

Dalit Autobiographies in Hindi: the transformation of pain into resistance

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Omprakash Valmiki begins his autobiography by asserting, “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not managed to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalits.” Again and again, both critics as well as Dalit writers themselves describe Dalit autobiographies as ‘narratives of pain’. It is pain which strings one narrative event to the next, and it is pain that binds individual Dalits together into an ‘imagined community’ of fellow sufferers. Yet the experience of oppression does not imprison Dalits in eternal victimhood, but rather is then used by the Dalit community as a tool mobilized against this “cruel and inhuman social order’ which supports caste-based discrimination. As this paper will show, Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. This is especially important because, as a marginalized community, Dalits have previously been excluded from participating in mainstream public debate. However, beginning in the late-1980s, Dalit literary expression has shown a dramatic increase throughout the Hindi belt. The publication of Dalit books has increased, new Dalit journals have a growing readership, and even mainstream Hindi newspapers have begun to include articles by Dalit writers. Within this larger trend of literary assertion, autobiography in particular has been one of the most important genres since many Dalit writers of Hindi have launched their literary careers by first narrating their life-story, making autobiography an institutional space through which Dalit writers can first enter the literary public sphere. This paper attempts to understand how Dalits have used autobiography as a means of assertion against untouchability by looking at two well-known Dalit autobiographies of Hindi, *Joothan* (1997) by Omprakash Valmiki and *Tiraskrit* (2002) by Surajpal Chauhan. This paper will first elucidate the powerful narrative agenda of Dalit autobiography which contests both the basis of caste-discrimination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India. Delving straight into *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit*, the paper looks at the way this agenda of contesting untouchability is expressed within the narrative, specifically regarding the construction of Dalit subjectivity and the flow of narrative events. Then, Dalit Hindi autobiographies are contextualized within certain larger socio-historical processes, including as well the influence of the Dalit autobiographer’s own status as an urban-dwelling member of the middle class. This will aid in understanding why autobiography has arisen as such an important genre of Dalit assertion, and why this specific narrative agenda is articulated by Dalit writers through these autobiographical narratives. Coming back to Dalit autobiography as a means of assertion, this paper concludes that autobiographical narratives have been used by Dalit writers as a form of political assertion by providing entrance the public sphere and a reassertion of control over the construction of Dalit selfhood. Finally it has given Dalit writers a way of uniting with a larger ‘Dalit community to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against caste discrimination.

Theoretical Insights

Recent critical theory on women's and black autobiography serves as an interesting lens through which to analyze Dalit autobiographical work, since, unlike the autobiographies of famous individuals, autobiographies of marginalized groups differ in that they are usually written by anonymous individuals who emphasize the ordinariness of their life rather than their uniqueness in order to establish themselves as representative of their community. For Dalit autobiography, as for autobiographies of other marginalized groups, the entire life-narrative is based on the idea of the communal identity. As Stephen Butterfield writes of African American autobiographies, "the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self."¹ Subjectivity in these autobiographies is thus complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self.

Furthermore, theoretical studies by Margo Perkins and Barbara Harlow have discussed the ways narrative and autobiography have been used as a means of political assertion by marginalized groups. Many of their insights reveal important similarities to the way Dalits use their own autobiographies as a political act. For Perkins and Harlow, the autobiographical narrative is perceived as the actual site of the power struggle, where the voice of the marginalized individual contests the institutionalized narrative of the dominant group. Harlow writes,

‘If resistance poetry challenged the dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or colonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structures of its own—resistance narratives go further still in analyzing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation.’²

Certainly, one strength of Dalit autobiographies has been their act of exposing the continuation of caste-based discrimination and the power structures and belief systems that support the practice of untouchability.³ However, unlike the black women activists of Margo Perkin's study, whose autobiography is both an expression and extension of previous activism, for Dalit writers, autobiography often constitutes their primary political act of assertion.⁴ Thus, for the Dalit

¹ Mostern, Kenneth. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 1999. 51.

² Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Methuen and Co.: London. 1987. 85.

³ Perkins' study, *Autobiography as Activism*, looks at how three African American women activists use the very act of writing itself—of making personal experiences public—in order to contest dominant narratives and rewrite or reinterpret the 'self' since, as Janice Morgan has argued, 'to be marginalized to a dominant culture is also to have had little or no say in the construction of one's socially acknowledged identity.' Valerie Smith considers that for an African American, "Simply to write the story of his or her own life represent[s] an assault' on the line of reasoning that assumes and perpetuates the construct that African Americans do not live...as fully imaginative, significant, intellectual, and complex lives as the dominant American community, 'since to make oneself the subject of a narrative presumes both the worth of that self and its interest for a reader.'" Quoted from Lindon Barrett in R. Folkenflick. 108.

⁴ This is certainly true of Surajpal Chauhan. Omprakash Valmiki has been involved in various forms of social activism since the mid-1970s when he was living in Maharashtra. However, in general, both he and the other well-known Hindi Dalit writer, Mohandas Naimishray, exhibit their main form of activism through their writing.

community, like many other marginalized groups, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of assertion and resistance in its own right.

Narrative Agenda: The Contestation of Untouchability

The power of Dalit autobiography's narrative agenda is its use of the author's life-experiences of pain as a means of political assertion. By writing about their own experiences as a Dalit, Omprakash Valmiki and Surajpal Chauhan reveal two objectives in their autobiographies. One is to contest the basis of caste discrimination. For example, in *Joothan*, Valmiki asserts, "Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom."⁵ The other clear narrative agenda of these Dalit autobiographies is to expose the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India. In other words, that untouchability was abolished by the Constitution of India in 1950, and consequently, there is no longer caste-based discrimination in government jobs, public schools, transportation, etc. Chauhan addresses this issue in his autobiography: "In this country, the pain and insult of being born as a Dalit can only be known by a person who has experienced it. Today, everyone is crying out in the whole country that there is no racism and that things have changed in the towns and villages in these thirty-five years. I would really like to discuss with these people an incident which took place in 1987." The author goes on to describe how he and his wife had asked a zamindar for some water on a visit to the village during the summer vacation. The zamindar immediately agreed, but when he discovered the caste identity of Chauhan, he became enraged and began insulting them—"The Bhangis and sons of Bhangis and Chamars wear new clothes in the cities and no one can tell whether he's a Bhangi or not."⁶ Thus, Dalit autobiographies constitute a challenge to this institutional narrative by presenting what they claim are 'factual' experiences of untouchability from the writer's own life. Valmiki, for instance, does this by repeatedly narrating his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes, "I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendents of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door."⁷ In another instance, Valmiki relates how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab 'on some pretext or the other', and despite protesting to the head master of the school, nothing was done to enforce the equality of every student regardless of caste to use the lab. He writes, "Not only did I do poorly in the lab tests in the board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiner's

⁵ Valmiki 133-4.

⁶ Chauhan 30.

⁷ Valmiki 16.

questions quite correctly.”⁸ There is a tension between the institutional ideology of meritocracy (that students are graded according to performance rather than caste identity) and Valmiki’s own experiences as a Dalit student. Thus, pain, whether experienced as humiliation, as exclusion, or as actual physical violence, all serve a similar purpose in the narrative, that is to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability, which is otherwise ignored in the public discourse. Exposing the continuation of untouchability through this pain does several things for the audience of Dalit autobiographies. For its Dalit readers, pain is a uniting phenomenon. As Valmiki writes, ‘Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine,’ and Chauhan comments, ‘I realized that only those who have also felt the pain of Dalits can understand.’ For the non-Dalit reader, this pain and the social reality it exposes means something different all together—shame, accusation, and hopefully an invitation for change.

Subjectivity: Autobiography of the Individual or Community?

It is clear then that Dalit autobiographies, like the autobiographies of other socially marginalized groups, serve a very different purpose than those of famous celebrities or historical personalities. Their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. Consequently, there has been much debate over who is the subject of Dalit autobiography. A senior Hindi scholar, Manager Pande claims, for instance, that, “if it is an autobiography, then it is not of an individual but of a community. Putting community in place of the individual...the past and present of the community itself becomes the plot of the story.”⁹ An unstable attention to the individual (‘I’) is certainly a common characteristic of Dalit autobiographies, even despite the dictates of the autobiographical form. In Hindi Dalit autobiographies, focalization jumps quickly between the individual protagonist, other Dalit friends, neighbors or family members, and the Dalit community as a subject in its own right. (EXAMPLE 1) To some degree, one could say that there are innumerable subjects within the autobiography, all bound by their identity as ‘Dalit’. However, both Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* and Surajpal Chauhan’s *Tiraskrit* give a more complex picture of subjectivity where the protagonist (‘I’) and the Dalit community (‘We’) are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning, yet without the loss, as Manager Pande would claim, of either the individual or the community. For example, in *Joothan*, the protagonist Valmiki is an individual, and yet his individuality is often stifled by those who see him only as a faceless member of his community—to them he is nothing more than a ‘Dalit’, ‘Chuhra’, ‘Bhangi’. In other words, the protagonist continually faces a clash between the negative identity imposed on him from the outside (usually by the upper castes) and his own positive self-ascribed identity. (EXAMPLE 2) The protagonist’s own subjective autonomy is also bound up in a close relationship with his caste community. He faces personal discrimination and is also deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits, with whom he identifies to such a great extent that he seems to experience their pain himself. (EXAMPLE 3) Furthermore, Valmiki’s personal success in

⁸ Valmiki 65.

⁹ See Manager Pande’s preface to the Hindi translation of Babe Kamble’s *Jivan Hamara*.

education is interpreted as a success for the entire Dalit community. (EXAMPLE 4) And as his father repeats throughout the narrative, it is Valmiki's *personal* responsibility to 'improve his caste' through his individual achievements. The paradox is that his own progress as an individual—options that are open to him and obstacles that come in his way—is largely affected by the progress of the Dalit movement as a whole. Valmiki writes, "Gandhiji's uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government school had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor."¹⁰ Thus, Valmiki's entrance into the school system is both aided by steps made in an early Dalit assertion movement as well as restricted by the movement's own limited successes. Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* adds the additional complexity of 'jati' to this communal subjectivity. Unlike *Joothan*, which largely avoids discussing the conflicts among the various Dalit *jatis*, *Tiraskrit* emphasizes that even the Dalit community is divided along caste lines. Interestingly, Omprakash Valmiki, like Surajpal Chauhan, was also born in the Bhangi caste in U.P. The way his autobiography often glosses over inter-jati conflict between the Chamar and Bhangi Dalit communities re-emphasizes the narrative agenda of Dalit autobiography as part of a larger movement of Dalit assertion. In this context, focusing on the divisions within the Dalit community is often perceived as counter-productive to the larger movement, and is thus often silenced within the Dalit autobiographical narrative. Surajpal Chauhan's autobiography is obviously an exception to this, though other Dalit writers have criticized him for it. Admitting in his preface to *Tiraskrit* that his writing has made many Dalit writers uncomfortable, he writes, "I have been additionally accused of spreading casteism in Hindi Dalit writing." Thus, in many instances, the individual subject of this autobiography is linked with the 'Bhangi' community and placed in opposition to the Chamar community. However, while *Tiraskrit* is at once able to describe the tensions between the Chamar and Bhangi communities, it also shows certain Chamar characters, such as Sumaru Jatav who tried to help the Bhangi community against the exploitations of the landlord, in a sympathetic light, thus promoting the ideal union of the Dalit community. Yet although the individual of the Dalit autobiography is portrayed as inseparable from the Dalit community, his individuality is not wholly stifled. Valmiki, for instance, is still able to assert his own personal agency in opposition to the traditions of his community during his marriage by rejecting the community-chosen bride and marrying the girl of his own choice, and that too without conforming to the community's traditions during the marriage ceremony at the expense of offending many members of his family.¹¹

Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as a representative life story, where the 'ordinary' or 'representative' Dalit individual uses his narrative to raise his voice for those who are silenced by caste oppression. Yet, although Dalit autobiographies certainly invoke multiple subjectivities where the individual 'I' is linked to the communal 'We', the relationship between the two is neither direct nor unproblematic. Since all individuals hold multiple identities (class, caste, gender, occupation, location,

¹⁰ Valmiki 2.

¹¹ Joothan 103.

religion etc.), no one individual can represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community he claims to represent. In fact, while discussing the ‘representative’ nature of the subject in Dalit autobiographies, it becomes important to look closely at instances in which the subject ‘I’ has difficulty representing the ‘We’, either of another Dalit individual or the Dalit community. One example is the case of Dalit women, who are almost entirely absent in *Joothan* and considerably so in *Tiraskrit*. Though the protagonist associates himself with other Dalit friends and the Dalit community as a whole, the ‘We’ that has come to mean ‘all Dalits’ is also decidedly male. The silence regarding Valmiki’s wife’s own agency is one obvious example; Chanda only appears for brief moments in the narrative, once when she asks ‘you’re not joking, are you?’ in response to Valmiki’s marriage proposal, again when she receives a theatrical award, and once more when the narrator describes her refusal to use the name ‘Valmiki’ herself. No insights into this character’s own reasoning, nor the different circumstances and restraints faced by Dalit women in general, are given in the narrative.¹² *Tiraskrit* is an even more complex case since the examples of women exhibiting their own agency are interspersed in the narrative with derogatory comments questioning the moral character of ‘women’ in general. (EXAMPLE 5)

The construction of subjectivity in Dalit autobiography thus reflects the autobiographer’s desire to re-establishing links with the Dalit community. However, underlying this deep connection between the autobiographers as individuals and their Dalit community, both autobiographies exhibit a deep undercurrent feeling of alienation from their community. Though born in rural Dalit bastis, both autobiographers, through education and career successes, have left their community and entered the urban middle class. There is not only a sense of physical separation, but also divisions due to education and economic status as well. (EXAMPLE 6) It is in this sense that Dalit narratives may also be viewed as a means for autobiographers to re-establish a feeling to connection to a community. Through the process of narrating their life-story with a focus on their Dalit identity, Dalit writers are able to come together into a powerful group which can then assert itself against the main obstacles they still face—the continued practice of untouchability.

The Narrative: Pain as ‘fact’ and Pain as ‘identity’

Corresponding to the narrative agenda of contesting untouchability, the narrative of autobiography focuses on events that highlight the pain of experiencing caste discrimination and expose its continued practice in modern India. Thus, the autobiographer values events that reinforce the ‘reality’ of the continuation of untouchability, and consequently, most of the narrative time focuses on these events. This creates what at first seems to be an unstable, interrupted narrative. However, underlying this interrupted narrative, which jumps back and forth in time from one painful experience to the next, is a stable narrative agenda, which

¹² The main exception is an instance when, in response to the insults of an upper caste Tyagi, Valmiki’s mother aggressively refuses to accept the *joothan*. As Valmiki describes, “That night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother’s eyes...My mother had confronted him like a lioness.” (*Joothan* 11)

guides the narrative by skillfully weaving one ‘factual’ experience of caste discrimination and pain to another. Both *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit* begin in the village during the autobiographers’ respective childhoods, and both narratives follow the protagonist’s gradual move to the city—seen at first as a space of modernity, anonymity, and thus new freedom from untouchability. (EXAMPLE 7) This is originally reflected in the protagonist’s experience of pain. In the village, where caste identity is openly known and acknowledged, pain is experienced bluntly, as forced exclusion or even as physical violence (getting beaten by peers on the way to school or getting hit with a stick for coming up to the shop counter instead of remaining on the street are common examples). However in the city, pain is subtler, and is first experienced within the context of anonymity and the fear of being ‘caught’ so to speak. When the experience of ‘passing’ ends in the revelation of the protagonist’s untouchable identity, pain is often experienced as humiliation. Again, the narrative itself is driven through consecutive experiences of caste discrimination as well as by the protagonist’s struggle to gain an education and increase in political consciousness—a process which leads to the realization of his Dalit identity. Time, for example, is often marked in the narrative by noting which class the protagonist was in at the time of such and such event. A sense of progress through education and to the city, however, is not interpreted as a fundamental move away from the community, despite the sense of alienation expressed in the narrative. Instead, it is understood by the autobiographer as a process of realization of one’s communal ‘Dalit’ identity, which then incites him to fight to regain the rights and self-respect for him and his community. Life events not related to experiences of caste discrimination or to education and the development of the protagonist’s political consciousness, events such as marriage or the death of parents, are quickly passed over with a few paragraphs. However, the idea of ‘progress’ from the superstitious village to the ‘enlightened’ city bursts apart towards the end of the narrative. As this happens, the experience of pain is expressed in ways similar to that in the village. Thus, meaning previously given to the village now transposes onto the urban space in the narrative, making ‘the village’, representing the baseness of caste-discrimination practices, the ‘metropole’ in the mind of the Dalit autobiographer.¹³

Contextualizing Dalit autobiography in the Hindi belt

While autobiography represents a new genre of Dalit literary expression, it certainly doesn’t constitute the beginning of Dalit discursive assertion in the Hindi belt. Political and historical tracts were being written in Hindi from the time of Swami Achutanand in Kanpur and C. Jigyasu in Lucknow as early as the 1940s and 50s. In light of this longer trend of Dalit literary assertion in Hindi, we must ask why the narration of a Dalit’s individual life-story becomes important to Dalit assertion in the 1990s? What was the cultural context for its sudden rise, and furthermore, why does this specific narrative agenda manifest in the genre

¹³ Alok Mukerjee, in his discussion of Marathi Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature* writes, “Limbale establishes the Dalits’ subalternity not in a colonial structure but in the caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. Here the village becomes the metropolis, and the Dalits exist literally on the periphery.” Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Transl., ed. Alok Mukerjee. Orient Longman: New Delhi. 2004. 2)

of autobiography? Certainly the most important and widely recognized context of the rise of Hindi Dalit autobiography is the influence of Marathi Dalit literature which was the first to take advantage of autobiography as a literary form of assertion. By the mid-1980s, Marathi Dalit autobiographies were being translated into Hindi, and several of the most well-known Dalit autobiographers of Hindi were either living in Maharashtra during this literary movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Omprakash Valmiki), or were at least in contact with the Dalit Panthers there (Mohandas Naimishray). However another important factor was the effect of forty years of reservation for SCs/STs, which had, by the 1990s, created a significant Dalit middle class who had the economic capital to become producers and consumers of this new literature. In addition, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party disseminated the idea of 'Dalit identity, first articulated by Dr. Ambedkar, throughout the Hindi belt,¹⁴ and the growing recognition of 'Dalit' identity helped stabilize this new form of 'Dalit' literature and provided certain conditions where the individual and the story of his life could be used to represent the entire imagined community of individuals now identifying themselves as 'Dalit'.

The Dalit autobiographers, who have escaped poverty, rural superstitions, and ignorance to join the educated, economically stable, urban middle class feel very strongly that they have been unable to escape their caste. Surajpal Chauhan goes as far as to describe 'caste' as a *brahmarakshas*, a brahman ghost, who follows him wherever he goes.¹⁵ Thus, one final factor has had a significant influence on the specific narrative agenda which is put forth in Dalit autobiography, namely, that Dalit writers themselves began to write their autobiographies in Hindi under a feeling of disillusionment. Having escaped the confines of the village, availed of reservation, and experienced a rise in their class status, these writers continued to experience caste-based discrimination despite their many 'successes'. In the face of this sense of disillusionment, several needs arose for the Dalit writer. One was a need arose to expose the myth that untouchability was no longer practiced in modern India, and autobiography institutionalized as a 'truth-telling' genre based on the '*facts*' of one's life provided an excellent outlet for these individuals to raise their voices in protest. Another need resulted from the paradox these writers experiences at being continually oppressed and obstructed in the own lives by their caste identity, while at the same time feeling significantly distanced from their caste community which they had left behind in the village. Thus, autobiography also serves this second purpose of re-establishing a link between the middle class Dalit individual and his caste community through the process of narrating his life with a focus on his Dalit identity. The narrative agenda of Dalit autobiographies to contest specifically caste-based discrimination (rather than class-based issues such as poverty, labor, or land-ownership etc. where the government would

¹⁴ This is not to argue that the BSP has *accurately* articulated Dr. Ambedkar's ideology. The point here is only to credit Kanshi Ram and the BSP with the wide dissemination of Dalit identity in North India, especially in U.P.

¹⁵ Chauhan 57.

also be seen as a major oppressor) must therefore also be understood in light of the specific desires of its authors.¹⁶

Conclusions: Dalit Autobiography as Political Assertion

An important similarity between Dalit autobiographies and the autobiographies of other marginalized groups is the difficult struggle these writers face to gain the right to speak. Sidonie Smith's work on women's autobiographies has noted the necessity for the author of a marginalized group to renegotiate narrative authority of autobiography, which has been originally defined and continually policed according to the interests of the dominant (in this case, male) community. More than anything else, the 'right' or 'ability' of the marginalized group to write literature comes under immediate contestation, and Dalit writers have likewise been forced to fight for the right to speak as well as to redefine the boundaries of what can be said. Dalit writers have attempted to negotiate this challenge of securing narrative authority by emphasizing the 'experience of discrimination' and 'Dalit identity' as two necessary criteria for both writing and critiquing Dalit autobiography. Phrases such as "only he or she who has suffered this anguish knows its sting" clearly delineate narrative authority for the Dalit writer. For example, one well-known Dalit writer, Shyauraj Singh 'Bechain' explained in an interview that autobiography is an especially valued form of Dalit literature since unlike poems, novels or short-stories, it can only be written by a Dalit. Thus, it is through the politics of identity that Dalits have—at least for the genre of autobiography—successfully re-negotiated narrative authority since the nature of autobiography itself means that Dalit identity confers on the autobiographer a kind of uncontestable authority to speak. Dalit autobiographers also negotiate the issue of authority to represent the Dalit community by presenting their autobiography not as a result of their desire for personal recognition, but as a response to the requests from the Dalit community for representation. For instance, in the prefaces of both *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit*, the author bases his decision to write his autobiography on the requests of the Dalit community. After Valmiki's short autobiographical essay was published in a journal, he attests that "responses came even from far-flung rural areas. The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine. They all desire that I write about my experiences in more detail."¹⁷ Similarly Chauhan writes, "The readers of these magazines [where several short autobiographical articles were published] sent me letters for two continuous years, among them senior literary writers but also villagers. And through their reflections, I realized that only those who have also felt the pain of Dalits can understand."¹⁸

¹⁶ While class-based issues certainly arise in both autobiographies, especially in *Tiraskrit*, where pain is commonly experienced as hunger, the narrative is clearly driving forward and given meaning by issues of caste. For example, the accepting of *joothan*, leftover scraps of food, is interpreted by both authors in the context of their caste rather than class identity, i.e. as 'Dalits' rather than 'poor'.

¹⁷ Valmiki vii.

¹⁸ Chauhan 7.

Thus, Dalit autobiographies are not simply the narration of a Dalit's life-story. They are also used by Dalit writers as a means of political assertion. In an interview, Surajpal Chauhan spoke about writing a second autobiography. He said, "I had never in my life thought that I would write an autobiography. So now I am collecting stories I now remember which I had missed before. I had to rush to write the first one *since the movement needed it.*" (emphasis added) While there are many intriguing aspects to this comment, what is clear is that Chauhan views his autobiography as a political statement and part of a greater movement of resistance. Thus, Dalit autobiographies serve as a dissident space within the literary public in which the Dalit writer can speak out against untouchability and contest the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a social force in modern India. They are, as Paul Gilroy claimed for African American autobiographies, that is, a process of 'self-emancipation' in the creation of a 'dissident space' within the public sphere. At the same time, as Gilroy claims, they are also, a process of 'self-creation' through the narration of a public persona.¹⁹ Thus, autobiography also serves as means for Dalit writers to reclaim narrative authority over the construction of the 'Dalit self'. While dominant Indian society has identified Dalits as 'inferior', 'polluted' etc., Dalit autobiographers 're-write' selfhood, so to speak, in their description of their life and the life of their community. (EXAMPLE 8) Whether they are extolling the positive aspects of Dalit society—such as the meaning of 'prosperity' rather than 'filth' given to the rearing of pigs—or whether the writers are criticizing aspects of their cultural practices—such as Chauhan does regarding child marriage and in fact the use of pig's blood in marriage ceremonies—both writers give alternative meanings to their social traditions. Dalit society is not inferior, as is claimed by the upper castes, but is 'different', or 'oppressed' or 'inventive in the face of extreme exploitation'. Thus, rather than describe their life only as one of 'victimhood', pain becomes transformed into a uniting, 'enlightening' experience in which an assertive Dalit identity is realized and incites the individual to action and political struggle. Watching their community continually oppressed by the upper castes, the protagonist of the Dalit autobiography does not experience his pain 'lying down', but rather pain incites him to unite with his community in a fight against caste discrimination. Similarly, the process of 'reliving' this pain, while writing the autobiography is not viewed as a process of healing or forgetting in order to move on with one's life. It is a way of solidifying individual connection with the larger imagined Dalit community and at the same time contributing to the political assertion by presenting 'facts' of one's life to contest casteism. Towards this effort of strengthening the unity of the Dalit community, Valmiki's autobiography serves as a list of all those Dalits the author believes have contributed to the movement, a narrative technique Perkins terms 'roll call'. He describes the accomplishments of Marathi Dalit writers, of various editors who published Dalit articles in their magazines, and of Dalit social activists.²⁰ (EXAMPLE 9)

¹⁹ Mostern 11.

²⁰ Part of this effort also involves the writing of a 'Dalit' history. Dalit autobiography constitutes a socio-cultural record of the Dalit community. It also details events in the political history of the Dalit movement. For example, *Joothan* includes descriptions of the Ganwai Brother's incident in Poona and the activities of the Dalit Panthers in response to this incident, the 1978 assertion movement for the renaming of Marathwada University after Dr. Ambedkar, the anti-reservation protests in Gujarat, and the 1984 incident

To conclude, the presence of the Dalit voice in the public arena is one of the most important contributions of Dalit autobiography, and in the Hindi belt in particular, it has been a presence long overdue. Once that space is achieved (even to a limited extent) however, it is interesting to note what Dalit writers then do with it—in other words, not only their mere presence but *what* Dalit writers say becomes important. To this end, Dalit autobiographies in Hindi are very clear. Their narrative agenda is to expose the continuation of caste discrimination, even in modern times, and even in the urban centers of India. It attacks the basis of this caste discrimination in a variety of ways, but especially through a stable focus on the ‘factual’ recounting of experiences of discrimination. In the autobiographical form, these ‘facts’ become uncontested truth, since no one knows more about an individual’s life experiences than the individual himself. Furthermore, the autobiography serves the additional function of re-affirming and strengthening the link between the individual Dalit writer and the larger Dalit community. Through this union comes the ‘strength in numbers’ needed to contest the institutionalized social order of caste in India. An increasing understanding and awareness of these contributions of Dalit autobiography must also take into account the cultural and historical processes under which they arose in the Hindi belt, including the social location of the Dalit writer himself. Finally, Dalit autobiography is considered a form of political assertion for a number of reasons. Besides giving Dalit entrance into a public space through identity-based narrative authority, autobiography provides a space for Dalit writers to regain control over the constitution and meaning of Dalit selfhood and join in a show of strength with the larger ‘Dalit community’.

in Malkapur in Amravati district in which an upper-caste teacher forced his students to rip out the lesson on Ambedkar from their textbooks.