

Neither Rural, Nor Urban: Incomplete Migration in Dalit Life-narratives

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Begumpura, the ‘city without sorrow’, is a casteless, classless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi’s village utopia of Ram Rajya.

—Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*

Fifteenth-century saint Guru Ravidas, who belonged to the ‘untouchable’ Chamar caste, was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song ‘Begumpura’ (Omvedt 2008, 106–107). Interestingly, he does not dream of a village that is caste-free, he dreams of a city; to him, the city is the hope of a caste-free space. ‘Begumpura’ shows that the hope and dream for caste-free spaces is not a modern phenomenon; it goes back in time. The importance of modernity (unlike pre-modern times), however, is that through social rationality it promises an egalitarian space for everybody to live in (Aloysius 2009), where one can question, critique and make demands when the promise is not fulfilled. In this regard, the genre of the Dalit life-narrative is a strong critique of Indian modernity, a modernity that believes that to shut out the language of caste is to shut out caste itself (Pandian 2002).

Ravi Kumar Shankar argues that ‘Dalit testimonials and autobiographies forcefully bring up the question of a silenced life-world in the public domain’ (Shankar 2016, 47), and thereby unmask the holistic portrayal of the modern urban lifestyle. However, this genre does not entirely side-line the modern way of life; it ‘underscore[s] caste as an oppressive tradition and modernity as both weakening some and reproducing other aspects of caste inequality’ (Rege 2013, 75). Vivek Dhareshwar brings to the fore the importance of language and argues that through the emergence of the ‘language of caste’, especially through Dalit articulation, a new kind of ‘politics of caste’ arises which brings previously repressed social relationships into the formation and fashioning of the modern self (Dhareshwar 1993, 2–4). The Dalit writer ‘transcodes’ caste into a modern institution in the act of speaking ‘the language of caste’, unlike the earlier ideal modern self that shut out the language of caste from literature and other public spaces. The very language in which modern Dalit literature (and Dalit life-narratives in particular) are written in, pose a challenge to modernity. Moreover, the name of the

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genre encompassing the word ‘Dalit’ – as a political term referring to socially and historically oppressed communities – also asserts the language of caste.

The protagonists of Dalit life-narratives are born in villages, and move to towns and cities for better opportunities. For them, the city becomes representative of modernity, because it is the site of social, political and economic opportunities in the form of education, employment and political participation, which is further representative of a move towards equality and dignity. In their movement towards the urban, they dream of a caste-free life in cities, but their illustrations of urban experiences portray partially refashioned caste. In the process, the protagonist becomes the ‘other’ of modernity as they realise that the mainstream notions of modernity are not completely inclusive of Dalits (Pandian 2016, 34). In the words of Shalini Ramachandran, the Dalit writers ‘have been able to access the apparatus of modernity, in education, work and the political process, and demonstrate a responsibility to make known through their literary expression the difficult passage into material and social equality that the majority of Dalits continue to face’ (Ramachandran 2004, 42).

To the figure of the Dalit protagonist, caste experiences in the village are stark and obvious; however, it is the hope of the city as a liberating space—the space of modernity—and the disappointment that comes with migration to the cities that are the crux of this genre. This journey, with its failures and successes, creates the identity of the protagonist, and these are the nuances that this paper explores, while simultaneously studying migration metaphorically—as the self-transformation of the protagonist.

The Disappointment of Incomplete/Continuous Migration

It is essential for this study to unravel the textures of migration and the role of the city in Dalit life-narratives. Let us explore the nuances of migration in Daya Pawar’s autobiography *Baluta*, known as the first modern Dalit life-narrative. To Daddu Pawar, the protagonist, the city is not an unfamiliar space; Pawar’s childhood was divided between the village and the city. However, the family moves back to the village due to his father’s alcoholism. Pawar writes, ‘it would not be wrong to say that I had one foot in the city and one in the fields. Perhaps that is why I am never really at home in either place’ (Pawar 2015, 6). His *Aaji* (paternal grandmother) was the first person in their family to set off to the city, that too to cosmopolitan Mumbai. As a young widow she was ostracised in the village, and hence she moved to the city for a better life (6). For young Pawar, ‘It was impossible to forget Mumbai, city of freedom’ (136). He dreams of Mumbai as the liberating space where he can have a decent job and live a life of dignity, and he writes that the means to such a life is through education:

After the finals [examinations], I could have, with a little extra effort, become a school teacher, but I didn’t want to rot in a village. I did not want to live with constant references, all slightly, to my caste origins. To get out of all this, I had to study (166).

In contrast to the dream of the city, the village is where they ‘lived like animals in the Maharwada’¹; he is filled with revulsion about the life he is leading and wants to get away from it (47). But those who appear to be living the kind of life that Pawar wants for himself would have nothing to do with him; this is his conundrum and he writes that it slowly leads to isolation. Here, the protagonist is discriminated against for being poor and belonging to a lower caste, to the Mahar caste. Subsequently, the world of books becomes an escape for him, by helping him to physically detach himself from his surrounding and by providing the possibility to dream (46–47).

Even after attaining some degree of education, Pawar continues to face the same attitude in the village: his Mahar identity is ‘a leech that would not let go’ (103). However, within the Maharwada, education raises his esteem; here he is treated with respect because he is studying in high school, which is located in the town. Their conditions have improved a little and he also observes that his behaviour has begun to stand out from that of the Maharwada children (188). The migration to the town, residing in a hostel and pursuing high school are the first steps towards a dignified life for Pawar. The hostel experience in Dalit life-narratives is a crucial turning point: it becomes the in-between experience before being thrown into the big city to sail on one’s own. The Dalit protagonists get a closer view of people from other socioeconomic backgrounds; they even befriend residents belonging to other castes, which is not possible in the village. In this adolescent and early adulthood period, they are also exposed to political ideologies and social movements. More importantly, the hostel is where they receive wholesome meals every day; this is important because it kindles the dream that hunger and poverty can be overcome. The hostel exposure provides the protagonist the hope to dream of a more dignified and secure future.

This hope, concurrently, is a hindrance for acceptance of their own socioeconomic background in the context of their new-found social life, and it puts the young protagonist in a difficult situation. Daya Pawar narrates an anecdote from this phase: when his mother visits the hostel to sell her wares to the hostel residents, Pawar does not acknowledge her amidst his fellow hostellers, but he runs after her when she has left. ‘I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord’ (122). However, Pawar the narrator is no longer ashamed of his mother; he asserts her presence throughout the life-narrative and shows how significant she has been in his life, especially after his father passes away. In fact, the text comes to a close with the passing away of *Aai*, his mother. However, we see that the non-acceptance of his poor, backward and rural background continues well into his adult life, after he has married and found employment.

1. A settlement away from the village meant for the Mahars. In the villages live people of caste communities, and people of untouchable communities live physically segregated from the village.

After completing school and experiencing life in a hostel, Pawar thinks that migrating to the city would further improve his standard of living. He recalls his thoughts after completing schooling:

My love for Mumbai resurfaced. The city beckoned. I felt I would find my way in this siren city. Some of my friends had already found work in offices there as clerks. Being a clerk in charge of advances meant a glorious salary. And such respect! You were called 'Bausahib', or respected brother. Everyone turned lickspittle in front of you. You were served special tea, betel leaf was ordered. I was drawn by all this (213–214).

But getting a job as soon as one arrives in Mumbai is not possible. The protagonist grows terribly ashamed that his mother is still scavenging; after all his studies, he is still living on his mother's earnings. He does the rounds of the Employment Exchange in Mumbai, and each time he returns home disappointed (216–217).

The job the protagonist is finally able to obtain is that of a lab assistant in a veterinary hospital, where he has to work with samples of the shit of sick animals all day long. He writes, 'On the first day I understood how I got the job. No upper-caste person would have taken it' (234). We can see in Pawar's experiences of the big city how the post-facto social relation of caste reproduces itself in the urban space. The close connection between the caste profession of the Mahar community, to which the protagonist belongs, and the job he gets in the city reveals the reproduction of social relations, while the economic relations of his job has shifted from the agrarian/feudal/rural economy to a capitalist one.

The modern world provides political equality, territorial unification and juridical equality, but it does not annul economic inequality, end territorial imbalances, or dispel social hierarchies and inequalities (Zene 2013, 13). The discrimination against Dalits is reproduced in the modern/urban scenario but in different forms from that of the village. The tug-of-war between the secular conceptualisation of urbanity and the caste experiences of the protagonist is clearly visible in the portrayal of the city space in Dalit life-narratives (Gajarawala 2013, 129–167).

Gandhi called for the preservation of the idealised village society, Ambedkar encouraged Dalits to go to the city to work, to escape the feudal backwardness of the village and gain representation in India's march towards modern nationhood. However, Gopal Guru suggests that with the inequitable distribution of material wealth, only the higher classes decide who has access to the modern and who does not, and the Dalits continue to be relegated to the margins of modern society (Guru 2000, 124–125). We not only witness this form of inequality through Pawar's life-narrative, we also see that the protagonist becomes conscious of his inequitable space in the city and his marginalisation in modern society. Realising the reason for attaining the degrading job in the city is a significant

step towards realising that his dream of a caste-free space is challenged. The challenge leads to the formation of a self that is conscious of the challenge, of the self that is yet to overcome the structure of caste.

The protagonist sees that the city is clearly divided on the basis of class and caste lines, that there are two worlds within Mumbai. He had dreamt that he would, through education, enter the dignified world, but little penetration is possible. He writes, ‘Those well-appointed offices. Those velvety carpets underfoot. Those sibilant “Hellos” issuing from the glossy red lips of the receptionists. This seemed like a dream world far removed from Kawakhana [the slum where he lives in Mumbai]’ (Pawar 2015, 217). On the other hand, Pawar’s world was ‘rich with cuss words and torn quilts, wreathed in the smoke of coal fire, a suffocating place where [he] was only a sub-tenant’ (217).

The Dalit protagonist does not attain the space and experience he/she set out for from the village; the promise of modernity is only partially met, and the migration in search of the dream space is a continuing one, not a complete one, with caste being an experience of the urban space as well. The dream self—of the self in an egalitarian, caste-free space—continues to be unattainable, and the protagonist is compelled to conceptualise an identity that acknowledges the incomplete migration. The identity that acknowledges the incomplete migration, that is, of being constantly in migration from the feudal to the modern, becomes the new identity of the Dalit protagonist (this formulation is further explored in the next two sections).

We see this self-realisation unfolding through various episodes scattered across the text in *Baluta*. One such episode is when Pawar boards a first-class compartment in a train carrying some dry duck meat, and all the passengers begin wondering what the source of the stench is. Embarrassed by the reaction of fellow passengers, Pawar de-boards at the next station and boards a third-class compartment, where nobody feels/smells anything unusual (281). It becomes evident for Pawar that to be completely accepted in the city, he has to change the ways of his life because his culture is not normative in the urban space. If the Mahar culture, Dalit food, and lower-caste language and sensibilities are not normative in the urban public domain, then this raises the question of what is normative. The feudal to urban transformation has never been a smooth one, both literally and metaphorically.

The narrative trope of journeys from rural to urban as a metaphor of self-transformation has been a common one in both western and non-western literature since the advent of the city itself. In these generations of literature, the metropolitan and the pastoral have been opposed as contradictory poles of the self (Brueck 2014, 137).

However, in Dalit life-narratives we see that the experiences of village life and city life are not outright contradictory poles. On the contrary, the contradictory poles exist within

the city space (as it does in the village space) in those who have claims to modernity and those who need validation for modernity.

Pawar recalls what he told his father in his youth: '*Baba*, when you came to Mumbai, you were doing physical labour. I have an education. When I get a job, the basic pay will be three-four hundred rupees' (Pawar 2015, 220–221). Pawar thinks he could, unlike his *Baba*, be able to build a house because he is educated and would earn better than his uneducated relatives engaged in manual labour. He now expresses his disappointment: 'Now I know that I spoke from the shaky foundation of hope. Today I see how foolhardy my words were' (220–221). We can see three Pawars in dialogue with one another in this recollection: the young Pawar full of hope about modernity; the dream self of the young Pawar in an egalitarian, modern space, and the Pawar that is later writing the autobiography—all of which are starkly different. The dream self and the self that is writing the autobiography are drastically different because the city and modernity have let him down.

Having not attained the dream self, the protagonist turns critical of Mumbai, which was once the hope, the dream and the site of liberation. After all these years of living in Mumbai, the protagonist wonders what the city has given him. The world he saw from afar was an illusion of heaven, and 'The city seemed like a precious stone set in a ring on a rich man's hand. It would gleam an invitation at you, but it would never end up on your finger' (214). Yet, unlike his parents who returned to the village, Daya Pawar does not consider that as an option. He knows that at least the city does not accept caste at the theoretical level, and thereby becomes a space for negotiation, dialogue and protest. The city is also the space where Pawar becomes politically active, and writes and publishes his autobiography. If his parents migrating back to the village was a failure of the city, by remaining in the city and writing his life story, Pawar has taken two steps towards engaging with the city as well as with the modernity it promises.

The reason for his family returning to the village when Pawar was a child is an insightful one; the protagonist calls it 'a strange reason' (22–23). After spending a couple of years shuttling between Mumbai and the village, the family moved back to the village because the father had taken to drinking, an outcome of his work at the docks. Pawar observes that his father took to this habit only after working in the docks. He was a skilled shehnai player, an expert at sowing seeds and a fearless person who could catch snakes. But at the docks, 'he was the man who burned the rubbish'. The protagonist wonders, 'Was that it? Did *that* make him an alcoholic?' (23) Pawar observes that the alienating experience of his father's job in the city, where capitalism is the mode of production, is probably what made him an alcoholic. The village was the rehab and the refuge for his father.

Even though caste experience in the village is starker, there is a sense of belonging in the village, a sense of community, which is erased upon taking the first step towards the city. The protagonist's physical and intellectual journey to the city, his entry into the modern, has resulted in a loss of an essential, unmediated self that is celebrated in the rustic; the road to freedom and modernity is not without sacrifice (Brueck 2014, 122–

153). The protagonist, after living all his/her adult life in the city, both yearns for the sense of community and belonging in the village and is repelled by its caste-ridden life. This sense of neither completely attaining what he/she dreamt of, nor having the possibility of returning to the village, leaves the protagonist feeling trapped. The character is neither a village boy/girl, nor a city man/woman; he/she is in continuous migration, in constant search for liberation. Hence, the emplotment of adversity, struggle and self-formation are among the most enduring modern autobiographical plots (Kumar 2013, 164).

Love and the City

As critical as the Dalit protagonist is of the city, he also acknowledges the opportunities the city opens up for everyone. In the urban space, persons of various castes are able to interact more freely with one another in educational institutions, university campuses, hostels and workspaces, in comparison to the more illiberal village. In these spaces with fewer caste constraints, the protagonist is able to befriend people from across social backgrounds. But the inter-caste interactions in the urban space are also limited in certain ways. The primary rupture in social interactions arises sharply in narrations of love and marriage, which is where caste becomes the crucial concern.

In Omprakash Valmiki's life-narrative *Joothan*, during his youth, the girl Savita who is fond of him begins to cry when she learns he is a Dalit. She even refuses to believe him at first and hopes that he is playing a prank on her (Valmiki 2003, 106–113). She and her family do not consider the possibility that a person belonging to a Dalit community could be well groomed, educated and articulate in the ways of modern life; they naturally assume Valmiki belongs to an upper-caste community. This episode between Savita and young Valmiki reveals the mask of urban modernity. Persons from varying communities may spend time together, socialise and be friends, but may not fall in love and dream of a life together. Savita belongs to a relatively progressive atmosphere: people of various castes visit her home regularly, her father eats meat (although being a Maharashtrian Brahmin, his caste position prohibits him from consuming meat), and she has freedom of mobility. But the progressive and inclusive attitude shrinks more and more in the domestic space. Valmiki observes that the Kulkarnis (Savita's family) serve Kamble (a person from a Dalit community) tea in a separate cup, and Mrs Kulkarni collects all the used cups other than Kamble's. Thereby, marriage and life with a person belonging to a lower caste were not within the parameters of progress that was acceptable for Savita.

Despite Indian modernity's claim to be universal, it not only constitutes lower caste as its 'other', but also silently inscribes itself as upper caste (*Pandian 2002*). Thus, caste, as the other of the modern, always belongs to the lower castes and secularism belongs to the upper castes. This means that the Dalit protagonist does not have the space within

Indian modernity to be modern and secular; Indian modernity has to be challenged and changed for that space to be created.

We see the same trajectory of being rejected by an upper-caste girl in his youth in Aravind Malagatti's life-narrative *Government Brahmana*: 'Kings and queens who turn day into night and stand naked, freeze at the very mention of marriage and become completely lifeless. They light lamps even during the day, on the wall called caste, and slip away' (Malagatti 2007, 69–70). After six years of love, the woman not only abandons the protagonist because she is not able to fight the system, but also shows him photos of two prospective upper-caste husbands and asks him to pick one of them for her. Besides which, she meets him for the last time to get hold of all the letters she had written to him, the two albums of photos of their days together, and even the negatives of the photographs. She does so because to leave them with him makes her vulnerable; it leaves him with the possibility of stirring up her past and ruining her respectable life. Further, she invites him to the wedding, which he attends because he had 'promised to always obey' her words (83–84). In the desire to please her, he loses his own identity and is left stranded.

The Dalit claim to modernity suffers from the lack of recognition from the Hindu (civil) society (Guru 2000, 126), just as Malagatti's claim to modernity was not recognised by the 'brahmin'² girl's family. Affirmative policies in the form of reservations in public educational institutions and government jobs are not sufficient to make personal spaces egalitarian. Modern education and lifestyle are not sufficient milestones to transcend caste barriers. In fact, affirmative actions that are implemented to uplift underprivileged sections of society re-create caste biases in the urban spaces in the Dalit life-narratives. *Government Brahmana* is named so because the protagonist and other Dalits in the educational institutions were taunted as being 'privileged' in the eyes of the state; thereby they were addressed as the new-found Brahmins of the democratic state. Inbuilt in the idea of 'Government Brahmana' is the notion that Dalits are believed to have entered educational spaces only because of the quota system, and that they are not as worthy to be in these spaces as the upper-caste students are.

In their association with an urban space and the new kinds of social and economic opportunities it entails, the Dalit characters have transgressed their prescribed socioeconomic roles dictated by the village caste hierarchy, but the protagonist is still haunted by his caste. This situation is not at all comparable to the beatings and humiliation suffered in the village, but it is not real equality, or the unmarked citizenship of the 'modern' man. In the village narratives, we see that even if the protagonist is attracted to a person of the upper castes, they do not develop dreams around their feelings. Nevertheless, education—which is denied to lower castes as per the Hindu Dharmasastra—is a liberating process, and love is where that hope is brutally shattered.

2. The word is usually written with the first alphabet in upper case, but in this context it is fully in small case. It probably refers to the lack of particular importance to the caste.

A more disturbing narration is of an encounter between a Dalit student and an upper-caste girl, which succeeds Malagatti's own love story in his autobiography. It is the story of his roommate during his research days. The roommate had obtained a 'B.Sc. with a first class and had worked at the Bhabha Research Institute'. He 'was an Ambedkarite who took pleasure in sharing his knowledge with his people in simple Kannada' (Malagatti 2007, 90). He was beaten up by strangers a couple of times in public, he started soiling his bed, his eating became erratic, and he even had bouts of shivering. People even 'started calling him a lunatic'. It turns out that he was in love with a professor's daughter and 'she had played games with him'. 'It was a treacherous game they played in order to destroy his life. When an intelligent dalit emerges as a researcher, this is a way they pluck out a sapling. Such professors are found in plenty in our universities' (90). The story suggests that an upper-caste woman is employed to lure an intelligent Dalit youth from a life of education and dignity.

On the other hand, Daya Pawar, who initially marries Sayee—a poorly educated girl from his own community and his village—faces a different kind of difficulty. Although he loves her dearly, he expresses his love only within the four walls of their house. He is embarrassed to introduce his village wife to his urban colleagues and therefore does not invite his friends home. He longs to see Sayee wearing a five-yard sari instead of the traditional nine-yard in the Mahar style, but *Aai* does not approve of it. He writes:

I wanted my wife to look like she belonged to the Brahmin or Baniya caste. But that never became a reality. I felt aggrieved, for many of my friends had wives who dressed in the latest fashions and I couldn't even get my wife the kind of sari I wanted her to wear' (Pawar 2015, 243).

One day, when Pawar forgets to carry his lunch to office, his wife brings it to his workplace out of concern that he would be starving. Soon after she leaves, a colleague of his passes this comment: 'You sly dog! You've got a hot one as a maid' (244). Pawar does not correct his colleague. Recalling this episode, Pawar writes that he was ashamed to acknowledge that the person who brought his lunch was his wife. He was too concerned about how his colleagues would perceive him if they learnt of his village wife. By never inviting his colleagues home, nor taking Sayee out, he secures a certain economic, social and spatial image of himself.

Although Pawar writes in detail about his marriage and domestic life with Sayee, he does not write about his second marriage, nor does he mention the woman's name. Many Dalit protagonists do not engage in detail about their present marital life and their children. The silences have to be read into; it is probably because their families do not wish to be associated with the Dalit identity that the protagonist holds onto. Therefore, the family is either not mentioned or is only mentioned in passing. These partial silences will be explored later in the paper.

However, Urmila Pawar bravely writes about the difficulties she faces in her marital life and about bringing up her children in *The Weave of My Life* (Pawar 2003). It is

possible that her gender plays a role in this aspect. She marries a person from her village and her community who is also well-educated and employed in the city. She had to find time for activism and writing without compromising on domestic chores, spending time with her family, and her job. Even a little blunder in these arrangements upsets her husband and leads him to blame her activism. More perspectives of women are not available (at least in English), as the number of Dalit women's autobiographies is limited. Baby Kamble's narrative is different from the usual plot of rural to urban migration, and every aspect of life accompanying it; she marries at a very young age and does not document much about her domestic intimacies (Kamble 2008). And, Bama decides to become a nun early in life (Bama 2005).

We have witnessed unsuccessful love between the protagonists and upper-caste women. The upper-caste lovers portray themselves as secular modern figures, but caste becomes decisive for not marrying a person. We have also seen a protagonist who cannot acknowledge a wife from the village in the urban public sphere. The remark that the colleague makes regarding Pawar's wife is blatantly degrading, but Pawar is muted by it; he is not able to deny the remark by expressing the truth and shattering his 'modern' persona in the eyes of his colleagues. Modernity does not accept and include these Dalit protagonists in their entirety. Pandian argues that "the politics of becoming" is not a matter of adding yet another discrete identity to those which are already part of the public sphere, but the way it challenges and changes the manner in which politics is previously conceptualized and conducted' (Pandian 2016, 28). That is, the protagonist has no other option but to move the pre-existing shapes of diversity, justice and legitimacy towards creating a more egalitarian space. Be that as it may, Guru writes that 'at the ideological level, the Dalit will continue to feel attracted towards modernity as a liberating condition based on equality and dignity from the traditional occupations that we still considered to be defiling and contaminating' (Guru 2000, 129).

Resistance from within the Community

It is important to note here that 'incomplete migration' does not refer to unsuccessful lives or that Dalit life-narratives are not 'success stories'. The success in these stories cannot be measured in terms of the biographies of upper-caste/privileged persons, and the sense of success and grandiosity those project. The Dalit protagonist crosses several hurdles from where he begins to where he makes it in life; it is a relatively long journey. Whether it is being the first literate in the family, the first person to attain education in the community or to get a white collar job, or the fact that she/he goes on to write her/his life-narrative makes the Dalit life-narrative a success story. The protagonists of Dalit life-narratives are leaders, fighters against casteism; they are great orators, cultural activists, educationalists, progressive writers, public intellectuals, etc. Daya Pawar, for instance, was a well-known poet and Ambedkarite activist of his times. The Dalit protagonist spends several years of his/her life struggling for dignity and self-respect. Yet, we are not left feeling elated or satisfied towards the end of these narratives.

We feel a sense of heaviness towards the end of Dalit life-narratives; the effect is not of grandiosity or success and fulfilment. Daya Pawar ends his text with: ‘I think this restlessness is my permanent state. When it ends, I will feel as if I am bearing my own corpse and I shall feel profound grief... Slowly he gets lost in the crowd’ (Pawar 2015, 297). His story ends with a sense of restlessness arising out of not having reached the goal, of not having settled or of not being at peace with oneself. Pawar dreamt of a dignified life; he thought he would socially and economically mobilise upward, but we see that society and state have failed him. His migration from the poverty-stricken, caste-ridden village to a liberated space is not fulfilled. The dream self is not attained, so the protagonist is forced to conceptualise an identity for the present self, the self that is continuously in search of the dream. Writing his life story is an important part towards conceptualising that identity.

But his fellow Dalit brothers and sisters in the city do not want to acknowledge that the migration is incomplete. The sense of heaviness at the end of these texts comes from the protagonist not having found a community that believes the migration is incomplete and who want to challenge Indian modernity. While cities being caste spaces is the primary disappointment of this genre, the secondary and an intense disappointment and sense of betrayal comes from within. The urban Dalit educated class, to which social strata the protagonist also belongs, poses a challenge to the protagonist’s perception of social mobility and caste in urban spaces.

In these narratives, those in close proximity to the protagonist—the spouse, children, extended family members, friends and colleagues—represent the urban educated Dalit community. The challenge that the community poses is subtle but visible, as though Pawar consciously wrote so as to not offend them. He does not write about his wife and children. The wife is referred to only once:

I had a soft spot for the house in which I was born. Then last year, a close relation advertised an auction of the house. The next rains would have completely annihilated it, he said, and I agreed with him. My wife was annoyed at how emotional I became. What’s that? The fall of some great house? She asked (Pawar 2015, 198–199).

The challenge that the community poses is more starkly visible in an episode in Omprakash Valmiki’s life-narrative *Joothan*:

My niece Seema was studying for her bachelor’s degree. Dr. Kusum Chaturvedi, a writer of fiction, was the head of the Hindi department. One day I happened to mention to her that my niece was a student of hers. The next day, when Chaturvedi went to the class, she asked Seema, ‘Do you know Omprakash Valmiki?’ Seema looked around the class and denied that she knew me. In the evening she told me the whole story and tried to justify herself. ‘If I had acknowledged in front of everybody that you are my uncle, then my classmates would know that I am a

Valmiki. You may be able to face it. I can't. What is the point of going around with the drum of caste tied around your neck? (Valmiki 2003, 147–148).

The irony in Seema's belief is visible to Omprakash Valmiki (the protagonist). Seema believes that as long as her caste is not revealed she is safe/free, but that she lives in the fear of having to 'face it' if her caste name is revealed shows that she is actually not liberated. It is as though Dalits need to get their claim to modernity authenticated by the upper castes, even if it is by hiding the truth as Seema does. Seema knows that the upper castes will not authenticate her modernity if they know her actual social background. They are not prepared to offer this recognition, which we have also seen in the difficulty of marrying out of caste. More importantly, it puts the claims to modernity of the upper castes beyond examination, because only upper castes can decide who gets to be modern: this is the un-freedom of the Dalit middleclass. 'These kinds of dalits are ready to make huge sacrifices like snapping all emotional and cultural ties with the family and finally the entire community' in their mindless pursuit of modernity (Guru 2000, 126). In the process, love is replaced with contempt, disdain and personal hatred towards members of his/her community.

The mindless pursuit of modernity by the Dalit middle class makes them believe that their migration from an utterly casteist setting to a caste-free one is complete. This is a rupture in the move towards dignity and liberation, and this bothers the Dalit protagonist. Valmiki writes, 'The stings that this surname has made me endure are hard to describe. Why talk about the others when my own family and friends have caused me unspeakable anguish? It is easy to battle against the outsiders; the most arduous battle has to be fought against one's own' (Valmiki 2003, 149). What is meant to free Dalit characters from the stigma of the 'rural' and 'backward', in fact, feels oppressive—such as not using one's surname, eating only food that is 'civilised', and speaking a certain (type of) language. Being surrounded by a socially and economically upwardly mobile class of urban Dalits who stand in contrast to the protagonist's belief in acknowledging caste as a means to annihilate it, disturbs the protagonist. Udaya Kumar observes that Dalit life-narratives show gradual distancing of protagonists from the community, and the emergence of new, more enlightened and politically active conceptions of a collective through the acquisition of formal educational qualifications, employment and social recognition (Kumar 2013, 164).

The people whom the Dalit protagonist calls one's own are offended and angered by the protagonist's language of caste, which they wish to shed. Daya Pawar writes,

I have tried my best to forget my past. But the past is stubborn, it will not be erased so easily. Many Dalits may see what I am doing here as someone picking through a pile of garbage. A scavenger's account of his life. But he who does not know his past cannot direct his future (Pawar 2015, 63).

By speaking of caste and by writing of caste experiences, the Dalit protagonist associates the upwardly mobile urban Dalits with the poor, urban, slum-dwelling Dalits on the one hand, and reminds this class of Dalits about their rural pasts ridden with poverty and humiliation. The characters of this class are unwilling to acknowledge their incomplete migrations, and their recent pasts of oppression and suffering. It is also undesirable for them to have a common past with the lower-class urban Dalits who the protagonist sympathises with. The protagonist mourns the plight of the urban wage labourers for whom the dream of quality education and dignified jobs is unrealised. These brothers and sisters, the protagonist thinks, are integral to urbanity, but simultaneously socioeconomic outsiders. By portraying the common recent rural past of the urban Dalits, the protagonist inevitably clubs these two types of urban Dalits, which is unpalatable for the economically upward mobile Dalit class.

In reaction to the protagonist's attempt to make these connections across class, space and time, the urban Dalit middleclass distances itself from the narrator; it dreads belonging to the category that the protagonist has created (based on the common past of 'untouchability' that continues to be found in refashioned form). From within the narrative erupts the protest against their stories being written. This undermines the notion that Dalit life-narratives speak for the community at large, that Dalit life-narratives 'have depleted the genre boundaries of "I"—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and replaced it with the collectivity of the Dalit community' (Rege 2013, 13). Sarah Beth problematises the individual 'I' as representative of the communal 'We'. Although Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as representative life stories, the relationship between the two is neither direct nor unproblematic. 'The "ordinary" or "representative" Dalit individual uses his narrative to raise his voice for those who are silenced by caste oppression', but although 'all individuals hold multiple identities (class, caste, gender, occupation, location, religion, etc.), no individual can represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community he claims to represent' (Beth 2014, 5–6). She further stresses that it is essential to look closely at instances where the 'I' has difficulty representing the 'We'.

In the process of speaking in the collective, the Dalit writer has lost his space within the urban middle-class community. The ending is that point in the book when the writer is contemplating his struggles against caste, and wonders why he feels lonely even after thinking in the collective in all his struggles. Although the Dalit narrator has only good intentions in expressing to the world the Dalit plight, struggles and achievements—because only upon acknowledging caste can it be fought—he is shunned by this class for revealing to the larger world the lowly past that they are attempting to forget and move on from. The urban Dalit middleclass, which is educated and economically mobilising upward, is facing an identity crisis (Kothari 2001, 4310–4311), and this is strongly reflected in Dalit life-narratives.

Although the Dalit urban middleclass has benefited from the material advantages of modern society and enjoys a comfortable life, the protagonist feels that it is not aware

of the precariousness of the new-found status. By ensuring its own well-being, this class is isolating itself from its larger community, and it will never completely make the journey away from the past on its own. The protagonist of the Dalit autobiography is aware of the dangers of cutting ties from the umbilical cord, that it would lead to alienation and isolated struggles. The isolated struggles will further lead to alienation.

Proposition for a ‘Second-generation Dalit Life-narrative’

Since Narendra Jadhav wrote *Outcaste – A Memoir: Life and Triumphs of an Untouchable Family in India* in 2003, many urban born, city-bred Dalits have begun documenting their lives and that of their families. These narratives depart from the rural-born, first-generation literate, urban migrant writer/narrator.

The proposition towards a second generation Dalit life-narrative is based on which generation of the writer’s family shifted to the urban space, the centre of power, of movements, dialogue, etc. It is also inevitably based on which generation gained the weapon to write their stories – i.e. the tool of literacy; whether it is the generation of the narrator or the parent generation. As migration to the urban space and education are means of liberation from the caste system and exploitation in the village, education, urban migration and arriving at a context to write their narratives go together. These aspects are decisive of the characteristics of the Dalit life-narratives. It should be noted that the few Dalit life-narratives that are written in English are by second generation urban and second generation literate Dalits, whereas first generation Dalit life-narratives are written in regional languages, in the mother tongues of the writers.

The second generation Dalit life-narratives are predominantly focused on the experiences of their parent’s generation, which made the shift from agrarian work to urban careers, to literacy and even to activism. The first generation Dalit life-narrators are the first ones in their family or their entire community in their village to attain high school or university education or a white-collar job. While all Dalit life-narratives (or, even non-Dalit autobiographies) provide familial, social and economic background, the primary narrative in the second generation Dalit life-narrative is about the family, as was told to the narrator and was witnessed by him/her. The blatant caste experiences in the village, utter poverty and their struggle to survive in the city are written as was heard and perceived by the writers.

Y B Satyanarayana’s narrative *My Father Baliah* is predominantly about his father who migrates to the town and attains a job in the Indian Railways, upon which the family shifts to a railway quarters where people of all castes live. Sujatha Gidla’s *Ants Among Elephants* is primarily about her uncle Satyamurty and her mother Manjula. Narendra Jadhav’s life-narrative *Untouchables: My Family’s Triumphant Escape from India’s Caste System* also focuses on the narrator’s father Damu.

The narrators of second generation Dalit life-narratives migrate to cities other than Indian cities, and their experiences are manifold. By writing about their families and upbringing, they retain their Dalit identity and ties to their past, while simultaneously moving towards a global Dalit identity. However, second-generation Dalit autobiographies are concurrently drifting away from a sense of collective movement; notably this genre is an outcome of collective movements.

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