life and history:**

Life and history of Dalits in the works of mainstream writers are quite often absent and if at all find a place that appears to be a partial one depicting a distorted negatively motivated presentation. A chief aim therefore of Dalit literature and specifically Dalit autobiography is recording a legitimate history thereby correcting the misrepresentation. An autobiographer reveals their memories and experiences always in connection with the community. Baby Kamble thus says to the translator of her autobiography, “I wrote about what my community experienced. The

suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine.” Pramod Nair calls Bama’s autobiography, *Karukku*, a ‘testimonio.’ Dalit autobiographies are testimonials of their authentic history. Struggles positive as well as negative are depicted in Dalit autobiographies. Aravind Malagatti in his autobiography *Government Brahmana* records both positive and negative experiences. Such depiction marks their authenticity.

### **ii. Assignment of menial jobs:**

Almost every kind of resource excepting the menial jobs that enable an individual to earn their livelihood has been closed for Dalits for centuries. Owning farming land, securing education and skills were prohibited as a consequence of which Dalits have systematically been made to be dependent upon upper caste people to even to get their daily food. Then one could imagine of their livelihood. Menial jobs such as manual scavenging, street-sweeping, drainage cleaning, skinning of dead animals, etc were left to them. Dalits were forced to take them up. Daya Pawar writes in his autobiography, *Baluta*, that Dalit women of their streets do collecting rags, papers, broken glass, iron and bottles from the public streets. They are then brought home to sort out and sell to a shop in the morning. Therefore, all the movements by and for Dalits pay immense importance on educating Dalits so that they could earn a profession to gain self-respect and livelihood too.

### **iii. Humiliation:**

Humiliation is another issue many autobiographies deal with. Quite shockingly in the older generations one doesn’t feel humiliated at all in the hands of upper caste people be it whatever treatment they receive. An individual needs to feel humiliation in order to agitate in demand of self-respect and dignity. The treatment upper caste people extend towards Dalits is made so natural that it is internalised and accepted as if such treatment is natural. The case certainly differs with the newer and younger generations who show a protest against such treatment. In *Ooru Keri*, Siddalingaiah’s autobiography in Kannada, Dalits run to stand in que in order to get delicious dishes from a Brahman. Purity-pollution is another tool upper caste people made the worst use of to keep Dalits away from touching them. The upper caste people humiliate the very existence of Dalits. In *Antasphot*, Kumud Pawde writes, “The girls who studied along with me were Brahmins or from other higher castes. I had to pass their houses, I paused, waiting casually for their company. Right in front of me, the mothers would warn their daughters, ‘Be careful! Or I won’t let you into the house again.’” Kumud Pawde continues to record that her classmates of upper caste would feel disgusted to sit along with her in a classroom. On special occasions and in the festivities when feast was served there used to be serving only after completion of lunch of all the upper caste



people. Sometimes Dalits were served left-over food only to be carried to their houses and not allowed to dine at the houses of upper caste people. In this way Dalits confront humiliation in every walk of life. Nonetheless, the younger generation makes it a point to protest against any such injustice.

#### **iv. Agitation**

There have been numerous agitations and counter movements by Dalits in the history of India right from Chravakas to Ambedkarite movement and to date. Such agitations have found their place in Dalit autobiographies as a premier issue. Buddhist movement, Lingayat movement, Phule movement, Periyar self-respect movement, and Ambedkar movement play a pivotal role in inculcating the sense of agitation against inequality, injustice, and inhumane practices in Indian society. Such instances are prevalent in many Dalit autobiographies. It is recorded in *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle about Kumud Pawde. Kumud Pawde developed a passion to learn Sanskrit from very childhood and thus was making enquiries with her father as to which language those Vedic hymns were written in and could she learn that language. Her father says in reply that they are written in Sanskrit and adds that Kumud could very well learn the Vedic hymns in Sanskrit as they are independent, “Why shouldn’t we? After all, we are independent now. Those days are gone. Learn Sanskrit.” A father dares to say to his daughter that she could learn Sanskrit which is a positive development in the life of Dalits and a way of agitation. Sharmila Rege in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios*, writes while discussing Baby Kondiba Kamble’s *Jinne Amuche* that Baby Kamble does not feel shy of making use of the word ‘mahar’ as she takes pride in the fact that mahars were the original inhabitants of her land. Urmila Pawar documents in her autobiography *Aadian (The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs)* that a brahmin priest would sit on a tree to supervise marriage and other such ceremonies. Great grandfather Hari finding it quite humiliating calls on a village meeting and decides to conduct all the religious ceremonies themselves without the supervision of a brahmin priest. Many such agitating and revolutionary incidents are recorded in Dalit autobiographies.

### **13.2.4 List of Some Dalit Autobiographies**

#### **a. Dalit men’s autobiographies:**

- Bechain, Sheoraj Singh. *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandho Par*. Vani Prakashan. (Hindi: 2009. Translated into English as *My Childhood on My Shoulder* by Tapan Basu and Deeba Zafir, 2018.)

- Chauhan, Surajpal. *Tiriskrit*, 2002. *Santapt*, 2006. (Two-part autobiography, Hindi)
- Das, D. P. *The Untouchable Story*. Allied Publishers, 1985.
- Freeman, James M. *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*.
- Gaikwad, Laxman. *Uchalya*. (Marathi: 1998. Translated into English as *The Branded* by Kolaharkar. Sahitya Akademi, 1998)
- Gunasekaran, K.A. *Vadu* (Tamil. Translated into English as *The Scar* by V. Kadambari.)
- Hazari. *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste*. Bannisdale Press, 1951.
- Jadhav, Narendra. *Amcha Baap Aani Amhi*. (Marathi: 1993. Translated into English as *Outcaste: A Memoir*, 2003)
- Jatava, D. R. *A Silent Soldier: An Autobiography*. 2000.
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Akkarmashi*. (Marathi: 1984. Translated into English as *The Outcaste*, 2003)
- Limbale, Sharankumar. *The Outcaste*. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar. Oxford University Press, 2003
- Malagatti, Aravind. *Government Brahmana*. Orient Longman, 2007. (Kannada. Translated into English by Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janat Vucinich, and N. Subrahmanya)
- Mane, Laxman. *Upaara*. (Marathi: 1984. Translated into English as *Upaara*, 1997)
- Moon, Vasant. *Vasti*. (Marathi: 1995. Translated into English as *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, 2001)
- Naimishrey, Mohandas. *Apne Apne Pinjare* Part I. 1995, and Part II, 2000. (Hindi)
- Pokkudan, Kallen. *Ente Jeevitham*. (Malayalam. Pokkudan's second autobiography)
- Pokkudan, Kallen. *Kandalkkadukalkkitayil Ente Jeevitham*. (Malayalam. Half written and half mediated)
- Satyanarayana, Y.B. *My Father Balaiiah*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2011.
- Shyamlal. *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*. 2001.
- Siddalingaiah. *Ooru-Keri: An Autobiography*. Sahitya Akademi, 2003.
- Singh, Balwant. *An Untouchable in the IAS*. 1997.
- Tulsiram. *Murdahiya*. 2010. (Hindi)

- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan*. Samya, 2003. (Hindi: 1997. Translated into English as *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* by Arun Prabha Mukherjee)
- Valmiki, Ompraksah. *Joothan. Untouchable's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2003

#### b. Dalit women's autobiographies

- Baba. *Sangati*. 2008. (Hindi)
- Baisantry, Kaushalya. *Dohra Abhishap*. Parmeshwari Prakashan, 2009.
- Bama. *Karukku*. (Tamil: Translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, 2000.)
- Kamble, Baby. *Jina Amucha*. (Marathi: 1986. Translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit. Orient Blackswan, 2008.)
- *Pan on Fire*. (It is a collection of eight "narrated autobiographies." The eight Dalit women are :Sangeeta, Chhaya, Rakhma, Rukmini, Mangala, Ashoka, Savitri and Leela. Their life-stories were narrated originally in Marathi and later translated into English by Gauri Deshpande. The narratives were collected by a research team headed by Sumitra Bhawe.)
- Pawar, Urmila. *Aaidan*. (Marathi: 2003. Translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. 2009.)
- Takbhore, Sushila. *Shikanje ka Dard*. 2011. (Hindi)

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### 13.3 Learning Outcomes

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Upon the completion of this Unit, you should be able to:

- Trace the history of genre of autobiography
- Distinguish between mainstream and Dalit autobiographies
- Appreciate the struggles of Dalits

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### 13.4 Glossary

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- **Genre:** style or category of literature
- **Memoir:** a nonfictional kind of writing based on an author's personal experiences
- **Reminiscence:** a story of a past event told by a narrator
- **Retrospective:** looking back specially focusing on experiences

- **Profuse:** a large in number
- **Self-narrative:** telling a story of one's own life focusing on personal experiences
- **Mainstream:** refers to writer/s belonging to dominant established social class of
- **Marginalised:** the section of society that is sidelined on various grounds
- **Aesthetics:** a study of set of rules with regard to nature and appreciation of beauty
- **Critique:** an analysis in detail
- **Stratified:** classification
- **Downtrodden:** the section of society who are underprivileged
- **Constructed:** an identity is made or given socially

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## 13.5 Sample questions

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### 13.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Who first used the term 'autobiography'?
  - a) Robert Southey
  - b) Philippe Lejeune
  - c) Gail Omvedt
  - d) William Taylor**
2. Which is the first Indian full-fledged autobiography published in 1641?
  - a) *Government Brahmana*
  - b) *Atmanivedana***
  - c) *Ardakathanaka*
  - d) *Confessions*
3. Which of the following is the first Dalit autobiography?
  - a) *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste***
  - b) *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*
  - c) *Karukku*
  - d) *Ooru Keri*
4. When was Hazari's autobiography published?
  - a) 1641
  - b) 1951**
  - c) 1978

- d) 2003
5. Dalit literature and Dalit autobiography are consequences of..
- a) Indian struggle for freedom
  - b) Social Reform Movements by upper caste Hindus
  - c) Dalit movement and activism**
  - d) Bhakti Movement
6. What constitutes a significant segment of Dalit literature according to Raj Kumar?
- a) Autobiographical narratives**
  - b) Lyrical poetry
  - c) Romantic writings
  - d) Epics
7. Which Dalit writer's autobiography is referred to as a 'testimonio'?
- a) Aravind Malagatti
  - b) Baby Kamble**
  - c) Siddalingaiah
  - d) Daya Pawar
8. What significant event did Babasaheb Ambedkar lead in 1927?
- a) Mahad Satyagraha**
  - b) British Resistance
  - c) Dalit Panthers Formation
  - d) Bhakti Movement
9. Which of the following issues is NOT mentioned as a crucial issue in Dalit autobiographies?
- a) Assignment of menial jobs
  - b) Economic empowerment**
  - c) Humiliation
  - d) Agitation
10. Which Dalit writer's autobiography is referred to as a 'testimonio'?
- a) Aravind Malagatti
  - b) Baby Kamble**
  - c) Siddalingaiah
  - d) Daya Pawar

### 13.5.2 Short Answer Questions

1. Define autobiography.
2. Write a note on any three events that led to the birth of Dalit literature and autobiography.
3. Write a note on agitation as a chief issue discussed in Dalit autobiographies.
4. What are the key themes present in Dalit autobiographies?
5. List out any five Dalit autobiographies.

### 13.5.3 Long Answer Questions

1. Dalit autobiography is a result of movement and activism. Discuss.
2. Comment on birth and development of Dalit autobiography.
3. Documenting history of self as well as community is crucial for Dalit autobiographies. Illustrate with examples.

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## 13.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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Dangle, Arjun, *editor. A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies*. Orient Longman, 1994.

---. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Longman, 2009.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Zubaan, 2006.

Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. Orient BlackSwan, 2012.

**Unit-14: Baby Kamble: *The Prisons We Broke***

## **Unit-15: Introduction to the Life and Works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**

### **Structure**

**15.0** Introduction

**15.1** Objectives

**15.2** Introduction to the Life and Works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

**15.2.1** Family, Birth and Childhood

**15.2.2** Early Life and Education

**15.2.3** Formative Opinion on Indian Society

**15.2.4** Life Abroad

**15.2.5** Writings

**15.2.6** Thought and Ideas

**15.3** Learning Outcomes

**15.4** Glossary

**15.5** Sample Questions

**15.6** Suggested Learning Resources

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### **15.0 Introduction**

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In this Unit, we will be discussing the life and works of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. We will study how his early childhood, his family and the formative years shaped Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) into a leader. Moreover, it provides a short overview of Ambedkar's early life and his schooling in both India and overseas, detailing how these encounters influenced his role as a leader for the marginalized and downtrodden. Ambedkar possessed a unique combination of talents from leaders around the world. Despite facing many challenges throughout his life, Ambedkar is now seen as a hero for the people.

Despite being a Dalit, he not only advocated for the rights of Dalits, but also for those of all individuals who face discrimination and oppression under the Hindu Varna system. He worked hard to promote equality and make sure social justice was achieved. To gain a deeper understanding of Ambedkar, we should revisit his early years and examine his life, family, education, and career in more detail. With the understanding that Ambedkar possessed a



multifaceted personality, how should we analyze his life and beliefs? Today, Ambedkar represents a different individual to each person. Hindu nationalists consider him “anti-national”; Hindu fundamentalists see him as a protector of Hindu values; followers of neo-Buddhism view him as a representation of Buddha. And he represents the fight and optimism of millions of Dalits nationwide.

As a Dalit community member, Ambedkar advocated for their rights and consistently fought for equality, social justice, self-esteem, and liberation throughout his life. Ambedkar advocated for the social freedom, financial independence, and political progress of the oppressed masses, a mission never boldly pursued by any upper caste Hindu leader. To learn more about Ambedkar, let's delve into the historical pages of India and discover some details about his life and professional journey. Ambedkar is one of the leading intellectuals of contemporary India. His primary focus revolves around freedom, equality, democracy, and socio-political liberation.

Despite experiencing considerable humiliation, poverty, and social stigma since childhood, he is a distinctive thinker who achieved great educational and philosophical success. He was a groundbreaking social reformer who showed immense trust in democracy and the ethical foundation of a community. He established civic and political structures in India while condemning ideologies and institutions that oppressed and kept people in bondage. He conducted numerous extensive research projects on the economy, social systems, institutions, law, constitutionality, history, and religion with rigorous methodology and reflection. He served as the head of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution and eloquently justified its important elements with academic accuracy and thorough reasoning while also staying loyal to its underlying principles and remaining grounded. He adopted Buddhism, reinterpreting it for contemporary social liberation, attracting a large following and reviving its influence in India.

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## 15.1 Objectives

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This Unit would enable you to understand Ambedkar's

- early life and college education.
- life abroad.
- struggles in life.
- thought and ideas.

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## 15.2 Introduction to the Life and Works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

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### 15.2.1 Family, Birth and Childhood

Ambedkar's family originated from the Konkan region, known for producing numerous leaders, thinkers, and reformers. Ambedkar's village is called Ambavade in the Ratnagiri District, which originally served as his surname. During his time in school, Ambedkar decided to change his surname from Ambavade to 'AMBEDKAR', which is how he is commonly known. Despite his parents naming him Bhim, he preferred to be called Ambedkar. Ambedkar's grandfather, Maloji Sakpal, belonged to a respected Mahar family. It is believed that the Mahars were the indigenous people of Maharashtra, which is now known as Maharashtra.

The Europeans first encountered the Mahars in India. They became members of the Bombay Army of the East India Company, similar to how the Dusdas in Bihar and the Pariahs in Madras served in the Company's armies in those regions. Both of Ambedkar's parents, Ramji Sakpal and Bhimabai Murbadkars, came from an untouchable Hindu background yet were revered and esteemed in their village, to the extent that the temple's palanquin would be placed in Ambedkar's father's family. His maternal grandfather and other relatives on his mother's side primarily worked in the Army. Bhim, the final child born on April 14th 1891, was the fourteenth child of his parents.

Ramji retired from the Military when Bhim was two years old, so they moved to Central India. Therefore, Ambedkar began his education at a school in Dapoli when he was five years old. Subedar Ramji Sakpal couldn't stay in Dapoli with his son Bhim for long, so he relocated to Satara for a job at the Army quarters. Soon after Sakpal relocated to Satara, tragedy struck Ambedkar's family. His mother, a proud, independent, and devout woman, passed away when he was six years old. Satara is home to a Sammadhi that serves as a reminder of her. At the time of his mother's death, Bhim was six years old and only five out of fourteen children survived. His older sibling was Balaram, Anandrao was second and had two sisters named Manjula and Tulsi. Additionally, Mirabai, who was the sister of Bhim's father, was present to look after Bhim as the youngest member of the family, receiving unique attention and care from his aunt.

#### ***Check your progress:***

1. Ambedkar advocated for the rights of Dalits and consistently fought for equality, social justice, self-esteem, and liberation throughout his life. (True / False)

2. Ambedkar decided to change his surname from Ambavade to 'AMBEDKAR'. (True / False)

### **15.2.2 Early Life and Education**

Ambedkar is lucky to have had caring parents. His father was naturally hardworking and religious. He was strong, remarkable, charitable, and talkative. Every morning and evening, he said his prayers, and without fail, his children would join him. He further delved into the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as sang devotional poems by Marathi saint-poets such as Moropant, Mukteshwar, and Tukaram. His children were greatly influenced by the frequent readings and performances of epics and songs from a young age, leading to Ambedkar frequently referencing Tukaram in his later writings and speeches.

Ramji possessed additional outstanding attributes as well. He was a dedicated abstainer from alcohol and never consumed any meat. In his youth, he excelled at both cricket and football and maintained good physical well-being. He lived during the same time as Mahatma Jotiba Phule, who established the Satya Shodhak Samaj and led anti-caste movements among non-Brahmins in Maharashtra. Ramji, a friend and admirer of Phule, put in a lot of effort to tackle societal issues prevalent during his time. In 1892, when the British Government banned the recruitment of Mahars in the Indian Army due to pressure from upper castes, Ramji led a protest against the decision. He organized individuals and, with assistance from Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, formulated a petition that was then handed over to the Government to revoke the unfair directive. Years later, Ambedkar stumbled upon the petition among his father's old papers. Bhimabai, who was Ambedkar's mother, hailed from Murbad village in Bombay state's Thana district. The family was relatively wealthy. Her fair complexion, broad forehead, curly hair, round glowing eyes, and short nose made her beautiful. She exhibited a great deal of kindness and compassion. All of her six uncles and her father held the rank of Subedar-Major in the Army.

Ambedkar also belonged to the Kabir Panth, which they were part of. Ambedkar began his formal schooling in Dapoli, where his father resided following his retirement from the military. When he was five years old, young Bhimrao was enrolled in a nearby Marathi school. Afterwards, his father moved to Satara for a new civilian job, leading to his enrollment in a school in the area. Following the completion of his primary education, Ambedkar enrolled at Satara Government High School in 1900. The name listed in the school register for him was Bhima Ramji Ambavadekar. His family's original last name was Sakpal. However, his predecessors chose to

identify with their ancestral village Ambavade located in the Khed taluka in the Ratnagiri district. One of the Brahmin educators at the high school admired Bhimrao's honesty and intelligence so greatly that he desired to mentor him. The teacher was friendly and helpful. Frequently, he would offer his food to Bhim and encourage him to strive and aim high in life. Showing love and respect to his teacher, Bhimrao changed his name to Ambedkar and always felt thankful towards him. When Ambedkar traveled to England for the Round Table Conference in 1930, his teacher sent him a letter of congratulations. He must have felt proud to witness Ambedkar's successful progression in life. However, Ambedkar encountered the discrimination of untouchability from early on in his life.

Prior to Ambedkar's emergence in politics, caste discrimination was severe due to the dominance of orthodox Brahmanism at that time. Physical contact with the outcasts was believed to be 'contaminating' and additionally, even their shadows were viewed as 'tainting'. The untouchables were once mandated to wear an earthen pot around their neck and a broom around their waist while walking in public to prevent their spittle and footsteps from dirtying the paths used by the higher caste individuals. Severe consequences awaited the depressed caste individuals if they accidentally violated the restrictions imposed on them. After experiencing such shame, Ambedkar developed a strong dislike for the Hindu social structure that forced him and his community to live in complete disgrace. Numerous distressing events led the young Ambedkar to understand that the caste system was founded on discriminatory rules.

Consequently, he dedicated himself to eradicating the caste system. During a summer day, Bhim, his older sibling, and their young nephew embarked on a train trip to visit their father employed as a cashier in Goregaon. They boarded the train at Padali station and journeyed all the way to Masur. Their father did not show up at the station to pick them up because he had not received their letter in time. After a lengthy wait, they convinced the station master, who was a caste Hindu, to arrange for a bullock cart for them and set off for Goregaon. The cart had not traveled a long distance when the devout Hindu cart driver realized that they were from an untouchable background and immediately kicked them out of the cart. However, when the boys offered to pay him twice the usual fare, the cart-man agreed to let them ride in the cart. As Bhim's older brother drove the cart, the cart-man, afraid of contamination, walked behind the cart. The boys journeyed from dusk until midnight without encountering any water along their route. Whenever they asked for water, people either pointed to dirty water or told them to leave. This was Bhim's initial harsh awakening, as he discovered he belonged to a family of untouchables,

who, by Hindu caste regulations, were considered lowly and confined to consuming unclean substances.

Shortly after, Bhim was observed drinking water from a public location as a form of demonstration. Upon being captured by the higher social classes, he was severely beaten. Later on, Bhim found numerous other cruel regulations in the caste Hindu society regarding the untouchable population. For instance, he discovered that the barber, who was from the same religious and national background as him, refused to give him a haircut because he was afraid of becoming impure. His sisters trimmed his hair. Experiencing regular humiliation and inhuman treatment from his peers, Bhim's personality began to develop a distinct form. He was combative, clever, and daring. To such an extent that he could challenge anyone or anything imposing regulations on behavior and control. He couldn't be stopped from doing something without facing resistance. He arrived at school drenched in rain after being dared by his classmates to attend without an umbrella. Seeing him walk into the classroom with a wet shirt and traditional dhoti, his teacher, named Pendse, was touched by the sight. Immediately, he instructed his son to take Bhim home, provide him with a warm bath and clothing, and hang his wet clothes to dry.

Throughout his time in school, Bhim faced discrimination from both his teachers and classmates. He had to sit alone in a different part of the classroom from his peers. He was unable to socialize with other boys or engage in activities like cricket or other games with them. The teachers also refrained from touching his notebooks. In a negative setting like that, Bhim had minimal interest in his studies. He began pursuing various interests instead of focusing on his studies. Since he was a child, he was captivated by gardening, spending all his money on buying new plants and taking care of them. He eventually grew tired of chasing that goal and switched to taking care of cows and raising goats instead. Bhim's tough demeanor was also influenced by his family circumstances.

Following the death of his first wife, Bhim's father, Ramji wed for a second time. Bhim despised his step-mother for wearing his mother's jewelry, as he disliked the thought of another woman replacing his mother. Bhim made a decision to stop relying on his father's money and vowed to support himself financially. After their marriage, his two sisters in Bombay had informed him that there were job opportunities in the mills in Bombay. Bhim made the decision to travel to Bombay and start working as a spinning boy at a mill. However, he lacked the funds to pay for the transportation. He devised a scheme to steal his aunt's purse while sleeping on the floor next to her. After that day, Bhim stopped all his usual bad habits and behaviors and started focusing so

much on his studies that his teachers, who were once disappointed in him, now recommended to his father that he should receive the highest quality education.

After losing his job in Satara, Ramji moved his family to Bombay in 1904. They resided in a compact space in a chawl at lower Parel. The chawl, located in a neighborhood exclusively for mill workers, had a mysterious atmosphere reminiscent of the underworld. Two of his daughters had already tied the knot and established their lives in Bombay. They occasionally aided Ramji. Ramji enrolled his sons in Maratha High School. He received 50 rupees as his monthly retirement income. His family's needs were never adequately supported by such a small sum of money. However, Ramji was firm in his decision to provide education for his children. In the interim, Bhim had advanced significantly in his academic pursuits. He performed better in English than in other subjects. A couple of months later, Bhim was enrolled in Elphinstone High School, which was considered one of the top schools in Bombay at the time.

Despite his efforts in studying, Bhim still encountered challenges. The single-room chawl hardly had any room. The space contained a multitude of household items and tools. The place was filled with smoke and people. However, Bhim had to adapt to the circumstances. He rested on a coverlet. A grindstone was resting near his head next to the wall, while a panting she-goat was lying near his feet. He awoke at dawn and studied by the dim light of a flickering oil-lamp without a glass shade. Despite facing numerous challenges, Bhim consistently attended class on time. In contrast to Satara High School, Bhim found some relief from caste discrimination at Elphinstone High School.

As a Mahar, he was not allowed to play cricket in Satara, but in Bombay there were no limitations and he could play games freely. However, casteism was still present in the atmosphere of the school. One day, Bhim's teacher asked him to go to the blackboard and solve a problem in front of the class. Immediately, a commotion broke out in the classroom. The Hindu children from the high caste would place their lunchboxes behind the blackboard. Terrified that Bhim touching the blackboard would contaminate their food, they hurried to the blackboard and shifted their lunch boxes out of the way. Bhim experienced a sense of embarrassment. The school prohibited both Bhim and his older brother from choosing Sanskrit as their additional language option. As per Hindu rules, individuals from lower castes and women were not allowed to learn Sanskrit as it was deemed as Devabhasa, the divine language. Therefore, Bhim and his older sibling were required to choose Persian instead. After several years, Ambedkar learned Sanskrit both independently and with the assistance of Sanskrit scholars.

After studying both languages extensively, he believed that Persian was not as impressive as Sanskrit because the latter was a rich source of epics, the foundation of grammar, politics, and philosophy, as well as the origin of logic, dramas, and criticism. Despite facing intentional insults and humiliations from the caste Hindu society, Ambedkar persevered and did well in his studies. Certainly, a few open-minded individuals stepped in to assist him in his undertaking. He successfully completed the matriculation examination at Elphinstone High School in 1907. This was definitely a rare accomplishment for someone from the lower caste. His community thus celebrated the event. A meeting was convened in Bombay to honor Bhimrao for his achievements. The meeting was chaired by S. K. Bole, a famous social reformer. Krishnaji Arjun Keluskar, another notable Marathi writer and social reformer, was also present at the gathering. Impressed by Ambedkar's dedication and effort, Keluskar gifted him his new book, "Biography of Gautam Buddha". Therefore, Ambedkar was introduced to Buddha's teachings and way of life during his formative years. By chance, at the end of his life, he switched from Hinduism to Buddhism, fully embracing the new faith.

Soon after completing his matriculation exam, Bhim, aged seventeen, married Ramabai, a well-behaved nine-year-old girl who was the daughter of a porter named Bhiku Walangkar. In the past, child marriage was common. Bhim did not go against his father's wishes and got married at the Byculla market. Bhim's father was always supporting him to continue his studies. However, after Bhim successfully completing the Inter Arts examination, his father ran out of money, but Keluskar stepped in to help. Keluskar went to the Raja of Baroda, who had previously declared in a Town hall meeting that he would provide assistance for the education of deserving untouchables. Sayajirao Gaekwad was a man who practiced what he preached; he lived by his words. Raja allowed a meeting with Bhim and questioned him. Satisfied with his answers, he promised to award Bhim a scholarship of 25 rupees every month. Consequently, Keluskar's assistance made Bhim to pursue his education effortlessly.

Additionally, at Elphinstone College, Prof. Muller offered assistance to Bhim. However, even during his college years, he experienced humiliations and insults, as the college hotel keeper refused to serve him Bhim tea or water. While Bhim was preparing for the exam, he found joy in reading as it gave him a sense of purpose in life. At the same time, he successfully completed his B.A. exam in 1912. Following his graduation, he began working in Baroda despite his father's disapproval. He served in the Baroda State service for only fifteen days in 1913 before being called back due to his father's failing health. Upon receiving the telegram, Bhim departed for Bombay.

When Bhim arrived home, his father passed away in Bhim's arms on February 2nd, 1913, a day that Bhim described as the most sorrowful in his life. Afterward, he had no desire to travel from Bombay to Baroda, spending a few months at home feeling regretful.

### **15.2.3 Formative Opinion on Indian Society**

As the freedom movement gained momentum in the 20th century, British oppression was on the rise. Several Indian freedom fighters and leaders were sent to the Andaman Islands. The Britishers completely ignored the rights of Indian citizens and considered any complaints or appeals as acts of sedition, leading to violent political unrest. The condition of suppression and oppression impacted young Bhim, leading him to explore it further in his thesis, titled "The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India". He further mentions that the Indian Press Act of 1910 has completely stifled press freedom. He further remarked on the Morley-Minto Reforms Act of 1909, stating that these laws did not contribute to the advancement of Indian society or its people. He began working for the Baroda service, but had to stop not long after. Then, in June 1913, his life took a sudden turn when he learned that the Raja of Baroda was sending students to the USA on scholarships, and he wanted to be one of them. As a result, he submitted his application for the same program along with three additional students, and Ambedkar was chosen as well.

### **15.2.4 Life Abroad**

The ruler of Baroda State chose to send Bhim to America. Accordingly, on June 4, 1913, Bhim was summoned to Baroda where he signed an agreement with the deputy minister for Education. In the agreement, Bhim committed to studying the required subjects and serving the State of Baroda for a decade after completing his education. This was a significant moment in his life and a notable chance. Like a few other distinguished leaders, Ambedkar also obtained top-notch education from the United States. In July 1913, Ambedkar arrived in America where he had the chance to pursue postgraduate studies at Columbia University. He brought Buddhism books for his trip, and upon arriving in America, he first stayed at Hartley Hall, a dormitory at Columbia University. However, he transferred to the Cosmopolitan club because he did not enjoy the food at Hartley Hall, and also because many of the dishes there contained beef, which he did not eat. There were Indian students already residing at Columbia University. Shortly after, he moved to Livingstone Hall where he resided with Parsi student Naval Bhathena and formed a lifelong friendship. He also had in-depth conversations with his close friend C.S. Deval.

For the first time in his life, Ambedkar experienced a unique situation in America where he felt the joy of being treated equally. There, he was able to socialize freely with everyone, while



also enjoying meals at a set time at a formally set table, complete with a napkin. He broadened his mental horizons while studying at Columbia University. Ambedkar believed in making the most of his opportunities by avoiding distractions like sightseeing, going to the theater, smoking, drinking, and even being conservative with his meals. He only ate when he was hungry, and even then he was very conservative with his meals, never indulging in extravagance. The only thing he was hooked on and regularly drank was the tea he had been enjoying since he was a child. He used to set aside the funds from his scholarship to cover his wife's family expenses; it was in America where Ambedkar began wearing glasses.

Between 1913 and 1916, Ambedkar spent time in the United States where he became familiar with several notable professors, including Edwin Seligman, James Shotwel, John Dewey, James Harvey Robinson, Franklin Giddings, and Alexander Goldenweizer. These Professors greatly influenced American thought. He wanted to take advantage of this chance, and aimed to excel in the fields of Science, Politics, Sociology and Economics. Edwin R.A. Seligman, a friend of Lala Lajpat Rai, advised him to diligently pursue his own research methods when asked about research techniques by Ambedkar. This became a reality in Ambedkar's life, and from that point forward, he would spend eighteen hours a day delving into knowledge. After much effort and late-night studying, Ambedkar earned his M.A. degree in 1915 with his thesis on 'Ancient Indian Commerce'. Additionally, in 1916, he presented a paper on "Caste in India their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development" before Dr. Goldenweizer, an Anthropology Professor. Therefore, even in those early years, his efforts to comprehend the caste system and find a solution were evident. This article was subsequently printed in the Indian Antiquary Journal in 1917, marking Ambedkar's initial published piece.

While pursuing his M.A. degree, Ambedkar was also working on his Ph.D. thesis, 'National Dividend for India: A Historic and Analytical Study'. He submitted it in 1916 and received his Ph.D. degree in 1924. This was released as a book titled 'The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India' by P.S. King and Son Ltd. in London. Ambedkar dedicated this book to Sayajirao, the Maharaja of Baroda, and the introduction was written by his favorite professor, S.A. Seligman, who first introduced him to public finance. Seligman described Ambedkar's work as "nowhere, to my knowledge, has such a detailed study of the underlying principles been made". Ambedkar's love for books was insatiable, he frequented the city's second-hand book stalls and amassed a collection of two thousand old books while in New York. During his time in America, Lala Lajpat Rai tried to convince Ambedkar to join the freedom movement, but Ambedkar declined, saying

that as a student, he shouldn't break the trust that Raja has in him. Therefore, he declined to participate in the freedom struggle.

While studying in America, Ambedkar did not have the opportunity participate in the Indian freedom movement. But he closely monitored political events globally. He was particularly fascinated by two things in America: the U.S. Constitution and, even more, the fourteenth Amendment which granted freedom to African Americans. Booker T. Washington, a prominent reformer and educator of the Black community in America, passed away in 1915. Ambedkar experienced a significant change in America, realizing the importance of education. In a letter to his father's friend, he stressed the importance of education, particularly for women. He also mentioned in the letter that parents are the ones who bring children into the world, not Karma. Therefore, he highlights that we have the power to control our fate, as well as the responsibility to educate those in our vicinity.

Ambedkar traveled from America to London, which was seen as a hub of education and learning at that time. During the First World War, Lala Har Dayal and his Gadar Party were encouraging and rallying Indians in America to return to India and expel the Britishers. As a result, when Ambedkar arrived in London, his personal belongings and clothing were thoroughly searched by the British Police, but nothing incriminating was discovered. In October 1916, Ambedkar signed up at Gray's Inn to study for a Bar-at-Law qualification. At the same time, he was accepted into the London School of Economics, where Professor Seligman provided an introduction letter to Professor Edwin Cannan and Professor Sydney Webb. Despite the approval from the Raja of Baroda, the Diwan of Baroda rejected his request to continue his education. Therefore, before departing with a heavy heart, Ambedkar was requested to come back and he approached the University for support from his Professor Edwin to seek permission to resume his studies within four years. In 1921, he returned to England and in 1923 he finished his PhD in economics by presenting his dissertation on 'The Problem of the Rupee: Its origins and its resolution'. In that very year, he was admitted to the Bar by Gray's Inn.

### **15.2.5 Writings**

It is a well-known fact that Ambedkar did not write any poetry, novels, plays, or other fictional work. However, he left behind ample scholarly content. He primarily wrote in English; his works were the result of thorough research and reflection. The literature of Ambedkar remains relevant today, just as it was when originally written. His writings are being studied not only in India but also internationally. Though we have learned much about his life and achievements, his

writings and ideas are not well-known. This section aims to provide an overview of Ambedkar's literature from a broad perspective. Ambedkar authored numerous books.

Unlike his peers, he conducted extensive original research on his texts. In addition to drafting the Indian Constitution as the leader of its Drafting Committee and advocating for it during the lengthy discussions in the Constituent Assembly, he authored numerous books that demonstrate his methodical approach. Apart from his doctoral dissertations on "The Problem of the Rupee" (1923) and "The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India" (1925) he wrote – to refer a few: "Castes in India" (1917), "Small Holdings in India and their Remedies" (1918), "Annihilation of Caste" (1936), "Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables" (1945), "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah" (1943), "Thoughts on Pakistan" (1945), "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables" (1945), "Maharashtra as a Linguistic State" (1946), "Who were the Shudras?" (1946), "Status and Minorities" (1947), "History of Indian Currency and Banking" (1947), "The Untouchables" (1948), "Thoughts on Linguistic State" (1955), "Buddha and Karl Marx" (1946), "Communal deadlock and Way to Solve it" (1945), "Buddha and the Future of his Religion" (1950), "Future of Parliamentary Democracy" (1951), "Linguistic States: The Need for Checks and Balances" (1953), "Buddhism and Communism" (1956), "The Buddha and his Dhamma" (1957) In addition, he authored many articles, presented scholarly documents, gave lectures, and provided commentary in his published journals.

The books written by Ambedkar cover a wide range of topics and his analysis is incisive and accurate. Below is a concise overview of the main topics covered in his key publications. The book "Castes in India" by Ambedkar illuminates the origins, structure, and evolution of castes in India. Ambedkar views caste as a self-sufficient and enclosed community. He stated that there are four dimensions to the issue of caste in India. i) While consisting of various components, Hindus maintain a robust cultural coherence. ii) Social classes are an integral component of this enormous cultural identity. iii) In the beginning, there existed only a single social class. iv) Various social classes were created either through exclusion or imitation.

The book, "Small Holdings in India and their Remedies" discusses the concept of "chakbandi" and the consolidation of fragmented agricultural lands. In this book, Ambedkar asserts that without consolidating small and scattered holdings, agricultural reforms in India are not achievable.

"Annihilation of Caste" by Ambedkar is a thought-provoking and enlightening text that questions the entrenched social hierarchy of caste in India, advocating for a fundamental

reassessment of the cultural practices that maintain these segregations. Initially written as a speech in 1936 for a group of progressive Hindus, the content was deemed too extreme and was ultimately not delivered as planned. Ambedkar, a relentless advocate for the marginalized and the main creator of the Indian Constitution, analyzed the religious and ethical basis of caste, revealing its harmful effects on social equality and personal liberty. He advocates for the abolition of the caste system and promotes a society with equal rights and opportunities, making it a crucial read for those interested in Indian social reform history and anyone who values liberty and equality.

Ambedkar's book "Thoughts on Pakistan" has garnered a lot of attention. It came out in 1945, during a period of unrest caused by the upcoming Partition. The book provided a solution to the issue and was crucial in solving it. Ambedkar asserts that based on its title; the book may seem to focus solely on Pakistan's X.Y.Z. It goes beyond that. It is a critical examination of the communal aspects of Indian history and Indian politics. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to clarify the basics of Pakistan. The content regarding Indian history and politics in this book is extensive and diverse, earning it the title of *Indian Political What is What*.

The book, "Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables" published in 1945, examines the actions of Congress and Gandhi towards the Untouchables and criticizes them for not following the correct path. The book suggests that Congress utilized the Shudras' emancipation issue as a means to advance its political agenda. The program initiated by Congress for the liberation of the Shudras is focused more on gaining public attention rather than genuine actions. The book advises Dalits to be cautious of Gandhi and his principles. Ambedkar believes that Gandhism is the only "ism" that has exploited religion to control the masses with deceitful ideas and empty commitments. Untouchables are deceived by Gandhism.

Another important text titled "Who were the Shudras?" by Ambedkar delves into and examines the origins of the Shudras. It is stated that the term "Shudra" holds historical connotations in addition to its etymological meaning. Ambedkar states that the individuals referred to as Shudras today were previously known as Survanshi Aryan Kshatriyas.

"The Untouchables", released in October 1948, delves into the origins of untouchability. With solid evidence, Ambedkar has demonstrated that the Untouchables were oppressed individuals who were labeled as such because they had adopted Buddhism and refused to stop consuming beef. Ambedkar argues that the tradition of untouchability likely began in the 5th century AD. He concludes that untouchability arose from the power struggle between Buddhist and Brahmanical faiths.

The book, “The Buddha and his Dhamma” which was released after his death in 1957, holds a unique position among his body of work. It could be characterized as a Buddhist scripture, given its thorough examination of Buddhism. Dr. D.R. Jatav, an expert on Ambedkar's writings, stated that the book poses significant and innovative questions, offering intelligent and scholarly responses to them. Ambedkar rejects the categorization of Buddhism into Hinayana and Mahayana sects. He states that Lord Buddha's religion is unified, despite possible variations in philosophical understandings of its teachings. He contends that two forms of Buddhism cannot coexist.

***Check your progress:***

1. *Castes in India* by Ambedkar illuminates the origins, structure, and evolution of castes in India. (True / False)
2. Ambedkar’s text *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* examines the actions of Congress and Gandhi towards the Untouchables. (True / False)

### **15.2.6 Thought and Ideas**

Dr. Ambedkar's thought has many dimensions. There were very few issues that he left untouched. He formulated his opinion on many crucial questions that India was confronting during his times. His versatility is reflected in his social and political thought, economic ideas, law and constitutionalism.

**i. Ideological Orientation:** Ambedkar referred to himself as a 'progressive radical' or at times as a 'progressive conservative' depending on the need to differentiate from liberals, Marxists, and others. He was a passionate follower of liberty. He viewed it as a positive force and ability, allowing individuals to freely make decisions without being limited by economic systems, exploitation, social structures, religious beliefs, and biases. He believed that liberalism promoted a limited idea of freedom that allowed for the concentration of resources in a small number of individuals, leading to deprivation and exploitation. He believed that liberalism disregards social and political structures by allowing significant disparities in the economic, social, and cultural spheres despite formal equality. He claimed that minority groups like Black people in the U.S.A. and Jews in Europe face hidden inequalities within liberal systems. He also contended that liberalism was frequently used to support colonial exploitation and the widespread injustices it perpetuated.

Emphasizing individual importance in Liberalism overlooks the significance of community connections needed to support a thoughtful and innovative self. Liberalism continued to overlook the oppression and detachment from self that exploitative and dominant structures caused. He discovered that liberalism lacks a sufficient grasp of the roles and actions that the state must take in order to support and encourage a quality life. He believed that while the principle of equality before the law is a significant improvement over previous unequal systems, it is not sufficient. He introduced robust ideas like equality of respect and dignity, emphasizing the importance of respect and community.

**ii Religion:** Ambedkar extensively discussed the major religions of the world, focusing on Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. He extensively wrote about Hinduism and Buddhism. He mapped out the religious evolution of early India, showing the decline of the Vedic society into the Aryan society, the emergence of Buddhism and its social and moral changes, and the opposing reaction seen in the rise of Brahmanism as a distinct ideology and political movement. He discovered that the Hindu scriptures are not easily understood in a unified and coherent way. They indicate deep divisions within and between sects and factions. There are divisions present in the Vedic texts; Upanishadic ideas sometimes clash with Vedic beliefs; Smriti texts often contradict Sruti texts; gods are sometimes in conflict with each other and Tantra is at odds with Smriti writings.

The figures in Hinduism like Rama and Krishna should not be worshipped as role models. He viewed the Bhagavad-Gita as mainly presenting an argument to protect Brahmanism after the emergence of Buddhism and the failure of the former to defend itself through rituals and religious acts. Ambedkar formulated a fresh perspective on Buddhism and viewed it as actively involved in societal matters. It favored the less fortunate and oppressed and focused on the hardships and happiness of the present world. It rejects the belief in God or the immortality of the soul. It supports logic, confirms the reality of the present world, follows a moral code, and aligns with scientific principles. He viewed freedom, equality, and community as key aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

Further, Ambedkar criticized Christianity and Islam from both a theological and sociological perspective. He affirmed that these religions believe in a transcendental realm that, despite contradicting human logic, generates authoritative and paternalistic inclinations. They overshadow human logic, curiosity, and fairness to individuals. Their statements are not in line with scientific logic. The Christian belief that Jesus is God's son goes against logic. He believed that both religions adjusted to varying levels of inequality and ranking. Their teachings have

frequently caused their followers to turn to aggression and brutality. He observed the Buddha standing upright in comparison to the main figures of Christian and Islamic faiths.

**iii. Caste:** Ambedkar's views on caste and caste system evolved over time. At first, he recognized caste traits as endogamy combined with exogamy within a common cultural environment. He believed that practices like sati, child marriage, and banning widow remarriage were certain consequences of the system. After one caste decided to restrict access, other castes also adopted similar measures. The development of castes stemmed from the Brahmins' initial practice of social exclusion. Ambedkar continued to highlight the endogamous nature of caste, incorporating additional factors like division of labor, lack of inter-dining, and the principle of birth that he had previously viewed as essential to endogamy. He also discovered that the caste name is crucial for the ongoing perpetuation of caste. He contended that castes should be differentiated from the caste system, which is built on the concept of graded inequality. The Brahmins are at the highest point of this system. He stated that grading inequality maintains system stability and allows for ongoing reproduction, unlike simple inequality. The members who disagree are included as a separate rank within the caste system's structure of inequality and disdain.

Ambedkar believed that caste is a fundamental element of Hinduism. While a small number of reformers have criticized it, the majority of Hindus see going against caste traditions as a direct contradiction of their strong convictions. The principles determining varna system and caste system are identical. Both support hierarchical inequality and believe in the idea of status based on birth rather than merit. Ambedkar advocated for the eradication of caste as it is crucial for establishing strong community connections and promoting freedom and equality. He proposed the idea of inter-caste marriages and inter-caste dining, believing that the latter is not strong enough to create lasting connections. He continued to argue that texts supporting the 'varnashrama-dharma' must be discarded because they uphold and authorize the hierarchical structure of society. He believed that in Hinduism, priesthood should be accessible to all followers based on proven skills rather than lineage. He believed that it would be nearly impossible to complete the project because what needs to be given up is seen as something religiously mandated.

**iv. Untouchability:** Ambedkar differentiated between the practice of untouchability and the system of caste, even though both are based on the same principle of unequal hierarchy. Untouchability is not just a severe version of caste discrimination but a fundamentally different one, excluding untouchables from society and viewing any contact with them as impure and

shameful. He contended that despite variations and divisions, all untouchables face common disadvantages and are subjected to equal treatment by caste Hindus: they are relegated to ghettos outside the village, universally scorned, and isolated from human interaction. He rejected the idea that untouchability is rooted in race. He viewed it as a societal establishment upheld by the beliefs of Brahmanism. Although he didn't deeply investigate the causes of untouchability in one case, he suggested a creative theory that untouchables were marginalized individuals living on the periphery of village societies who, because of their adherence to Buddhism and consumption of beef, were stigmatized as untouchables.

Ambedkar believed that the issue of untouchability in India was deeply entrenched in beliefs and practices, making it difficult to find a simple solution. Getting rid of untouchability necessitated a societal transformation where treating others with respect and recognizing their rights became ingrained in everyday behavior, not just a legal requirement. Because of the deeply ingrained biases and vested interests related to the practice of untouchability, it was unrealistic to anticipate change from established factions. Hence, he believed that the main responsibility for freeing themselves rested with the untouchables themselves. Self-improvement needs more than just effort, it also requires learning and planning. Additionally, a constitutional democracy with choices on different levels can greatly aid in this pursuit.

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### 15.3 Learning Outcomes

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After completion of this Unit, you should be able to:

- demonstrate general familiarity with the life and works of Dr. B R Ambedkar.
- understand Ambedkar's critique of caste, religion and untouchability.
- get a sense of Ambedkar's formative opinion on Indian society.

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### 15.4 Glossary

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- **Agrarian:** Pertaining to farming or cultivation of the land
- **Bar-at-Law:** the law degree required to practice in court.
- **Democracy:** leadership determined by the population
- **Discrimination:** involves treating a particular person or group unfavorably compared to others.



- **Discrimination:** Prejudiced and showing favoritism.
- **Dormitory:** a dormitory is a room for multiple individuals in a school or other establishments.
- **Downtrodden:** subjected to oppression or mistreatment by those in authority.
- **Emancipation:** is the act of being liberated from legal, social, or political constraints.
- **Federal:** pertaining to a system of governance where multiple states come together as a whole while still maintaining autonomy in domestic affairs.
- **Foundations:** are a fundamental principle or basis.
- **Fraternity:** a collection of individuals with common professions or hobbies.
- **Karma:** determining man`s position in Present life by deeds done by him in his past life.
- **Liberal education:** is a way of encouraging the integration of learning throughout both the curriculum and co-curriculum.
- **Polygamy:** the tradition of being married to multiple wives simultaneously.
- **Sovereignty:** the highest authority in politics.
- **Spiritual:** associated with faith in religion.
- **Supremacy:** refers to the state or position of being greater than all others in terms of authority, power, or status.
- **Thesis:** an assertion or hypothesis proposed to be upheld or demonstrated.
- **Uniform:** a procedure with components existing in a single state.

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## 15.5 Sample Questions

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### 15.5.1 Objective Questions

1. Ramji Sakpal retired from the army when Ambedkar was \_\_\_\_\_ year old.
  - a. **Two**
  - b. Three
  - c. Four
  - d. One
2. Ambedkar passed his matriculation examination in the year\_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. **1907**
  - b. 1905
  - c. 1908
  - d. 1910
3. Ambedkar was born in the year\_\_\_\_\_.
  - a.**1891**
  - b. 1901
  - c. 1881
  - d. 1892
4. Ambedkar obtained his M.A degree from \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. **Columbia University**
  - b. Stanford University
  - c. London School of Economics
  - d. Osmania University



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## 15.6 Suggested Learning Resources

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**Unit-16: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: *Annihilation of Caste***