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WE are Dalit History*
**Hindi Dalit Autobiographies and Their Engagements with
India's Past and Present**

ABSTRACT: Life writings had time and again been used as source material for historical research both in the West and the various literary cultures of South Asia. Considering the absence and a deliberate, socially conditioned erasure of Dalit history from the mainstream narratives of Indian historiography, some scholars have introduced the notion of viewing Dalit life writings as exercises in history writing. This article explores several Dalit autobiographies as instances of engagement with the process of constructing history of Dalit communities in India. Starting from this premise, it undertakes a preliminary analysis of

* First and foremost, I would like to express my immense gratitude to the reviewers whose comments guided me in making the line of argument of this article more consistent. In the text one may notice some inconsistencies in spelling of words from Indian languages. It results from variations in spelling chosen by me and those opted for by the authors of cited texts, e.g. “Dalit”/”dalit” and “mahār”/”Mahar”/”Mahaar.” On the term “Dalit” Chatterjee writes: “The radically subordinate position of the latter group in this power hierarchy was aptly captured in the term Dalit, a Marathi word coined by the activist Jyotiba Phule in the late nineteenth century and taken up in the first half of the twentieth century by Babasaheb Ambedkar, the most influential leader and theorist of the Dalit movement, and also an architect of the Indian Constitution” (Chatterjee 2017: 380). I use the term “Dalit” in somewhat ahistorical manner as at present it is a denomination commonly used by castes earlier pejoratively named as “untouchable.” I am aware that not all individuals and communities that belong to this vast category associate themselves with this term, and some even oppose it.

various narrative strategies employed in Hindi autobiographies by Dalit authors in the hope of revealing the nature of their engagements with India's past and present. The study presented in this paper is based on four relevant examples of prose in Hindi—by Kausalya Baisantri, Sushila Takbhaure, Omprakash Valmiki, and Sheoraj Singh Bechain.

KEYWORDS: autobiography, identity, Hindi literature, Dalit, history

I am Dalit History
 YOU are Dalit History
 WE are Dalit History
 And we believe that
 it's not just HISstory, but HERstory, and OURstory
 that are necessary to set us free.

Dalit History Matters Collective (2015)

Discovering and celebrating Dalit history

The idea of celebrating Dalit History Month has been germinating among Dalit activists for some time. It discernibly stems from Black History Month, an annual event observed in many countries world-wide but with its roots in the USA, where it had begun as an initiative that acknowledges significant contribution of Afro-Americans to American history.¹ Dalit History Month in India takes place in April, the month that marks

¹ Carter G. Woodson initiated Negro History Month in 1926 and the commemoration spread steadily throughout the USA. In 1969 it was renamed Black History Month by the association of Afro-American students at Kent State University and in

birth anniversary of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, the champion of Dalit cause.² The festival designed as reclaiming the narrative of Dalit past and present in India was possibly first envisaged by a Tamil activist, Paari Chelian, in a blog post of 2011, but was ultimately launched by a group of women activists, Vee Karunakaran, Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, Asha Kowtal, Sanghapali Aruna, Manisha Devi and Thenmozhi Soundararajan.³ Together they formed Dalit History Matters Collective (henceforth DHMC) which organized and coordinated a series of events and social media activities “to raise the visibility of Dalit History around the world” (DHMC 2015). Their manifesto—introducing the thought behind celebrations—published on April 1, 2015, opens with the verse quoted in the epigraph and focalizes inclusiveness in the process of making and writing Dalit history, as well as its embodiment in the physicality of lived and individual experience and, pertinently, belief in the emancipating power of history narratives.

1976 it was recognized by the then-president of the USA, G. Ford as the national festival (Goggin 1997).

² “For some Dalits, Ambedkar is an actual prophet who changed the course of their history and future. But despite his outstanding political career and invaluable contribution do Dalit rights, Ambedkar’s celebrity faded fast, especially when compared to upper-caste nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Nehru... Generations have missed out on learning his contributions to equality and human rights. But in the past few decades, especially after the anti-Mandal, Dalits turned to him in a big way and actively brought his work back into the spotlight, even if it was limited to Dalit circles” (Dutt 2019: 125–126). Jyotirao Phule, another important leader of the Dalit movement, was also born in April.

³ “Using the celebrations of Black History Month as an example, Dalits announced and celebrate April as Dalit History Month to redeem the history of the struggles for social emancipation and political service of Dalit leaders who have been ignored and deliberately forgotten, to write about this history and take it to the people through various media. Towards redeeming for research histories that were hidden, twisted and re-written vengefully by the Brahmin and middle-castes, pamphlets and books are published and conferences organized as a part of the Dalit History Month celebrations every April... We must celebrate every April as Dalit History Month to bring into history the unknown documents and speeches of Dalit leaders, in a way that will impact society at large” (Chelian 2011).

The first observance of Dalit History Month in 2015 combined on-site actions in India (New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Kurukshetra) and abroad (New York, Boston, Princeton, Houston, San Francisco, and Toronto) as well as online activities. These included: a launch of a timeline dedicated to Dalit history publicized on social media (a dedicated website, Facebook, and Twitter simultaneously) and popularized on Dalit online platforms (Dr B R Ambedkar’s Caravan, Round Table India and Dalit Camera), as well as “Dalit-led Wikipedia hackathon at Massachusetts Institute of Technology” (*ibid.*). Patently, the initiative’s manifesto foregrounds its significant goals, i.e. the recreation of history from Dalit perspective and by Dalits as opposed to the *savarna*⁴ historiography propagated by the mainstream academics and established institutions of knowledge; participation of Dalit community in this process; significance of accounts of oppression and continuous resistance to it; and inclusion of various forms of telling history such as oral traditions and performing arts.⁵ In the parlance of the Collective, the Dalit History Month,

⁴ *Savarna* is a traditional term denoting those ‘within *varṇa*,’ i.e., communities that belong to any of the four social classes recognised by the Hindu orthodoxy: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or Shudras. The antonym would be *avarṇa* or those ‘outside of *varṇa*,’ the term used for communities outside of the hierarchical order of classes, those on the margins of society or considered the lowest. At present, many members of these communities self-identify with the term “Dalit” or “oppressed,” “crushed.” In the hierarchical order of the Hindu caste system communities that belong to the three upper classes are named “upper-castes.” Neither of the phrases *savarna* or “upper-caste” when used in this article express support for the idea of the hierarchical order of society that divides people into supposed upper or lower echelons, pushes the latter ones into the margins, ostracises and oppresses them. On relation of *varṇas* or classes and *jātis* or castes see Thapar 2014: 187.

⁵ “Our goal is to share the contributions to history from Dalits around the world. We are a parallel model of scholarship to academic institutions that study Dalits without Dalits in collaborative or lead roles of research. We believe in the power of our stories to change the *savarna* narrative of our experience as one solely of atrocity into one that is of our own making. Our story may have begun in violence but we continue forward by emphasizing our assertion and resistance” (<http://dalithistory.com>, accessed on 22.11.2021).

... is a love letter to our ancestors—our great foremothers and forefathers who struggled to pass on dignity while suffering unspeakable violence. Weaving their proud legacy in poetry, dance, song, or drum, they prepared future Dalits, our generation, to survive, endure, and fight. Today, we are their voice, as they were ours. Through our knowledge, we assert that to be Dalit is not just to be broken, but to essentially be defined by struggle. We boldly claim our legacy of power, resistance, and resilience inherent in our histories. With pride we collectively move onwards into Dalit History Month, not just as students of history, but also, most powerfully, as co-creators of a new Dalit History. In this collective-creative place and practice, we dream for a future of infinite Dalit possibility and freedom. (DHMC 2015)

This “participatory radical history project” (*ibid.*) is an educational initiative that spreads awareness about pervasive presence of the oppressive caste system and equally widespread and continuous, active resistance of Dalits towards it. Hence, it purposefully proposes to create an alternative narrative of Dalit history that comes from within the earlier silenced community.

The online presence of Dalit discourse has been marked by activation of a new generation of Dalit campaigners conversant with new technologies and media as well as by the “egalitarian” or inclusive character of these media.⁶ Many online platforms and social media run by the members of these communities include first-hand testimonies of oppression and exclusion bringing to the fore yet again

⁶ Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit journalist, writer, activist, advisor to the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce had this to say on the online social media about the forms of Dalit expression and communication, “For upper-caste people, Twitter is just another invention. For Dalits, it has the potential for a revolution... There is no barrier for Dalits’ entry here. Nobody will filter your words here or chop your thumb for daring to write what you feel” (Laskhmi 2016). His bitter words refer to violence restricting Dalits in public sphere; though his comments relate to Twitter they can be extended to other social media platforms. “Over time, Dalit social media and Dalit-owned websites built such an intensely vocal narrative between Dalit and upper-caste followers that mainstream media outlets had no choice but to cover it” (Dutt 2013: 172).

the significance of autobiographical narratives to the movement. Its online mode of communication and reach, along with other activities of Dalits in the digital environment corroborate the extension of a “subaltern counter-public,” “formed under conditions of dominance and subordination” (Fraser 1990: 70). Reworking the concept of Habermas, Fraser describes the existence of multiple public spheres as a prerequisite of democratisation in stratified societies which corresponds to the present situation in India (*ibid.*: 68). Fraser further states, “although in stratified societies the ideal of participatory parity is not fully realizable, it is more closely approximated by arrangements that permit contestation among a plurality of competing publics than by a single, comprehensive public sphere” (*ibid.*).⁷ Ganguly’s observations on the commitment of Dalit life writings to the initiative of questioning Indian democracy, seem to germanely foreground this issue,

... this corpus of writing can be seen as an integral part of a continuing contest within Indian democracy over the role of caste and its visibility/invisibility in the public sphere. It also brings to the fore the low-caste rejection of the civilisational claims of Indian nation-making while at the same time embracing its liberating potential. Most significantly..., the narratives herald the emergence of Dalit personhood as a figure of suffering, unsettling the celebratory mood of late modern Indian democracy, and moving towards realising its true potential by demanding due recognition. The logic of democracy, as political philosophers have reminded us, resides in the idea of an absolute extension of personhood to everyone. (Ganguly 2009: 130)

Prior to their association with the online environment, Dalit oratures and literatures in Indian regional languages have long been contributing accounts contrary to those of the mainstream upper caste thus attesting to the plurality of narratives of India’s past. The new developments purposefully oppose voices claiming hegemony for the dominant, i.e.,

⁷ The subject of Dalit public sphere was extensively discussed earlier from various angles (e.g., Narayan 2011, Beth 2014, and others).

upper-caste, Brahminic accounts (cf. Mani 2005, Omvedt 2008). Mahananda in his study of Dalit historiography observes, “The Indian society has very obstinately resisted all attempts of democratization; it has cleverly reinvented itself to take the undemocratic structure of caste alongside the process of modernization” (Mahananda 2017: viii). In response to that *status quo*, modern Dalit writings have been theorised as an exercise in democratisation of Indian society by expanding public domain along with reflections on the question of representation and identity politics. Ravi Shankar Kumar, for instance, writes, “The act of ‘representation’ in Dalit literature achieves its ‘politicality’ by showing the systematic prejudices of the social order. It opens new fields of visibility by bringing them into public domain. One can argue that this act also leads to the expansion and redefinition of the public domain, making it more democratic” (Kumar 2018: 57). Pondering over aesthetics of Dalit writing, Omprakash Valmiki, an acclaimed Dalit poet, playwright and author writing in Hindi, argues that Dalit literature is a versatile tool for the democratisation of Indian society, which otherwise is strongly divided into various class and caste groups, and as such tool will have a very positive impact (Valmiki 2013: 8). An academic, a Dalit woman writer, Sushila Takbhaure (2008: 10), goes so far as to assert that Dalit movement and literature are against all sorts of oppression.⁸

Autobiography, Dalits and history

Autobiographical accounts play significant role in Dalit literature though it is critical to note that Dalit literary creativity is not restricted to one single genre.⁹ The over-emphasis on life writings in the publishing

⁸ “[T]he aim of Dalit literature and the Dalit movement is to get rid of any kind of oppression” (“har prakār ke śoṣaṅ se mukti pānā dalit sāhity aur dalit andolan ka uddeśya hai”). English translations from texts by Baisantri, Takbhaure and Valmiki are done by the author of the present article. Bechain’s (2009) original Hindi text is being quoted from translation of Zafir and Basu, see Bechain 2018.

⁹ “The literary corpus of Dalit literature is written in various genres. However, there is a misplaced tendency to equate all Dalit literature with Dalit autobiographies” (Kumar 2018: 58–59).

of Dalit literature, its marketing, reception and critical reflection have already been noticed and problematised.¹⁰ With this in mind the present article would like to explore the idea of Dalit autobiographies in Hindi as engagements with the narratives of the past and the present, hence as alternative—to the concept of traditional history—accounts of the once voiceless communities absent from the historical writings altogether. To test this hypothesis I proceed to examine four Dalit autobiographies written in Hindi, two by women—Kausalya Baisantri’s (1926–2009) *Dohrā abhiśāp* (1999, “Double Curse”) and Sushila Takbhaure’s (b. 1954) *Śikanje kā dard* (2011, “Pain of Living in Shackles”) and two by men—Omprakash Valmiki’s (1950–2013) *Jūṭhan* (2009 [1997], the English translation published in India: *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*, 2010)¹¹ and *Apnā bacpan apne kandhō par* (2009, the English translation, *My Childhood on My Shoulders*, 2018) by Sheoraj Singh Bechain (b. 1960).¹² As a person conversant with Hindi I pursue the analysis by working with the original Hindi texts. Selection of the narratives in focus results from the preliminary and qualitative character of the present study aimed at initially exploring the subject prior to further detailed enquiry employing a larger corpus. For purposes of this exercise, I opted for an equal

¹⁰ “Very often their autobiographies have been isolated from their other sometimes superior literary productions and published because of a popular misconception, on the part of publishers, that autobiographical writings are the most popular form of Dalit self-expression and therefore will attract the maximum number of buyers” (Basu 2017: 55). Also, “[u]nless one wants to conflate history with subjectivity, we must pay more attention to the diversity of Dalit literature, and the politics of privileging one genre over the other. This does not mean we deny significance of Dalit autobiography that has shaped contemporary Dalit writing forcefully” (Kumar 2018: 59).

¹¹ The American edition was retitled as *Joothan: An Untouchable’s Life* for the USA market (Mukherjee et al. 2008: 4).

¹² Other critically acknowledged autobiographies by Dalit authors in Hindi: *Apne apne piñjre* (1995; “Our Own Cages”) by Mohandas Naimishray; *Tiraskṛt* (2002; “Disdained”) by Surajpal Chauhan and *Murdahiyā* (2010; “Our Colony Murdahiya”) by Tulsi Ram. Throughout the article, I am purposefully using names of Hindi authors as written in English (and not Hindi transcription), as these are the names they identify with. I believe it is important to publicize them in this form for the greater visibility of Dalit writers of various Indian languages in the public sphere and in the academic discourse.

representation of autobiographies authored by Dalit women and Dalit men, belonging however to different generations, and to some extent, different sub-castes and regions. Through a close reading of the selected texts I propose to analyse how their authors articulate representation and identity, and how do they view dominant narratives of Indian history vs. their own narratives of Dalit community's past and present. Earlier, I have conducted research on women autobiographies in Hindi and have extensively examined Kausalya Baisantri's text in the context of other Dalit autobiographies in Hindi, reading them as tales of individual lives entangled in a greater narrative of their community's oppression and struggle (Browarczyk 2013, 2019). In this article, however, I would like to focus on the collective angle of the selected autobiographies and preliminarily examine them as their authors' conscious engagements with India's past or the authors' own narratives of Dalit history or histories-in-writing. Due to the near absence of earlier written histories coming from within the community and communicating its unique historical experience, it appears that these and other Dalit life writings self-reflexively perform the function of Dalit histories.

However, before moving on, let me briefly review some earlier collective engagements of Dalit castes with the narratives of India's history. Interestingly, in the late 19th and the early 20th c. members of Dalit communities embarked on writing histories of their castes through genealogies (Hons 2020: 95, Hunt 2014: 26). These genealogies, created at the behest of caste associations in order to "reconstruct their caste histories and rediscover their glorious past" (Hons 2020: 95), usually provided the said Dalit caste groups with noble lineage of Kshatriya origin and may be viewed as attempts at upward mobility. Narayan indicates the role played by Arya Samaj in this process, particularly in the context of North India:

The caste histories of many lower castes were written during the colonial period not by scholars of their own caste but by Arya Samaji activists and scholars who tried give the middle and lower caste an identity and create a space for them within Brahminical social system. (Narayan 2004: 197)

The Adi Hindu movement of the 1920s and 1930s claiming that Dalits, low castes, and tribes were the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent enslaved by the invading Aryan (Jaffrelot 2003: 200–205), was also committed to rewriting the narratives of India's past. Narayan in his study of the *pasi* community of Uttar Pradesh attests that contemporarily, in the constant process of Dalit mobilisation, some castes continue to actively recreate histories of their communities by utilising various resources. Such narratives are later publicly displayed and used to garner support of political parties from BJP, to BSP, Congress, and the Socialist party:¹³

The facts of the past are merged with myth and fantasy and create a new perception of a past that is glorious, pure and exclusive. These caste histories are both part of the wider dalit history, and are also a history of the glory of the dalit caste. Various sources are cited to authenticate the caste histories and glorify their heroes. These sources include colonial gazetteers and colonial ethnographical studies, local archaeological remains linking these claims with mounds and the rubble of various forts, and re-interpretation of the names of cities and local places. Folklores, proverbs, idioms, ethno-musical oral traditions and literature are other sources. The caste histories are not only circulated through narratives, both in the written and oral mediums, but are also the fulcrum around which festivities and commemorations are held. (Narayan 2004: 218)

However, in the current study I argue that the four autobiographies in focus engage with the narratives of Dalit history in a totally different manner. Though their involvement also relates to identity politics of Dalit rights assertion, the same takes place in a much broader spectrum

¹³ Cf. "Thus the caste histories appear as the space where various political forces can find a niche to mobilise the concerned communities. The social equations in the electoral market are apparent in the framing and retelling of the stories by the different political parties. Through these caste histories, political parties channelise the dalit sense of identity in their favour while at the same time swaying them against their political rivals" (Narayan 2004: 219).

as the authors are more concerned with the promotion of the idea of unity and solidarity of the whole Dalit community and less with the history of their particular castes, which is perhaps most visible in Takbhaure's book. For this reason, the issue of conflicts between different Dalit castes, conflicts of which authors are acutely aware—and which are mentioned by all the narratives—creates a certain fissure which is further interiorised within the tale of the personal.

D. R. Nagaraj focalizes such personal involvement of Dalit autobiography not only with the tale of Dalit community but also with its history:

Whereas in non-Dalit literary works, the autobiographical self of the author takes a place effortlessly in the dense network of the community, but the Dalit writer weaves a tale of the self and the multifaceted community miniatures itself in the limited persona of the writer. The larger tensions of history have hurt Dalits into autobiography. (Nagaraj 2010: 194)

Dalit community, or rather a collection of communities, is not a monolith; the existing disparities between Dalit caste groups in different regions of India reflect regional dynamics of their historical trajectories defined by specific historical and geopolitical circumstances, hence shape their present economic, political, and social status. Mimicking the exclusion of these communities by the caste Hindus, Dalits too have created a hierarchical order of exclusion, and ostracise some communities within their fold. Ambedkar coined the term “graded inequality” to describe this process (cf. Jaffrelot 2003: 21–23). Historically, members of different Dalit castes followed different trajectories of political representation and self-organisation and were differently affected by the affirmative or legal actions for their benefit implemented first by the colonial authorities and later by the independent Indian state. Authors of the autobiographies to a certain extent reflect this multiplicity of Dalit experiences in India, which further problematises the idea of the scrutinised autobiographies as typical histories in writing.

Wallach observes that “[a]utobiography is a peculiar genre, which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other” (Wallach 2006: 446).¹⁴ Autobiographies have been explored as primary sources for historical research, but adepts of history needed to be alerted to “the emotionally charged relationships autobiographers have to their texts” (*ibid.*: 447).¹⁵ Wallach, however, brings attention to the added value of life writings as unique narratives of the lived past:

Life writing has the potential to enrich our historical understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in any other single source material. But to understand the kind of impact that autobiography can have, we must complicate our thinking about the nature of historical understanding. Further, we must pay careful attention to issues of literary style, for there are certain aspects of historical reality that can best be captured by artfully wrought literary memoirs. Skilful autobiographers are uniquely equipped to describe the entire universe as it appeared from an acknowledged perspective, as well written life writing has the ability to portray the complicated interplay between the thoughts and emotions of a historical actor. (*ibid.*)

Somewhat in tune with the theme of the present volume dedicated to South Asian’s literatures engagements with the past, Wallach brings to the fore literary value of life writings as re/tellings of the past and so shall this article.

In the light of the above, Dalit autobiographies are further problematized by the fact that individual life stories of Dalits, like those of other people coming from underprivileged, minority or variously othered communities, are basically personal tales that by

¹⁴ Mahananda remarks, “... both history and literature collaborate to understand the past. ... Consequently, one finds different models of historiographies informed and governed by different objectives and subject positions” (Mahananda 2017: 4).

¹⁵ In relation to this debate, an ideal of objective, academically rigorous history writing resurfaces, however Narayan (2004: 196), for instance, discusses how colonial narratives of documenting castes in India “became frozen as historical facts.”

default encompass the experience of the communities because of the shared and lived experience of exclusion. Julia Swindells observes,

... autobiography is now often the mode that people turn to when they want their voice to be heard, when they speak for themselves and sometimes politically for others. Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond individual. People in the position of powerlessness—women, black people, working class people—have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via ‘autobiography,’ via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. (Swindells 1995: 7)

Contextualising the problem further and correlating it specifically with Dalit writing, Ravi Shankar Kumar writes,

Dalit autobiographies are not simply accounts of one individual’s life history. They are also representative of the life lived in stigmatised communities. It is the shared nature of this life that reflects in these narratives. Though there are problems involved in simple equation between an individual’s account and a community’s account, it is clear that both accounts have significant elements that resist a reading along the line of traditional autobiographies. (Kumar 2018: 60)

In his evaluations of Dalit studies, now a new, interdisciplinary academic field of research, Rawat recognizes its potential to reassess historiographical outcomes of South Asian studies and identifies study of Dalit literature and autobiographies as one of its leading trends (cf. Agarwal 2016). Mahananda elucidates further:

Pan-Indian growth and acceptance of Dalit writings is a significant marker in this direction. With their focus on what was so far the neglected and unspeakable, Dalit writings have been said to have started an alternative discourse about Indian society, polity and history. ... Dalit writing presents a new site of history, which, in the absence of a better term, may be called Dalit history. (Mahananda 2017: viii)

On the other hand, mainstream historical discourses on India are largely critiqued by Dalit intellectuals through Foucauldian lens of knowledge and power as “abusive forms of knowledge” (DHMC 2015) because—similarly to other products of the institutionalized, state-sponsored academia—in their accounts of India’s past they recurrently exclude systematic oppression of Dalits and their lived experience, and hence control and manipulate knowledge/power. For instance, the rejection of Dalit perspective and experience and the hegemony of the North Indian, upper-caste narrative is thus commented on by the Collective: “Yet in the never-ending battle for textbooks between left and right views of history, Dalit history gets entirely side-lined. What enters textbooks instead is a caste Hindu narrative weighted towards North India and Hindu epics” (DHMC as quoted by Chari 2015).

At the same time, Dalit literature in Indian regional languages, including Hindi, and in English (both in translation from regional languages and the originally written in English, e.g., Gidla 2017, Dutt 2019, Yengde 2019) have become subject of much academic debate, not only in India but also abroad.¹⁶ Its growing presence as an independent field of research reflects increasing mobilisation of Dalit emancipation movement/s since the 1970s and the growth of those movements’ outreach. However, before proceeding further, let us revisit the critique coming from the non-Dalits studying cultural production/s of the underprivileged communities, an academic practice

¹⁶ Cf. a webpage “Writing, Analysing and Translating Dalit Literature,” which is the outcome of an international research project on Dalit literature and apart from description of its academic activities provides a compendium of primary texts in translation and research studies on Dalit literature. It introduces its aims in these words: “Establishing an international dialogue between key researchers in the area of Dalit literature, the project has fostered a close collaboration between academics working in the field of literary and cultural studies, as well as cultivating contacts with authors, translators and publishers of Dalit literature. ... This list of publications includes primary texts and critical material that is relevant to the study of Dalit literature. One of the aims of this network is to make the study of Dalit writing more widely known and accessible internationally and we therefore focus on listing primary texts in translation” (<https://dalitliterature.wordpress.com>, accessed on 22.11.2021).

that has been strongly opposed by some Dalit activists and refuted by academics from the non-Dalit backgrounds in India and abroad (cf. Abraham and Mishrahi-Barack 2018a: 5, 2018b: 15). This ongoing and very heated debate surrounding criticism of academic research on Dalit literature by non-Dalits seems unresolvable. It mirrors the overarching concept of Dalit literature seen by Dalits as that written exclusively by Dalits and drawing from Dalits' lived experience of oppression, i.e., "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" to quote Limbale (2004: 18). Needless to say, the emergence of Dalit writings may be considered one of the most significant developments in the Indian subcontinent and Hindi literary scene of the last decades. Dissemination of related research interest in the academia within India and abroad reflects the growing visibility and significance of Dalit writings in South Asia.

Dalit autobiographies in Hindi and history

Dalit autobiographies are sometimes compared to "misery memoir," a genre popularised in the last decades in the West. Avowedly, Ajay Navariya (b. 1972), a critically acclaimed Dalit writer who in his prose foregrounds Dalit—but not only—urban characters, shares following observations as he describes early life writings of Dalit authors in Hindi,

The first wave of Hindi Dalit writers in the 1990s was doing *dard bayaan*—offering testimonies of their suffering. They were the first generation to get out of villages and have urban exposure; many of them were educated but they rarely went to fine colleges or moved in literary circles. At best, they had day jobs as clerks. In their writings, the emphasis was more on *bhav* (emotion) than *bhasha* (language/artifice). Their experience was their identity. Their writing was communitarian—the story of one person became the story of the community which had never been told. (Anand 2011)

However, even in his critical evaluation of Hindi Dalit life writings of the 1990s, Navariya declares that these narratives of individual lives are reclaiming the right to voice stories of their own communities. Significantly, the authors, and possibly some of the readers too, read these narratives as testimonials of systemic, institutionalized, centuries old and now obsolete yet still on-going oppression of Dalits, and parallel to this oppression, the lasting, continuous opposition from within the community, so contrary to Navariya's opinion, not only as tales of victimhood but also accounts of resistance. Pertinently, as Rawat and Satyanarayana observe, "Dalit authors writing in Indian languages offer an analysis of human dignity, and they echo Charles Taylor by insisting that they are engaged not only in a political project but also in a historiographical one" (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016: 7).

Authors of the four autobiographies in focus come from different regions of India and represent different generations. Baisantri, *née* Nandeshvar, was born in 1926 in Nagpur in a *mahār* caste of Maharashtra, a dominant Dalit caste of the region. Her local, natal community enjoyed a relatively better off economic status as some of its members, due to industrial development of the region, were engaged in occupations outside of the degrading, unpaid livelihoods considered hereditary by the caste system.¹⁷ Their status was further strengthened by community's commitment to the reformist agenda of Ambedkar, who too hailed from among the *mahārs*. In fact, Nagpur was one of the main centres of Dalit movement in Maharashtra, movement that was initiated by Ambedkar and carried on by his followers, Baisantri's parents included,

¹⁷ "The Mahaars are the most numerous dalit caste in Maharashtra. Like other dalit castes they live on the boundaries of the village. Their traditional duties include defence of village boundaries, removing carcasses of dead animals, and carrying messages between villages, especially news of death. They are generally regarded as a class of village servants" (Sonalkar 2014: 35). "The Mahars of Vidarbha were even better off than the Mahars of the other regions of Maharashtra. ... They enjoyed better economic circumstances in that a few owned land, some were forest contractors, many were weavers, an occasional Mahar even served as the village headman" (Elliott 2000: 22).

who were actively involved at the grassroot level.¹⁸ Baisantri clearly articulates that one of the reasons behind writing her autobiography was to give account of the life of an activist engaged in Dalit movement since early age. She writes that she first had the chance to listened to Ambedkar speak when she was ten or twelve years old (Baisantri 1999: 82) and narrates how she was later actively involved in Dalit students' and Dalit women's movement, participating proactively in grassroot level actions and public gatherings. Those include the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in Nagpur in 1942, where she had an opportunity to interact closer with Ambedkar himself. She also emphasises the fact that several Dalit women activists encouraged her to write about her life because of her role in the movement (*ibid.*: 7–8), which gives her a sense of historical impact the movement has had on her community and of personal contribution to the continuity of Ambedkar's teachings.¹⁹ Her narrative provides a first-hand account of Ambedkar's growing influence on

¹⁸ “The two main bases of the Ambedkar movement were the cities of Bombay and Nagpur... The first cotton mills in Nagpur started production in the 1870s, and Mahaars as well as untouchables of other castes were taken on as mill workers. Nagpur thus became a centre where Mahaars and other dalits were present in large numbers as an organised working class, and there was also a significant section of well-to-do Mahaars. Even then they suffered various forms of caste discrimination” (Sonalkar 2014: 22–23). According to Baisantri's account, her parents worked in a Nagpur cotton mill.

¹⁹ “The people of the untouchable community were deeply influenced by the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Being deeply influenced was a natural thing, because it was Babasaheb who for the first time made the untouchable community aware that they too were human beings, and that they too have right over this country, and that they too have the right to live a respectful life. Babasaheb encouraged them and inspired them to fight for themselves and to fight for their human rights. Whatever progress the untouchable community is striving to achieve and begins to achieve, is the legacy of Babasaheb,” (“bābā sāhab ambedkar ke vicārō kā aspr̥śya samāj ke logō ke ūpar bahut gahrā prabhāv parā. yah prabhāv parṇā bahut svābhāvik thā kyōki bābā sāhab ne hī pahlī bār aspr̥śya samāj mē yah bodh jagāyā ki ve bhī insān hai, is deś par bhī unkā bhī hak hai, unhē bhī sammānit jīvan jīne kā adhikār hai. bābā sāhab ne unkī himmat barhāi, saṅgharṣ karne ke lie aur apne mānvīy hak ke vāste larne ke lie unhē prerit kiya. āj jo bhī unnati aspr̥śya samāj kar rahā hai aur karne ke lie agrasar ho rahā hai, yah bābā sāhab kī den hai. Baisantri 1999: 81).

her community of *mahārs* in Nagpur.²⁰ Though, on the other hand, she also bitterly recounts hostility of some of her community's members towards her family's efforts of bettering their lives in line with Ambedkar's instructions—"Educate, agitate, organise"—and towards her own education.

Prior to the Hindi book version, Baisantri's shorter autobiographical essay in Marathi, her mother tongue, was published in a remarkable Marathi collection that itself constituted a seminal intervention in the making of history of the Dalit movement by bringing to the fore women activists sidelined in the movement by men (cf. Guru 1995: 2549). The volume in question, originally published in Marathi in 1989, was made available in English translation in 2014 as *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (Pawar 2014). It was in turn inspired by another feminist initiative of reclaiming women's activism, i.e., a collection of memoirs of women in the Telangana movement, *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in Telangana People's Struggle* (1987), prouced by Stree Shakti Sangathana (Sonalkar 2014: 5).²¹ However, Baisantri, who was a Marathi speaker, ultimately resolved to write her full-fledged autobiography in Hindi for the simple reason that there were no autobiographies written by Dalit women in that language. Opting for Hindi, hence, marks her conscious decision of engaging in the process of making and writing history of both Dalits and Hindi literature with her own, personal narrative (cf. Browarczyk 2013, 2019). In accordance with the historical usage, she tends to employ the word *aspr̥śya* ('untouchable') in her autobiography to refer to the traditionally practiced Dalit untouchability.²²

²⁰ Baisantri (1999: 82) recalls, for instance, how women of Dalit community, inspired by Ambedkar's achievements, would sing songs about him to their children or while at work.

²¹ The English translator of the volume, Sonalkar (2014: 5–6) introduces Pawar and Moon, the authors, and editors of the Marathi original thus: "The two women were deeply influenced by the dalit movement but were not trained academic historians, embarked together on a journey of rediscovering the past of the movement."

²² "Baisantri in her autobiography uses at times the term *mahār*. She also mentions the name of her own sub-caste (*sārebārā upajāti*), as well the names of other

Born into the next generation of the 1950s, Valmiki and Takbhaure both came from *bhaṅgī* or sweeper families. The community is considered one of the lowest in the hierarchical order of caste system and is ostracised also by other Dalit communities as its so-called hereditary occupation, cleaning, included manual scavenging. Valmiki and Takbhaure grew up in villages of the economically underdeveloped state of Uttar Pradesh of the 1950s and 1960s; their communities were impoverished, stigmatised and backward. Intellectual and ideological formation of both authors was to an extent similar, for unlike Baisantri, exposed to Ambedkar's teaching since her childhood, they remained unaware of Ambedkar and Dalit movement till their early adulthood, when acquaintance with Ambedkar's biography and his writings influenced them deeply and awakened their Dalit consciousness and pride. Stressing the broad time span of Dalit history, Valmiki writes, "Dalit consciousness is the legacy of the long history of the Dalit movement, which in different historical periods took different forms."²³ On the one hand, the authors' early unawareness of Dalit movement attested in the autobiographies resulted from the near absence of Ambedkar and the account of his reformist activities in the public sphere of the Hindi belt, for example, in the school syllabuses of the Uttar Pradesh of the day. On the other, Takbhaure and Valmiki claim that their caste groups were

Dalit castes, and the names of various communities, both low-caste and tribal, that inhabited her colony in Nagpur. However, the term *aspr̥śya* is for her the most common denominator of her caste status. Because of its Sanskrit roots the term sounds slightly euphemistic to the Hindi readers but is a common word in Marathi, language generally richer in direct loanwords from Sanskrit. She rarely uses *achūt*, a word more common in colloquial Hindi, which in her text appears mostly as a part of the phrase—*chuāchūt*, a noun encompassing behaviours and customs associated with the practice of 'untouchability.' In Baisantri's narrative the word 'Dalit' appears rarely, particularly in connection with the most contemporary developments, reflecting the historical process of its acceptance by Dalit activists. Her preference for a common word encompassing the whole community of castes considered the «lowest» is very telling; hers is a story of the whole community" (Browarczyk 2019: 88–89).

²³ "dalit cetnā, jo dalit āndolanō ke ek lambe itihās kī den hai, alag-alag kālkhandō mẽ alag rūpō mẽ dikhāi partī hai" (Valmiki 2014: 50).

loyal followers of Gandhi and the Congress party, a fact mourned by both authors as a factor that had direct bearing on their communities' backwardness as compared to other Dalit caste groups of North India. Takbhaure (2011: 28, 79, 184, 291, 293, 299, 300) describes this situation, considered by her unfortunate for the fate of her caste, in terms of "Gandhi's conspiracy" that blocked Ambedkar's message and influence on her caste group which was thus lured by Gandhi and the Congress party into submission and hence remained backward. Takbhaure (*ibid.*: 28) writes,

It was a kind of conspiracy; it was a misleading deception that never allowed our simple and naïve people to even think about protesting or revolting. Because they got ensnared in Mahatma Gandhi's deceptions, these untouchables simply became *harijans*. Neither the uplifting ideas of Dr. Babasahab Ambedkar could reach them, nor could they understand them or act according to them.²⁴

It is for the rhetorical purpose of strengthening her argument that Takbhaure uses words "untouchables" and "harijans" as a pair of pejorative synonyms of the word "Dalit," popularized later in the movement. The first, earlier term was strongly linked to the idea of ritual pollution embedded in the supposed Hindu sanctity of the caste order while the second, coined by Gandhi in his campaign for the upliftment of the communities whom he renamed "harijan" or "god's children," is a phrase often considered patronizing by Dalits. Bechain recounts his early, distorted image of Ambedkar, and a somewhat manipulative image of Gandhi, both his takeaway from school:

²⁴ "yah ek prakār kī sāzīs thī, bhramit karne kā jāl thā jo hamāre bhāle-bhāle logō ko kabhī virodh-vidroh karne kī bāt socne nahī detā thā. mahātmā gāndhī ke prapañcō mē ulajkhār ye achūt harijān hī bane rahe. bābāsāheb dā. ambedkar kī vicārdhārā na to in tak pahūc sakī, na hī ye un vicārō ko samajh sake, na hī unpar kabhī amal kar sake" (Takbhaure 2011: 28).

I was introduced to Ambedkar by my non-Dalit teachers as someone who was supporter of the British, and accommodationist, who had also spared some thought for the well-being of Dalits. This was what was taught to me. On the other hand, Gandhi was never represented as a leader of Banias or Brahmins: he was also that of Dalits and was spoken of as the ‘Father of the Nation.’ He had fasted for the welfare of the Dalits and had become a Bhangī himself. I was drawn to the semi-clad figure of Gandhi and believed that he too was poor like my Babba, who did not have money to buy clothes. (Bechain 2018: 93)²⁵

Valmiki confesses that he became familiar with Ambedkar’s criticism of Indian society and the caste system, and the Marxist ideas, at the same time, in the vibrant and politically potent atmosphere of Maharashtra where he moved in the 1960s because of his work. In fact, all the autobiographies give testimony of ideological wrestling, of different organisations and parties, for apart from Ambedkarite activists, keenly agitating among Dalits, e.g., Bechain mentions Arya Samajis and Marxist, Baisantri talks about Marxist and RSS activists, Valmiki discusses Marxists, which proves that all the authors were immersed in politicised environment.

It is Marxist ideology that is closest to the heart of the youngest of the cohort, Bechain, born in 1960 in a village in Uttar Pradesh. Bechain belongs to one of the most numerous and influential castes among Dalit communities of the state, i.e., *camārs* or leatherworkers, tanners.²⁶ It seems Bechain remains loyal to Marxism and subscribes

²⁵ “ambedkar ko jab apne gair-dalit śikṣakō dvārā jānā to unhē angrez-bhakt, samjhautāvādī, aur keval thoṛā-sā dalitō kā hitaiṣī hī samjhā. yahī mujhe parhāyā bhī gayā thā. iske viparit gāndhī jī keval baniyā, brāhman mātr ke netā nahī the ve dalitō ke bhī rāṣṭrpitā the. unhōne harijānsevā ka vrat liyā thā. ve khud bhangī ban gaye the. aisā paṛhne-sunne ko khūb miltā thā. mujhe gāndhī jī kā adhnaṅgā huliya ākarṣit kartā thā. māī samjhātā thā, ve mere babbā kī tarah garīb ādmī the. is kāraṅ pūre vastr upalabd nahī kar pāte hōge” (Bechain 2009: 176).

²⁶ *Bhaṅgīs* are still one of the most backward communities of the region whereas *camārs*, who account for the biggest beneficiaries of the affirmative

to the opinion that “there is no scholar in the field of social sciences equal to Karl Marx” (*dā. ambedkar karl mārks jaisī vaigyānik samaj ke vidvān nahī the*, Bechain 2009: 336),²⁷ though “many Dalit critics consider the Indian Marxist view incomplete: it does not take into consideration the specific social inequality created by Hinduism” (Abraham and Mishrahi-Barack 2018: 18).²⁸ In the introductory passages of his autobiography Bechain (2009: 17) reveals that his ideological formation was shaped by somewhat contradictory vectors of communism and Arya Samaj. He was also influenced by Achutanand, and repeatedly mentions other voices of dissent from the re-constructed Dalit past, Kabīr and Raīdās, as sources of inspiration in his life and Dalit struggle (Bechain 2009: 47, 88, 175, 211, 224, 249).²⁹

Bechain describes his position as that of multiple exclusion. He is othered by Hindu society because of being a *camār*, but also by his own caste community for being a half-orphan rejected by his stepfather.³⁰ Moreover, he writes about being looked down upon and

action, are the dominant and relatively better-off Dalit caste of the region (Chandra et al. 2008: 637–638).

²⁷ Translation of the original Hindi by the author of the article, not from the published English translation.

²⁸ “Dalit is a position that allows some members of the Scheduled Castes to identify with the dalit identity, but also draws on a legacy of Marxist, Ambedkarite and other ideologies” (Satyanarayana 2018: 9); “The Marxist model too failed in India because it never tried to understand the dynamics of caste class but tried to import and superimpose in a society which is acutely caste ridden and is far more complex than that of Europe” (Mahananda 2017: 27).

²⁹ Swami Achutanand (1879–1933) was a religious and social reformer, who hailed from *camār* community; he was involved with Arya Samaj, but later supported the idea of Adi Hindu. Though he is “often credited with being the first published Dalit writer from the Hindi belt, it is now acknowledged that he was by no means the only one of his times to print accounts of the sufferings of the «untouchables»” (Basu 2017: 45).

³⁰ “... my burdensome childhood became the load which my weak shoulders learnt to carry. ... The savarna people looked down upon me as an untouchable, and the people of my own caste considered me inferior on account of being a stepchild” (Bechain 2018: 23, 32). (“*merā bacpan merā bojh lekar mere kamzor kandhō par*

marginalised by some members of his caste who gave up the occupation considered hereditary, i.e., disposing of carcasses, flaying them and tanning leather, a work that he along with some members of his impoverished family is still engaged in. A point to note, Bechain in his autobiography projects a certain sense of pride resulting from the expertise of his family members in skinning carcasses as he purposefully includes passages that in detail describe the process (as observed by the translators, Zafir and Basu 2018: xi). At the same time, he emphasises the enormity of the task, both because of it being a physical and logistical challenge and because it was even more so for him as a child (Bechain 2009: 30–31). These fragments of the narrative provocatively elevate tasks connected to an occupation considered traditional for Bechain’s caste but also polluting and loathed by other segments of Indian society. The detailed accounts might be abhorring to some, but the narrative appreciation of the know-how, skilfulness and hardship involved in these tasks is persistently meant to upgrade them and showcase them from the insider’s or Dalit perspective. Somewhat in contrast to Bechain’s statements, Valmiki talks about his own compulsions whenever he was asked to undertake this kind of tasks and emphasises his family’s resistance to him taking up this kind of work, resistance closely connected with his father’s dream of making his son into an educated person and “upgrading” his caste. This attitude is in tune with instructions of Ambedkar who emphasised the importance of Dalits abandoning their traditional livelihoods, considered polluting by the caste Hindus. Both autobiographers thus give account of Dalits adopting different strategies and consequently project different approaches to these elements of Dalit past. Taking still a different perspective, Takbhaure (2011: 26) describes her grandmother’s manual scavenging, images that reflect her affinity with her grandmother and her empathy towards inhumanity of the task she was forced to perform,

savār honā śuru ho gayā thā. achūt hone ke nāte to savarṇ katte the aur ‘dūsri kā beṭā’ kahkar camār, bhaṅgiyō, dhobiyyō ke bacce mujhe kam darje ke samajhte the.” (Bechain 2009: 41, 53).

that impel her to reflect on the inhumanity of caste order imposed by Hinduism and the upper castes.

Gendered perspective is the focal point of Baisantri's and Takbhaure's life writings. "Double Curse," the title of Baisantri's autobiography, infers a twofold oppression that results from being an "untouchable" and a woman. Writing in the same vein, Takbhaure (2011: 10) expresses the need for Dalit women to free themselves from oppression inflicted by men of their caste at home and by the upper castes outside it. Both female authors recognise and give testimonies of subjugation they, their family members and their acquaintances suffered because of the caste system and patriarchy within Indian society and within the Dalit community, adding to the inequality of women and "graded violence" they had to face (Rege 2013: 143).³¹ Baisantri, moreover, faced domestic violence inflicted by her seemingly progressive husband, a Dalit activist and writer, violence that ultimately led to her separation and divorce in later years.³² She bewails the time of her life when the burden of domestic responsibilities and domestic abuse led her off the course of her engagement with Dalit cause and social activism. Comparing autobiographies of Baisantri and Takbhaure, Brueck writes,

Like Baisantri, Takbhaure also confronts her personal history of domestic abuse by her husband, describing many different forms of physical and psychological abuse bluntly and with a remarkable

³¹ Drawing from the 'graded inequality' concept proposed by Ambedkar, Sharmila Rege formulated the mechanism of "graded violence against women." According to her, Dalit women are double victims because of their caste and gender, and likewise, due to their exploitation by Dalit and non-Dalit men. Cf. a feminist Dalit activist, Ruth Manorama distinguishes three types of exclusion of Dalit women that result from their caste, class and gender (Hardtmann 2010: 217).

³² Dharamveer (2004) is of dissenting opinion; in his defence of Baisantri's husband he sees her as a woman of 'upper-caste' mentality, far from the ideal of a cause driven Dalit woman. "In his misogynistic outburst, Dharamveer (2004: 68) calls Baisantri a «dinosaur» woman and ponders to what extent her life was that of a woman twice as much cursed because of being both Dalit and woman ('*dohrā abhiśāp' kitnā dohrā?*)" Browarczyk (2019: 100).

candour as she ponders how—even with a PhD and job as a college professor—she continues to allow herself to suffer such torment. It is in these passages that her experiences as a woman confound her “Dalit consciousness.” and it is therefore here that we can consider how Dalit women’s autobiographies may complicate generalizing critical frameworks for both “women’s” and “Dalit” life narratives. (Brueck 2017: 5)

Both writers supply readers with narratives of resistance to violence and oppression caused by patriarchy and caste system, through stories of women in their families and communities and through accounts of their own engagements with women’s movement and Dalit cause. Baisantri draws vivid picture of conflicts between the Dalit and mainstream feminist organisations of India, as the latter tend to downplay the specificity of Dalit women issues by submerging Dalit women’s demands in the agenda of the women’s movement in general (Baisantri 1999: 119–223). Takbhaure combines her activism for the cause of Dalit women with involvement in associations and organisations connected specifically with her caste.

In their stories of individual lives all authors refer to their communities in terms that reflect various degrees of exclusion or inclusion of the whole Dalit community or their particular communities; this is specifically articulated in Takbhaure’s and Bechain’s narratives. Takbhaure repeatedly addresses her concerns about her caste community which she addresses throughout the narrative variously as the Valmiki community else *safāi karmcārī* or ‘sanitation worker,’ the last being the official administrative designation and a kind of euphemism when compared with the term rarely used by her namely *bhāngīs*, the caste name with a derogatory connotation. She continuously expresses her sense of belonging to this community, as well as her sense of responsibility towards its history and upliftment.³³ She reserves the word “Dalit” for the cohort of communities of India, whenever she discusses

³³ Cf. “While they do reject Brahmanism to look forward to the liberating effects of modernity, they also hang on to their individual caste identity—which, as noted

the need for solidarity and participation in common struggle. Bechain provides more specific testimony of divisions within his own caste and his expulsion by the members of his own community. On the other hand, Baisantri and Valmiki, self-declared admirers of Ambedkar, refer to themselves and their communities as, respectively, *aspr̥śya* and Dalit. They bewail unfortunate caste divisions within the community of Dalits because they both believe these divisions, which break the unity and brotherhood of these communities, create obstacles for all of them. The unity and consolidation of the movement is considered by them a highly desirable development as only such development may lead to a real social change within the Indian society and the “annihilation of caste,” to borrow Ambedkar’s phrase. The autobiographies discuss conflicts between different Dalit castes and touch upon graded inequality visible among these communities.³⁴ Sometimes a prejudice of a kind is also vented.³⁵

Self-reflexively, Bechain articulates highest attentiveness to the absence of Dalit history when compared with other authors considered here. He returns to questions regarding history and ancestry in his autobiographical narrative, while other authors talk about

earlier, is the remnant of a premodern apparatus that ensures their ignominy—as a mode of assertion and to celebrate their own culture”(Mahananda 2017: 177).

³⁴ Cf. Basu 2017: 57: “There is no attempt made in these texts to shy away from the blotches and blemishes of Dalit society and of the conflicts within it — the animosity of the Chamars toward the Bhangis for instance, or the pervasiveness of patriarchy in Dalit communities. These are constitutive elements of the experience that have moulded Chamars and Bhangis into Dalit subjects and have prevented them from being reduced to paradigms of the predicament of untouchability.”

³⁵ For instance, Baisantri refers to *bhaṅgis* by a caste-neutral term *jamādār*, and observes: “Even now, there is little awareness among them; you have to work with a missionary spirit to bring this awareness to them only then some progress can be achieved. Because of being forever neglected and insulted an obstinacy developed in their character, to improve them and for their own good you need a lot of patience and endurance.” (“abhī bhī in mē bahut kam jāgṛti āī hai, in logō mē jāgṛti lāne ke lie miśanarī spiriṭ se kām karnā paregā tab kuch uddhar ho saktā hai. sadā se upekṣit aur apmānit rahne se inke svabhāv mē kuch ziddīpan ā gayā islie inko sudhārne, inkī bhalāī ke lie baṛe dhairya aur sahanśakti kī zarūrāt hai.” Baisantri 1999: 69).

silenced community that was forced into abhorred and difficult occupations, oppressed by the caste system created and sanctified by Hindu orthodoxy. Bechain shares the most pertinent observation,

To my knowledge there is no scripted history in existence of either my village or my community. This being so, how can I expect my family to have a sense of its past? What happened to that chapter of our history? [Just like that our communities of *camārs* and *cūhṛās* were made into almost extinct. Their means of livelihood, facilities, life of dignity, all was snatched away from them by the Hindu caste system. Where is their history?]. (Bechain 2018: 15)³⁶

He also quotes verses of songs sung by people of his community and his own poems referring in this manner to the traditional ways of weaving collective tales of Dalit community's history, ways acknowledged in the manifesto of the DHCM. In the process of self-examination, in his "tale of *camār*'s life" (*camār jīvan kī vyathākathā*) as he refers here to his autobiography (2009: 66), Bechain poses a rhetorical question: should he be proud of his ability to speak in his own voice and represent himself, because of the education that he fought for? He further ponders over his own autobiographical act, seeing it as an on-going process of asking unanswerable questions on behalf of the entire *camār* community.

Baisantri, on the other hand, in an outburst of just anger after an incident of being insulted by upper caste women when they learned about her caste, addresses not only those who disrespected her but the generations of *savarṇas* and voices that anger on behalf of generations of her own people,

³⁶ "merī jāti ke yā mere gāv kā koī likhit itihās merī jānkārī mẽ nahī hai. māī yah bhī nahī jāntā ki gāv kā koī itihās hai bhī nahī tab mere parivār kā atīt kyā rahā hogā? vaise to hamāre camār-cūhṛō kī kaumē mṛtprāy banā di gayī thī. unke sādhan, suvidhaē, sammān rūpī prān to varṇ, dharm vālī vyavasthā ne kab se khīc liye the. unkā itihās kahā hai?" (Bechain 2009: 31). Part of the text, not translated in the English edition, is rendered by the author of this article and placed within brackets.

The people of your caste had for ages tormented my forefathers and people of my caste—no water to drink, no education, no property, no decent work. We were forced to live outside the villages, in tatters, facing innumerable inhuman atrocities. However, we have survived it all and learned to stand on our own feet and prosper, and now we have shown you that we have come ahead of you. Now you will not intimidate us. So why should I be afraid of you?³⁷

Takbhaure draws clear demarcation line between Dalit history in the pre- and post-Ambedkar times,

There was a time when untouchables had no power of their own. They lived their lives like blind, deaf, and mute creatures, because of agelong tradition they were suffering injustice and tyranny, at that time even thinking about resistance and rebellion put them in danger. Then there came a time, when a wave of change entered history of India in its political, social, religious, educational, economic and ethical dimensions. The wheel of change kept turning along with the wheel of time. Dr. Babasahab Bhimrao Ambedkar awakened the oppressed, suffering Dalit community, he taught them to see, to hear, and to talk. By providing rights to equality, freedom and dignity in the constitution he taught them to fight for their rights.³⁸

³⁷ “āpkī jāti ke logō ne hamāre bāp-dādā aur hamāre jāti ke logō ko sadiyō se satāyā - pīne ko pānī nahī, parhāī nahī, sampatti nahī, kām karne kī manāhī. gāv ke bāhar cithrō mē rahne ko mazbūr kiyā. aur bhī amanuṣ atyacār kie. phirbhī hamne yah sab sahkar apne pāv par khare rahkar unnati kī aur āpse āge barhkar dikhāyā hai. ab āp se dabkar nahī rahēge. phir māī āpse kyō darū?” (Baisantri 1999: 116).

³⁸ “ek samay thā jab achūtō ke pās apnī koī tākat nahī thī. ye andhe-bahre mūk prānī kī tarah jī rahe the, sadiyō purānī paripāṭī ke kāraṇ anyāy-atyacār sah rahe the, tab virodh-vidroh ke pariṇām bhī unke lie bahut ghātak the. phir vah samay āyā, bhāratīy itihās ke rājnītik, sāmājik, dhārmik, śaikṣaṇik, ārthik, naitik abhī kṣetrō mē parivartan kī lahar calne lagī. samay-cakr ke sāth, parivartan kā cakr ghūmtā rahā. bābāsāhab dā. bhīmrao ambedkar ne apne śoṣit, pīrit, dalit varg ko jagāyā, unhē dekhnā, sunnā, bolnā sikhāyā. svatantr bhārat ke sanvidhān mē samtā, svatantrtā aur sammān kā adhikār dekar unhē adhikārō ke lie laṛnā sikhāyā” (Takbhaure 2011: 8).

Takbhaure alludes here to Buddhist lore, invoking the metaphorical image of the wheel of time and change that brings to mind Buddha's teaching, but also a comparison of Ambedkar's role in Dalit history to "the awakening," creating a self-explanatory link again alluring to Buddha. She continuously blames Hinduism for being the sanctifier of the caste system that forced Dalits into degrading occupations, oppressed them, and pushed them into "poverty and illiteracy going on for generations" (*garībī aur aśikṣā pīr̥hī par pīr̥hī calī ā rahī thī*, Takbhaure 2011: 56).³⁹ She underlines that there is no place and respect for Dalits within the Hindu fold, though they worship rivers, mountains, plants, and snakes (*ibid.*: 51). She draws a parallel between historical experience of exclusion and oppression experienced by Dalits and Afro-Americans (*ibid.*: 274–275).

All authors, but for Takbhaure, are unconcerned with the milestone events that shaped India's modern history. The opposite, they—like in the above example of relation between national, dominant narratives of Gandhi and Ambedkar—question and problematise these narratives of national history from their own and their community's perspective. Narayan draws attention to two co-existing patterns of Dalit involvement with narratives of the nationalist phase of India's past, i.e., association and disassociation from it. He emphasises that from the 1960s some Dalit groups formulated accounts of the role their communities played in the nationalist movement to legitimate their claims to development projects initiated by the Indian state, "Such nationalist narratives were used by the Dalits to prove their important role in the nation-making process, and to establish themselves as respectable citizens"

³⁹ "The next significant component of Dalit historiography would be its articulation of the relation of Dalits to the idea of nation-state. It has been widely perceived and argued by the Dalit intelligentsia that the nation-state in the context of modern India is nothing but the extension of Brahmanism. The fact that despite more than six decades of implementation of a Constitutional-Parliamentary-Democracy, India still witnesses caste based violence and atrocities on the Dalits, it reflects the sophisticated permeation and continuation of caste ideology/hierarchy in the Indian polity" (Mahananda 2017: 175).

(Narayan 2004: 200); but some other Dalit communities “were disillusioned by the independent Indian State, which had failed to satisfy their needs and expectations” (*ibid.*) and bitterly disassociated themselves from such accounts. Narayan gives example of two Dalit communities from Uttar Pradesh, the *pasis* and the *camārs*, the first as a caste group that embraced the nationalist narrative and the second as a community that did not. He further adds, “Chamars ... do not glorify their martial status in society but emphasise the work culture of their caste and their history of Brahminical oppression” and consider the *pasis* as oppressors acting “on behalf of the colonial overlords” (Narayan, 2004: 217).

The autobiographies in focus read against the grain of founding narratives of the Indian nation. For instance, British are not portrayed as colonial oppressors but as those who were the first to grant protective measures to Dalits, those who helped at the grassroot level with education and healthcare and did not practice untouchability (e.g., Baisantri). In this context Rawat aptly discerns, “Dalit perspectives on Indian history have little respect for the framework of colonialism versus nationalism mapped by Hindu-dominated mainstream Indian historiography” (Rawat 2011: 4). And so does Merrill, sharing her observations on Valmiki’s autobiography, which are applicable to all texts in focus here: “Valmiki’s aim in telling his life story in this way is to protest the upper-caste narrative of the national culture” (Merrill 2010: 133). Thus, the greatest achievement of the anti-colonial, nationalist movement, i.e., the independence of India itself is again and again questioned and projected as an event that excluded, and continuous to do so, the impoverished and low castes. Bechain, for instance, shares some resentful observations about situation of Dalits pre- and post-independence,

The preachers of Gandhianism would come to the bastis of Chamars and assure us that the benefits of Independence would soon be reaching us, even if it took some time. However, after Independence the condition of Dalits worsened in direct proportion to the increase of affluence of the savarnas as has the hostility between castes. ...

Along with caste distinctions, economic faultiness has also grown deeper. Post-independence, it seems, as if Gandhi has been proved wrong and that many of Dr Ambedkar's fears have come true, one of which was that once the British were gone, the Dalits would be riled by the non-Dalits. Is it not true that Independence, without the implementation of the principle of the participate governance, has proved to be a great disaster for the Dalits? (Bechain 2018: 37)⁴⁰

Throughout the narrative, Bechain repeatedly returns to questioning independence as achievement for the select sections of Indian society only. (Bechain 2009: 58, 145, 176, 211).

Unlike the other authors, Takbhaure refers to many events of India's history, but she presents them from Dalit perspective. Referring to the colonial past, for instance, she recalls an alternative role model or Tantiya Bhil (19th c.), a dacoit from the Bhil tribe, considered the hero of the downtrodden, the tribal communities and the poor for he would steal from the wealthy and give to the poor (Takbhaure 2011: 69). According to her, "*savarṇas*, by making untouchables into their pawns... would instigate fights among them" (*savarṇa achūtō ko apna mohrā banākar... unhē āpas mē larvāte the*) and also set them at odds with Muslims. She is very critical about Hinduism as an ideology behind oppression of Dalits and women (*ibid.*: 58, 61, 283), and because of this manipulative aspect of Hindu practice she is certain that Dalits are not Hindus, which she asserts several times in the narrative. Concerned with historical events that shape contemporary India, she tackles them from the Dalit angle. For instance, describing the hike in food prices and the ration cards

⁴⁰ "gāndhī pracārak camārō-bhaṅgiyō ke bastiyō mē ākar prāyaḥ kahte the ki kuch samay ke antarāl mē azādī dalitō tak pahuñc jāegī. usmē samay lagegā. par jyō-jyō svatantrtā kī umr barḥ rahī hai, dalitō kā dālitya, daridrtā aur savarṇō kī samṛddh-savarṇtā aur jāṭiy vidveṣ kī bhāvna barhtī jā rahī hai. donō ke bīc rīste tanāv aur dveṣ pūrṇ hai. ... jāṭi bhed ke sāth-sāth arth-bhed gahrā hotā jā rahā hai. idhar ke daśakō mē lagne lagā ki gāndhī jī jhūthe sābit hote jā rahe the aur dā. ambeḍkar kī kaī śankāē sac hotī jā rahī hai, jis mē se ek yah ki 'angrezō ke jāne ke bād dalitō par gair-dalitō kā rāj hogā.' bhāgīdārī ke siddhānt par amal ke bagair svatantrtā dalitō par mahān āpdā nahī hotī jā rahī hai kyā?" (Bechain 2009: 58).

introduced in years 1966–1967, she talks about bad grains received through foreign aid that only Dalits were forced to eat because they could not afford better food (*ibid.*: 91, 108). While relating Sanjay Gandhi’s forced birth control measures, she asserts that they affected mostly lower castes and Dalits (*ibid.*: 160).⁴¹ She grieves over the condition of Indian democracy whenever she discusses the forthcoming anniversary of the independence, thus questioning celebratory spirit of the mainstream narratives, both historical and official, proposed by the state. For instance, “twenty years have already passed since country gained independence but still our people have the mentality of slaves” (*deś ko āzād hue bīs varṣ ho cuke the phir bhī hamāre log mānasik rūp se gulām the, ibid.*).

Engagements with Dalit history

In the current article I have tried to analyse Dalit engagements with history-in-the-making and history-in-the-writing in Hindi autobiographies, scrutinising in detail four texts written by two women, Baisantri and Takbhaure, and two men, Valmiki and Bechain. In a sense, all four autobiographies share similar though highly individual tales of dire poverty, economic hardships, social exclusion, struggle for betterment through education, difficulties and oppression faced in order to achieve present status of relative economic stability. The texts emphasise also importance of authors’ social activism aimed at eradication of the caste system, betterment of Dalit lives, more inclusive society and more democratic Indian state which would offer equal chances to all its citizens. Theirs are unique stories, stories of success and determination that convey a historical sense of personal achievements as

⁴¹ Takbhaure mentions such historical events as: Nehru’s death; the war with Pakistan; the Tashkent agreement; nationalization of banks by Indira Gandhi in 1969; a wave of upper caste violence against Dalits in 1968 in North India; the election of Indira Gandhi as prime minister in 1966; the emergency of 1985; Jayprakash Narayan’s opposition; death of Rajiv Gandhi; the Babri masjid demolition of 1992 (Takbhaure 2011: 75, 76, 78, 86, 90, 160, 183, 235).

individuals and as members of their communities, i.e., of being path-breakers—the first to study, to get occupations outside their hereditary caste livelihoods, etc. For example, Bechain, while summing up twenty years of his life that the autobiography covers in detail writes about himself taking the distant perspective of the third person narration in the following words, “That grandson of the blind Gangi Chamar, the one who studied up to the tenth class, belonged to a family that did not have a single literate person in any preceding generation till now. This news spread [like a wildfire] among all castes and sub-castes” (Bechain 2018: 252).⁴²

Dalit aesthetics of writing the past as embodiment in their lived experience is a promising area to be explored in further research. The autobiographical narratives of Dalit past are marked by metaphorical language that expresses lived oppression and at the same time, presents it as an embodied experience, which was emphasised in the goals of the DHMC manifesto. Kumar observes, “The body is not merely a site of subordination, a prison of the Dalit person. Rather, the body can become an evasive entity, and develop itself as a site of resistance through gestures aimed at transgression” (Kumar 2018: 64). Valmiki, to articulate this experience of suffering caused by exclusion, repeatedly employs metaphorical images of being physically pierced by sharp instruments, “How those, who have never suffered the pain of thin needles of hatred and hostility piercing their skin, can feel this suffering?” and “The stings of untouchability made a virtual sieve of me.”⁴³ Takbhaure uses similar metaphorical vocabulary of physical pain for expressing the experience of caste oppression (Takbhaure 2011: 74, 115). “Shackles” from the title of her autobiography metaphorically imply physical and possibly hurtful impediment of movement and freedom that, yet again,

⁴² “us andhe gaṅgī camār kā nātī dasvī pās ho gayā thā, jiskī ab tak kī sabhī pīṛhiyō mē kabhī koī sāksar tak nahī huā. har jāti mē bāt gayī”(Bechain 2009: 410). The author of the article introduced some changes in the published English translation.

⁴³ “is pīṛā kā ehsās unhē kaise hogā jinhōne ghrnā aur dveṣ kī bārik suiyō kā dard apnī tvacā par kabhī mahsūs nahī kiyā?; asprīyatā ke ye danś mujhe chalnī kar dete the” (Valmiki 2007: 62, 82).

alludes to social, economic, educational, political and gendered oppression and restrictions that she, her natal community and Dalits in general had, and still have, to endure. Likewise, the metaphorical image of “carrying the burden” from the title of Bechain’s autobiography, evoked repeatedly throughout the text, encapsulates oppression caused by caste, orphanhood, poverty, disability (some of his caretakers, his family members are people with disabilities which intensifies their exclusion and hardship), lack of education and opportunities. Bechain also employs figures of speech based on being wounded to translate the experience of exclusion and oppression caused by the caste system to those who are not subjugated by it. Baisantri, however in her succinct manner of narrating events, restrains from ornate figures of speech, and simply names emotions, i.e., suffering, pain, inferiority, fear, but also pride, that accompany her throughout her life as a Dalit woman in India.

Despite ideological differences among the authors, systematic oppression of Dalit castes practiced by Hindus in different periods of the community’s history is significantly focalised in these narratives. The same narratives also give accounts of continuous resistance to oppression from within community. For instance, the figures of parents and grandparents are portrayed as entangled in the caste system but making constant efforts to break through to achieve advancement for their children and the next generations. Be it a portrayal of Baisantri’s mother who continuously struggles to better her family’s life but extends her activities to people of the community in the colony as well. Be it Valmiki’s father who tries to subjugate the caste system through seemingly small gestures of opposition and rebellion, like insistence on his son’s education against all odds. Through a set of different narrative strategies, the autobiographies voice tales of individual lives but also make attempts at history-writing by providing accounts of their Dalit communities through lenses of individual and collective experiences of the authors.

Considering Dalit literature’s place in Dalit historiography, Mahananda concludes,

As Dalit historiography would take a position against the elitism of Brahmanism, Nationalism, Marxism and Subalternism to produce an alternative narrative, it has to invariably go along the line of 'cultural history' in which context literature will have to play a crucial role to document the hitherto undocumented 'micro histories' of the 'nation.' It has to not only correct the distortion of old image but also create new one where necessary. In the process, bits and pieces of Dalit life across the country can be put together in different regional languages to constitute the 'micro history' of the people. Consequently, what emerges is not only a documentation of simply 'resistance' and 'violence' but a celebration of never say-die-spirit which finds its way through different local cultures. No doubt, it may not (and need not) produce the so-called 'authentic' history but certainly it will be a history which will be more 'imaginative,' more sympathetic and more human. (Mahananda 2017: 31)

Indeed, the authors of the four texts in focus engage with narratives of Dalit history from the community's perspective and hence "de-brahmanise" or "rebrand" mainstream history of India while simultaneously presenting tales of micro-history of their specific castes, often entangled in regional settings, through tales of their communities, families and their lives. The narratives are focalized from the vantage point of their authors with their strong sense of Dalit identity, but also with a set of specific individual experiences and within framework of ideological differences, e.g., Marxist or Ambedkarite stands. They bring to the fore nuanced and personalized readings and accounts of Dalit history.

In the concluding paragraph of my article, I would like to bring a coda to the opening passages on celebrating Dalit history and pride. At one point, Bechain (2009: 277, 289) ponders over business success of two big companies, Tata and Bata, whose products relate to traditional occupations of his caste; taking a leftist perspective of the free-market economy, he compares achievements of these triumphant enterprises with low economic position of his own caste. And here I would like to call attention to the compelling example of rebranding of Bechain's caste name into a successful brand, a company named Chamar. Its website

carries a politically conscious manifesto that refers to historical process of oppression and subjugation of Dalits and situates the company within the campaign against it. It reads, “A tale of crafts and stitchers from historically ostracized Dalit community/From and for courageous people who defy conventions/Made from waste material for lifetime products. CHAMAR is a signature, make CHAMAR your own offbeat pleasure... In India, ‘Chamar’ is an ethnic slur used to describe ostracized Dalit community by caste system. At CHAMAR, we use it as a pride” (<https://chamar.in/chamar-brand-history>).

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