

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN DALIT COMMUNITIES:  
AN ANALYSIS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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for the award of the degree  
of  
(MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY)*

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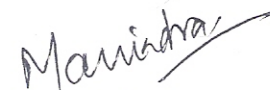
**DECLARATION**

I, Rakesh Ranjan, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled "RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN DALIT COMMUNITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES" submitted by me for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** is my bonafide work and that it has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any degree or diploma of this university or any other university.


  
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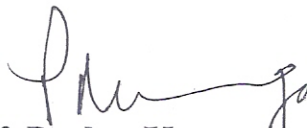
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## INTRODUCTION

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Debate on caste in India is significantly linked with religion. It has been argued that caste emerged out of Hinduism. This relationship between religion and caste has been reflected in the writings of various scholars like Louis Dumont, M.N. Srinivas, Andre Batteille, S.C. Dubey, Ambedkar, Phulle, Periyar, and contemporary writers like Dipankar Gupta, Sudha Pai, Badri Narayan and so on. They all have argued in some way or other that hierarchy, discrimination and exclusion are the essential features of the caste system emanating from Hindu religion, which is based on the principle of 'pure and impure'. It has been well documented by many scholars that the Dalit community has repeatedly questioned this exclusion. However, it seems they have missed out the point that the response from the Dalit community has another dimension that is innovations of new and alternative practices of religion and spirituality. It is also important to note that these alternative forms of spirituality and religious practices have hardly any direct link with the mainstream Hindu religion.

This research is based on the assumption that religion is a significant fact of human existence. But given the essentially exclusionary feature of Hindu religion, it explores the ways and manners in which the 'excluded' have been practicing their religion. In so doing the research attempts to show, in the light of the fact that the mainstream Hindu religion excluded Dalits from the operating everyday rituals and spiritual practices, the ways of Dalit community's engagement with alternative religious practices. In the process, I think, in order to fulfill their spiritual needs they are carving out a grand religio-cultural space of their own. It also explores the way social scientists have reflected on the relationship between these phenomena in India. This research further attempt to show the way religious imagination of Dalit communities develops in the process of invention, reconstruction and representation of the myths and memories of Dalit communities. It explores the sources from where their alternative religious ideas of cultural identity get constructed. More precisely, my research is an attempt to capture the process of reconstruction of religious practices of Dalit communities using their cultural resources. It is an attempt to locate the constituents that make them realize their 'religious aspiration'. I would like to show as to how the Dalit communities are trying to redesign an alternative space in attempt to



subvert the mainstream Brahminical code of conduct through glorifying their own cultural resources.

In the above context, it would be pertinent to raise the following questions- What do Dalits think about the concept or idea of 'religion'? Why do myths, histories and heroes have started playing such an important role in their lives? Why do their religious imagination and aspiration start moving towards the realm of reality so as to create an alternative religion? Where does this 'alternative religion' of Dalits help them as an institution while challenging the institutions and agencies of mainstream Hindu religion? Why do the literary writings of Dalit communities' traumatic pain start moving towards the realm of reality so as to create an alternative literature to explore their social reality vis-à-vis to uncover the exploitative nature of Indian Hindu social order? Where does this alternative literature help them as an institution while challenging the literary institutions and agencies of Hinduism?

As I have mentioned above that most of the social scientists who work on 'caste' have ignored these questions and engaged mainly with Dalit communities' relations with the mainstream Hindu religion. This research aims at indicating towards this gap in the literature of the social sciences. I shall show in the following space the limitations emanating from this among the scholars who work on religion and caste. It is not difficult to see that those scholars who have worked on caste have ignored religious engagement of Dalit communities and vice-versa. While exploring the above concern, I could have attempted to investigate these questions through rigorous field-work involving participant and non-participant observation. However, for the present work this could not be possible in the given short period of time. So, instead of doing this I have attempted an alternative way to understand the complexities of this relationship between religion and caste through an analysis of Dalit autobiographies.

Let me have a cursory survey of the available literature on this issue from the point of view of the problem in hand. The first kind of relevant literature for this work is that of Village studies conducted by sociologists and anthropologists. Village studies by leading sociologists explain certain specific aspects of rural life and the holistic nature of the village communities based on Brahminical code of conduct. For instance, **S.C. Dube's** (1955), 'Indian Village' is the traditional account of **Shamirpeth** village. He

has analysed the nature and character of village and argues that it can be studied by giving due attention to the vital interactions between its different components. He suggested that in the village the issue of private property is very much connected with identity, as it has not only economic but a social and prestigious value as well. According to him village is:

System of co-operative labour, based on a pattern of inter-caste relations approved by tradition, is not confined only to economic activities but also extends to ceremonial and ritual life. The hierarchical organization of caste within the community is so fixed in the structural patterns of ritual India that the tribal as well as non-Hindus (such as Muslim and Christian) segments of the population came to be regarded as other caste in the village. In many parts of India while maintaining the socio-religious identity, several of these non-Hindu groups have acquired some caste characteristics, particularly occupational specialization.<sup>1</sup>

And further on another page, he points out that:

Analysis of life histories reveals that spiritualism cannot be said to be the keynote in the life of community; far from it the religion appears to be a practical one. It strengthens and fortifies the individual and the group in situation when technical competence and practical intelligence are of no avail and at the same time acts as a bond of cohesion for maintaining the structural unity of the society.<sup>2</sup>

The quotes taken from the different pages of the book significantly explain that village is a pattern of organization which comprises a territorial as well as social, economic and ritual unit. It is the place of diverse social groups interdependent and integrated in the social, occupational as well as rituals collectively. It is not only the territorial organisation but also a distinct unit of community having distinct way of life, where religion play great role in maintaining a bond of cohesion among different castes.

In his study of Shamirpeth, I find, he brings out details about the village and deduces that despite there being more than a dozen castes, the village displays solidarity. He has discussed almost all the issues of village social life including religio-cultural issues but in the upper caste, Brahminical framework. He has also discussed the different festivals and rituals of Muslim community but has failed to take cognizance of religious practices of the Dalit community.

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<sup>1</sup>Dube, S. C. (1998). *Indian Village*. London: Rutledge. P. 07.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P. 93

Let us take another example of **M.N.Srinivas**' (1955), 'India's village'. It is an edited work containing several village studies conducted by different anthropologists like Mckim Marriot, S.C.Dube, David Mandelbaum, F. G. Bailey and others. The problem of unity of village has been the major concern of this edited book. The contributors have mentioned in their studies that despite majority of people being engaged in various sorts of religious activity they display a strong sense of unity which gets reflected in their acceptance of the overarching theme of Hindu religion. They have concluded that the unity of village is based on the solidarity of 'caste' and religious practices. Hence, caste is a strong unifying factor based on religion.<sup>3</sup>

For Srinivas one of the most important things is the difference in caste-culture of the same caste in different villages. He suggested that 'a numbers of caste live in a single village and each caste has a culture of its own which is to some extent different from the culture of the others'<sup>4</sup> the same caste located in the other villages. The book has the unity and the inter-dependence of the villages only as a secondary concern. The book predominantly tends to suggests that 'caste is an institution of great strength'.<sup>5</sup> The ties is so strong that some sociologist like G. Morris, Eric J. Miller and W.H. Newell in this edited book assert that 'the unity of the village is a myth and that the only thing which counts is caste, but this unity and strength is weakened if not destroyed by caste and it ought to be even weaker in dispersed villages.'<sup>6</sup> Each caste is divided on occupational line and it is also a major source of rivalry between different groups and castes. The social situations of Dalits in all respects remained at the bottom. However, the concept of 'Dominant caste' based on numerical and economic strength is identified, but he finds no area where Dalits are dominant.<sup>7</sup> This book suggests that religion plays vital role in allocation of position and identity. All horizontal and vertical ties are regulated by Brahminical code of conducts. Following this code of conducts 'the Brahmin is given some respect by virtue of his ritual position'<sup>8</sup> but Dalits have been given so low identity and ritual position that they are not part of the village. In the same book W. H. Newell asserts that 'caste is the means

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<sup>3</sup> Srinivas, M. N. (Eds.) (1955). *India's Village*. India: Asia Publication House.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., P. 03.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., P. 07

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 36- 89

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

by which inter-village and intra-village marriage is regulated' to strengthen economic, religious friendships.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that all scholars, whose contribution is regarded great in this book, understand that religion has played major role in caste discrimination, such as assigning identity like upper and lower, pure and impure, superior and inferior, none of the scholars raised a question as to what Dalits themselves think about their identity in such a degraded social situation meted out to them. Do they have any chance to create their own independent identity breaking the hegemonic Brahminical cultural code to move out of this exploitative and discriminatory fold? They failed to see what the (social, cultural and religious) village structure tells almost obviously to us about the effects on Dalit communities. One needs to ask them following questions: How does caste works as an agency to preserve and propagate the Brahminical institutions which manifest into discrimination and exploitation of Dalit communities? Do the Dalit communities have any chance to create an alternative to break this hierarchy?

Moving on to another book titled as *Village India* edited by **Mckim Marriott**'(1955), we can see that it has examined the concept of caste. Contributors of this work have highlighted the concept of 'Great' and 'Little' tradition. The great tradition, they have defined is the tradition followed by dominant castes and little tradition is followed by lower castes. Further, they have argued that there is a constant interaction between the great and little tradition based on caste.<sup>10</sup> They have observed a number of changes in various discourse of life in terms of degree not in traditional structure. This book has raised various questions of interrelation based on caste identity. I think, the interaction is seen as a relation between 'Little Community' and 'Great Community'. Equally emphasizing on culture, this book has raised questions like 'what elements of rituals and beliefs represent contribution from village life upward to the formation of India's great sanskritik tradition? What elements are local modifications of elements of that great tradition communicated downward to it?'<sup>11</sup> Marriott have seen '*universalisation*' and '*parochialisation*' as the two processes responsible for the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., P. 60.

<sup>10</sup>Marriott, M. (1955). Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation In McKim Marriott (ed.), *Village India*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 211.

continuous interaction between great and little tradition and it 'move along a vertical axis of non-Dalit and Dalit society.'<sup>12</sup>

For him, religion has played a role in 'sociological horizons of personality formation.'<sup>13</sup> Describing religion in two aspects '(1) the extent to which the religion of the little community can be conceived as a whole apart from the religious great tradition of the Indian civilisation and (2) the extent to which the religious great tradition of Indian civilization is understandable through study of the religion of one little community'<sup>14</sup>, his whole efforts has reduced to anti-formation and effects of Sanskritization which has been brought by Srinivas. Marriott has come up with the conclusion that religion is the product of civilization and operations of various symbolic activities of religious rituals and festivals help to create and preserve traditional identity of both communities. The interaction of both the traditions is nothing but 'the spread of sanskritik rites and the increasing *Sanskritization* of non-sanskritik rites'<sup>15</sup> apart from this all great efforts in this book the question like: 'to what extent can the religion of the little community be conceived as a whole apart from the religious great tradition of Hinduism' remained unanswered?<sup>16</sup>

Having a close look of an another great work on village study done by **Andre Beteille**, titled as *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Pattern of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, I have found micro level analysis of caste hierarchy at Sripuram village in Tanjore district. It has focused on the caste structure, economic organisation among caste and distribution of power according to Brahminical code of conduct. He explores the religious arrangement of village in which the Brahmin live in 'Agraharam' which is at the centre of village, while the *Adi-Dravidas* live in 'Cheri' which is at the periphery of the village and in between live the Non-Brahmin artisan caste. Brahmins wear vesthi (kurta) which is ritually superior which Non-Brahmin and *Adi-Dravidas* are prohibited to wear it. Brahmin way of life is sanskritised. However, the process of democracy is functioning to turn the table upon them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 191.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., P. 208.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., P. 207.

<sup>17</sup> Beteille, Andre (1969). *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. University of California Press.

In my view, it is an exclusive study of many forms of social relations between *Brahmins, non-brahmins, and Adi-Dravidas* (Dalits/Untouchables) and these relations, according to him, are ‘governed by norms and values.’<sup>18</sup> Beteille is of the opinion that lives of Dalits are very much different from upper castes in terms of way of living, spheres of rituals, ownerships, in terms of identity, social position and social practices. Hierarchy is the base of social ranking and ‘the extent to which they operate in practices.’<sup>19</sup> Despite his exclusive effort this study has failed to notice the socio-religious reality of Dalits, because during his research he stayed with upper caste (Brahmin), he identified himself as Brahmin, so the access to Dalits communities was limited to him. Unable to access Dalit community he regretted that:

my identification with the Brahmins was, however, not an unmixed blessing. I soon discovered that it made me suspect in the eyes of non-brahmin and Adi-Dravidas, who at first regarded me as just another Brahmin from north india. My access to these groups was, therefore, far more limited than to the Brahmin... Consequently my data for the Adi-Dravidas and also, to some extent, for the non-brahmins are of poorer quality than for the Brahmin... Had I lived with the Adi-Dravidas this study would perhaps have had a different focus.’<sup>20</sup>

This ‘**micro level**’ study of village and caste system have touched almost every aspect of discrimination and segregation on the basis of their residential settlement, dresses they wear, language they speak, rituals they follow and utensils they use. He have analysed that Dalits are victims of the concept of ‘pollution and purity’ scale, of restriction on commensality and cannubium and of traditional occupation and segregation. Every caste for him is divided into sub-castes which is the unit of endogamy whose members follows common occupation, they share a common culture. He sees hierarchy as the core or the essence of the caste system. There are restrictions on commensality, dress, speech and custom but open to upward mobility. People follow ‘Sanskritisation’ and ‘de-sanskritisation’ to their upward mobility. But he himself accepted that his research is poorer quality to the respect of Dalits and non-Brahmin. Even this hard effort has remained insufficient to understand religio-cultural space of Dalits because Beteille has analysed every relationships through the Brahminical lens working in the domain of Brahminical code of conducts.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., P. 01.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., P. 93.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 09-10.

Another celebrated book having title *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), written by **Louis Dumont** in this series of village study has great worth. Dumont has put three major attributes of caste, namely hierarchy, separation and division of labour. For him, hierarchy is the essential feature of the caste system supported by Hinduism and based on the principle of 'pure and impure'. Brahmins are considered pure and supreme and live at the heart/centre of village whereas the untouchable/Dalits are considered impure and live outside the village. Further, Untouchables are considered so impure that their mere touch severely pollutes members of all other upper castes. The notion of distant pollution existed in many parts of India where it was practiced in such a humiliated form that mere presence of shadows of an untouchable person was considered polluting and upper castes performed purificatory measures based on rituals. Hence, for him, the notion of caste hierarchy is highly religious, exploitative and humiliating to Dalit community in nature.<sup>21</sup>

He explains that hierarchy is the outcome of Varna system and Hindu religion. Division of occupation based on birth which is nothing but a biological accident. Caste and religion are the fundamental bases of identity and social status. He deals with several issues like, untouchability, commensality and connubium and relations between castes etc. which are the product of Brahminical imagination. Identity, social status and power are derived from this hierarchical system of caste. Religion, rituals and festivals are main components of culture. He defines hierarchy as:

the principal by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole. It being understood that in the majority of the section it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will thus be religious in nature... once hierarchy has been isolated as purely a matter of religious values, it naturally remains to be seen how it is connected with power and how authority is to be defined.<sup>22</sup>

He studied various relationships from the angle of hierarchy and power which are based on the religious ranking. This work is a great contribution in social science but it is losing its relevance when we analyse its contribution for Dalit communities. Since, Dumont was Western sociologist, his whole efforts has reduced to understand India from western point of view. He has observed the hierarchy but failed to observe

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<sup>21</sup>Dumont, Louis (1980). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., P. 66.

the hidden as well as visible impacts on Dalits of these hierarchical values. He failed to touch life according to Dalit perspectives.

In their village studies these leading sociologists have analysed various perspectives of Dalit communities but they ignored or were not able to locate the religious practices of Dalit communities because of the followings basic reasons: they did not belong to Dalit and untouchable caste and therefore could not feel their painful dilemma to resist humiliation, exploitation and segregation based on upper caste hegemonic religious conduct. They failed to observe any possibility of creating an alternative Dalit religious identity or they had different concern as Andre Betteille accepts himself that 'Broadly speaking, our concern is the phenomena of 'caste', 'class', and 'power' mainly with its political aspects and with their changing relations.'<sup>23</sup> Another important cause is that in their efforts these sociologists involved in reformulating Indian society according to their own vision. And as they neither visited nor became at least a participant observer of Dalit communities, their accessibility to Dalit communities remained limited.

At their 'micro' and 'macro' level research almost all sociologists, thinkers and researchers have taken almost all central issues of caste, religion, culture, politics, power relations, structure, injustice, untouchability etc. but they all have failed to locate and understand the issues of identity construction in general and the possibility of mass political mobilization of Dalit community in particular. They have analyzed Indian society from the Sanskritized upper and dominant castes point of view. What do Dalits think about the various concepts or ideas formulated by these sociologist in the process of studying Indian society? They have failed to visualize it through their lenses of pragmatic vision. Even they failed to analyze whether various processes of upward mobility was in reality Sanskritized or not?

Furthering this analysis of social study in view of my research, second type of literature that I have gone through is the available literature based on Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule and Periyar thinking. These three thinkers represented three different social backgrounds having different approach to emancipate Dalit communities from Brahminical caste hierarchy. Even they could not enter in the religio-cultural domain

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<sup>23</sup> Betteille, Andre (1969). *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. University of California Press. P. 03.



of Dalit communities to develop a frame of reference and feel the gap that I have raised above concerning the approach of social scientists towards Dalit religious discourse.

Before looking more closely at the protests against Brahminism and discriminatory caste system launched by Dalits, I think, understanding the following quote will make our task easy. Locating discriminatory nature of upper caste people, a 14 years old girl student of Jotirao Phule, asserted that:

The people who dress themselves up and parade round in their purity have only one intention, and that is to think that they are more pure than other people, and they feel happy at this; but do their cruel hearts ever feel any pity at the suffering that we endure that the very touch of ours pollute them?<sup>24</sup>

This excerpt is taken from an essay read out by 14 years old Phule's girl student of an untouchable (Mang) caste that clearly demonstrates the Phule's hard labour for untouchables. The girl had studied under Phule for three years. She located discriminatory nature of Brahminical code of conduct as she had heard it from her parents' own lips. In particular she pointed out the discrimination in the Brahminical religious order which constituted a religion that a small section of upper caste community can enjoy their every aspiration while the rest of mankind looks on with segregated/ humiliated faces. I must say her motive was to ask, is this rich religion, Hinduism?<sup>25</sup>

Jotirao Phule was born in a Mali family in 1828. His movement became the torch bearer of lower caste movement. I think the main objectives of his movement were (a) to save the lower caste from the Brahminical hegemony and their hypocritical/self-righteous attitude. (b) To provide an organized movement against Brahminical hegemony and (c) to create a sense of unity through education and to make no distinction between non-Brahmin and untouchables

Mostly he was influenced by his family and local community, the social and religious issues and public debate took on personal for Phule's life as individual. According to Phule what I understand, Hindu religion brings exploitation to lower caste by two

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<sup>24</sup> O'Hanlon, Rosalind (1985). *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste protest in the Nineteenth –Century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

ways (a) By putting ideological restrictions and (b) It's deep insistence of rituals and religious ceremonies. Criticising Hindu religion, he was of the opinion that along with the above two reasons Brahmins used education and literacy as a vital social resource that conferred great power on their (Brahmin) social groups. For Phule, the unreasonable sufferings of the lower castes were not an obvious outcome of social system but the creation of irrational Brahminical religious system. Nonetheless, illiteracy and backwardness of Dalits were equally important cause of their humiliation. Phule was of the opinion that the Brahminical hegemony was largely responsible for the ignorance of the lower caste and for their outcaste status. The lower castes had been religiously misguided by Brahmins for centuries. For instance; 'all the Brahmins would secretly give advice to the Malis and Kunbis not to send their children to school.'<sup>26</sup> In addition, religiously Brahmins misguided lower castes that education was the prerogative of upper caste. Hence, the effects of Hindu religious conduct and social regulations imposed on lower castes were the important concern to Phule.

Phule was so impressed with education that Ramchandra Guha taking reference from G. P. Deshpande writes:

Phule saw access to modern education on crucial to advancement of his people who were peasant and untouchable masses of western India. Like, Syed Ahmad Khan who had been proved and inspired by the work of Ram Mohan Roy. Roy thought that by means of modern education Hindus would come to be on a par with the British, Khan hoped that same instrument would bring Muslims on a par with Hindus; Phule hoped that it would bring non-Brahmins on a par with Brahmins.<sup>27</sup>

For him, education can play great role in establishing an egalitarian society and bringing all communities on a par with all in accessing their space freely and equally. He had strong belief in God. He understood God as very secular in nature. He found English education secular same as a nature of Creator/God. He argued that God will act in human affairs to remedy injustices being done to lower castes. Further, showing fraternity and brotherhood to lower castes against Brahminical exploitation, he suggested them that:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., P. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Guha, Ramachandra (2011). *Makers of Modern India*. USA: Harvard University Press. P. 74.

All of you Malis and Kunbis, even Mang and Mahars should not fear the Brahmins for a movement. For this purpose god has sent the English into your country. The purpose of this was to lift the ban on education which Brahmins had imposed on the shudras and ati-shudras to educate them and make them wise.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, Phule was sharply aware of the crucial role women played in the transmission of traditional culture and religious practices. Their ignorance was the main instrument used by priest to perpetuate their irrational religious dogma. Since, women were ignorant they were easily convinced by priest. They were generally more religious than men and force her husband to indulge into doing as the priest asks. So, Phule showed his early concern for education for all lower castes in general and for women in particular. He saw education as an ultimate liberating force for lower castes from their deprivation and backwardness on the basis of Hindu caste hierarchy. Since, education is the key to a new understanding of society. When people become educated they acquire the ability of rational understanding of their surroundings. They won't let what Brahminical religious forces want to carry on their religious practices.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, for him, education was the only way to liberate lower caste people from Brahminical religious hegemony and social sanctions. According to him the principles of all religions have universal application without discrimination to any section of society. On contrary, He found that the Hindu religious practices were very much discriminatory and it perpetuated inequality, deprivation and material impoverishment among Dalit communities. It maintained high and low status among people, however, creator of these all people were same. For Phule, the creator of all existing things and the source of moral law for human society is one i.e. God. The essence of his religious thought was that there is one God and we should worship him. We should conduct our behaviour according to the moral principle that are respected everywhere. The main truth is that doing good to others is virtue and harming others is sin. Having decided on these general religious principles Phule did not plan for either conversion to any other religion or to create any alternative religion for Dalit

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<sup>28</sup>O'Hanlon, Rosalind (1985). *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste protest in the Nineteenth –Century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:. P. 129.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

communities. His approach was totally emancipatory in nature by correcting the wrongness with improved social and material condition of Dalit communities.<sup>30</sup>

I must say that Phule worked hard for the emancipation of Dalit communities by generating rational outlook about the nature, structure and function of Hindu religion only, but did not say anything about Dalit discourse of religion. His major concerns were education, women, and Hindu religiosity rather than Dalit religiosity. He saw Indian society through the lens of Hinduism better say Brahminism but failed to see it through Dalit frame of reference. No doubt he visualised the discrimination, deprivation and material impoverishment of Dalit communities. He criticised it as completely immoral and made humble effort to convince Hindus to change their conduct of behaviour according to the moral principle. He did neither go for any radical change nor suggested any alternative which could bring equality, self-respect and dignity to an individual by being virtue of a Dalit. He failed to locate any alternative means in the domain of Dalit religiosity through which Dalit communities can develop an independent identity to emancipate themselves from the scourge of Hindu religiosity.

Similarly, Ambedkar himself claimed that ‘the roots of my philosophy lay not in politics but in religion.’<sup>31</sup> The essence of his philosophy can be materialized in three words i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity. For him, law in society should be maintained in order to protect liberty and equality and liberty and equality are concerned to maintain fraternity. For him, we-feeling i.e. sense of belonging is another name of fraternity and this feeling of togetherness is another name of religion. His goal of life was to construct a society in which all people may have equal opportunity. In the presence of Varna system based on religious philosophy of Hinduism, it is almost impossible to reach this goal. So, Varna system has to be abolished by all possible means.<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar was born in an untouchable (Mahar) caste of Dalit community. He had felt a number of live experiences of humiliation and observed exploitation of his community. He saw how his/Dalit communities were being forced to live a segregated

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Naik, C. D. (2003). *Thoughts and Philosophy of Doctor B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons Publication. P. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

life in all respect. They were discriminated on every social, economic and cultural aspect of life. They were religiously segregated. They were not allowed to enter in mainstream locality and a number of discriminatory social restrictions were imposed on Dalit community based on Brahminical code of conduct by upper caste Hindus. Being a Dalit he felt that the hardships and humiliations faced by a Dalit cannot be understood by a non-Dalit. Hence the remedy to their problems has to be different from those of the upper caste population. Ultimately, he gave a call for total conversion of Dalit community to Buddhism.<sup>33</sup> This attempt of Ambedkar can be seen as an attempt to create a parallel religious identity to Dalit communities to challenge Hinduism.

For him, Vedas, Puran, and Manusmriti are originator of caste system, Ramayana and Mahabharata preserve it and Bhagavad-Gita justifies and supports it. All Hindu religious books were directed to make propaganda of Hindu religion and they eulogized Brahmanism, priesthood and maintained caste system. Ambedkar felt that ‘Manusmriti’ was the beginning of Brahminism’ and caste system. He burned Manusmriti and gave a call to the entire Dalit community for conversion into Buddhism. For him, Buddhism was based on the philosophy of liberty, equality and fraternity and free access for all. It did not believe in the concept of caste, class, priesthood, Vedic rituals and Brahmanism. No community would be segregated, humiliated and exploited in Buddhism.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, the philosophy of Ambedkar stands for annihilation of both caste, class and high and low with an alternative means of Buddhism. Somehow with his all efforts he felt need of a possible alternative to emancipate Dalit community from their sub-human condition. He wanted to give Dalit community an ‘alternative religious identity’ so that they get out of Varna system based on Hindu religion. He wanted to make Buddhism a space where the Dalits could assert their independent identity free from humiliation, exploitation and segregation. Through this he wanted to create a separate space where the Dalits can stand at par with the so called upholders of the Hindu religion as far as the idea of dignity and self respect are concerned. His efforts is no doubt very close to my research but he also failed to locate the religious

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<sup>33</sup> Keer, Dhannajay (1990). *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.

<sup>34</sup> Ambedkar, B.R. (2007). New Delhi: *Critical Quest*.

institutions and agencies already functioning in Dalit communities which could be a viable alternative to propagate his mission of emancipation of Dalit communities without taking very radical step of conversion.

Then coming on another Dalit icon Periyar will give another dimension of studying Indian society within the framework of Hindu religion. Periyar born in a ruler family stood strongly with anti-Brahminism, anti-Casteism and anti-Hinduism. His movement was concentrated to resist Hindutva discourse of cultural identity which forms an ideology of cultural nationalism in India embedded deeply in religious myths, history and irrationalism. For him, Hindutva discourse of cultural identity was based on the motive to denounce a Composite culture within the framework of hardcore Hindu nationalism. In this notion of monolithic Hindu nationalism Periyar found no space for Dalit community and he opposed this notion of Hindutva discourse of nationalism. His frustration with Hinduism was such that he went on to claim for a separate non-Brahmin or Dravidian country. As Ambedkar, his idea was based on three principles i.e. social change, equality and rationalism and his whole fight went against Brahminism and criticism of religion. He was an atheist. Dominant feature of his ideology was his vehement stand against religion culminated in destroying Hinduism in general and Brahminism in particular.<sup>35</sup>

He was of the opinion that using this discriminatory religion the upper castes have kept the Dalit community in poverty and ignorance. He declared that 'Hinduism is not a religion; it is founded by small group for their own power interests. They built it on ignorance and poverty of the people and exploited them.'<sup>36</sup> For him, the bases of Hinduism are superstition and exploitation. Hinduism is the cause for all kind of problem in Dalit society. It is responsible to restrict their progress and happiness. He had firm belief that education can bring rationalism, atheism, anti-superstition and anti-transcendentalism which only can help to liberate Dalit community from the scourge of Hinduism. As Ambedkar who born as Hindu but wanted not to die as a Hindu, he wanted to die as a Muslim. He recommended conversion to Islam as a way to get out from the scourge of Hinduism. He also eulogizes Buddhism because it rejects God and Rituals. But when he realized that both Buddhism and Islam also

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<sup>35</sup> Diehl, Anita (1978). *Periyar E. V. Ramaswami: a study of the influence of a personality in Contemporary South India*. B.I. Publication: University of Michigan.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., P. 128.

have become a religion with rites and rituals and godly practices, he turned his idea of conversion. One thing noticeable in his idea was the promotion of local cultural resources which have promoted a sense of history, cultural consciousness and self identity among lower and Dalit community.<sup>37</sup>

Similar to Ambedkar, Periyar also made his all efforts to understand Indian society within the framework of caste, Brahminism and above all Hindu religion. He put his all efforts to understand the Hindutva discourse of cultural identity. He ignored the Dalit's discourse of cultural identity. He lags far behind even Ambedkar in his demand for social change, equality and rationalism. His anti-transcendental and atheistic stands were far beyond from the understanding of common people. Even, he stood for promotion of local cultural resources to develop an independent self-identity among Dalit communities but he also failed to see religion as a significant part of even Dalit's life. It can be viable source to generate self-respect, dignity and independent identity to Dalit communities.

While analyzing both the literatures based on comprehensive village study and the literature based on the understandings of these Dalit scholars it have given me a sense to understand that, a particular idea and thought is the product of socialization of men guided, nurtured and reared in a particular environment. The means adopted by Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar were different while the mission of emancipation of Dalit community from Brahminical code of conduct was same for all. Just because they came from different community with different status as well as experiences their imaginations and approaches were different. Hence, the life of Dalits at grass-roots levels is completely ignored or remained untouched in different respect of their imagination and approach in general and religious discourse in particular, this is why their thinking, imagination and approaches to assert their identity were still not located even by Dalit thinkers. Dalit thinkers were more concentrated on demolishing Brahminical caste hierarchy than understanding Dalit religious discourse. However, the main objective of Dalit movement was to create an atmosphere of a counter culture and to bring a separate identity to the Dalit in the society but their efforts reduced to concentrate to anti-Brahminical and anti-Hinduism work. Even these Dalit thinkers have ignored the Dalit religious beliefs, rituals and practices. They ignored

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

the question of their cultural autonomy in their various liberative, emancipatory messages.

Moreover, the contemporary scholars have also made several efforts to analyze and understand Indian social reality from Dalit's life perspectives. These various efforts also have remained far away from the exclusive Dalit religio-cultural discourse. They have failed to include this issue exclusively in their social studies. For instance; Sudha Pai in her book *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Agenda* has analyzed the role of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in empowering Dalits so as to facilitates their upward mobility. She has traced the role of Dalit-Bahujan ideology, programmes, and strategies in the mobilization of Dalit communities. For her, Dalit assertion and transformation of BSP into mass party is the result of democratization process and the affirmative policies of the government of India. She also explains the Dalit assertion through Cultural Revolution or the glorification of cultural resources of Dalits as the part of Dalit-Bahujan politics to create an independent identity<sup>38</sup>. But her study has remained untouched to an autonomous religio-cultural discourse of Dalit communities.

Another example in the series of contemporary scholars is Badri Narayan who has done a number of works related to the Dalit communities. In his one of the most celebrated work, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* he has attempted to carry forward almost same idea of Sudha Pai that how Dalits in Uttar Pradesh are trying to create an alternative identity by glorifying their cultural resources to counter Hindu hegemonic culture based on exploitative caste system. He analyses, how this strategy of Dalits creates foundation to assert identity, self-respect and dignity of Dalit communities? How Dalit's form of dissent redesign their alternative space to broaden their social, cultural and political space.<sup>39</sup> He has touched Dalits' politico-cultural discourse but he has not explained Dalits' religious discourse exclusively. He does not find the great role of religion in creation of independent identity for Dalit communities.

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<sup>38</sup> Pai, Sudha (2002). *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Agenda*. Sage Publication: New Delhi.

<sup>39</sup> Narayan, Badri (2009). *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.



Let us have a brief look of the book *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy, Contributions to Indian Society* written by Dipanker Gupta's (2000). He has analyzed that hierarchy in Indian society is the very existence of caste system based on the notion of 'pollution and purity'. Dalit communities have never been given space to enjoy their independent cultural autonomy. They have been segregated, marginalized, and exploited in all aspects of their life.<sup>40</sup> He has also failed to see contemporary Dalit religious rituals and practices running through their independent institutions as a viable source for generating independent cultural autonomy, identity, self respect and dignity for Dalit communities to emancipate themselves from the scourge of exploitative and discriminative Hindu religion.

These all literature have not only failed to understand Dalit religious discourse but even they have failed to forecast the possibility of mass movement concerning the independent identity of Dalit communities through using their own cultural resources. In India the Dalit communities are still struggling to resist their degraded status in the orthodox caste structure. They have still not been able to break the dominant hegemonic Brahminical religious and cultural discourse. To assert their identity either they have to reconstruct their alternative identities independent from Brahminical cultural code of conduct or they have to accept the humiliation, exploitation and segregation as destiny. In this context one can understand Badri Narayan's formulation about identity and liberation that 'imagination and memory constructed out of myth and history, is the foundational requirement for the identity, self respect and social existence of marginalized communities in the age of power, conflict and competition.'<sup>41</sup> Similar to the Badri Narayan formulation, there is emerging a tendency in Dalit community to formulate their independent religious identity using their imagination and memory constructed out of their myths and histories. But even Badri Narayan has failed to observe it.

Further, an argument can be made that on the one hand the rising assertiveness of Dalit castes is widespread with simultaneous construction of caste identity in general and Dalit identity in particular on the other hand Brahminical cultural code of conduct

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<sup>40</sup> Gupta, Dipankar (2000). *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

<sup>41</sup> Narayan, Badri (2009). *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication. P. 13.

is still flourishing in India and Dalits are becoming victim of this hegemonic upper caste cultural code in their everyday lives. In the new emerging dynamics of socio-cultural scenario 'these marginalized sections have been asserting their identities through myths, legends, heroes and histories, narratives of their own caste. Many heroes of these castes have begun to symbolize their caste identities, evoking feelings of pride and glory within their members.'<sup>42</sup> Also, a number of emancipatory, reformative and alternative movements have been launched to subvert the Brahminical cultural code of conduct and to end the constant humiliation, exploitation and segregation by them in their everyday life, but they all have failed to understand the importance of religious discourse of Dalit communities to carve out an independent identity to them. And one very important issue of Dalit community has still remained untouched which is about the construction of their independent Dalit religious identity.

Now, since autobiographies are also a major source of understanding social reality, let me explore the possibility to understand the nature, structure, relations and religious practices among caste hierarchy created by Hindu religion through the Dalit autobiographies. A numbers of Dalit autobiographies have been narrated to portray clear picture of social, economic and cultural conditions of Dalit communities and to portray the reality of Indian society dominated by Hindu religion and based on Brahminical code of conduct.

A very recently written autobiography, titled *Murdahiya* is a Dalit autobiography by Dr. Tulasi Ram, professor at Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, portrays a live picture of backwardness, bigotry, exploitation and humiliation of the Dalit community. It displays a series of local deities such as *Chamariya Mai*, *Deeh Baba*, *Sawani Mai* and so on, different from mainstream Hindu religious deities which are worshiped in parallel to mainstream Hindu religious deities. These separate religious imaginations of Dalit communities grew out due to the discrimination and continuous marginalization of Dalit communities by upper caste Hindus. It reflects that the Dalit community is not permitted to join the mainstream upper caste Hindu religious practices. They are cheated on every front of life such as social, economic, cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., P. 15.

and religious by upper caste Hindus. While reading *Murdahiya* it is obvious to understand that these different religious practices were developed to fulfill Dalit religious aspiration and to counter Hindu religious structure in search of their independent religious and social identity.<sup>43</sup>

In another autobiography, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* written by Omprakash Valmiki is the history of entire untouchable (Chura or Chamar) community who has been marginalized and exploited on the basis of Hindu caste based discrimination for centuries. They have been treated by the upper caste Hindu worse than street dogs. The entire community totally depends upon the scrap food of upper caste in return of their hard but humiliating work. They were not only scavengers but also collect stool and carry it on their heads to dump it outside the village and it is considered the traditional occupation of his community. While portraying the backward condition and a series of different religious practices of his community, he also narrates the painful experiences of his community life. While they are Hindus, they never worshiped mainstream Hindu deities. They have their own deities to worship. Some examples of their deities are *Mai Madaran, Jharpeer, Kalwa, Hari Singh Nalwa*<sup>44</sup> holy and evil spirits and they call them *Paun* in spite of calling deities. Despite the humiliating condition, the people of this community today take pride in being descendent of Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana (the holy book of Hindus), but in reality, the people have nothing to be proud of from such lineage because they have never been treated as part of Hindu Brahminical caste hierarchy. Raising caste related issues Valmiki is of opinion that 'the main issue of his autobiography is about identity concerning caste.'<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, in Nemishray's autobiography *Apne Apne Pinjare*, I have found almost similar alternative religious traditions and different religious deities such as bhoot, prît, chudail, peer, majar, the slogan like *jai ho kalkate wali, tera bachan na jaye khali*<sup>46</sup> created in their village by Dalit community under their own religious imagination different from Brahminical religious conducts. It displays a number of practices of his/Dalit community depending on their own myths, histories and

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<sup>43</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. P. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (1997). *Joothan*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Nemishray, Mohandas (1996). *Apne-Apne Pinjare*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan. P. 45.

narratives.<sup>47</sup> Institutionalizing these Dalits' deities under tree or in open space or a small temples, Dalits have developed an alternative religious practice which is an interesting subject of research.

Finally, I came to the point that Dalit autobiographies constitute a different dimension of Indian society dominated by Hindu religious discourse. It tells personal sufferings of writers mixed with their inter-personal responses and community feelings which they experience under the Brahminical cultural code of conduct. Dalit autobiographies attempt to portray a live picture of live experiences growing out from suffering related to poverty, powerlessness, contingency, scarcity, untouchability, marginality and several other degraded practices. It portrays the complete picture growing out of a continuous battle between *loss of identity* and *assertion of self*. Writers narrate their stories with the realization that the other members of their community also suffer in the same way and feel the same pain. And 'generally, it is engaged in carrying out two main functions *Demolition* and *reconstruction*'.<sup>48</sup> By *demolition* and *reconstruction* I mean, Dalit cultural resources are being glorified in their community to generate a sense of consciousness and respect about Dalit history, myths, heroes and other Dalit literatures. At the same time they are demolishing Hindu old religious tradition based on caste system and supported by the notion of *pollution and purity*. Dalits are making attempt to redesign their space in search for identity by transforming social reality in the direction of liberty, equality and human dignity. It is concentrated on the value of life rather on the literary value. It seeks to redesign a new form of social order based on equality and socio-economic justice.

Now it has become clear that the reason I am concentrating on Dalit autobiographies is only to explore alternative religious practices of Dalit communities and their visible and invisible impacts on them. Further, I shall say that recorded or written history only tell the story of kings, queens, upper caste heroes, rich feudal landlords and the heroes from Dalit society who played their role behind the curtain still remained uncelebrated. Apart from this, three other reasons are as follows, Firstly, the very emergence of Dalit autobiography is an act of resistance because 'Dalits are using this

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Kumar, Raj (2011). *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. P. 149.

opportunity to assert their identities through their writings.’ And ‘they have also advocated the restoration of dignity and self respect of the Dalits who have been denied such basic human rights for so long.’<sup>49</sup> Secondly; the upper caste autobiographies aim to celebrate their achievements in public life while Dalit autobiographies aim to lodge a symbolic complaint and protest against oppression to make people at least realize if not feel the pain of their community so that they can create a base to challenge the Brahminical hegemonic structure based on caste, religion and other form of discrimination. And finally, in upper caste autobiographies there is always a sense of fulfillment but Dalit autobiographies aim to display their insatiable religious as well as other social and cultural desires in exploitative social condition under the hegemonic upper caste cultural code.<sup>50</sup> This completely fits into the domain of my research.

In a small overview of my research the first chapter aims at to develop an analytical framework to search an answer that whether autobiographies can be an important source for understanding social reality. Why autobiographies are treated as very authentic and rich research for understanding social reality? Explaining autobiography and its elements it will explore major shifts in relationships between social orders and individuals through practices of self-interpretation, self-introspection, confession, apologies and moral judgment of self portrayed pictures in the autobiographies in the history of west. This chapter also deals with the terms and conditions of the emergence of autobiographical writing in India and their general trajectory. Precisely, analyzing various dimensions of relationships between autobiographies and society this chapter explores the importance of autobiography in social science research. In addition, it will explore the terms of the debate about the relationship between autobiography and social science in general and that of the Dalit community in particular. The chapter explains that what do Dalits experience when they are compelled to spend segregated and marginalized life in almost all respects? Why do the literary writings of Dalit communities’ traumatic pain start moving towards the realm of reality so as to create an alternative literature to explore their social reality vis-à-vis to uncover the exploitative nature of Indian Hindu social order? Where does

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<sup>49</sup> Kumar, Raj (2011). *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. P. 259-60.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

this alternative literature help them as an institution while challenging the literary institutions and agencies of Hinduism?

In the second chapter I explore the alternative religious rituals of Dalit communities and their social relationship in context of Hindu religion. In fact, this chapter precisely reflects the points upon which my one aim of research is based upon and that is to locate the alternative rituals and religious elements and institutions running in the Dalit communities in northern India. It explores the different rituals and practices of Dalit communities. Why Dalit communities need different rituals and practices? What is their significance to them? What is the nature of those different rituals and practices of Dalit communities?

Final chapter explores the ways adopted by Dalit communities to break their religiously sanctioned degradation and to bring dignity, equality and self-respect to them. What are the constituents, the process, the sources with which Dalit communities reconstruct their alternative religion to broaden their space and to stream their religious and cultural aspiration? How their mission of emancipation has gained momentum? What are the alternative they have discovered to break that Brahminical code of conduct based on rigid caste system and notion of purity and pollution? Among the various alternatives my focus in this chapter is to explore the strategy of religious changes adopted by Dalits to create new religious identity different from mainstream religion. What steps have Dalits taken to institutionalize their religion? What is the objective of this strategy? What is the psychological impact of this strategy on Dalit communities? And finally, how the strategy of creating an alternative religious Dalit identity is acting as an agency of emancipation for Dalit communities?

These three chapters will explain three important aspects of Dalit communities in India. These can be understood as the development of counter-literary sphere of Dalits, the actualization of their religious imaginations/aspirations through various alternative rituals and practices and finally the assertion of their identity through developing alternative Dalit religious discourse with the help of their own cultural resources existing within the domain of Dalit counter public sphere. These chapters must be

taken coherently in order to understand their relative importance in the process of creating identity, bringing change and establishing social justice.

## CHAPTER-01

### Autobiography and Social Reality: Experience of Dalit Community

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Autobiographies are an important source of understanding social reality. Scholars are using it for understanding the social reality of various communities including the Dalit communities. A number of researches are busy analyzing important causes of social, cultural and religious marginalization of Dalits and the hierarchical power relation between Dalits and Non-Dalit society. In this process several uncomfortable questions are being raised. Like, who is responsible for the exploitative hierarchical social order which brings bundles of sufferings and humiliation to Dalit communities? Where did this hierarchy come from and who made it perpetual? Whether Dalits themselves are responsible for their sufferings or the various social and religious institutions governing hierarchical social order? Does Indian independence, after a long period of more than six decades, has any relevance when a larger number of people are still unreasonably segregated and alienated from the mainstream society and democracy because of their accidental birth in a particular community? Who is responsible for not including those communities in the mainstream society? On whose behalf the national freedom movement was fought for? What happened to the dream of creating an egalitarian society on the basis of which Indian freedom movement was fought to bring just and equitable social order in which all can get their equal share indiscriminately? Why religion remains so prominent in Indian society? Does religion teach us to bring discrimination and humiliation to any section of society, and so on? For answer to these questions researchers are approaching autobiographies.

This chapter aims to develop an analytical framework to search an answer that whether autobiographies can be an important source for understanding social reality. Can autobiographies be treated as very authentic and rich resource for understanding social reality? Explaining autobiography and its elements it will explore major shifts in relationships between social orders and individuals through practices of self-interpretation, self-introspection, confession, apologies and moral judgment of self portrayed picture in the autobiographies in the history of west. This chapter also deals with the terms and conditions for the emergence of autobiographical writing in India and their general trajectory. Analyzing various dimensions of relationships between autobiographies and society this chapter explores the importance of autobiography in



social science research. In addition, it will explore the terms of the debate about the relationship between autobiography and social science in general of the Dalit community in particular. The chapter also explains that what do Dalits experience when they are compelled to spend segregated and marginalized life in almost all respects? Why do the literary writings of Dalit communities' traumatic pain start moving towards the realm of reality so as to create an alternative literature to explore their social reality vis-à-vis to uncover the exploitative nature of Indian Hindu social order? Where does this alternative literature help them as an institution while challenging the literary institutions and agencies of Hinduism? To be very precise, this chapter explores the importance of autobiography in social science research.

## 1. What is Autobiography?

Autobiography is defined as the detailed description and documentation of one's life by oneself. It is very specific form of narration which is basically a description of individuals' past experiences in daily life. It involves telling the stories, constructing a new perspectives, events that are personally meaningful to author. It is portraying of the personal life history of the writer; visualizing social order, myths, cultural, social and religious practices in which the writer has lived his life. It explores events, actions, norms, values etc, from the perspective of self experiences. It provides detailed descriptions of the 'social settings', 'commitment to understand events, behavior, etc. in their context'.<sup>1</sup> In this view one would agree with James M. Cox, when he claims that autobiography is basically a factual rather than a fictional 'narrative of the person's life written by himself.'<sup>2</sup> In autobiography the questions of truthfulness and authenticity are the central issues and it cannot be the subject of self-assessment but a subject of moral judgment.<sup>3</sup>

There are several variants of autobiography narration. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica 'an autobiography may be placed into one of four very broad types: thematic, religious, intellectual, and fictionalized'.<sup>4</sup> The first type includes

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<sup>1</sup>For detail, see Matsuda, Paul Kei and Silva, Tony J. (2005). Use of Narrative. *In L2 Writing Research in 'Second Language*. Writing Research: Rutledge. pp. 22 - 23.

<sup>2</sup>Cox, James M. (1971). Autobiography and America. In J. Hillis ( ed.). *Aspects of Narrative*. New York: Miller Publication. p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Barbour, John D. (n. d.). Character and Characterization in Religious Autobiography. *Humanities*. Journal of the American Academy of Religion. Oxford Journal. LV, 307-330.

<sup>4</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica Facts Matter. Retrieved from: <http://www.britannica.com>

autobiography which is too personal and truthfulness and authenticity are the central issues. This is not the subject of self-assessment but reflection of social realities and moral judgment. For example; Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, M. K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of my experiments with truth*, including Tulasi Ram's *Murdahiya*, Valmiki's *Joothan* and *Tiraskrit* written by Surajpal Singh Chauhan. Religious autobiography includes confession, apologia, self-introspection etc. for example; *The Confessions* of St. Augustine, Rousseau's *Confessions* Newman's *Apologia* etc. Analytical Autobiography includes John S. Mill's *Autobiography* and finally, fictionalized autobiography which is written in the form of novel or transformed into novel includes '*Shekhar: ek jeevani* of Agyey, *Balchanama* of Baba Nagarjuna, original name, Vaidya Nath Mishra, nick name Yatri, also known as Janakavi etc. in this type of autobiography the character is fictional but story is true and authentic. My focus in this study is on the first type of autobiographies.<sup>5</sup>

Above description of autobiography shows that it is taken to understand the connection between narratives and social reality reflected through combinations of various elements of autobiography in perspective of his/her social connection. The *Character*, *Technique* and *Theme* are three elements of autobiography which are woven together to bring out the connections between self-narrative and social reality. There are certain strategies that autobiographer employs while writing his/her autobiography. The first strategy the autobiographer employs is the *element of character*, the image or self-portrait in his writing. Writer's sense of self, of place, of history, of his motive of writing are the various factors that determine the character of *self* in the process of self-interpretation. A second factor in autobiographical strategy is the *element of technique*, which may be called *art of writing*. It is prominent in creating real picture of self-portrait in autobiography. This varies person to person according to their style of writing and choice of character. The third strategic element of autobiography is the *theme*. Theme according to Pascal is 'the idea and belief that gives an autobiography its meaning'<sup>6</sup>. Theme may arise from the author's general philosophy, religious faith, and political and cultural attitudes. His theme is no doubt personal but must be representative of that period, society and practices which are capable to illustrate the history of ideas. More precisely, the theme of autobiographer

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

is actually his life style.<sup>7</sup> The autobiographer uses his conscience as well as knowledge to write about his past limiting perspective of his present self-image. He adopts specific strategy in order to express the truth about his past. It expresses nothing but spontaneous as well as clinical construction of a mixture of what Roy Pascal says 'design' and 'truth' in the process of portraying self. This mixture of design and truth manifests the autobiographer's spontaneous reflection of his past into the intentional purview of his present narrative project with his own formulated postulates.<sup>8</sup> Means, autobiography explains the various myths, values, customs and symbols that shape the social relationships between individuals and society and help to understand the connection between autobiography and social realities.

## 2. Autobiography and Social Science

Various shifts have taken place in study of social science. Autobiographical mode of social science research is a form of collective exploration through individual lived experiences. It helps understand different discourses of social reality. This approach in social science started after the introduction of subjectivist and constructionist approaches to the social sciences. This is known as period of the *sociology of deviance*. The biographical and autobiographical approach to study society has become attractive to social scientist as they attempt to study both individual actions and socio-cultural changes. It has given a renewed position and attention to individual meanings and choices. This deviance in sociological context or *sociology of deviance* describes actions or behaviors that violate preconceived cultural as well as social norms. This deviance is seen in both the deviance as a violation of cultural as well as social norms and the deviance as a reactive construction to link personal and social values. Rustin also agrees with the point that this outcome was a cultural or linguistic turn. It emphasizes both the concerns with language and representation, and the detailed analysis of autobiographical texts. However, the reading and analysis of social and cultural forms and the use of new discourse to describe thought and practice on which 'Theme' is based resulted in disappearance of the creative role of individuals. Even so, the increasing influence of postmodernism with its critique of narratives and social theories and their stress on change and diversity within cultural

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<sup>7</sup>Howarth, William L. (1974, Winter). *Some Principles of Autobiography*. *New Literary History*. Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 363- 371.

<sup>8</sup>Hart, Francis R. (1970, Spring). Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography. In *History and Fiction*. *New Literary History*. 1(3), 485-511

studies and the social sciences generally have opened the possibilities for new accounts of the individual. The study of biography and autobiography to study society has become the one major account in social science under these newly opened possibilities. It has provided a new model for social science students to deepen their understanding and widen their practices through various examples.<sup>9</sup>

The opening of these possibilities through the *sociology of deviance* and postmodernist critique in terms of personal *Narrative Analysis* or *Autobiographical Analysis* has added new dimensions of debate concerning autobiographical research to study the social relationships. Now, autobiographical study has become the major concern in social science research to understand social reality. There are three major issues that are being debated in the field of study of autobiography. First is the issue of methodology and hypothesis. Second debate is related to *Realist* versus *Constructionist*, and finally the issue of *Concerned readers* versus *Theme*. Let me explain these various terms of debates separately.

The first debate is going on the issue of methodology and hypothesis. This new genre of analytical study of ‘Autobiography’ or ‘Narrative’ attempts to understand individuals account of life experiences within the contemporary cultural and structural settings of societies. It also explores how their experiences are interpreted within the particular group, caste, and communities and institutions. This genre of Autobiographical study is based on scientific objective reality. It denies that autobiography can represent scientific objective reality because it is too much personal and subjective. It cannot be used as a resource for social science research to understand and investigate social reality. Explaining the reason for the ignorance of autobiography in social science research, taking reference of Becker, Kirk & Miller write that ‘the basic reason of traditional ignorance of autobiographies within social science is the dominant scientific *hypothetico-deductive method*.<sup>10</sup> The basic aim of this method in social science research is to reduce subjectivity and bring objectivity in social science research. This method produced the notion that hypothesis were to be constructed for testing the validity of research through experimentation, verification and generalization to theorize the findings of research.

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<sup>9</sup> Rustin, Michael (2000). Reflection on the biographical turn in social science and Biographical analysis In Chamberlayne, Jonathan Bornat and Wengraf, (ed.) *The Turn to Biographical Method in Social Science*. London: Routledge. Pp. 35– 65.

<sup>10</sup> For detail see Kirk, Jerome and Miller, Marc L. (1986). *Objectivity in Qualitative Research in Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. (P. 11- 14). Sage Publication: New Delhi. where, he discusses ‘hypothetico-deductive method and Qualitative Research. p. 11.

The problems started when the allegations were made that autobiographies being a single life story, does not provide the adequate resources that sociological researchers require. It is full of subjectivity; the domain is too short to take a source of social study. It also lacks empirical material basis to test the validity of hypothesis. Therefore, formulating a concrete hypothesis becomes almost impossible. The basic meaning is that an autobiography is insufficient to fulfill the criteria of research. But this allegation did not last longer when Kirk and Miller (1986) rejected this allegation by claiming that a single autobiography is capable to provide adequate resources required for testing possible hypothesis before the formulation of valid research.<sup>11</sup> Further, they claim that the assumptions underlying the search for objectivity are simple in all kinds of research. There is a world of empirical reality out here. The way we perceive and understand the world is largely up to us but the world does not tolerate the understanding of it equally. Moreover, referring Popper they argued that scientists formulate and test hypotheses that can, in principle, be applied to all researches equally. But it may fail when it is applied to the real world.<sup>12</sup> Hence, in order to recognize the meanings given to the social world by individuals requires rather different criteria and different vision. Autobiography of an autobiographer does not present events and experiences of his lived life only but it also displays various dimensions of the social order in which he lived his life. It contains all terms and conditions and contents which need to formulate hypothesis to test the validity of the research. In society various hypotheses run at same reference point, one has to just choose it according to their criteria of research and referential to the social reality perceived in that society.

Second key debate in the study of new genre of narratives or autobiographical study to understand social reality is related to the dialogues between *Realist* and *Constructionist*. Simply, realism holds that to take autobiography as a subject of social science research there must be some objective knowledge of reality in autobiography. For realists, autobiography contains single voice, a single vantage point and it is too much subjective. In single narrative position, self-interpretation and self-introspection autobiographies lack objectivity, lacks multiple voices, it lacks historical insights, political context and sociological perspectives on institutions and

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<sup>11</sup>Kirk, Jerome and Miller, Marc L. (1986). *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. New Delhi: Sage Publication. P. 11-14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 11-12.

structure. It also lacks empirical material basis to test the validity of hypothesis. Therefore, formulating a concrete hypothesis becomes almost impossible. For a valid research a resource must represent objective reality, multiple vantage points and multiplicity in voices to formulate as well as test the validity of hypothesis. Hence, the realists consider autobiographical writing as an individual phenomena and it must not be a resource of social study.

On the other hand Constructionist's approach is collective and they consider how social phenomena or object of consciousness develop in social context. The major focus of Constructionist is to uncover the illusion created by realists. Constructionists are of the opinion that it is not autobiographies but realists lack a definite socio-historical insight, social and political context, a sociological perspective on institution and structure of society and finally they lack vision to study autobiography. Autobiography is completely misconceived by realist. They create just autobiographical illusion to say stories are not simply referential of expression. Reality or empirical truth reflected in autobiography is not simple but very much complex. Constructionists say, while reading autobiographies it also needs to see the process of formation of story. Denzin, a constructionist says that realists, rely on the text only, look for multiple voices and try to test it in domain of multiple vantage points in autobiographical study and in this process 'interpretation feeds interpretation in a swirl of language and symbols'<sup>13</sup> used in autobiography.

For constructionist, an autobiography reflects material and empirical basis for individual experiences and reality of lived life. It explores the way in which individuals and group participate in the construction of their perceived reality. For them, autobiographical writing practices are social phenomena which are created and brought into tradition by human itself. It reflects ongoing reality and dynamic process of society that are portrayed by narrator in their interpretation of events, practices and experiences of past life. Hence, both the story and its interpretation by author/narrator are shaped by narrative techniques and conventions of society. It contains plural voices, multiple vantage points and complexity which are good enough to formulate and test a good hypothesis as well as research in social science. It must be studied in the socio-historical context.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts as quoted in Merrill, B. & West, L. (2009). Using Biographical Method in Social Science. New Delhi: Sage Publication Ltd. P. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 20-26.

I would agree with the constructionist view that analytical induction/approach must be applied to study autobiographies because its study does not depend on pre-existing deduction. It is true that writing autobiography is a social phenomenon. It is written by an individual but this individual is the product of society. Autobiography has analytical potential. It explores how lives are constructed and reproduced in social conditions and situations. It includes reflexivity, rejects subjectivity and encourages objectivity. It cannot be understood in a public-private domain but understanding depends on constructing experiences at a collective level. In this view one must agree with the view of Amada Coffey that 'autobiographical approach to social science research can imply a greater self awareness of the research process, research relationships and the researcher-self, as well as a clearer appreciation of the value of lived experiences and personal knowledge as part of social science scholarship'.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, autobiography is not only an authentic resource to study social science but it can be a method for exploring and investigating social reality.

The third debate concerning study of autobiography is concerned with concerned readership or audience and how the text is to be read. More precisely, I can say that this question is related to *readers* and the *theme* of an autobiography. This question has gained significant attention in contemporary autobiographical study. However, the questions of (who should write what? Who represents whom?) interpretation, representation and authenticity of autobiography and biography are not new concerns in the field of autobiographical study. The questions of subjecthood, representativeness, reliability, validity of interpretation of autobiography and their proper connection with theme are the all time special concerns in the genre of autobiographical literature. Likewise in Dalit autobiographical debate, the major issue is that only Dalits have the right to write Dalit autobiography. But another question is equally important and that is, just because one is Dalit, he/she has this right even if he/she has no experiences of humiliation? And, Can a Brahmin having experience of humiliation be denied?

This debate continues on the issue of who has written on what theme. Whether the theme chosen by the narrator is related to himself or it is just narrated by using their imaginative capacity about that theme? Authenticity of narration is judged on the

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<sup>15</sup> Coffey, Amada (2004). Autobiography. In Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Alan Bryman, Tim Futingliao (ed.) The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Method, Vol.- 1, pp. 45-46.

degree of reflexivity of theme. According to Atkinson the central problem that has emerged, is to deal with the relationship between the individual and the collective social reality. Critical voices have claimed that the emphasis has been given to the individual rather than collective. Today, interpretation of life stories is focused on either personal or subjective.<sup>16</sup> Relationships to the character, influence of social backgrounds, for example, caste, class, race, gender, religion are the major concerns in autobiographical study. How deeply the 'Character' embedded in the text in the study of autobiography, is intended to gain understanding of individuals' live experiences within their socio-cultural context. The subjective nature of autobiography mostly reflects the form and structure of his society in which the Character and his community live their lives. It also reflects the power relations in terms of 'power', 'authority', 'voice' and 'reciprocity' in regard to relations between his community and social and religious institutions. Some autobiography recognizes not only the context but it also generates solidarities among those who have similar experiences of life.

Thus the various dimensions of debates to study general autobiography raise not simply the question of methodology, hypothesis, and the perspectives. It also emphasizes on the degree to which Character should raise her/his 'voice' within a socio-political context with various moral and ethical questions concerning social, economic and cultural discourses. Autobiography today remains not only a matter of self-interpretation, establishing proper sequence between elements like Character, technique and theme and facts in subjective way guided with personal interests but it has taken shift to objective interpretation and moral judgment with new issues and insights. It is not only an object of celebrity but solidarity also. The new genre of autobiographical study sees the facts as secondary and emphasizes the interplay between objective truth and subjective reality perceived in narration of autobiography.

### 3. Relationship between Autobiography and Social Science

It is very difficult to evaluate the analytical potential of autobiography in social science research as the emergence of autobiographical study in social science research claims that the self can also be the source of investigating empirical social reality. In

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<sup>16</sup>Atkinson, Robert (1998). The Life Story interview. Vol. 44. In *Qualitative Research Methods*. Sage University Paper, SAGE.



the above study we find that personal lived experiences and life events have potential to reveal social reality and to analyze social relationships in empirical social world. Let us move over to analyze relationships between society and autobiography. It will help us to understand the trends and the subject matter of autobiographies in different ages and the reflexive potential of autobiographies as there has been change in the terms of differentiated subject matters to reflect collective social reality. It is possible to see that the nature of relationships between society and autobiography has changed with the changes in the form and subject matter of autobiographies. Let's have a historical survey of autobiographical writings and its social relationships.

The conception and origin of relation between autobiography and social reality generally traces back (to Fourth Century BC) to the Plato's writings where he writes about an important period in his life. Sources also tell us that the fashion of writing about self life's account was started much before the Plato's writings. This was further continued by Roman rulers like *Lutatius, Catulus, Scarus, Rutilius, Rufus, Sulla, Caeser* etc. to glorify mostly their political or military achievements, to display their mighty power, victory in battle, subjection of their enemy and to preserve his record of the work done. For example, Assurnasirpal, the king of Assyria who ruled from 885 to 860 BC in his political autobiography, he writes:

I am the king. I am the lord. I am the exalted, the great, the strong, I am famous, I am prince, I am noble, the powerful in war; I am a lion, I am a hero of youthful strength; Assurnasirpal, the mighty king, the king of Assur, the chosen of Sin (God of growth), the favorite of Anu, the beloved of Ramman, who is the mightiest of the Gods; I am the unconquerable weapon, which subjugates the land of enemies, I am the king strong in the battle, who lays waste cities and monuments, the first in conflict, the king of the four quarters of the world, who lays his yoke upon his enemies, and destroys all his adversaries, the king of all kings of all quarters of the world, of every one of them, the king who suppress those who rebel against him, who subdues the hosts of the nation all combined. These are the decisions of fate that came for me out of the mouths of the great Gods, who establish them unchangeably as my destiny...<sup>17</sup>

This shows how the rulers of ancient age extend the terror of his power among people of ancient society through their autobiography. In the ancient age king usually portrayed themselves as the march of greatest God on the earth to save the humanity. Religion was embedded in society deeply. Masses were cheated on the name of God

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<sup>17</sup> See Misch, Georg in *A history of Autobiography in an Antiquity*, p. 38. He has taken this quote to display the character and motive of autobiography in the ancient civilizations of the middle east. According to him that was the starting period of genre of autobiography.

and religion. This was the beginning of the genre of autobiography. This was completely political and power motive. The first and foremost attempt of this beginning of genre of autobiography was to establish person's fictional character with bundles of abstract properties and myths. This first type of autobiography shows three main motives, first; documenting live events in fascinating way of their mighty personality in order to make people acknowledge the ruler, secondly; to maintain their hegemonic power by creating terror among the masses and thirdly; they glorify their achievements to generate faith among people in ruler so that they can perpetuate their hegemonic power unquestionably.

Some autobiographies seem to reject the tendency to glorify their mighty personality, their unquestionable achievements and heavenly body to perpetuate their hegemonic power by creating fear among the masses and written basically in the form of apologia to confess their misdeed, sin done in past life. It is known as confessional mode of autobiography. It includes both, the religious and secular mode of autobiography. For example, in confessional mode of autobiography the two best examples we have in the world. First is Saint Augustine's Confessions and second is Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions. Answering the question why did Augustine write the confessions Raj Kumar writes:

It is difficult to get an exact answer to this question because it has multiple bearing on the author in relation to his time and society. To begin with, Augustine's Confessions seems to be an apologia. Probably Augustine, at a certain point of time realized the misdeed of his past and took a vow before God not to repeat same in the future. The fact that Augustine ventured to write the confessions only after his conversion also corroborates this view. 'Confession' in common usage is an acknowledgement. It is well known that Christians use confession as a method both for the expiration of sins and for the acknowledgement of faith in God. Thus, a confessor is someone who is honored for having declared his or her faith at the risk of martyrdom, even though he or she does not, in the fact, die a martyr. Further, acknowledgement of faith in God becomes praise in God's greatness and goodness, even in the basic acknowledgement, 'Jesus is Lord'. The opening paragraph of Augustine's Confessions i.e., "Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and of Thy wisdom there is no end" make it clear that the author was very much conscious of his sin and believe that it was God who would come to his rescue. He had full faith in God and therefore he sought his blessings. However, the significance of Augustine's Confessions lies not

in the personal encounter with his Christian God, but an involvement of his Christian self.<sup>18</sup>

Thus throughout his autobiography Augustine seems to be obsessed with sin, religion and above all God. His approach clearly shows that he is doing a role of prophet and setting a trend to maintain the religious institutions of Christianity. His genre of autobiographical writing is very much religious because he is glorifying Christianity and asserting his identity as a faithful Christian.

In respect of Rousseau's Confessions again Raj Kumar writes:

In Rousseau's Confessions, firstly, by stating at the very beginning of the book that, this is the only portrait of man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and probably ever exist. In his autobiography Rousseau is raising some important points not just about his individual life but also about the society he belongs to. As commonly understood, Rousseau's was an enlightened self. Being conscious that he was a true representative of his age, Rousseau, divides, and then sees opposition between, head and heart, reason and emotion; and self and nature. Living in the worlds of duality Rousseau tried to bring a balance between his private self and public spirit. Secondly, by writing his life-story Rousseau was also earnestly engaged in doing, at least, two important things, i.e., documenting the emergence of a modern individuality in him and defining his 'self'. Like Saint Augustine though Rousseau also addressed his confession to God to judge his activities, he at the same time asked his fellow men to scrutinize his character and study him in the light of their own experience.<sup>19</sup>

Further, he writes that 'apart from his difficult childhood Rousseau's experiences of stealing, telling lies, prattling etc., get highlighted in his narrative as a part of development of the self. By narrating such events Rousseau had an agenda to pursue' his present intension.<sup>20</sup>

Both these confessional mode of autobiographical writing indicate two different strategies to establish social relationships. First reflects narrator's inherent motive to assert his religious identity by interpreting the self as a true believer of religion and God. And second autobiography reflects narrator's honesty and courage of true interpretation of his sufferings, pain and other life experiences. Though, both were Christian but first reflect a religious nature of autobiography and later reflect secular nature of autobiography to the society. But both adopted the self introspective mode rather than self interpretative mode of autobiographical writing to establish a kind of

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<sup>18</sup> Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives, Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan. p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 22

social relationships so that they can generate faith among people towards religion and the institutions of religion. Confessional mode of autobiography acted as a mediator between people and religion. Spirituality was the major concern and its motive was social and other oriented rather than self oriented.

Another form of autobiographical writing seems to explore a scientific social reality. This form of autobiographies is more associated to philosophy of life and reflects moral and aesthetic preoccupation of human life as collective responsibility. In this category comes the autobiography written in the *Victorian age*<sup>21</sup>. The language of Victorian age was richly influenced by the language of *Positivism*<sup>22</sup>. Events, activities and experiences of past were explained on scientific terms. It was the period of Spencer, Butler, Newman and August Comte and all of them published their autobiography early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were primarily breaking old traditions and making new grounds. Their autobiographies were found more convincing than others just because of their scientific way adopted and described in their autobiographies.

Broadly, the Victorian attitude toward autobiography may be divided into two aspects, one; to instruct and rule over masses and second; to glorify achievements of self. This can be named as *early Victorian phase* and the *later Victorian phase*. The early Victorian emphasis was upon autobiography as a moral influence and the later phase emphasized upon autobiography as an art. But what is common in both is that they have done emphatic appreciation of autobiography. They viewed autobiography as ‘autobiography is allowed, by common consent, to be one of the most universally agreeable kinds of reading, combining utility with amusement.’<sup>23</sup> Now we need to explore two phases of Victorian autobiography to understand the shift in social relationships and establishment of new social reality in the Victorian age.

According to Linda H. Peterson the genre of Victorian autobiography is the tradition of self interpretation. In this genre of autobiographical writing self-introspective mode was ignored and autobiographical writing took the route of self-interpretative mode. People started glorifying their achievement and their *Character* within *Self* even at the cost of the ethos of autobiography. Linda says, ‘the method which the Victorians

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<sup>21</sup> Victorian age represents the period of queen Victoria’s reign from 1837 to 1901.

<sup>22</sup> I have used this word ‘*Positivism*’ just analyzing the rational nature of autobiography.

<sup>23</sup> *Autobiography* (1829) (2005). *Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine*. W. Blackwood & Sons. 26, 737.

inherited remained *hermeneutic*, achieving self-interpretation rather than self-expression. She sees such interpretation as the distinctive mark of the genre, 'its emphasis lies in the understanding of events rather than in the art of narrating them'.<sup>24</sup> The individual studies of the Victorian autobiographers demonstrate each writer's dependence upon the *typological method*<sup>25</sup>. Hence, I see that, it is the period of autobiography of *reconstruction*, where autobiographical writers merely reconstruct himself by interpretation of self rather than making a literal account. By interpreting self, autobiographical writers were serving the purpose of *self* rather than society just opposite to confessional mode of autobiography. Works were looking self conscious. Spirituality and aesthetic sense were also found in the Victorian autobiographical writings but they were independent to moral values.

Genre of Victorian autobiographical writings is focused equally on moral usefulness as they are found to be scientific and poetic. What pleases Victorians above all else is the belief that in autobiography they are dealing with facts rather than values. It was the period of self-interpretation and fading of spirituality in autobiography. Their thinking explains the premise that how impressive the smallest historical fact may become as contrasted with the biggest fiction. But the whole history of the Victorian age portrays a conflict between aesthetic sense and moral values. A chief problem confronting the Victorians was how to combine aesthetic interest and moral values with the facts of growing industrial activity and scientific knowledge and the consequently growing dissatisfaction with traditional religious creeds. On one hand, with the growing scientific knowledge and industrial advancements, old myths were broken and new facts were established in society with new values. On the other hand, growing positivism and rationalism in society were challenging the traditional religious beliefs and creeds. It was a great challenge to establish balance between tradition and modernity. In this conflicting situation religion was to play a great role

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<sup>24</sup> Peterson, Linda H. (1986). *Victorian autobiography: the tradition of self interpretation*. London: New Haven. P. 04.

<sup>25</sup> The *typological method* entails the classification of ancient objects—such as weapons, work implements, ornaments, or vessels—according to the materials and methods used in making them and according to their shape and ornamentation. Objects that have identical functions and are similar in appearance but differ in detail are grouped in typological evolutionary series; by comparing these series, one can identify groups of objects that are characteristic of a particular epoch.

in terms of moral judgments of every deeds and creeds. Autobiography promised to be a suitable literary medium in the Victorian attempt to cope with this problem.<sup>26</sup>

A number of English Victorian autobiographical writers were against the spiritual autobiography. According to Peterson, spiritual autobiography's convention entails following the exodus pattern overall, making frequent Biblical allusions. It overtly interprets individual episodes according to Biblical precedents. It reflects a system of different kind of hermeneutics. Victorians see it valid for interpreting their own life. Victorians made various modifications and substitutions in traditional Biblical hermeneutics and maintained that the writing of autobiography is a matter of self not social or collective. One should be free to decide their course of action without any external influence. One can decide how he can interpret one's own life validly. In autobiography variations are self conscious and the subject of autobiography is *self* rather than collective. Linda H. Peterson describing the view of John Ruskin is of the opinion that Victorians later consciously rejects Biblical hermeneutic. He supported deconstruction of the traditional generic pattern of the autobiography based on philosophy of Bible. She avoids extensive interpretation and focuses on external and historical interpretation of life free from Biblical allusion. His overall message is, 'the self is the source of revelation, and Bible is open to various Interpretations'.<sup>27</sup> Thus started an alternative approach to autobiography during Victorian age.

It is also argued that the genre of Victorian autobiography were aware of the tradition of Protestant spirituality. So, Victorian writers must discard its hermeneutics to be true to their own beliefs. To do so they thought that one cannot use '*Exodus pattern*'<sup>28</sup> (behaviour) as an organizing metaphor but search an alternative to challenge the hegemony of other in terms of religion, culture and so on. Following the same principle Harriet Martineau, a women Victorian autobiographer, disconnected herself from the genre of traditional spiritual autobiography because women were excluded from 'Biblical hermeneutics'. Instead of following 'a *Necessarian mode of*

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<sup>26</sup>Jerome B. Schneewind (1995, Sep.). Moral Problem and Moral Philosophy in the Victorian Period. *Victorian studies*. (pp. 29-46). Vol. 9, Supplement. Indiana University Press.

<sup>27</sup>Peterson, Linda H. (1986). *Victorian autobiography: the tradition of self interpretation*. Yale university press: New Haven.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, Newman in his autobiography as I have understood uses 'Exodus' as same as Gandhi uses 'Hijrat' in Hindi it is understood as 'palayan' meaning, migration of masses to some other place to show the anger against any oppression when all the other methods of 'Satyagraha' are failed to change the heart of concerned. I have used this word in the same sense.

*interpretation*<sup>29</sup> she chose an alternative method. She chose an objective point of view based on scientific and egalitarian concepts, stressing on the cause and effect of self development rather than bothering herself for failures.<sup>30</sup>

No doubt this new alternative approach of self-interpretation must have bothered those of traditional spiritual autobiographers, but in terms of trustworthiness, authenticity her method was more scientific and superior to previous one. She started a new genre of autobiography fusing literary theory and context (i.e. theme) together. She gave a new vision that one cannot claim that the all writers use same pattern of imagination or object or genre to write autobiography even they are followers of same religion and cultivators of same social grounds. Each writer and genre has their particular dilemma with their own vision, emerged out from different socio-religious conditions. No genre has a unified theory of discrete challenges to other genre. Intellectuals and social currents are responsible for the literary variations. One can interpret him/herself in such effective details as effective his surroundings or external influence. Besides, in any contemporary genre of autobiography, a more consistent treatment of context (i.e. theme) and a stronger connecting thread (technique of writing) between 'self' and masses are potential element in autobiography. Thus this new emerging egalitarian and scientific tendency in autobiographical writings facilitated the way for new age known as the later phase of Victorian autobiography.

The richness of Victorian autobiography did not end with the early phase with an alternative approach of writers like Linda H. Peterson's *Victorian Autobiography* (1986), Newman's *Apologia* (1864), John Ruskin's *Praeterita* (1885) among many, but it continued even after them. It addressed the origin of autobiography in an age that could praise creative literature. Starting from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833) with whom we enter in Victorian autobiography to Edmund Gosse's, *Father and Son* (1907), Francis Galton's *Memory of My Life* (1908) autobiography found an important place in a self-interpreted and unique transitional phase. The later phase of Victorian Autobiography crossed borders of gender and class as well as of time. Harriet Martineau's 'Autobiography', a painful account of her extraordinarily difficult life, or the working-class autobiographies edited by John -Burnett in *Destiny Obscure: autobiographies of childhood education, and family from 1820s to 1920s* (1982)

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.143.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

became testimonies to new autobiographers of nineteenth-century literary industry. Used reluctantly at first, it came to include memoirs, confessions, and various personal writings for a number of men and women. The various new questions about genre and history, memory and psychology, epistemology and romanticism were started sounding similar to the formal questions related with aesthetic sense, moral values and facts, scientific knowledge, industrial development and spirituality were raised in early phase of Victorian autobiography before entering to the later phase of Victorian autobiography.<sup>31</sup>

Later phase of Victorian autobiography treat autobiography as ‘*a referential art*’<sup>32</sup>. It is an art of establishing an autobiographical pact between author and reader establishing a connection between individual life and public events without maintaining any authority. It is not an authoritative relation but a psychological bond through which reader feel their past in the pages of autobiography of author. Here in the later phase of Victorian autobiography the question of subjecthood of ‘self’ started shifting to the subjecthood of ‘*whole*’ or ‘*collective*’. Slavery, corruption and humanity were the main elements which had prominently been dealt with especially in Harriet Martineau's ‘Autobiography’ and John Burnett in ‘Destiny Obscure’. Their major concern came to the social evils and issues like slavery and discrimination. This can be seen as shift in autobiographical subject. *Subjecthood of Self* in autobiography shifted to *Subjecthood of Collective*. The fashion of representing self with the word ‘I’ replaced with the word ‘We’ to assert collectivism. For instance:

We can think of little else at present than of that which should draw you and us into closer sympathy than even that which has so long existed between us. We, on our side the water, have watched with keen interest the progress of your War of Opinion, — the spread of the great controversy which cannot but revolutionize your social principles and renovate your social morals. For fifteen years past, we have seen that you are ‘in for it,’ and that you must stand firm amidst the subversion of Ideas, Customs and Institutions, till you find yourselves encompassed by ‘the new heavens and the new earth’ of which you have the sure promise and foresight.<sup>33</sup>

The above extract is part of a letter mentioned in Harriet Martineau’s autobiography and written to an Anti-slavery friend in America in 1849 at the time of outbreak of the

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<sup>31</sup> Machann, Clinton (1994). *The Genre of Autobiography in Victorian literature*. University of Michigan Press.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Martineu’s ‘Harriet (1855). Section IX. In *Autobiography, Vol. 2 and Memorials of Harriet Martineu* [1855]. Retrieved from: <http://www.oll.libertyfund.org>



war between England and former USSR. This letter clearly shows the shift from subjecthood of self to collective subjecthood.

Nevertheless, she was well supported by Clinton Machann but Later Victorian phase of autobiography added nothing new to the discussion. Later writers just remain the follower of earlier Victorian phase of autobiography. She asserts that 'from the beginning of the nineteenth century it was recognized that autobiography fulfils an aesthetic as well as an ethical function.'<sup>34</sup> However, in their little progressive attempts they never found an adequate subject other than spiritual and moral values to restore autobiography their status it once enjoyed but religion and spirituality remain two main elements throughout the Victorian age of autobiography with collective '*subjecthood*'. It started the important debate of subjectivity in the genre of autobiography. Now, let me analyze the trajectory of Indian autobiographies and social reality.

India has no Victorian history like west. The tradition of writing autobiography in India came quite late. Banarasidas's '*Ardhakathanaka*' is considered to be the first autobiography in India. However, tradition of writing biography was very common in India. It is dated back to the Vedic age, the age in history during which the oldest scriptures of Hinduism were composed. In post-Vedic period biographies (not autobiographies) were mainly focused on describing lives of Mahavir, Gautam Budhdha and Ashoka, the king of Magadha. After that the '*Charita literature*' came as prominent literary writing. In this period Ashvaghosa's *Budhdha-Charita*, Bana Bhatta's *Harsha-Charita* and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* are prominent among various biographical writings. These above mentioned writings except Banarasidas's '*Ardhakathanaka*' all others are biographies not autobiographies. They are just detailed literary account of personalities written to describe the achievements, philosophy and socio-economic structure of states by others. *Baburnama*, the autobiography of Babur who ruled India from 1483 AD to 1530 AD is very famous autobiography in India but it cannot be considered as an Indian autobiography

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 07.

because he was outsider.<sup>35</sup> So, now question remains that when the autobiographical writings in India came into fashion?

I find that the genre of autobiographical writing in India prominently came in fashion under the British rule. The modern education, printing press, communication system, railways, scientific knowledge and various social reforms have brought social mobility and consciousness among Indians to write autobiography. In this view Bhikhu Parekh writes:

British rule also introduced modern individualism and rationalism. Indian began to question traditional values and practices and to experiment with new form of life and thought. Unwillingly, to fully adopt the new and unable to break with the tradition, they became puzzled to themselves. This highlighted their self consciousness and stimulated self-reflection. They were anxious to share with others the excitement of their newly found freedom and the problems it had brought in its train. Since Hindu society generally hostile to them, they sought each other's approval and good opinion. For these and other reasons they grew a new subculture conducive to autobiographical writing. A group of people were anxious to write about themselves; a well develop constituency was interested in reading them; and the newly acquired access to western literature offered the necessary intellectual tools for writing autobiographies.<sup>36</sup>

The genre of autobiographical writing started in British rule in India has been still continuing in different modes and discourses. Among the numbers of popular autobiographies, Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* and Nehru's autobiography titled *An Autobiography* are very much popular. Though, Ambedkar have not written any autobiography but he himself became a character throughout his life. Analysis of these literary autobiographies is a difficult task when the subject is religion. In the case of most well-known characters like Gandhi and Nehru it is very tough to comment on the connection between life and literature exclusively because these autobiographies can best be understood within the non-religious or secular framework of their life. I am taking both Gandhi's and Nehru's autobiographies together because most of the parts of Nehru's autobiography are dedicated to Gandhi's leadership in congress for national movement and rest of the parts dedicated to national movement when he was leading congress.

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<sup>35</sup> Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives, Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.

<sup>36</sup> Parekh, Bhikhu (1989). *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An analysis of Gandhi's political discourse*. New Delhi: Sage Publication. P. 280.

Apart from its obvious autobiographical elements, Gandhi's autobiography contains two important elements. They are; the importance of religion and morality in life and preservation or continuance of Varna system as it is. M.N. Srinivas commenting on Gandhi writes that:

Religion was central to Gandhi's life, thought and work and he regarded politics as applied religion. However, his religious ideas were complex, and his utterances and writings on religion, over a period varied according to the occasion.<sup>37</sup>

Further, quoting B.R. Nanda he is of the opinion:

In the first place, Gandhi considered himself a Hindu. He said, it [Hinduism] was the most tolerant of all religions. Its freedom from dogma gave the votary the largest scope for self-expression. Not being an exclusive religion it enabled the followers not merely to respect all the other religions, but to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths. Non-violence ('ahimsa') is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism. Hinduism believes in the oneness not only of merely all human life but in the oneness of all other lives.<sup>38</sup>

To understand above quotes we can take reference from Gandhi's own writing. He himself in his autobiography writes that 'the term religion I am using in its broadest sense, meaning thereby self-realization or knowledge of self'.<sup>39</sup> What I think after reading Gandhi's autobiography is the concept of Gandhi's religion is not an easy task to understand. Gandhi tried to broaden the horizon of religion by imbuing it with the universal principles of humanity, morality and self-realization. However, every religion is deeply connected with some beliefs, myths etc. and well supported by rituals but Gandhi never gave much importance to rituals and practices. For him, religion acts as an institution in society and people use it in their daily affairs to solve their problems. Religion is the permanent element in human affairs and helps them to find their full expression and development. Nevertheless, I am not able to explain Gandhi's religion in any definitive language but all I can say is that his religion is functional and have permanent relation with god. He was proud of Hinduism but as a true follower of religion he did not prevent himself from rejecting and criticizing several institutions, ideas and beliefs which Hindus ordinarily regard as part of their

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<sup>37</sup> Srinivas, M.N. (1995, June 25). Gandhi's Religion. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 30(25), 1489-1491.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Gandhi, M.K. (1927). *An Autobiography or The Story of my experiments with truth*. Translated from the Gujarati by Mahadev Desai. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.

religion. For instance, he not only rejected untouchability but fought against it all his life.

Nehru stood apart from religion, believed in reason, rationality and what I think; he tried to adopt practical part of morality. In his vision religion has wider and deeper theme in intellectual and political history of India and it can help unite Indians in their search for a common destiny. But in his autobiography, religion is subsumed within the story of nationalism. Gandhi's concern is how we can create and sustain a moral public life? He focuses to reconstruct its shape. Both Gandhi and Nehru tried to search principles and practices through which Indians could engage in the public political life secularly and more committedly. Gandhi offers morality and ethics to create a common ground for all section of society. And his ambitions were much greater than those who think merely in terms of a narrow identity. However, his ambition to maintain Hinduism as it is, was severely criticized. Both Gandhi and Nehru sought to combine 'Universalist ambitions' with enlightened sense of distinct context of India in which individual can get their full expression. We can see their 'Universalist ambitions' when thinking about moral questions. However, Gandhi's concerns to some extent have a narrow framework like caste, class, Hindu, Muslim, Varna system and religion but Nehruvian framework is much broader than Gandhi. Even India and Indians are also a narrow framework to him. He never asked, what should an Indian do? Or what should a Hindu or a Muslim do? Rather, he asked: what should a moral being do? What is right for well being for humanity? Especially Gandhi was more concerned with the relationship between morality and personal identity. What means should one adopt in order to achieve moral ends? What could ensure that the institutions of modern politics, the state, would pursue moral ends by moral means?<sup>40</sup>

Coming to the purely religious questions both Gandhi and Nehru found that India is a multi religious country. Religious faith/myths are deeply imbedded in each and every section of society, where no particular religion or belief system could claim universal allegiance like Christianity in west. They were of the opinion that India being a deeply stratified society and rigid caste structure based on Varna-system where people conflict every day on the matter of religion and caste and no religion could achieve a

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<sup>40</sup> Khilnani, Sunil (2003). *The Idea of India*. England: Penguin Books.

universal status. No doubt, Nehru was one of the few Indian intellectuals who were the product of western education. But he had great knowledge of both European as well as Indian history. Most importantly, he was such a rare intellectual having capacity to relate his knowledge of European history with Indian circumstances. Understanding, the pattern of Indian society and religion in particular, through his vital European experience he had firm belief that the democracy is the only acceptable standard of political legitimacy for the modern state and if this is linked to religious faith, the consequences will be catastrophic. He wrote in his Autobiography how terrified he felt with organized religion expressing that:

The spectacle of what is called religion or at any rate organized religion in India and elsewhere has filled him 'with horror, and he had frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seemed to stand for a blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.'<sup>41</sup>

He agreed with Gandhi that a politician should hold deep moral conviction. He believed in the moral life as sustaining not just private life but also as necessary for the living of any kind of political life. Yet he never placed his faith in religion throughout his autobiography. Further, he is of opinion that what Church has done to England is that it has served the very purposes of British imperialism and it has given both Capitalism and Imperialism a moral and Christian covering and the brand of 'Organized Religion'<sup>42</sup>.

Nehru was of opinion that this religion has apparently helped them to pursue their interests by blunting their moral emotions where their own interests were concerned. For Nehru religion is the enemy of clear thought. It is based on the acceptance of certain fixed theories and dogmas. It shuts its eyes to reality and believes in preconceived notions. 'It is narrow and intolerant to other opinions and ideas. It allows itself to be exploited by self-seekers and opportunists.'<sup>43</sup> For him, religion hinders the moral and spiritual progress of the people. Usually is an asocial quest for God or the Absolute and concerned with individual salvation than good for society. Moral standard has no relation to social need but are based on a highly metaphysical doctrine of sin. It is non progressive and anti-change. Religion is very cause of slavery

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 390-391.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. Nehru has described Protestantism as organized religion because the way it has adopted itself to new conditions and their intension to dominate the both worlds.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

and exploitation.<sup>44</sup> After seeing the general view on religion, let us see their views towards downtrodden and exploited in religious discourse of India.

Finally, Nehru turns towards the downtrodden and exploited. He asserts his view on religion to the respect of development of individual that:

religion consists of the inner development of the individual, the evolution of his consciousness in a certain direction which is considered good... But as far as I understand it, religion lays stress on this inner change and considers outward change as but the projection of this inner development. There can be no doubt that this inner development powerfully influences the outer development. But it is equally obvious that the outer environment powerfully influences the inner development. Both act and interact each other.<sup>45</sup>

Above quote from Nehru clearly explains the effective role of religion in the development of personality of individuals. On the contrary to this, for him, the class, caste and section of society which are downtrodden and exploited, victim of economic and social circumstances can never progress inwardly. They are restricted by outward religio-cultural environment. They can never achieve inner development until and unless their external religio-cultural environment is not insured equally. Hence, in the attempt to gain this outer freedom and to end the humiliation and the exploitative environment of downtrodden and exploited, so as to remove all hindrances to inner development the right means of religion should be adopted.

Hence, the self-presentation and self-interpretation of Gandhi and Nehru differs considerably from that of Rousseau and Saint Augustine's confessional mode in west which I have mentioned before. Both characters do not indulge themselves in Rousseau's and Augustine's intense introspection and they rarely provide intimate personal details or even a physical description of themselves like ancient autobiographies which have been analyzed earlier in this chapter. Their works are closer in spirit of the Indian tradition though Nehru is more oriented to western outlook. Apart from offering occasional insights into his emotional state, both present their portrait as a supremely well deserved fashion of autobiography, dedicated to Indian traditions and values. But even in the autobiographies of these most secular personalities the pains and sufferings of Dalits, downtrodden and exploited are not portrayed. Neither in respect of their identity nor against their centuries degraded

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 395.

social, religious and cultural position. The obvious reason is that they cannot feel the pains and suffering of these communities. So, we need, what I understand, to analyze Dalit autobiographies exclusively to understand to social reality of Indian society.

My research cannot be furthered without scrutinizing close relationships between Dalits and non-Dalits literary writings. Without judging the validity of allegation made by Dalits to non-Dalits and vice-versa in terms of representation and misrepresentation, I cannot take this issue as a subject of research. Now here, I am taking the basic terms and conditions which are being debated in the study of Dalit Autobiography to see the different dimensions of relationship between autobiography and objective and subjective social reality with the valid explanation to the allegation made to Dalit literature because it differs not only in terms of social reality but also in terms of objective and subjective conditions of debates.

#### 4. Dalit Autobiography and Social Science

Dalit literature is one of the major sites of their resistance and liberation movement from the exploitation and exclusion. Even after six decades of Indian independence Dalits continue to face social exclusion, physical violence, mass killings and rapes by ‘fire tender’<sup>46</sup> owned and operated by high caste dominant people or by themselves against Dalits attempt to create equal social and cultural opportunities. Dalit literary writings have emerged as a reaction to this physical violence and social exclusion as well as their misrepresentation in mainstream literary writings. Extending this view Valmiki writes that ‘Dalit literary movement is not just a literary movement; it is also a cultural and social movement. Dalit society has been imprisoned for thousand years in the dark mist of ignorance, deprived of knowledge. Dalit literature is the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits.’<sup>47</sup> But there has numbers of objections been made to bring genre of Dalit autobiographical writings in debate by upper caste literary critics.

Writing about the upper caste literary critics against Dalit literary writings, Sharan kumar Limbale in his book *‘Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations’* has written that ‘it has been charged that Dalit

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<sup>46</sup> This term I have taken as similar concept as described by Paul R. Brass (2005) in his book *The Production of Hindu Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. University of Washington press.

<sup>47</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2001). *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*. Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan. P. 97.

literature is propagandist, univocal and negative; that it does not represent the individual person; and, that excessive resentment is heard in Dalit literature.’<sup>48</sup> Further, it has been charged that Dalit literature is not neutral. Dalit writers cannot portray true relationships with their pains. It is nothing but exaggeration. The fact which I have found is that Dalit literature emerged as part of the Dalit liberation movement. Therefore, Dalit writers have to play dual role, first- to show the commitment to this movement and second- to portray clear picture of their suffering, pains and realities of Hindu society as well as to present their anguish and their questions. Dalit writers turn the table on mainstream literary objections by charging that mainstream literature is not able to present the voice of Dalits, exploited, marginalized and oppressed groups. Being oppressor they have either ignored the suffering and exploitation of oppressed or they are not able to feel the pain of the suffering of Dalits and oppressed groups. Valmiki finds almost similar reason and writes; ‘the non-Dalits are unfamiliar with the burning miseries of Dalit life, it is because of the distance between Dalits and non-Dalits that has been created by the Indian social order. When they do not know the reality of the Dalit life, whatever they will write about it will remain superficial.’<sup>49</sup> Hence, the charge that Dalit writing is propagandistic is because it aims to bring out the existing discriminatory social realities.

Another literary contest in Dalit literary movement has emerged out of the argument similar to what Valmiki made above. Dalits writers claim that Dalit literature can be written only by Dalits. How can non-Dalits feel the pain of dragging and cutting dead animals forcibly? How can non-Dalits have the traumatic experiences of humiliation if they do not have any live experiences of untouchability, segregation, exclusion and caste exploitation? Non-Dalits write about these experiences of Dalits only with the power of their imaginative capacity. Their writings about Dalits cannot be treated authentic.<sup>50</sup> Sharankumar Limbale too has suggested that only Dalits can represent Dalit in an authentic manner. Valmiki writes non-Dalits writings about Dalits ‘born

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<sup>48</sup> Limbale, Sharan kumar (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee. Hyderabad: Orient Longman. P. 34

<sup>49</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2001). *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*. Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan. P. 34

<sup>50</sup> Sarukai, Sunder (2007, Oct. 06). Dalit Experiences and Theory. *Economic Political Weekly*. 42 (40) 4043-4048



out of pity and sympathy and not out of desire for change or repentance.’<sup>51</sup> Dalit literature is propagandistic because it is written to bring about change. It is full of anger because sometimes words become short to represent the traumatic pain of Dalits. Their pains cannot be represented even in pages of the literatures. It does not provide joy and happiness like non-Dalits writings. It is not fiction. It is not the glorification of achievements but presentation of the picture of sub-human condition of Dalit communities. It is also argued that non-Dalits sympathies to Dalits are just an attempt to enter into the emerging wide literary scope in the field of Dalit literature. They want to grab this opportunity. The experiences described in Dalit literature are social and it is articulated as collective in character. Dalit literature is characterized as the literature of masses. In the absence of live experiences of exploitation, segregation and humiliation non-Dalits’ writings are neither reflexive nor able to present a collective character of Dalit literature.<sup>52</sup> Thus, in this respect autobiography becomes the favourite genre in Dalit literature in terms of representation of feelings of pains and sufferings of Dalits.

The newly emerged genre of literature to explore social reality of Dalit community through narrating autobiography is proved as a favourite genre of Dalit literature. It has become a powerful means to represent suffering of Dalit communities be it social, cultural, economic and religious. However, mainstream critics who say Dalit Autobiographical narratives are not a literary genre because it is unstructured and stereotypical. Quoting Bhagwan Das, Valmiki writes in the defense of above critics that ‘Dalit Autobiography should be written so that not only Dalit history will stay alive but it is also true portrayal of wrongdoers and exploitative character of Hinduism to Dalit communities.’<sup>53</sup> Kancha Ilaiah writes Dalit Autobiographical narratives of ‘personal experiences bring out realities in a striking way.... I would argue that this is the only possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place.’<sup>54</sup> Thus, Dalit narratives are not just exploring the past events and sufferings of Dalit lives but it is a way of

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<sup>51</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2001). *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*. Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan. P. 34

<sup>52</sup> Sarukai, Sunder (2007, Oct. 06). Dalit Experiences and Theory. *Economic Political Weekly*. 42 (40) 4043- 4048.

<sup>53</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2001). *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*. Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan. P. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ilaiah, Kancha (1996). *Why I Am Not Hindu: A Shudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta: Samya Publication. P. xii.

reasserting and reconstructing their identity in such a way as to help understand Dalit lives and exploitative Hindu social order that imposed immense restrictions to block cultural and religious mobility to Dalit communities. It also raises the sense of self-respect and passion for change in exploitative social order which is anti-Dalit and Brahminist. Further he writes that:

The ancient Indian Brahminical texts have been irreverent to Dalits. It does not contain anything which a Dalit can take with pride. He says turning the heroes into villains Hinduism differs from other religions even in terms of the way it has structured its Gods and Goddesses. All the Gods and Goddesses are institutionalized, modified and contextualized in a most brazen anti-Dalitbahujan mode.<sup>55</sup>

Hence, Dalits have never find space for cultural and religious opportunities because of their preordained impure status, preordained life of perpetual cultural and religious subjugation both as an individual and as a member of almost all form of stigmatized and oppressed community. Dalit autobiographies portray substantively this exploitative nature of Brahminical social order as well as the suffering of Dalit community. So, the genre of Dalit autobiographical writings has gained the status of the favorite genre of Dalit literature.

Coming to the final section of the chapter after analyzing the terms of debates in the Dalit autobiographies, now I am analyzing Dalit autobiographies in terms of subject matters. This section also explores the various objectives of Dalit autobiographies to understand their vision and social relationships from Dalits points of view.

Dalit autobiography is the autobiography written by Dalit itself. A close watch of these autobiographies reveal the fact that people belonging to this section of the population have started narrating their life stories mainly after independence because education was denied to them for a long time. The emergence of Dalit autobiography is very contemporary phenomena and a distinct genre by itself. One of the major concerns of Indian literature is that 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? These debates highlight that Dalit autobiography has been used as a means of assertion. Their autobiographical narratives have been used by Dalit writers as a form of not only social and cultural assertion but also in political and religious assertions. It provides

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

the viable entrance to the public sphere and a reassertion of control over the construction of Dalit selfhood. 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.<sup>56</sup>

Recent critical theory on Dalit autobiography serves as an interesting lens through which one can visualize difference between Dalit autobiographical narrative and the autobiographies of famous individuals of 'Savarna' caste. Dalit autobiographies are usually written by 'anonymous individuals' who emphasize to explore the ordinariness of their life along with their suffering, exploitation and humiliation in Indian society rather than to celebrate their achievements. It is this unique narration of collective selfhood of Dalit autobiography writing which aims at establishing themselves as representative of their community.<sup>57</sup> For Dalit autobiography, the entire life-narrative is based on the idea of the collective identity of the entire marginalized groups as Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography says that 'the Dalit readers had seen their pain in the pages of mine.'<sup>58</sup> It means in Dalit self autobiographical narrative, the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self. It is different in respect of subjectivity also.

The second major concern of Dalit autobiographies is the subjectivity in them. The question of subjectivity in these Dalit autobiographies is deeply connected between the 'Individual self' and the 'Collective self'. The ways Dalit narrative and autobiography have been used as a means of political assertion by Dalit communities reveals villages or the grass-roots level as the actual site of the power struggle where the voice of the marginalized individual contesting the institutionalized narrative of the dominant group.<sup>59</sup> It is being used to challenge the dominant and hegemonic discourse of so called upper caste by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting new symbolic structures of its own heroes, Gods & Goddesses. The poetry written in the glory of Dalit heroes and Dalit narratives are being recited in the

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<sup>56</sup>Narayan, Badri (2009). *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India; Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

<sup>57</sup> Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives, Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.

<sup>58</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010). *Joothan*. Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. P. 05.

<sup>59</sup>Narayan, Badri (2011). *The Making of Dalit Public in North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 97-122.

villages to glorify their own heroes and histories to generate a common sense of feeling to reassert their self identity.<sup>60</sup> Further, these Dalit autobiographies help understand and analyze the power relations which have been helping for centuries sustaining the system of domination and exploitation in Indian society. So, it explores the Indian social reality.

Thus, Dalit autobiographies has been revealing the continuation of caste-based discrimination and the power structures and belief systems that support the practice of Untouchability since the beginning of this genre of Indian literature. A close observation of Dalit autobiographies shows that in India Dalit autobiographies explores three dimensional agenda i.e. an expression of their painful suffering to generate empathy among non-Dalits, establishment of a foundation by which a movements can be built to deconstruct the irrational hegemonic Brahminical code of conduct and the assertion of Dalit identity to claim equal socio-political rights. Thus, for the Dalit communities' autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of expression, assertion and exposition in its own right.<sup>61</sup>

The Dalit autobiographies have certain objectives like, to contest the basis of caste discrimination, to deny the false claim of Non-Dalit writers, to decide the subject of autobiography and to reveal the subject matter of Dalit autobiography so that masses can see the reality of Indian society. The first and foremost objective of Dalit Autobiography is to contest the basis of caste discrimination, marginalization, segregation and exploitation of Dalits in Indian society. This is well reflected in Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*. Valmiki asserts that:

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.

All sorts of mythologies were constructed: of chivalry, of ideals. What was the outcome? A defeated social order in the clutches of hopelessness, poverty, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, religious inertia and Priestocracy, a social order embroiled in ritualism, which, fragmented, was repeatedly defeated by the Greeks, by the Shakas, by the Huns, by the Afgans, by the Moghuls, by the French and by the English. And yet, in the name of their valour and their greatness, savarnas kept hitting the weak and the helpless. Kept burning homes. Kept insulting women and raping them. To draw in self

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<sup>60</sup>Narayan,Badri (2009).*Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India; Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.

<sup>61</sup> Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives, Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan. P. 257-261.

praise and turn away from the truth, to not learn from history, what sort of nation building is being dreamt of?

Time has changed. But there is something somewhere that continues to irk. I have asked my scholar to tell me why 'Savarnas' hate Dalit and Shudras so much? The Hindus who worship trees and plants, beast and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits? Today caste remains a pre-imminent factor in social life. As long as people don't know that you are a Dalit things are fine. The moment they find out your caste, everything changes. The whispers slash your veins like knives. Poverty, illiteracy, broken lives, the pain of standing outside the door, how would the civilized Savarna Hindus know it?

Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have imprisoned myself in a narrow circle. They say that literacy expression should be focused on the universal; a writer ought not to limit himself to a narrow, confined terrain of life. That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door.<sup>62</sup>

Valmiki here raised a number of issues related with Dalit identity by virtue of being a Dalit himself, his accidental birth in Dalit caste and mythologies, histories, of Dalit communities. He also raised the questions related with untouchability, discrimination and segregation to Dalits. Hence, Dalit autobiographies explore the various dimensions of caste discrimination which need to be contested.

The other clear objective of these Dalit autobiographies is to expose the reality behind the false claim of non-Dalit writers. A numbers of non-Dalit scholars are making an argument that castes no longer function as a significant force in the public sphere in modern India. They claim that untouchability was abolished by the Constitution of India in 1950 and the practice of untouchability and discrimination in any form was declared as punishable offence. Consequently, there is no longer caste-based discrimination against any communities in Indian society. Again in reply of this false claim of non-Dalit writers Valmiki in his autobiography show by narrating his experiences of pain and exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. He writes that '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'<sup>63</sup> (Valmiki 2010, p.16). In another instance, Valmiki relates that how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab. He felt that

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<sup>62</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash. (2010) 'Joothan' Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. pp. 133- 34.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

whenever he went to the lab for practical his teacher Brajpal Singh kept him out on some pretext or the other. He writes 'I was unable to do any lab experiments after trying for several months, I began to feel certain that I was being kept out deliberately'<sup>64</sup> (ibid., p. 65). He had been awarded poor marks even though he had answered the examiner's questions quite correctly in oral test. He had been awarded poor marks by virtue of being Dalit.

Feeling almost same caste discrimination Surajpal Chauhan also explores many instances in his autobiography for example, he describes how he and his wife had asked a zamindar (landlord) for some water on a visit to his village during the summer vacation. The zamindar immediately agreed, but when he became aware of their caste identity of Chauhan he became angry and began insulting them<sup>65</sup> (Chauhan, p. 31). This is also clearly mentioned in his autobiography that the upper caste people do not allow their children to play with a Dalit child even their touch pollutes severely to upper caste children<sup>66</sup> (ibid. p.30). Thus, Dalit autobiography constitutes a challenge to false claim of non-Dalits writers in general and to this exploitative Brahminical caste structure in particular. He also claims that the traumatic pain of humiliation and insult of being born as a Dalit can only be felt by a Dalit who has experienced it. According to Ashish Nandy the pain whether experienced as humiliation, as (social and religious) exclusion or as actual physical violence all serve a similar purpose in the Dalit autobiographies that is to uncover the exploitative nature of Indian caste structure based on Brahminical code of conduct.<sup>67</sup> Hence, for this purpose they felt the need to fix the subject of Dalit autobiography.

The third objective of emergence of this new genre of Dalit literature is to fix, who the subject of Dalit autobiography is? Since, from the above discussion it is clear that Dalit autobiographies, unlike the non-Dalits autobiographies serve a very different purpose than to celebrate the personal achievements of celebrities in public life with a sense of fulfillment. Their aim is to lodge a symbolic complain against oppression of Dalit communities. Their aim is not to concentrate on individual achievements but links the individual to his entire Dalit communities. One must agree with the writing

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Chauhan, Surajpal (2005). *Tiraskrit*. Ghaziabad, Delhi: Anubhav Prakashan. p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Nandy, Ashis (2011). In Gopal Gurru, *Humiliation: claim and context* (ed.). Oxford University Press.

of Promod Kumar Nayar in reference of *Joothan* a Dalit autobiography written by Valmiki that:

‘Dalit writing is born out of brutal experiences. These are experiences shared by many Dalits across India. What is important is that in the case of Dalits, there has been no visible self-representation of their trauma. Dalit trauma has always been represented by others, while the victims have themselves, always been silent. That is, there exists a gap between event (atrocities) and representation. *Joothan* is a stage in the *representation* of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma becomes visible when the persons who compose these oppressed/injured put forward characterizations and representations of ongoing social events. *Joothan* brings to visibility the life of a Dalit lived in rural and semi-urban India, where caste is the single dominant factor...’ these claims must be articulated as speech acts before an audience. Valmiki’s text functions as a speech act where cultural trauma is claimed on behalf of several Dalits. That is, a single victim’s autobiography must be now treated as the biography of a community, in fact of a nation within the Indian nation itself... In her Translator’s Note, Arun Prabha Mukherjee suggests that texts like *Joothan* provide an answer to Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, ‘can the subaltern speak?’ (x). The Dalit text is the subaltern speaking... *Joothan* is not individual but collective.’<sup>68</sup>

Their aim is to bring solidarity and support in a group struggle to challenge the hegemonic caste structure which is the very source and the basis of the exploitation, marginalization and segregation of Dalit communities in Indian society.<sup>69</sup> Hence, A Dalit autobiography represents not only the experiences and aspirations of a single individual but of an entire community at large as a subject of study.

I find the Dalit autobiographical writing is a unique genre of Dalit literature. It arises from the revealing of its subject matter of segregated social, cultural and religious life of Dalit community as actually practice in Indian society. It explores Dalit life in relationship to other mainstream society and people and to his spiritual and religious surroundings to the world they live in. Today, the old nature of central interest of individual has shifted to central interest of collective as a clear-cut departure from previous nature of autobiography seen in almost all genre of autobiography discussed above. The most general contrast is formed by the Dalit autobiographical writers who while living the individual experiences in their depth, pervade the communal experience in depth. Readers find their own pain of social and religious exclusion in

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<sup>68</sup> Nayar, Pramod K. (2008). Dalit Writing, Cultural Trauma and Pedagogy: The Testimony of Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*. *Haritham*. 19, P. 51-65.

<sup>69</sup> Kumar, Raj (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives, Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan. pp. 259- 260.

the pages of Dalit autobiographers. The active or passive relation of man to their religion is an obvious phenomenon of society and so with the Dalit communities. This process of establishing active and passive relation between Dalits and non-Dalits communities has taken the conscious efforts to develop an independent identity using their religio-cultural discourse at wider level in India which I will explore in next chapter.

## 5. Conclusion

In the process of analyzing various dimensions of literature of autobiography I have come to the conclusion that autobiographies should be considered as one of the authentic sources for social science research. The interpretative, qualitative and analytical potential reflected in this socio-historical survey of autobiography, one can also see the multidimensionality of relationships between society and autobiography. The questions of subjecthood can provide us an entry point in the social realm. I think all this prove the importance of autobiography for exploring social reality.

I have established the above fact by surveying autobiographies starting from ancient genre to modern genre of autobiographies in general and Dalit autobiography in particular. The Ancient mode, the Confessional mode, the Victorian mode, the Indian mode all are almost similar in their sense of inner conviction, in their intense desire to glorification of their heavenly Character, their achievements and interpretation of their suffering, their protest, their confession and apology. Despite the above similarity there remains a marked difference in the nature of subject matters throughout the ages.

There are visible significant changes in relationships between autobiography and society with the changed subject matters. A significant shift to the question of subjecthood of collective from the subjecthood of self has also been observed in this socio-historic survey of autobiographies. However, throughout this socio-historic journey, the analytical potential to explore and investigate social reality of autobiography remained static. In all ages, autobiographies maintained a kind of relationships with society which display the conditions, situations and both external and internal environment in which characters are developed. Each genre has its own uniqueness and this uniqueness is the product of its inwardly and outwardly



conditions. Each genre has reflected its empirical social realities existed within its domain. Hence, autobiographies are always a part of social science research. For many people, the autobiography is intertwined with social stratification, power relation and authority possession, for others, it has become a method of representation of their restriction, repression, and reaction. The former attitude is well interpreted in the general autobiographies discussed above and the second attitude is well interpreted in Indian Dalit autobiographies.

Even in the modern age the moral and immoral strength of autobiographies has continued to influence people. In autobiography which I have studied for the purpose of analyzing social relations and their objective of subjecthood concerning the question of identity and social relationships tell that in India there is vital emphasis upon autobiography to investigate social reality. The role of autobiography as a rich resource of social science research either collective or individual cannot be denied. A living faith serves to integrate the individual's behaviour in society. It serves to give him an authentic source meeting the events which individual life as a part of society inescapably brings. It also provides the basis to know everything an individual does, every judgment he makes, every point of view he develops in given social conditions. The facts found in autobiographies not only justify how hard oppression, segregation and humiliation to Dalits in India are in practice in the existing social relationships between different section of society but it also reflects the authentic knowledge of social structure and nurturing and rearing condition of individual. Now, one can easily understand that how authentic an autobiography is as a rich source of social science research.

## Chapter-02

### Rituals of Dalit Communities: A Construction of Social

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In the first chapter we have seen that autobiography is an authentic and important source of social science research. It reflects that despite the immense variations in the outward observances the inner glow and the function of society in all genre of autobiography are identical except the Dalit autobiographies. It reflects a counter public sphere of Dalit communities developed against ignorance, misrepresentation of Dalit social reality and the undemocratic power relations between the Dalits and non-Dalits. Alternative Dalit religion is one space of this Dalit counter public sphere. In this chapter I will see how Dalits religious discourse is different from general religious discourse.

Religion is an important part of human life. Different sociologists have different opinions about religion. Some sociologists are of the opinion that 'religion is the source of higher culture', morality and public order. Religion, concerned as it is with shared belief and practices. In every established society it is one of the important institutional structures establishing total social order. Religious institutions are generally having a special importance and it is most viable forms of human association. Religion is characterized as the most expressive of human aspirations. It is testimony of morality, a source of moral public order and inner individual peace. It is also blamed of being an anti-progress, a viable source of fanaticism, ignorance, superstition, obscurantism and as 'the opium of the people'. Religion has such a significant effect on mankind that cannot be denied. It represents a set of human practices that reflect individual's orientation and behavior in society.

For some the question of identity is related to the individual subject and for other the same element become a collective subject in asserting their identity. It remains very close to the religion directly or indirectly cultivated the given space in various social relationships based on certain code of conducts. In the process of the formation of identity some sections of society lagged behind and are subjugated by those sections of society who developed their identity superior to them by misinterpreting that

certain code of conducts. Further, those sections of society who lag behind in terms of their identity are not only misrepresented but also exploited, subjugated and humiliated in almost all discourse of their lives by those who have superior identity. In India they are known as Dalits. So, they have started searching an alternative to develop their identity at least par with them. In this process religion became the most viable source to develop their independent identity. They started cultivating alternative religious discourse by practicing different rites and rituals. In this chapter I am exploring why Dalit communities felt the need of alternative religious discourse and what are the various rites, rituals and religious practices that they follow to express themselves quite distinct from the mainstream Hindu religion.

The aim of the chapter is to locate the cause of the emergence of alternative religious discourse of Dalit communities in the domain of counter public sphere first and their various alternative rituals and practices reflected in Dalit autobiographies. It is also aimed to analyze their social relationship in context of Hindu religion. What are their significances to them? What is the nature of those different rituals and practices of Dalit communities? To understand Dalit theological concept related to their misery, sin and atonement and its effects on their living. What is their spiritual privilege under the crisis-ridden limited space given to them in Indian society? What are their religious pattern of thinking and other inter-related view of their socio-religious sphere?

## 1. General Religious Discourse

Functional theory of 'Sociology' sees society as what Thomas F. O'Dea writes that society is:

Ongoing equilibrium of social institutions which pattern human activity in terms of shared norms, held to be legitimate and binding by the human participants themselves. This complex of institutions, which as a whole constitutes the social system, is such that each part (each institutional element) is interdependent to all the other parts, and that changes in any part affect the others, and the condition of the system as a whole. In these terms, religion is but one form of institutionalized human behavior.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> O'Dea, Thomas F. (1969). *The Sociology of religion*. New Delhi: Colombia University, Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited p. 02.

Religion plays significant role in the maintenance of social order. It is like a social institution having both ‘*latent*’<sup>2</sup> and ‘*manifest*’<sup>3</sup> functions in maintaining the equilibrium of social order.

Religion is also a part of human culture that is defined as a ‘way of life’.<sup>4</sup> It is integrated with values, beliefs, myths, histories, traditions and symbolic system of meanings which is very much particular to the community which practices it. It influences deeply the thoughts and feelings of human being which reflects in their actions. It defines human situations and the conditions of action for the members of community. ‘Members of community share values, beliefs, myths, histories and ideas and the orientation emerged out from their shared common beliefs and values affecting their behavior.’<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the contribution of religion to community and society as a whole is immense, given the Religion being the creation of society, some section of society use and propagates it as a means to achieve certain vested ends. In the history of the evolution of all major religions the aforementioned characteristics are invariably found to reside with or without any realization of the fact. When it comes to Hindu religion it becomes most pronounced. Hindu religion prescribes a universal hierarchical, exploitative, oppressive, indignant and inhuman social code of conduct placing Brahmins and Dalits into a dialectically conflicting categories assigning on former ritually superior position and striping the later off of any position by naming them as outcaste/ untouchables. It prohibits not only to participate into the practices and rituals of mainstream Hindu religion but also it lays down the rules and regulation for inhuman punishment for the violation of the code of conduct based on the notion of *pollution and purity*.

Further, Thomas F. O’Dea explains that ‘functional theory sees human being in society as characterized by two types of needs and two kinds of propensities to act.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For detail see Morton, Robert K. (1968). Chapter-01, Manifest and Latent Function: Toward the Codification of Functional Analysis in Sociology. In *Social Theory and Social Structure*. The University of California: Free Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For detail sees Williams, Raymond (1989). Culture is Ordinary. In *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. (Pp. 03-14). New York: Verso Press.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 05.

<sup>6</sup>O’Dea, Thomas F. (1969). *The Sociology of religion*. New Delhi: Colombia University, Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited. P. 04.

They are the *adaptive needs*<sup>7</sup> and the *expressive needs*<sup>8</sup>. The *adaptive needs* say that human being ‘must act upon the environment, either adjusting to it or mastering and controlling it, to ensure their own survival.’<sup>9</sup> In the entire evolution of mankind in every given historical circumstances we find continuous attempts to adapt and express themselves thereby improving and progressing capacity to control their environment according to the condition of their lives. ‘Human activities are not simply adaptive and manipulative but human also express feeling, respond to the members and things in non-utilitarian ways and enter into relationships to ensure their survival.’<sup>10</sup> In the process of improving and progressing their capacity human beings never limited themselves to those emotive, interactive and communicative activities necessary for their survival but expands these elements far beyond survival requirements to solve their individual and common problems maintaining equilibrium in social order according to given situation. Religion plays significant role establishing fine balance between these emotive, interactive and communicative activities of human beings to fulfill their adaptive and expressive needs and finally to maintain equilibrium in social order. Religion as a social institution acts as an adaptive and expressive agency and preserves human beliefs, values, practices and other social and cultural resources important to their survival of lives.

Further, functional theory of religion finds such adaptive and expressive needs as a result of three fundamental existential characteristics of human beings. They are *Contingency*<sup>11</sup>, *Powerlessness*<sup>12</sup> and *Scarcity*<sup>13</sup>. ‘Contingency’ is inescapable aspect of human existence. It is so brutal a given fact that howsoever prudent we organize human lives into, we can never manage it to our satisfaction. In spite of our so far unseen progress in our scientific and technological and intellectual horizon and with its attendant capability, we sluggish to protect ourselves from the vagaries of conditions of human life. It is here when all attempts of men get exhausted in their search to impose certainty on their social circumstances they look for answer in ‘beyond’. This reference to beyond is what satiates the inherent urge of men for both

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 05

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

‘meaning’ and ‘certainty’ in their life. This ‘transcendent reference’ i.e. religion serve as reason for certain inescapable aspects of life. As man cannot live without institutionalized social system, religion does not ceases into psychic contentment only, indeed it becomes the most potent of all social institutions operating as *latent* and *manifest* social fact.<sup>14</sup>

*Powerlessness* is another inherent attribute in men. Death and disaster are as much facts of life as life itself. These two most horrific of all experiences again call for search into realm of ‘beyond,’ thus resulting in the birth of religion. It is not that Religion empowers them enough to control the forces, which is ordinarily beyond them. It is simply that religion gives ideas of those uncontrollable forces. It alleviates their agonies. It indeed transform their misery resulting from *Powerlessness* into acceptable social facts where everyone has got to participate through elaborate rites and rituals specific to organization of social life.<sup>15</sup>

*Scarcity* is yet another fact of human life. Our all round progress is intriguingly unmatched by scarcity surrounding us. For society to function smoothly and efficiently it must allocate roles and rewards to its members differently. Thus *Subordination*<sup>16</sup> and *Superordination*<sup>17</sup>, functionalist theory postulates, are inevitable consequences of scarcity in human life. This subordination and its attendant consequences of deprivation and denial of dignity and freedom cause men to take refuge in religion. Religion thus provides the most palliative solution to the scar left out by the social consequences of *Scarcity*.<sup>18</sup>

These three fundamental existential characteristics enable human beings to enter into relationship with unseen supernatural, transcendental, meta-physical forces known as Gods & Goddess or other holy and unholy forces. These ongoing existential characteristics based on human activities and continued function of social system require notion of ‘Superordination’ and ‘Subordination’. *Godly forces* are regarded as ‘Superordinated’ and human’s controlling, adjusting, adaptive and expressive forces are regarded as ‘Subordinated’. To maintain the basic structure of social system based

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

on their existential characteristics inherent in 'Superordinated' and 'Subordinated' position creates an order. Order implies authority and authority requires subordination to maintain the equilibrium in social system. Religion has significant role to play in maintaining those equilibrium.

In the maintenance of that social equilibrium human being establishes relationship with those supernatural forces in search of answer to those questions related to human sufferings; unhappiness, dissatisfaction and disappointment emerged out in the contradiction with these three existential characteristics. In search of these answers religion is sanctified by some religious beliefs, values, norms, rituals practices and activities. Showing their religious beliefs, norms, values, ritual practices and activities religion tries to search answers to questions emerge out in contradictions of wishes and interests of those mankind in the process of adapting, adjusting and controlling the environment or nature. And this enables mankind to enter into relationship with those other worldly supernatural power and it becomes practical necessity of human being eventually becoming inseparable feature of human conditions.

## 2. Functional contribution of Hindu religion to Dalit communities

Taking this notion of fundamental existential characteristics of human life it is easy to understand the functional contribution of Hindu religion to human life in Indian society. Hindu religion created an order in society known as caste system. In the process of allocation of functions they created hierarchy in which certain functions are fixed to certain caste. To maintain this hierarchical social order based on Brahminical code of conduct, Hindu religion blocked the mobility of individuals by attaching caste as their identity and not functions as their identity. In this hierarchical social order religious function was allotted to certain caste, however, religion was the matter of mankind irrespective of their caste class and social status. As religion emerged out in response to the fundamental existential characteristics of mankind it enables each and every human being to access and participate in this grand play of human necessity and expression. It is not the prerogative of certain section of people belonging to certain caste. Hindu religion denies the 'essence' of religion and reduces it into a mere a practical spectacle of social order through making Brahmins the sole guardian of interpreter of *Shastras*. Those who were allocated the ritual function or occupation of

religion are regarded as superordinated and those who were indulged in manual works are regarded as subordinated, impure, untouchables and Dalits. They were not only subordinated religiously but also in the allocation of material and non-material rewards.

It is obvious that in this created hierarchical social order and environment Dalit communities are neither in position to adapt, adjust, nor mastering to it and nor in position to control it. In their subordinated, segregated, subjugated sub-human condition they are not in position to fulfill their 'expressive needs' in Hindu religion. Because of their impure status they are restricted to participate in religious practices and ceremonies and are blocked to enter in religious institutions of Hindu religion. Hence, to fulfill their adaptive and expressive needs in environment they have developed their own practices, rituals and activities and establish different kinds of relationships with supernatural powers based on their own myths, beliefs and superstitions to fulfill their religious aspirations emerging out of their fundamental existential characteristics of life. This is well reflected in Dalit autobiographies. For instance, Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan* asserts that 'not only in our basti, but in the entire Valmiki community, people do not worship Hindu gods and goddesses... The Valmiki community worships its own gods and goddesses whose name are not to be found either in the Vedas or in Puranas of Hindu religion. Like, *Chamariya Mai, Deeh Baba, Sheetla Mai (Murdahiya), 'Kalua-Pwan, Bulakhi Masan, Neta Khais'*<sup>19</sup>, *'Peer Badshah, Shivaji Mahesh'*<sup>20</sup>, *Mata Mai, Bhumiya Mai*<sup>21</sup> and several other spirits. 'The rituals and methods of worship are also different.'<sup>22</sup>

I have said above that religion like a social institution has both '*manifest*' and '*latent*' functions. Manifestly, In Hindu religion, caste is still the most powerful factor in determining the person's identity. The caste system is the result of the Hindu belief in *reincarnation and*

*Karma*. In this caste system Untouchables are at the bottom of the list or more precisely outside of the list. I am sure, such a rigid caste system is not found anywhere

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<sup>19</sup> Chauhan, Surajpal (2005). *Tiraskrit*. Gaziabad; Uttar Pradesh: Anubhav Prakashan. p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Nemishray, Mohandas (1996). *Apne- Apne Pinjare*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan. P. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010). *Joothan*. Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata:Samya Publication. P. 62.



in the world outside India. Persons born in a caste. Once born in that particular Caste, his status is determined and immutable. The birth decides one's status and this cannot be altered. It is irrespective of any talent that a person may have or develop or any wealth a person may accumulate. This is well reflected in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* by a sarcastic comment made by an upper caste woman when he was attending his friend Hiram Singh who was walking door to door to *salaam* the upper caste people after his marriage ceremony was culminated. An upper caste woman commented 'howsoever much you study... you will remain a Chuhra'<sup>23</sup> (Untouchable). In another event, when he was coming back to catch a bus after a seminar on 'Buddhist Literature and Philosophy' some people were arguing themselves 'whatever you say, a Chuhra (Dalit) will remain a Chuhra (Dalit). However high an officer he may become, he cannot change his caste.'<sup>24</sup> Further, the caste in which a person is born predetermines what occupation the person will pursue. Caste is very important element of Indian society. Caste determines his or her destiny. One has no freedom to choose their choice. Birth decides the occupation of the person in question.

To maintain this exploitative hierarchical caste system Brahminical social order associated the division of labour according to the capacity and talent of the individual. But in actual practice, this original principle of division of labour based on latent function of Hindu religion is manipulated in such an irrational way that even the most ignorant Brahmin continued to be regarded as someone next to god. Whereas a man from the lowest class, however high his qualifications and talent may be he is condemned as a degraded, untouchable and impure person. Its original aim is to promote organic unity among the Hindus, to perpetuate their hegemony and to exploit people belonging to lower strata.<sup>25</sup> In this process of perpetuating their hegemony upper caste always try to maintain the Brahminical code of conduct and whenever any attempt made by Dalits to at least search their identity and feel the pain of Dalit communities, it is regarded as breach of this discriminative code of conduct and they are punished severely. For instance, Valmiki asserts that 'once in school, master

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.131-132.

<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. (1987). The Hindu Social Order- Its Essential Features. In Vasant Moon (ed.) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches*. Vol-03, (p. 95-115). Bombay: Deppt. Of Education, Govt. of Maharashtra.

Saheb was teaching the lesson on Dronacharya. He told us, almost with tear in his eyes, that Dronacharya had fed flour dissolved in water to his famished son, Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The whole class responded with great emotion to this story of Dronacharya's dire poverty... but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?'<sup>26</sup> In spite of responding this reasonable question 'Master Saheb screamed, Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back.'<sup>27</sup> He was severely punished while screaming his teacher that 'Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya'. This senseless reprimand germinates flames inside Dalit community to alienate them from Hindu religion. This sense of alienation from Hindu religion is well reflected in the very next sentence of Valmiki on same page of his autobiography. He says seeing this feudalistic mentality 'I too have felt inside me the flames of Ashwatthama's revenge.'<sup>28</sup> I personally too have realised that even the most intellectual person of Hindu religion of India is not free from this feudalistic mentality. For instance; Valmiki asserts that whenever I asked in seminars that 'what historical reasons lie behind this hatred and malice. Who find the Verna system ideal and take pride in Hindutva? Instead of replying directly, they either avoid my question or get angry.'<sup>29</sup> Nemishray also asserts that seeing this continuous oppression and discrimination to Dalit community by Hindus the hate to Hindu religion, tradition, myths and ultimately to Hindu religious system was deeply imbedded in me.<sup>30</sup>

Thus in practice, this social and religious behavioural pattern of social relationship freezes itself into the caste behavioural pattern permanently, based on social, religious and cultural supremacy of one caste over the other which amounted to a denial of what had brought the Hindu social ideal into existence based on functional theory of religion. That is to say, it became the negation of its original meaning and purpose. The scourge of Untouchability, too, emerged against Dalits. This oppressed class, then, 'began to suffer most terribly in almost all context of life because of the Varna

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<sup>26</sup>Valmiki, Omprakash (2010). *Joothan*. Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. P. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>30</sup> Nemishray, Mohandas (2006). *Apne-Apne Pinjare*. (Part-02). New Delhi: Vani Prakashan. P. 31.

system.’<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Valmiki also asserts that ‘my village was divided along the lines of touchability and untouchability.’<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Different Ritual Practices among Dalit Communities

The above evidences shows that since Hindu religion imposed restrictions on ritual freedom to Dalits and do not allow them to enter into Hindu temples Dalits move closer to village deities and worship the local Gods & Goddesses. They do not need for huge temples and they have also searched their alternative religious rituals and practices to worship their deities. Dalit autobiographies reflect different deities, religious practices, rituals and festivals of Dalits. Let me explore it.

#### 3.1 Rituals Related to Scarcity, Powerlessness and Poverty

Different rituals and religious practices reflected in Dalit autobiographies emerged out due to above defined three fundamental existential characteristics of human being i.e. Contingency, Powerlessness and Scarcity, are connected with various myths. They reflect their conditions of poverty, powerlessness and scarcity.

##### a) Chamariya Mai: Equivalent to ‘Ganesh’

In ‘Murdahiya’ Tulasi Ram asserts that in his village, Azamgarh of eastern UP, Dalits worship separate Gods & Goddesses different from savarna (i.e. Hindus). These Gods & Goddesses are worshipped by Dalit community only. Chamariya Mai and **Deeh Baba** (see fig. 01.) are prominent deities among various others. ‘He Goat’ and pig or piglet are offered to them along with Halwa-Sohari, Dhar and Pujaura. Some nutmeg (myristicia fragrans, in hindi Jayphal), Rasins (chuhara), cloves (caryophyllus, in hindi laung) etc. are mixed in water in pot is called ‘Dhar’ and a fister flour was called Pujaura. There are no temple, neither Pictures of Gods & Goddesses nor statues, some earthen statues of elephant and horses are kept in open place made as mound of soil is the place of Chamariya Mai and Deeh Baba. Some spirits are also worshipped by Dalit community but they are not placed like Chamariya Mai and Deeh Baba. Dalits

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<sup>31</sup>Jatava, D. R. (1997). *Social Philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication. Pp. 07-09.

<sup>32</sup>Valmiki, Omprakash (2010). *Joothan*. Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata Samya Publication. P. 95.

understand there are spirits all around them living in trees, stream, stone, etc and they would do them great harm if not make them happy.<sup>33</sup>

Dalits worship different Gods & Goddesses of their own. In writer's of 'Murdahiya' village people worship Chamariya Mai. She is Goddesses equivalent to God 'Ganesha' being worshipped in mainstream Hindu society. See fig. 01& 02.



Figure 01: This is place made by just mounted some soil known as 'Deeh Baba' in Dalit communities. Dalits place it in the east of their village and worship annually. This village deity is worshipped as the 'Guard' or preserver of village in case of external attack. They offer first invitation cards of any function including wedding cards to him so that their function will go successfully. Source: Taken by self from a Village of Gopalganj district, Bihar.

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<sup>33</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 11.



Figure 02: Here in the picture of ‘Deeh Baba’ there is lying a wedding card been offered to this village deity. Source: Taken by self from a Village of Gopalganj district, Bihar.

As similar to God ‘Ganesha’ The Dalit community in writer’s village worship Chamariya Mai before starting new work. There are many other similar deities of Dalit community explored in Dalit autobiographies. For example, when writer was going to appear in his fifth class board exam, he was suggested by his Grandmother to don’t forget worshipping and promising to offer Dhar-Pujaura to Chamariya Mai before entering in the examination hall.<sup>34</sup> Chamariya mai lives in a tree known as ‘Taad’ or ‘Tarkul’.

#### b) **Pre-Offering**

In every religion one thing is very common to human being that is pre-offering. Pre-offering is the act of making promise to their deity whom they worship to offer things like pig, piglet, goat, chicken, sweets etc. for getting their demand fulfil. This word has same notion as corruption in administration of a system of country. People offer bribe to officers for getting their work done. In Dalit religion people promise to offer

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 82

Goat, pig, piglets, karaha etc if their wish gets fulfilled. It is reflected in Dalit autobiographies. For instance, in 'Murdahiya' writer had a 'He-goat' which was promised to offer Chamariya Mai if their wish get fulfilled by their deity. It is also reflected in Dalit autobiographies that once a goat is promised to offer their deity they cannot sell it or kill it for any other purpose. They graze that offered animal till the date of offering. If that goat is killed in any accident or by any other animal anyhow, before the date of offering it is understood ominous. They have no other option except offering other goat (most probably he-goat) along with most beloved sacrifice pig or piglet to get rid of that ominous. It is believed that if they do not make happy to their deity by offering goat along with pig or any other animal which is conceived as his/her beloved sacrifice/offering, their deity would bring epidemic in reflection of his/her anger which may cause disaster to their community.<sup>35</sup>

**c) Tree-Worshipping**

One thing which is very common in Dalit religion is the tree-worshipping. Since Dalits are poor and due to other restrictions imposed by Brahminical society, they cannot get built temple. Their Gods & Goddesses are also homeless as Dalit communities are. Their Gods & Goddesses live in tree and are placed on mount of soil made under that tree. Trees are worshipped in order to keep their child alive and their longevity of life. Whenever a child is born in their home they plant a 'Peepal' tree on same day and start worshipping, they offer water to tree in the morning before Sunrise and burn oil lamp in evening just after Sunset. They have a notion that as long as that 'Peepal' tree keep growing, so their child. However, the real cause of high death ratio of child in Dalit community is poverty, mal-nutrition and lack of other medical facilities to them. In spite of consulting doctor for medical advice they follow such type of various myth and rituals to get rid of various health related problems. Writer in 'Murdahiya' asserts that the realities behind following these types of rituals based on certain myths are born out of their conditions of poverty and scarcity. In this scarcity and penury availing medical facilities are almost impossible. So they have to depend on this type of various myths.<sup>36</sup> See fig. 03.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



Figure 03: This is the picture of Peepal tree planted by a Dalit on the same day of birth of his male child. The offering water in the morning before sunrise and burning oil lamp in the evening just after sunset is still in the practice. Source: Taken by self from a Village of Gopalganj district, Bihar.

In the beginning of this chapter, I have made an argument taking reference of functional theory of religion that religion emerges out with fundamental characteristics of existential conditions of human life.

### 3.2 Rituals for protection against epidemics

There are various rituals which are practiced by Dalit communities holding some myths behind them. They have understanding that if these deities are not made happy their consequences will be epidemical outbreak. For instance:

#### **a) Sheetla Mai**

Since every religious practices and rituals have some myth, history and story. Same is true for worshipping 'Sheetla Mai' reflected in 'Murdahiya'. In case of 'chicken pox' in village 'Sheetla Mai' is worshipped. There is a belief that epidemical outbreak of

chicken pox is the reflection of anger of Sheetla Mai. As Suneetha Rani asserts that ‘people believe that cattle disease, drought and sickness among the people spread due to her anger only.’<sup>37</sup> So, to keep happy ‘Sheetla Mai’ in Azamgarh village of Uttar Pradesh there was an annual tradition of worshipping ‘Sheetla Mai’. Every year on a fixed day whole Dalit community participate in this festival. In this festival Dalits offer piglets and Halwa-Sohari. In addition, to make Sheetla Mai happier prostitutes are called to dance and due to annual religious festival prostitutes are easily available for this ceremony.<sup>38</sup> They are known as ‘Devil Dancer’. In village when a person in Dalit community suffers from chicken pox sorcery is performed by soccer. They would stroke softly the body of sufferer with small leafy branch of Neem tree. Other people would burn oil lamp and repeat name of their deities like Chamariya Mai, Sheetla Mai etc.<sup>39</sup>

#### **b) Pujaiya**

Pujaiya is an annual ceremony practice in Dalit community. For this celebration Dalits collect donation from all members of their village. People make Dhar in earthen pot (pitcher). This is celebrated at mid night and out of the village. Soccer is called to perform sorcery. Soccer produce bizarre (funny) voices while offering cloves to deities. This is long process. It took hours in night. Pitcher full of ‘Dhar’<sup>40</sup> along with a Bhatua (a kind of Pumpkin of different colour) is kept in bushes outside the village. At mid-night Bhatua is tossed down to break into pieces on road crossing and Dhar is poured over it. People raise voices chanting the names of their different deities. Here, breaking ‘Bhatua’ is the symbol of sacrificing a human being. There is a myth that after this celebration/offering/practice no epidemic will outbreak in coming year. After Pujaiya offering, Dalit community offer Pig to their Gods in daytime on same day.

The ritual which is being followed to offer pig on the day of ‘Pujaiya’ has very significant relation with mainstream Hindu society. It reflects two practices of Hindu society. Generally, pigs are reared by a particular caste of Dalit community. They

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<sup>37</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Chakrapani, Ganjha (2009). Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities. In Manohar, Murali (ed.), *Dalit and Religion* (Pp. 09-18). New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. P. – 14.

<sup>38</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Some Jayphal (Nutmeg), Cloves, Rasin (Chhuhara) mixed in water in a pot caled Dhar.



have different caste identity, like Pasi, Dom, Mehtar or whatever. Those need pig to offer their deities purchase it and bring it to their village or to the place where offering is planned to be made. After catching pig people tie their legs together with rope and with the help of a Bamboo piece known as ‘Kadi’ they bring pig hanging between two people each side of that Bamboo piece. Tulasi Ram has compared this scene with the touching scene created by a Hindu girl after marriage when she leaves native/father’s home to in-law’s/husband’s home sitting in ‘Doli’ hanging between two people each side. Pig also similar to that Hindu girl cries like the girl lamentation cry in pain of leaving her loving father’s place to exploitative husband’s place. See fig. 04.



Figure 04: This fig is taken from the archive of ‘Madhubani Paintings’. It is symbolic representation of a ‘Doli’, used to bring a girl to her husband house after marriage.

Method of killing pig in the process of offering is totally inhuman. First, Putting Pig down to earth, with the help of that Bamboo piece crossing his neck people push it down forcibly so that Pig could not run away. They do not kill Pig by cutting his neck like goat and other buffalo offering. They insert a two foot long iron rod prepared for this purpose to his heart to kill slowly and keep pushing it till death. It is believed in Dalit community that longer the period of crying Pig in pain happier the deity whom they offer. As soon as Pig start crying in pain of killing people start chanting/ acclaiming the name of their deity while beating drum at same time so that people enjoy this inhuman practice. In ‘Murdahiya’ this inhuman practice of Dalit community can well be compared with the ‘practice of Sati’ practiced in mainstream Hindu society. It amounts the same degree of inhumanity when a woman is forced to

be 'Sati'. In that process of making a widow 'Sati' forcibly, widow woman was forced to sit on the pyre of her dead husband.<sup>41</sup>

In this practice widow was made to sit in that way forcibly so that she could not run away similar to Dalit community do with pig while offering him to their deity. When the women sitting on pyre would start crying while burning her body on fire people from Hindu community forcibly make her sit. Even they used to beat her with Bamboo piece so that she could not run away. As soon as women used to start crying people used to beat drums so that her cry could not be heard by people and especially women from outside because hearing this painful, touching cry of this inhuman practice women could revolt to this inhuman practice of exploitative Brahminical society. However, the practice of 'Sati' in mainstream Hindu society is disappeared but offering Pig to their deity in Dalit communities is still continuing.<sup>42</sup> These are the rituals mainly for the protection against epidemic.

c) **'Jai- Ram –Jamedar'**

The oldest people of every community are encyclopaedia of a numbers of myths. In Dalit community also the grandmother of writer's of 'Murdahiya' Tulasi Ram was encyclopaedia of myths. She suggests writer to chant the words 'jai ram jamedar' to save himself from snakes. However, his community does not know the real story behind it. They neither know the cause of using this mantra nor they know the origin of that myth. For example, the root of words 'jai ram jamedar' lies in the history of Mahabharata. When writer read Mahabharata then only he came to know the reality behind it. He came to know that Janmejaya was the son of the king Parikshit, who was the grand child of Arjuna. Janmejaya arranged a 'Sarpayajna' to kill all the snakes. Due to his personal cause he was to kill all snakes. After that event it is a myth that hearing the name of the king Janmejaya even till date snakes move away to save their life. writer's Grandmother used the word Jamedar in place of using Janmejaya. Jamedar was the impaired name of Janmejaya and 'jai ram jamedar' became mantra. His community has belief that if they chant these words snake will move away and do not bite to them.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010), Murdahiya. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. Pp. 42-43.

### 3.3 Rituals asserting alternative Identity

Some rituals of Dalit communities show that they practice it just to replace the mainstream Gods & Goddesses and other practices to assert their alternative identity.

For instance:

a) **‘Gaddi Lagana’**<sup>44</sup>

Different community has different religious practices even they belong to Dalit community. They follow rituals of their own ‘Panth’. It is also reflected in Dalit autobiographies that a group of people following same ritual behaves like a religious group, especially when they want to create an alternative after separating themselves from the larger religious group. They try to establish an institution of their own. They behave like religious body characterised by an attitude of exclusivity in contrast with the more inclusive religious group. They behave like ‘Sect’<sup>45</sup>. They try to follow a particular system of religious worship especially with reference to the rites what they want to propagate and ceremonies. They try to bind themselves together with self-respect and mutual dignity having motive to follow same ideal. They have a tendency to propagate and popularise similar sacred ideology and rites centring on their sacred symbols. For example, in ‘Murdahiya’ it is reflected that a group of Dalit community follows ‘Shiv-Narayan panth’<sup>46</sup>. Basically the rituals of Shiv-Narayan panth in his village are followed simultaneously with three mainstream Hindu festivals Holi, Deewali and Krishna-Janmashtmi. They name this occasional celebration different from mainstream Hindu festival ‘Gadi Lgana’. They make a stage on a low table covered with clean sheet. They put all available pictures of Gods & Goddesses, their ancestors and deities whom they worship, sacred book covered with red cloth called ‘Anyas’ on the table made as stage. Nobody is allowed to touch their manuscript (sacred book). After preparing stage and lighting incenses people sit around this stage

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Sect’ is a group of person following a particular religious faith, deviating from a mainstream religious tradition. For detail see Horlambs

<sup>46</sup> See Ram, Tulasi (2010), *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 18. *Shiv-Narayan Panth* was started by a Kshtriya, Shiv Narayan itself. He was from Baliya district of Uttar Pradesh state. The most interesting fact about this is that this panth was started by a kshtriya but Dalit community only became his devotee. Why rituals of this panth are followed by Dalits only is a mysterious fact. With time it became an organization for the conduct of rituals, magical and other religious observances of Dalit communities. They developed a tradition to show Devine respect to their dead ancestor and activities organized to respect their memories. They started showing extreme belief and bizarre behavior. The source of this fact is the author of ‘Murdahiya’ himself. He is professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University and I visited a number of times to him to clear my doubts.

and start singing their own devotional prayer. In writer's village on this occasion people sing Kabir's hymns. They distribute prasada in the end of 'Gadi Lgana' celebration.<sup>47</sup> This example shows that Dalit communities have their particular system of religious worship and rituals. They try to create a group of devotee inculcating particular system of their own rituals especially with reference to their culture, rites and deities. It is centred on exclusive ideology, practices, rituals and sacred symbols characterised by their own system of beliefs. Their conduct of rituals and other religious behaviour reflect respect to their own cultural resources i.e. history, myths, story, narratives etc. It also reflects that a group of Dalit community like Shiv Narayan panthi are the people having united by a specific doctrine under a leader to liberate themselves from the exploitative Brahminical Hindu society. The similar practices are observed in 'Joothan'.

'Although the basti people were hindu in name, they did not worship any hindu Gods or Goddesses. At Janmashtami, it is not Lord Krishna but Jaharpir, another God whom they worshipped. Or they worshipped the spirits not the eighth day, the ashtami, but on the morning of the ninth day of worship, the navami. In the same way during Deepawali it is not the goddess Lakshmi but Mai Madaran who is worshipped and offered a piglet. Or halwa and puri are prepared as offerings.'<sup>48</sup> John C. B. Webster is also of the opinion that 'unlike the Chuhras and Paraiyar, large numbers of Chamars were initiated into a variety of Panths which members of other castes belonged. Those Panths which attracted the most Chamars were the Kabir Panthis, the Raidassis, the Shive Narayans, the Dadu Panthis and the Satnamis.'<sup>49</sup> It is well reflected in Dalit Autobiographies that Chamars, Chuhras, and other Dalits do not worship the major deities of mainstream Hindu religion like Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Rama, because they are not allowed to worship them and they have only alternative to search their own alternative deities to worship. The basic aim is to replace the rituals of mainstream religion.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010) 'Joothan' Translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. P. 40.

<sup>49</sup> Webster, John C. B. (2002), Dalit Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives. Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributers. p. 24.

### 3.4 Rituals to ward off ominous

There are several myths of love, hate, presage, and ominous related to birds activities that prevails in Dalit community. People easily guess symbolic indication of presage and ominous by observing activities of birds and they relate these activities to different myths. In different symbolic indication of birds crow biting is understood to be most ominous. Whenever accidentally a crow attacks a person with his legs or beak, it is believed to be very ominous. To get rid of this ominous a member of this family is immediately sent to the closest relatives to send a message of death of that person who is attacked by crow. Hearing the message, women of closest families start crying and mourning the death. After some time they are told the truth and they stop crying. It is believed that by doing this ritual the ominous caused by crow biting would disappear.<sup>50</sup>

#### a) **Beating Soop Heating Poverty**

There is a tradition of beating ‘soop’<sup>51</sup> on the penultimate day of Deewali. Dalit women (especially the elder lady of the family) beats Soop with stick in the ‘Godhuli Bela’<sup>52</sup> (period just before morning) or in the last phase of night on the eve of ‘Deewali’. They chant the word ‘soop pito daridra khedo’<sup>53</sup> (beat the soop to remove poverty) while beating the soop. However, the condition of Dalits has never changed or improved by doing this practice. This is just a myth.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.5 Rituals for easing the anger of divine forces

Some rituals are related to the easing the anger of divine forces.

#### a) **Sawani Mai**

It seems that Dalits behind every natural calamity saw the divine anger and behind every reward the divine blessing. Often offerings are made to propitiate the deity who is responsible for rain. There is a tradition in Dalit community to offer pig to local deity so that they could make them happy and save their community from any misshapen in future. Sawani Mai is popular as the Goddess of rain. Dalits offer pig to

<sup>50</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010), Murdahiya. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 48- 49.

<sup>51</sup> Soop is used to separate grain from straw/husk. In village generally women use it to winnow.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Godhuli bela’ is period of disappearing darkness of night. People can see while Sun light is not reached yet. Here ‘bela’ denotes time or period.

<sup>53</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010) Murdahiya. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

her on the eve of 'Ashadh' month of Hindi calendar year. Ashadh month is the beginning month of rainy season. The same practices are performed by Dalits of different villages. Since she is believed as Goddess of rain and flood, Dalits offer pig in order to make her happy and bring sufficient rain required for crops of that season. Usually rice/paddy crop is planted in this season in northern India and it need more rain than other crops. So, once 'Sawani Mai' is made happy, she would bring sufficient rain. It is a belief in Dalit community. Sawani Mai is Dalit deity and she is worshipped by Dalit community only not by mainstream Hindu community. She likes Pig blood most so Dalits offer her Pig blood. In this offering the same method is followed to kill Pig as Dalits offer Pig on the Day of 'Pujaiya'. It is also known as the welcome ceremony of the rainy season.<sup>55</sup>

**b) Offering Undergarment to Spirit**

Practice of worshipping spirit is also reflected in Dalit autobiographies. Spirits are worshipped so that they do not attack on members of family or community. It is myth among Dalits that spirits live on trees. So, they worship spirit as well as the tree on which it lives. For keeping spirit happy people offer Jaur (Kheer) and undergarments (known as Langote) regularly every year. That kheer is cooked in pitcher especially on cow dung fire. It is offered on roots of that tree on which spirit is believed to live and undergarment (Langote) is tied with the branch. Then, remaining kheer are distributed to all member of community as prasad/offering. Every family has their own spirit. They believe that the spirit they worship will fight with all other spirits in case they make an attempt to attack on members of their family.<sup>56</sup>

**c) Offering 'Karah'**

There are a number of practices of performing sorcery. Offering Karaha is a special kind of sorcery. It is always offered by an Ahir/Yadava caste soccer. In this ritual people boil a number of bucket milk in a big moaned. Soccer soon while chanting some mantra starts bathing with that boiling milk. He chant the name of different deities while bathing his 'Lathi' with same boiling milk. Putting it on his shoulder he

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

rooms back and forth. A huge gathering from distance comes to enjoy this strange scene. This is known as offering Karaha to deities.

### 3.6 Dalit Rituals: Preserver of Indigenous Arts

It is said that dalit rituals are indigenous. They perform it in the form of art to express their views.

#### a) 'Kohbar'<sup>57</sup>

Kohbar is very important ritual of wedding among Dalit communities. Kohbar is a secret room, a aesthetically rich painting, it is songs and finally it is important ritual of wedding of Dalit community. Tulasi Ram asserts that the tradition of Kohbar painting is found only in Dalits' weddings and Dalits are preserver and carrier of this supernatural art. Further, he gives an argument about the origin of ritual and custom of Kohbar. Since Dalits are illiterate and they did not have knowledge of alphabets. So, they originated this tradition and style of paintings for the expression of their views in wedding ceremony.<sup>58</sup> But Nishi Sinha, Upendra Thakur and Mulk Raj Anand are of the opinion that ritual and custom of Kohbar is equally popular in non-

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<sup>57</sup> Kohbar is the room converted as a secret place during wedding for rituals and customs. It is decorated by married women only before the wedding. The ritual of kohbar is very popular in north India. Especially in Madhubani district of Bihar state, it is most important part of wedding. In Mathil's marriage, for four to five days bride and bridegroom spend in Kohbar room. Usually the pooja room (the room in which family member use for the purpose of worshipping and they keep statues and pictures of their Gods & Goddesses) is converted in Kohbar room. They are left alone in Kohbar room. In other regions wedding lasts only one day and bride and bridegroom are left alone in Kohbar room for the remaining time after other rituals. The paintings of the wall of that room are aesthetically very rich. It portray different rituals and customs. Kohbar paintings also depict different positions of intercourse using the Lingam and Yoni symbols. The rangoli is made on the floor of that room. The paintings of the wall are also called Kohbar. Kohbar is one of the style of Madhubani paintings. It is aesthetically rich and meant to assure a romantic bond between husband and wife. There is also figure of Sun and Moon to meant that this two eternal Gods are witness to marriage along with other Gods & Goddesses. It is also called house of Gods. Women sing song when bride and bridegroom are in Kohbar. These songs are known as Kohbar songs. 'the inspiration of Madhubani paintings is primarily religious. The ancient religious literature and mythology together with their numerous gods and Goddesses and the many tantra provide the themes for the painting (Nishi Sinha, p. 21). Generally they believe in tantra-shastra. 'They use special symbols for Gods like a lotus flower is made instead of Goddess Durga, a straight Lingam instead of Lord Shiva and likewise many different symbols are used. She further says the paintings of wall have deeper theme, also narrative, for they are the stories being told sometimes in a series of panels.' 'The most elaborate wall painting is done in the Kohbar room. These are designated to bless the couple with fertility and protect them from the evil eyes of the demons and evil spirits. The picture of the Sun, the Moon, the fish and the tortoise, snakes, frog, betel leafs, kadambh tree, parrots, Gods and Goddesses are beautifully depicted in the Kohbar. They have very rich aesthetic and religious messages like betel leaf, tortoise etc are considered auspicious, the parrot also known as 'love bird' signifies love and the fish which is Lord Vishnu's first incarnation. The Rat that often creep in is the indication of the presence of the God Ganesha, without whose blessing no auspicious event can take place' (Nishi Sinha, p. 21-26).

<sup>58</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. pp. 105-106.

Dalits in Madhubani and other parts of northern India as in Dalit communities. Nishi Sinha says no doubt this distinctive painting explores various local religious and cultural heritage based on traditional stories, dancing, singing and rituals but the symbols and 'the deity depicted, however, differ according to family, caste, the month in which the wedding is held accordance with the advice of their own priests'<sup>59</sup> (Nishi Sinha, p. 23). It has once got even international popularity as a part of Madhubani paintings. In this indigenous art and painting people use indigenous colour, prepared by themselves and local themes. In this respect one would agree with Suneetha Rani who asserts that 'the present tradition of deity worship is an extension of the Indus Valley culture whereas the worship of Vedic Gods is an extension of Brahminical religious tradition.'<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, not only their arts and paintings styles are different, the different Dalit communities have their own exclusive dances such as Chamar natna, Kanala Mai nach, Basuli nach (only for shoe makers) etc.

The pains and sufferings of Dalit communities well reflect in arts, rituals and practices of these communities expressed through their distinct modes and styles. Savarna Hindu societies do not have aforementioned practices.<sup>61</sup> Non-Dalits being alien to the experiences of pains and sufferings of Dalits, as they also being literate, belonging to oppressor and ruler class, they remained removed from aforementioned distinctive arts, rituals, customs and practices. They are materially rich and enjoy all facilities brought by modernity so they do not feel the importance of local and indigenous arts. People are leaving these rituals and customs as their conditions improved in terms of literacy, economy and modernity. C. B. Webster is of the opinion that 'whether organized around caste, village or (to a lesser degree) sect, Dalit religion was what is now being called folk-religion in the sense that it sprang up within local communities and is the direct response of the people of local conditions rather than being a sharing in a centrally developed national and global tradition. This all Dalits seemed to have in common. Whether they also, in their various forms of religion, also shared broadly similar experience of worlds and ways of coping with them as was expressed in

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<sup>59</sup> Sinha, Nishi (1999). *Tourism Perspective in Bihar*. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation. p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Ganjha Chakrapani (2009). Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities. In Manohar, Murali (ed.) *Dalit and Religion*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. P. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. Pp. 105-108.



Chuhra religion.’<sup>62</sup> Hence Dalits rituals and practices are the preserver of indigenous arts and culture. See fig. 05.



Figure 05: This is a ‘Kohbar Painting’. The various symbols used in this picture have specific meaning and sacred value. The origin of this painting is understood as the people had no knowledge of alphabets; they started this painting to express their views related to auspicious ceremony like weddings. Source: <http://www.google.co.in>

### 3.7 Rituals: Assertive in nature

Some rituals in Dalit communities are related to their forgotten and buried heroes. When Dalit communities became conscious about their identity, they started tracing their roots to those forgotten and buried Dalit heroes. They are now glorifying those local heroes to assert their independent identity.

#### a) Rahashu Bhagat

Dalits rituals and religious practices are mainly based on local myths, history etc. and ‘the main visible ritual of Dalit religion is the worship of the village deity’.<sup>63</sup> Among the deities some has their root in local story, myth and tradition. They are worshipped to assert an important identity of Dalit community. For instance, in Gopalganj district of Bihar state, there is a popular place ‘Thawe’ is known as ‘shakti peeth’ where

<sup>62</sup> Webster, John C. B. (2002), *Dalit Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributers. p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Ganjha Chakrapani (2009). *Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities*. In Manohar, Murali (ed.). *Dalit and Religion*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. P. 14.

Goddesses Durga is worshipped. There emerged a story which has root in Chero Dynasty of 'Hathua' state in 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. King 'Manan Singh' from 'Chero' dynasty was ruler.

The story goes like this. There was a grass cutter, named Rahashu Bhagat, belonged to Dalit community was a great devotee of Goddesses Durga. '*Manan Singh*' himself was a devotee of Maa Durga and he claimed to be the greatest devotee of 'Maa Durga' and did not like other saints and religious person's claim to be such a great devotee of Goddesses Durga. He was of proud nature. Once, due to great famine people were starving hunger but king was so cruel that he had given no relaxation to poor in terms of levy even in that miserable condition. They did pray to 'Maa Kamakhya' for relief. It is believed that to relief her devotees from their bad condition 'Maa Kamakhya' appeared in midnight while sitting on seven lions and told 'Rahashu Bhagat' to cut grass and after collecting it worships her in midnight. Rahashu Bhagat started following Goddess by cutting grass whole day and after collecting it he used to worship goddess 'Maa Kamakhya'/Durga. Then the Goddess 'Durga' would her seven lions harvest the grass. Thus he started getting '*Manasara*' (a type of holy rice). Every morning Rahashu Bhagat started distributing that holy rice known as 'Manasara' among poor people.

As a result, he became as popular as next to goddesses because he had relieved poor people from their starvation. When the king Manan Singh came to know about this, he felt insulted and became very angry. Immediately the king called Rahashu Bhagat and ordered to call 'Maa Kamakhya' to prove his true devotion. Rahashu Bhagat pleaded the king a number of time not to do so but 'the king insisted to call Goddess and threatened Rahashu Bhagat to kill in case of disobedience. At last, helpless Rahashu Bhagat started to pray Maa Kamakhya to call her. On the call from her true devotee, Maa Kamakhya started her journey sitting on seven lions from Kamrupa (Assam) where she is known as 'Kamakhya Devi' to Thawe. Rahashu Bhagat again requested the King to drop his insistence but the king did not agree and forced Rahashu Bhagat to call Maa. Meanwhile Maa appeared in Vindhyachal for some time and was called Maa 'Vindhyavasni Devi'. In her way to Thawe Maa reached Kalighat in Calcutta and was called Maa 'Kalka Devi'. Rahashu Bhagat again requested king to quit his wish and warned him for mass destruction but The king was not agreed.

In her way to Thawe Maa stayed at Patna for a while and was called 'PatanDevi'. Then Maa appeared in 'Aami' and 'Ghodaghat' was called 'AmbikaBhawani' and 'Ghod Devi' respectively. When Maa reached 'Thawe' the weather and appearance of the place began to change. Due to hundreds of thunders King's palace fell and destroyed. Everyone was feared. The devotees of Maa started to pray her to save them as they had known that Maa had reached 'Thawe'. After sometime, Maa appeared through broken head of Rahashu Bhagat and showed her right hand wearing a 'Kanagan' (Bracelet). The four handed Maa appeared sitting on the seven lions and blessed her devotees. On the pray from her true devotees, Maa made the things normal and disappeared. Rahashu Bhagat got 'Moksha' (heaven). The king, his palace and all his empire came to end. The remnants of the palace may be seen even today around the temple of Maa at 'Thawe'. The devotee of Maa built a temple where Maa appeared. They also built a 'Rahashu-Temple' where Rahashu Bhagat used to pray Maa. It is said that after 'Darshan' (visit) of Maa Thawewali, Darshan of Rahashu-Temple is mandatory to please Maa.<sup>64</sup>

Since, Rahashu Bhagat belongs to Dalit community they worship him parallel to Goddess 'Maa Thawewali/Kamakhya/Durga. Whenever upper caste make an attempt to discriminate and restrict Dalits to enter in the temple, Dalit community asserts themselves as being greater devotee of Maa than upper caste because Rahashu Bhagat was proved as greatest devotee than anyone else. Further, they argue that if goddess Durga for which this temple been built is not discriminating Dalit community then who are you to discriminate Dalits. Dalits claim greater right on this temple than upper caste. Today 'Rahashu Bhagat' has acquired the position of alternative God almost parallel to the Goddess Durga at that place. By worshipping Rahashu Bhagat Dalit community feel a sense of self respect and dignity. To glorify 'Rahashu Bhagat' numbers of song and narratives are available there in the form of CDs, DVDs, and printed small booklets. Some sections of Dalit community trace their root from Rahashu Bhagat to assert their identity, sense of respect and dignity. See fig. 07 & 08.

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<sup>64</sup> This story is very popular at my place (Thawe block in Gopalganj district). The remains of fort of 'Chero Dynasty' of Hathua State are still there and its narrative is popular in the wide region surrounding the fort and almost whole Northern Bihar. People from the many parts of India come to visit the place.



Figure 06: This is the picture of ‘Rahashu Bhagat’ placed beside the Thawe Durga Mandir in Gopalganj District of Bihar. However, Rahashu Bhagat was a Dalit but a great devotee of goddess Durga. His idol has been carved out beside the goddess Durga temple and he is worshipped by almost all communities Source: Taken by self from a Village of Gopalganj district, Bihar.



Figure 07: This picture shows the seven lions of Goddess Durga who used to harvest grass of Rahashu Bhagat to turn into ‘Mansara’ (a type of holy rice). Rahashu Bhagat used to distribute that rice among poor and starved people during the great famine in ‘Chero Dynasty’. Source: Taken by self from a Village of Gopalganj district, Bihar.

### b) Inheritor of Buddhism

Various ritual practices have their aboriginal importance. Rituals are very much used in tracing the roots of certain community and asserting the identity in order to glorify it or creating self-respect to their community. People trace the roots of their community of family relating/connecting it their rituals and various religious practices. Here in ‘Murdahiya’ writer asserts that using horn of dead animal to keep/preserve

thing are inherited from Buddhist tradition. Writer's grandmother used to keep several medicated and non-medicated things in horn of dead animal which has root, according to writer is in Buddhist religion. He is of the opinion that in *Tripitak* some amendments were made to Buddhist Philosophy. Before it, in *Vinay Pitak* Buddhist were not allowed to preserve any food materials. They spent their life on daily earning charity but salt were not given in alms or charity to monk. They had to had their food without salt. To get rid of this problem some amendments were made in Buddhist philosophy. Now Buddhist monk could preserve salt. They started using horn of dead animal to preserve salt. Writer in 'Murdahiya' traces the root of using horn by his grandmother to preserve medicated and non-medicated thing right from the Buddhist tradition and he claims that his family may be inheritor of Buddhist religion.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4. Dalit Rituals and Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice in Dalit religion is very much common. Explaining Dalit religion Suneetha Rani is of the opinion that 'the religion of Dalit communities, which is popularly known as village goddess worship is sacrifice based and most of the sacrifice are in the form of slaughtering of animals.'<sup>66</sup> Animal sacrificing is very much prominent in Dalit communities. It is reflected in each and every Dalit autobiographies I have gone through. For example: Valmiki asserts that 'whatever the festival, there are the gods and goddesses who are worshipped. After the exorcism, the god overpowers the evil spirit and orders it to set the patient free. Afterwards the wishes of the god are fulfilled. A pig is sacrificed and the bottle of liquor offered. Whether it was a wedding or a birth or a death, it was essential to worship the gods. If someone forgot, or omitted to do so, there was a possibility that something terrible might happen to them.'<sup>67</sup> Further, he asserts that 'Pigs were a very important part of our lives. In sickness or in health, in life or in death, in wedding ceremonies, pigs played an important role in all of them. Even our religious ceremonies were incomplete without the pigs.'<sup>68</sup> Answering the question that why do Dalits continue to practice animal sacrifice Suneetha Rani asserts in Dalits' view that 'blood sacrifice is

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<sup>65</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. P. 50.

<sup>66</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Ganjha Chakrapani (2009). Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities. In Manohar, Murali (ed.) *Dalit and Religion*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010) '*Joothan*' Translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. Pp. 40-41.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. - 13

one way of resisting or denying alienation. By denying alienability, sacrifice negates a fundamental premise of possessive individualism. Rather than individuate people and mediate their association through things, sacrifice de-individuate, by annihilating the mediating object, and restoring the spirits of fraternity in the group.<sup>69</sup> However, this animal sacrifice is conducted for the common good of the Dalit community but it makes Dalit religion violent in nature.

## 5. Dalit Rituals are Eco-Friendly

The various facts reflected in Dalit autobiographies in respect of their rituals and religious practices explore that Dalit religion and rituals recognise divinity in natural objects like trees (like neem, tulsi, peepal, amla, banyan etc), stone etc. It is said that Neem tree is found only in Dalit's courtyard.<sup>70</sup> Dalits feel that there are spirits all around them living in tree and other surrounding. They have more faith in Chamariya Mai, Banshkti Mai, Sheetla Mai, Sawani Mai, Deeh Baba, Peer Baba who live in tree and stone or other natural creation than Hindu Gods like Shiva, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Vishnu, Hanuman etc who live in artificially get built temple by destroying nature like forest and cutting stone. They are household deities and need huge structures. Dalits Gods & Goddesses need no structure or temples. This shows Dalits attribute soul to plants and other creation of nature. They have their belief in both supernatural power as well as their creation. 'In every hut or outside every Dalit Hamlet a stone or a tree has been dedicated as representation of the deity.'<sup>71</sup> Dalits worship of nature inclusive in their rituals indicates itself helpful in the preservation of the nature. Hence, Dalit religious practices are eco-friendly.

## 6. Rituals are ancestral care

The existing structure of Hindu religion does not fit the Dalit's existing belief system. Their belief system incorporates a hierarchy of gods and Goddesses. Spirits of the dead ancestors has a significant role and position in their religious activities and

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<sup>69</sup> Rajan, Nalini (2011). Dalit –Bahujan Rationality and the Persistence of Blood Sacrifice. In V. Geetha and Nalini Rajan (ed.). *Religious Faith, Ideology, Citizenship: The View from Below*. New Delhi: Routledge. P. 105.

<sup>70</sup> Nemishray, Mohandas (2006). *Apne-Apne Pinjare, Part-02*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan. p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> Elisha, James (2002, Dec.). Liberative Motive in Dalit Religion. *Banglore Theological Forum*. 34(2), 78-88.

beliefs and they are comparatively superior. They are saviour of community in case of diseases, epidemics and other crisis. It is believed that they could deal with the other spirits which may cause crisis and spread epidemic to Dalit community. Other malignant and malevolent spirits are subordinated to ancestor's spirits. Also, among these spirits some are at superior position and rest of them are subordinated to them. For instance, in Murdahiya it is reflected that Chamariya Mai and Deeh Baba are prominent deities among various others.<sup>72</sup> Evil spirits come after that. Some rituals are also related to the protection from evil spirits and while some sorcerer uses evil spirits to harm others but in both processes they sacrifice animals to make those spirits happy.

## 7. Dominance of female Deities

Dalits religious ritual and belief system is based on independent, ferocious, safeguarding and powerful female deities. These deities are not subjugated to their male partner. Even they are not confined to a particular context. Among their deities most of them are powerful female deities.<sup>73</sup> The various rituals and ceremonies of Dalit communities reflect the dominant space that women have occupied in the spiritual domain of Dalit religious practices. Dalits recognise and worship female deities like Chamariya Mai, Sheetla Mai, Bhumiya Mai, Mata Mai, Bhumiya Mai, Sheetla Mai etc.<sup>74</sup> It is also reflected in Dalit autobiographies that Dalit communities follow some tantric rituals at the time when a member of family goes out to other place in search of job or work for earning so that they could not fall in the grip of other black magic practices by other women to tie up in their courtyard.<sup>75</sup> Also, Valmiki asserts that 'in our community, widow remarriage was an accepted practice. Unlike the Hindu tradition, we did not see widow marriage negatively.'<sup>76</sup> One of the essential issues in the life of human being is the issue of sexuality. As the issue of sexuality engenders power structured relation by pushing female in the private domain and depriving them from participating in all the vitals of public spheres. Therefore, it will be interesting to locate the issue of sexuality and contrast it with

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<sup>72</sup> Ram, Tulasi (2010). *Murdahiya*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan. p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Ganjha Chakrapani (2009). Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities. In Manohar, Murali (ed.) *Dalit and Religion*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. P. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Nemishray, Mohandas (2006). *Apne-Apne Pinjare, Part-02*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan. p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010) '*Joothan*' Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. P. 12-13.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Dalits' rituals and practices from mainstream religious practices. The mainstream Hindu religion exercises strict control over one's sexual conduct by prescribing sexual mores of do's and don'ts. It creates a virtual wall of segregation between man and women and prohibits the spontaneous mingling between them right from childhood. This feature of strict sexual observance is conspicuously absent among Dalit religious rituals and practices thereby enabling these communities to participate freely and fully in every aspect of their lives.

## 8. Dalit Magico-Religious Discourse

The rituals related to the practice of sorcery to get rid of the possession of spirits is very common that one can find its references in many a Dalit autobiographies.

### **a) Sorcery**

Performance of sorcery is very common in Dalit communities. Valmiki in 'Joothan' narrates:

The whole basti has strange ideas about ghost and spirits. If anybody fell sick just a bit, a bhagat would be called instead of a doctor. After the Gods or the Goddess had taken possession of the sorcerer, the sick person would be brought to him. Often this sorcerer possessed by the God would talk about the influence of some ghost or spirit and would act as though he were catching it. In exchange, the Gods and the Goddesses are offered pigs, roosters, rams and liquor. These deities are worshipped in every house. They are different from Hindu deities and their names won't be found in any Purana even if one searched hard. But go to the any family of our clan, and you will find these deities worshipped. Whether it is a birth, a wedding, or a feast for the dead, nothing can be accomplished without worshipping these deities.<sup>77</sup>

When anybody got sick in the basti, instead of treating them with medicine, people tried thing like getting rid of the evil spirit that was deemed to be the cause by tying threads, talismans spells, and so on. All such ceremonies were performed at night. When the disease was prolonged or got serious, then puchha or exorcism would be performed by calling a bhagat, a kind of sorcerer, who would be accompanied by a drummer who played the 'Dholak' and two or three singers. They sang to the beat of the drum. Their song was an invitation to the devta who would enter the body of the bhagat and make him sway... the songs were full of vulgar expressions, a mark of familiarity towards the god.

The singing and the drumming stopped the moment the bhagat began to sway. The moment bhagat's head or hand swayed, it was an indication of the spirit's

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<sup>77</sup> Valmiki, Omprakash (2010). 'Joothan' Translated from hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya Publication. P. 26.



arrival. The spirit told its name, greeted everybody. Then the elderly family member described the patient disease to spirit. The spirit touched the patient and then prescribed that the evil spirit had to be appeased.

These visiting spirits are called 'Paun'. Kalwa and Hari Singh Nalwa are very special spirits and are worshipped most widely. There are many devis as well. Mai Madaran is among the most important ones.<sup>78</sup>

#### **b) Recruitment of new Sorcerer**

Religion always has propagating tendency. To maintain the equilibrium in social order every community perpetuates their practices and rituals. It accommodates the new generation so that they do not feel the scarcity of elements required to maintain the existing social order. Dalit community also recruits new sorcerer so that they can fulfil the empty space when older generation retire. The ritual of making sorcerer is performed always in night. Valmiki asserts that in the quite of the night people summons the spirit singing song and playing drum. 'for a month and a quarter, an oil lamp would be burnt in the house, and the person who was becoming a bhagat would stand in front of it with folded hand and concentrate. He wore a thick necklace made of thread. Incense would be thrown on coal kept near the lamp, and its smoke created a mysterious atmosphere as it waffled all over the house. The guru invoke the god who was tempted by all sorts of offering in order to persuade him to manifest himself in a new sorcerer's body... those who succeeded, offer liquor and pig to the god. The whole basti is invited to a meal. The bhagat could now conduct exorcism at anybody's house.'<sup>79</sup> This does not show the same process of making doctors to take care of people in mainstream society. But in the scarcity, poverty and illiteracy Dalits make their own people sorcerer to take care of people in the condition of ill health. S. C. Dube call it *magico-religious procedure*<sup>80</sup> of Dalit community. This *magico-religious practices* are still continuing in Dalit communities for the treatment of diseases, however, allopathic, homeopathic and ayurveda drugs and injections are available in the villages.

Hence, the theological aspect of Dalit community embraces the concepts and patterns of thinking from the ways of understanding the relation between supernatural and social dimensions of power in existence. A number of simple but very practical

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 41-42.

<sup>80</sup> Dube, S. C. (1955). *Indian Village*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. P. 127.

questions are related to their theological thinking, not only to worshiping spirits and deities but it is related to the atonement, sin, misery, future punishment, etc. Dalits are very much familiar to theological issues related to misery, disease and punishment and it has primary place in their consideration but how far they are convinced about their theological issue rationally could be another subject of research. The fact that is reflected in Dalit autobiographies is that Dalits practice different religious rituals which come with their expression in different ceremonies and festivals linked with their perception of liberation/salvation. Their belief system is of a world of spirits permeating all existence. Life and living, substance and surroundings are solely dependent upon the benevolence or malevolence of spirits. Their way of worshiping is evident that Dalits are seeking to control the ill-effects of spirits' disfavour or preventing these spirits from taking complete control of their life.

## 9. Conclusion

Understanding the emergence of religious discourse of Dalit communities one can easily agree that religion takes birth in attempt of searching social security through supernatural, metaphysical, transcendental and otherworldly powers created by human being themselves and derive from their fundamental existential characteristics i.e. 'contingency', 'powerlessness' and 'scarcity'. What I observe is that religion has its source in the fundamental existential characteristics of human being. Further, the adaptive and expressive conditions of human beings depend on the fundamental existential characteristics of human being. If these adaptive and expressive conditions are different the nature of religious orientation and mode of worships would be different. In this way the adaptive and expressive conditions of Dalit communities are different from the adaptive and expressive conditions of mainstream Hindu society. So, their religious orientation, nature and mode of worships are different from Hindu religion.

Embracing their rituals Dalits also derive spiritual privilege establishing relationship with supernatural and natural powers according to their imagination. From the available sources of Hindi Dalit autobiographies it is not entirely clear how widespread these theological beliefs are. However, it is entirely clear that their religious and rituals beliefs are very much practical in the everyday life. 'Dalits Gods & Goddesses are crisis-deities and are related to both auspicious life cycle rituals like

wedding, birth and good fortune as well as are invoked when life cycle in crisis as removing epidemic, famine, etc.’<sup>81</sup> Their rites and rituals are very simple not complicated.

After seeing various dimensions of Dalit’s religious belief system in Dalit autobiographies it is clearly demonstrated that existing theological concepts and patterns of thinking related to spirits and deities are deeply embedded in their minds. We can understand the things going on in their minds like their great fear of spirits that might punish them and turn their fortune to misfortune. Their fear of the wrath of the demons and their hesitation to forsake what they and their ancestors had perceived sacred for centuries. Dalits realise its importance in their life and the life of their coming generation and pray earnestly for them.

The notion of God or relation with supernatural power or Supreme Being who is accessible and approachable to Dalit community is not easy to comprehend. Indeed, such a notion of God & Goddesses is in complete contradiction to Hindu religion. What I understand after analysis of Dalits religious belief system through Dalit autobiographies is the existence of a Supreme Being is acknowledged by them but they believe that they too are capable of approaching Him. However they worship the regional and local deities as distinct from Hindu religion which are accessible to all communities invariably and these practices correspond with their caste position in society.

Finally, the most significant feature of Dalits’ religion is that, many aspects of existence, agricultural activities, physical health and social well-being were blended with it. Nature and spirit, for instance, were not external to each other. As a result, religion and culture, society and ecology were held in unity. Consequence to such an inter-related view of natural and supernatural, and social and religious spheres, any change in one area affected the other. As we shall see later in next chapter that socio-religious-political changes of modern India appear to have affected their traditional attitude to pre-existing dominant religious agencies of control and newer ways of dealing with the changing circumstances and conditions.

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<sup>81</sup> Rani, Suneetha and Chakrapani, Ganjha (2009). Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities. In Dr. Murali Manohar (ed.). *Dalits and Religion*. Darya Ganj, New Delhi: Atlantic Publication. P. 15-16.

## Chapter-03

### RELIGION AND DALIT COMMUNITIES: IN SEARCH OF AN AGENCY FOR LIBERATION

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In foregone two chapters we have discussed autobiography as rich and authentic source of social science research, development of Dalits *counterpublic sphere* and the alternative religious rituals and practices of Dalit communities. Now we will analyze the importance of alternative religious identity of Dalit communities and how it act as agency for their liberation from the scourge of Hindu religion? The practices reflected in Dalit autobiographies of Hindi heartland largely explain the various experiences of Dalit communities. They are transforming their common pains sufferings and feelings through these alternative practices. They are creating a sense of solidarity by celebrating their festivals, following their rituals and practices based on their own cultural resources different from mainstream Hindu religion. In so doing they are not only acquiring a sense of solidarity, self-respect and dignity but also a new socio-religious domain which is inclusive and accessible to all Dalit community.

These religious practices of Dalits emerged out due to discrimination, segregation, subordination and marginalization by mainstream Hindu religion, mentioned in the previous chapter, to contest their inferior status and assert their identity and self-respect. Dalit religious practices have become an important means to assert their identity and self-respect against the exploitative Hindu social order. It has become an important instrument to overcome their degraded position and graded inequality. As reflected in Dalit autobiographies, Dalits' religious myths, symbols rituals and practices are given new meaning to explore their identity. It has become a tool to redraw the new domain and create new socio-religious framework such as *Dalit-Bahujan*<sup>1</sup>. The practices of reviving, renovating and practicing religious rituals are being used to attain certain goals which provide Dalit communities a sense of self-respect and a sense of their own religious functions. It is acting as an agency for emancipation of Dalit communities. They are trying to inculcate a culture i.e. 'the way of life' having their own norms, faith, ethos and spirits latently (in subtle way)

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<sup>1</sup> Ilaiyah, Kancha (2009). *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta: Samya Publication.

through which they can propagate their *mission of emancipation*. It helps them to develop an abstract value into Dalits' living practices.

The aim of this last chapter of my dissertation is to explore the ways adopted by Dalit communities to break their religiously sanctioned degradation and to gain dignity, equality and self-respect. How their mission of emancipation has gained momentum? What are the alternatives they have discovered to break that religious code of conduct based on rigid caste system and notion of purity and pollution? Among the various alternatives my focus in this chapter is to explore the strategy of religious changes adopted by Dalits to create new religious identity different from mainstream religion. It will also locate the various steps taken by Dalits to institutionalize their religion? What is the objective of this strategy? What is the psychological impact of this strategy on Dalit communities? And finally, how the strategy of creating an alternative religious Dalit identity is acting as an agency of emancipation for Dalit communities?

As reflected in Dalit autobiographies within the context of segregation, marginalization and subordination and blocked social, religious and cultural mobility in mainstream Hindu religion, Dalit communities through their alternative religious practices do feel that they have the potential to change their lives with their own. They are exploring their hitherto buried as well as ignored 'cultural resources' for centuries like myths, heroes, histories, stories and narratives. It broadens their space and ensures the way to achieve and access equal participation within mainstream society. Many of their practices and performances like reciting Dalit narratives, poems, stories and worshipping Dalit heroes are now contesting the fixed degraded position of Dalit communities. On the one side it is constructing or restructuring their new domain by generating new faith towards Dalit cultural resources and on the other side it helps to deconstruct and subvert the Hindu social structure based on the Brahminical code of conducts and the notion of *pollution and purity* by negating the exploitative and discriminative Brahminical philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

In this process Dalit religious practices are becoming heavily ritualized and they celebrate their past in organized way. In some way such ritual performances are

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<sup>2</sup> Narayan, Badri (2009), *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India Culture, Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication. Pp. 86-112.

amounting conflict with mainstream Hindu society. It also questions their authority and protests against the existing exploitative Hindu social order. As observed in Dalit autobiographies, Dalits started some traditions of using symbols, paintings and rituals to express their views as they did not have knowledge of alphabets. These performances are today breaking the delegated limits of Dalit communities and creating possibilities of new domain in their lives within their own socio-religious framework. It reflects the power of Dalit religious ritualistic performances to redraw their religio-cultural horizon. The impacts of these ritualistic performances are clearly visible in helping them make their presence felt in political domain as well. As these alternative rituals provide them with loosely a common vision of the religio-moral universe different from mainstream Hindu religious practices which to some extent helped to capture state power. This has not only *redesigned their public space* but it has created a sense of emancipation from exploitation and discrimination. These ritual performances have become strategic tools of innovation for transformation of society and redrawing new space for Dalit communities both individually and socially.

The collective experiences of pain and suffering among Dalit communities are solidifying them to restructure existing exploitative social order. Collectively they are now executing their broaden space in search of becoming master of their own destiny. Previously their destiny was decided with biological accidental birth and degraded occupation imposed by their so-called *manu-vadi* upper caste master.<sup>3</sup> The old understanding about the dynamics of social relationship based on underlying principle of Verna system and notion of *purity and pollution* are increasingly getting influenced by Dalit religious practices and performances. The old social relationships are also transforming through the transaction of power to Dalit communities. The functional natures of social relationships are changing through the faith and respect developed among Dalit communities within their religio-cultural domain and framework. Institutionalization of their own religion is exploring the way to assert their respectful identity in society.<sup>4</sup>

However degraded Dalit religious rituals and practices may be in the upper caste vision, it gives them freedom to make their choice. They make themselves all

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<sup>3</sup> Narayan, Badri (2011). *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India Uttar Pradesh, 1950- Present*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 97-122.

<sup>4</sup> For detail see Parson, Talcott (1986). *Power and the Social System*. In Steven Luckes (ed.). *Institutionalization of Power*. London: New York University Press. P. 113.

decisions regarding their religious performances. They act as a decider of their own course of action. At least in their religious celebration all members of Dalit communities have access to equal participation without feeling of subordination and humiliation. In view of Dalit religious rituals Vijay Prasad observes that the different Dalit practices of worships do not count seriously in the mainstream Hindu religion. Their religious practices are typical and very complex, a faith based on worship of local deities, preceptors, Goddesses, figures and animals. A landscape is dotted with shrines to blessed figures such as what autobiographies reflect like Deeh Baba, Baram Baba, Kali Mai, Banshakti Mai, Bhumia Mai, Chamariya Mai, Peer Baba, Hari singh Kalua etc. since their life is mostly based on agrarian village economy, Dalits worships minor village deities and local saints and spirits than popular Gods and Goddesses of mainstream Hindu religion. They do not have any place in Vedas and other sacred Hindu religious scriptures. They trace their roots in Dalits religious myths, stories and histories. They are highly localized.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that even after more than six decades of independence, majority of Dalit communities are still in the same state of backwardness but the solidarity feeling through common experiences has assumed importance in the light of socio-cultural and religious development. At the grass-roots level upper caste still assume privileged and powerful position but these Dalit alternative religious practices are invoking power within Dalit communities to hold the condition under control. Various autobiographical narratives along with other literary sources explore that the practice of complete segregation of Dalit communities from mainstream Hindu religious institutions in south India is still in practice.<sup>6</sup> The stigma of sinful and unclean are attached to Dalit communities. Dalit communities through their alternative religious practices intimate themselves to share their common sufferings. Their alternative religious practices have established a pattern of social interaction within Dalit communities.

To understand this new dynamics of social relation analyzing the case of Uttar Pradesh state of India is very much helpful. To show their grievances Dalit

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<sup>5</sup> Prasad, Vijay (2000). *Untouchable Freedom: a social history of Dalit community*. Oxford University Press: London.

<sup>6</sup> Rajan, Nalini (2011). Dalit –Bahujan Rationality and the Persistence of Blood Sacrifice. In V. Geetha and Nalini Rajan (ed.). *Religious Faith, Ideology, Citizenship: The View From Below*. New Delhi: Routledge.

communities are spending even their hard earned money extravagantly. They are performing expensive function following their own ritual practices. In fact, the performance of these rituals and religious practices have widen today significantly to include not only the old and ancient deities but also by enmeshing in and celebrating the birthday of their contemporary heroes like Ambedkar, Periyar, Phulle, Kanshi Ram, Jhalkari Bai, Mayavati and other Dalit iconic figures. Analyzing this development Pradeep Kumar and Sudha Pai aseert that:

The portraits of Ambedkar, Phule, EVR, Shahuji Maharaj; etc, in its rallies are a tribute to those who fought against untouchability and caste system. From the speeches of BSP leaders and their use of symbols like the 'Ashok Chakra' and 'Blue Flag', we can logically conclude that dalit politics propagate non-Hindu symbols. The carving out of new districts during Mayawati's chief ministership, and naming them after Gautam Buddha, Shahuji Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule, etc, cat-egorically points towards a cultural revolt against the brahminical tradition of naming districts Rampur, Laxmanpur, Sitapur, etc. This strategy created apolitical fervour and sensitised the Dalit masses on these issues.<sup>7</sup>

These personalities represent antibrahminical ideology due to their movements against caste in particular and the hierarchical varna system in general and the symbols of the BSP reflect revolt against brahmanism in Indian culture. This has generated in UP, a socio-cultural process of 'Ambedkarisation', i e, tremendous growth in the consciousness among Dalits about the life and ideas of Ambedkar.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the news flashed on CNN World, a television news channel, on February 03, 2010 had explored that 'one of India's Dalit communities had declared its own religion'. Followers of 14<sup>th</sup> century spiritual Guru Ravidas will now have their own holy scripture, a flag and a greeting. The new holy book compiles Guru Ravidass writings which until now were predominantly found in sacred Sikh scriptures that the sect placed in its house of worship. The new Ravidassia faith was installed to large congregation at the birthplace of the revered leader in Uttar Pradesh state.<sup>9</sup> The CNN World news channel flashed that 'the experts said that the move was a response to social discrimination against Dalit communities in Punjab state of India where close to 30 percent of the population is Dalit, the highest in any Indian state.'<sup>10</sup> When the channel interviewed an eminent scholar of Punjab Babir Madhopuri, who has written

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<sup>7</sup>Kumar, Pradeep (1999, April- 03). Dalits and BSP in Uttar Pradesh: Issues and Challenges. *Economic Political Weekly*. 34(14), Pp. 822- 26.

<sup>8</sup> Pai, Sudha (1997, Sept. 13). Dalit Assertion in UP: Implications for Politics. *Economic Political Weekly*. 32 (37), 2313-14.

<sup>9</sup> Singh, Harmmeet (February 03, 2010), India's Untouchable Declared their Own Religion, *CNN World*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



several books on the Hindu caste, said that ‘the Ravidassias and Dalits remain marginalized in Punjab politically, religiously and economically and this act was the response of their all kinds of marginalization.’<sup>11</sup> According to the CNN World television news channel experts, ‘analysts said the declaration of new faith is likely to be a psychological boost for Dalits in India. They appear to have asserted themselves in a strategy that will give them a greater bargaining strength in their state where power has centered around specific caste.’<sup>12</sup> Expert Madhopuri has believed that ‘this announcement of alternative religion is the symbol of Dalit assertion.’<sup>13</sup> This is further in the eyes of Dalit communities a viable way for their mission of emancipation from the scourge of segregation and discrimination from the mainstream religion.

### 1. Dalit Identity and Alternative Religion

One of the most important movements in respect to alternative Dalit religious identity is that of *Ravidassia* movement in the northern India. If we observe and contextualize the strategies and methods adopted by *Ravidassia*, a Dalit community in northern India, for the construction of separate Dalit religious identity beginning in Punjab and now almost whole of northern India will reflect the emerging pattern and practices of new alternative Dalit religious and social identity different from mainstream religion. According to Ronki Ram this pattern is neither included in the domain of ‘assimilation’ nor in the domain of ‘radical separatism’ of religious conversion as advocated by Dr. Ambedkar. It is the ‘middle path’ of both strategies of ‘assimilation’ and ‘radical separatism’. Ravidassia are using teachings and philosophy of Ravidass to project a separate Dalit identity in northern India. They are using teachings, poetry, philosophy and legends about the life of Ravidas as a catalyst to build and generate new inter-communal relations among various Dalit communities.<sup>14</sup> Ravidassia are playing an important role continuously in the formation of a separate alternative Dalit identity in northern India.

Ravidas was a Dalit, having profession of cobbler, making and mending shoes. He is now Dalit religious icon. His teachings emphasize on the dignity of labour and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ram, Ronki (2008, Nov.). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 67(4), 1341-1364.

individual irrespective of their caste, religion, birth, color, race etc. He preached the philosophy of equality, liberty and fraternity. He spoke compassion for all living beings. His egalitarian principles today work as a pedagogic tool to spread the message of self respect and the dignity of occupations of downtrodden, marginalized, deprived and exploited Dalit communities. He criticized Hindu religion that imposed various religious and social restrictions based on occupational caste status. Dalit communities today use his spiritual teachings to generate self-respect and an alternative religious identity different from mainstream religion that not only restricts from entering into their religious institutions and participating in religious rituals and practices but also treat worse than animals because of their occupation and low caste birth.<sup>15</sup>

What makes Ravidas a prophet of Dalit communities in north India is his unique way of generating a sense of self-respect and creating a dignified identity of self. He neither denounced his caste nor hid his identity of Dalit/Chamar nor made a call for conversion, assimilation or Sanskritisation. He continued with his degraded cobbler occupation while emulating the prohibited dress and other symbols of upper castes. He argued that dress, symbols and culture cannot be categorized specifically for specific caste. This is the subject of individual irrespective of his caste, color, birth and occupation. Ronki Ram defined it as his 'innovative middle path'. According to him this 'innovative middle path' of Ravidass 'shows that how the lower castes could achieve social mobility without sacrificing or compromising their distinct Dalit identity.'<sup>16</sup> Today this novel 'innovative middle path' of Ravidass is becoming most effective tool to generate social consciousness among Dalit communities in north India and installing the institutions of their alternative Dalit religion to promote their distinct identity. Dalit communities 'in order to look different from the shrines of Hindu and Sikh religions, and to distinctly project their separate Dalit religious identity, Ravidass Deras have formulated their own religious symbols, ceremonies, prayers, rituals, and messages of social protest against the oppressive structures of caste domination in the agrarian society of Punjab.'<sup>17</sup> Further, explaining Ambedkari, Ronki Ram asserts that adopting 'middle path' and establishment of large number of

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<sup>15</sup> Ram, Ronki (2004). Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad-Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab. *Asian Survey*. 44(6), 895-912.

<sup>16</sup> Ram, Ronki (2008, Nov.). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 67(4), 1345.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1347.

Ravidas temples in order to assert their independent Dalit identity 'has generated a sense of confidence among them and provided them an opportunity to exhibit their hitherto eclipsed Dalit identity. These Deras (Ravidas temple) in fact, have been functioning as missions to sensitize the Dalits and to facilitate their empowerment.'<sup>18</sup>

Another Dalit group/panth prominently active in north India is Kabir Panth. It has also emerged as a result of widespread dissatisfaction of Dalit communities from orthodox, exploitative and discriminatory Hindu religion. Kabir Panth is known as religious sect and has a considerable influence among the Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh people. It has also some influence in Bihar. This is Dalit religious sect. it follows the teachings and preaching of Kabir. Kabir was the great Singer, Saint, Poet, Philosopher and social reformer. He strongly criticized the religious discrimination, exploitation and atrocities and spoke for the establishment of equal and just social order. He spoke for lower backward, Dalits and other deprived classes.<sup>19</sup>

On contrary to mainstream Hindu religion, the Kabir Panthis believe in 'monism' (one god) and do not have faith in caste based on Varna system. The basic religious teachings of Kabir are very simple and secular in character. According to Kabir Panthis (followers of the teachings of Kabir) all life is interplay of two spiritual principles. One is the personal soul (Jivatma) and the other is God (Paramatma). For them universe is governed by two knowledge, the 'internal knowledge' and the 'external knowledge'. They consider soul i.e. 'Jivatma', as the source of internal knowledge and external knowledge comes from the God i.e. 'Paramatma'. They give importance to internal knowledge and according to them Dharma/Religion is a call of soul (Jivatma) which is present in all living creature. It is Kabir's view that salvation is the process of bringing into union these two divine principles.<sup>20</sup>

Further, Abhilash Das in his book *Kabir Darshan* which explains philosophical ideas and the mission of Kabir Panthis writes that Kabir Darshan says:

Manushya ka jo apna swa-chetan hai, sadguru ke upadesh avam swa-vivek se jab uska bodh ho jata hai aur us bodh swarup me sthiti ho jati hai, tab use chir-abhilakshit anant shanti ki prapti hoti hai. Yah swarup sthiti-janit atyant sukh hi dharm ka such hai. Jo satya hai wah dharm hai, jo dharm hai wahi prakash hai, jo prakash hai wahi such hai.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 1346.

<sup>19</sup> Das, Abhilash (2009). *Kabir Darshan*. Allahabad: Kabir Parakh Sansthan.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Mat majahab, samaj, sampradaya adi kisi desh aur kisi kal me bante hai. Uske niyam... kisi mahapurush ya tatkalik samaj dwara nirdharit hota hai. Samay-samay par parivartan, parivardhan bhi hote rahte hai. Parantu dharma manushya ki antar-atma ka Vishay hai, wah sadaiv akshunn rahta hai. Dusre ke dukh me dukhi avam sahanubhuti tatha uske dukh ke nivaran me sahayta hi dharma hai.

Puja- namaj aur Ram-Rahim shabd sampradayik hai; atah dharma inme simit nahi kar sakte. Isprakar dharma na ghrina hai aur na hinsa hai, na mithya vishwas hai aur na wah afim (opium) hai; kyonki vah kewal mat aur majhab nahi hai, dharma hai. Dharma hai bhautik jagat ki vyavstha ka niyam aur adhyatmik jagat ki naitikta ka pran.<sup>21</sup>

(When the self-consciousness of human being meets with the teaching of his master and discretion develops a knowledgeable/favourable condition then he feels a most desired perpetual infinite peace. This infinite perpetual peace and happiness generated by favourable condition is religion/dharma. What is truth is religion/Dharma, what is religion/Dharma is light, what is light is truth.

Popular sect, society, community etc. are the product of space and time. Its code... is determined by some great soul or contemporary society. Time to time it is changed and modified. But religion is subject of (inner) soul and always remains attached to it. (Religion and soul is interdependent, wherever religion there is soul and wherever soul there is inherent notion of religion). Feelings of sorrow and sympathy for other's sorrow and helping them coming out of it are religion.

The phrases like Puja-Namaj and Ram-Rahim are communal; therefore religion cannot be reduced into it. Thus religion is neither hatred nor violence, neither myth nor opium; because it is not creed and opinion. Religion is the code of the system of physical world and the soul of ethics of spiritual world.) (Translation of above quotes which is taken from the book, Kabir Darshan.)

According to Kabir panthis Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Nanak Dharm these all are illusive term. These are mat-majahab (popular sect). It can create war but not religion. When people call mat-majahab (popular sect) religion, it is nothing but disrespect to religion. Religion is eternal, static, and unchangeable whereas mat-majhab (popular sect) is changeable. For them, religion is not a communal or collective subject, it is completely individual subject. Religion does not discriminate

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., page 60.

human beings. It does not believe in hierarchy, order and authority, neither believe in super-ordination and sub-ordination nor in exploitation and subjugation to other. Its basic principles are equality, liberty and fraternity. In all these above so-called religions, the group of people with certain vested interest came together having distorted notion of true religion, framed a code of conduct as a governing principle of religion. Taking the help of these codes of conduct framed by themselves they created hierarchy and order and brought subjugation and discrimination to other which is completely against the religion. Further, they created religious institutions to perpetuate their interest and became the head and priest to hold the dominant position in society. They are the masters and rests are treated as followers. All these so-called religion are agency of discrimination, exploitation, conflict, superstition, irrationality and dogma. In every above so-called religion there is hierarchy and order. So, they are not religion but popular sect.<sup>22</sup>

Another fact of Kabir Panthis revealed by Badri Narayan is that on the one hand Kabir panthis are criticizing religion as an agency of discrimination, exploitation, conflict, superstition, irrationality, unscientific and dogma, on the other hand they are claiming to gain the status of religion. Kabir Panthis are fighting for getting recognition as a religion in the next census of India. They are trying to assert their identity as a separate religion<sup>23</sup>. Replying to this Abhilash Das is of the opinion that Kabir panthis are claiming for a separate religious status just because of a true follower and propagator of religion. The teachings of Kabir and our practices are completely based on equality, liberty and fraternity that are sole tenets of religion. Our rituals and practices are non-discriminatory and impose no restriction at all. Kabir panthis are fighting for the end of religious discrimination to Dalits, deprived and other backward society to bring justice and equality to them. Our religion is not a forced religion or forced conversion but a choice of individual, so are saying kabir panthis. So, Kabir panth is the only true religion. It has the potential to grow as a world religion.<sup>24</sup> Non-caste character of Kabir panth has attracted a large number of Chamars in Uttar Pradesh. In this view R. S. Khare asserts that educated Chamars in Lucknow follow a distinctive principle, ideals and ideology based of Guru Ravidas

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-62.

<sup>23</sup> This formal statement revealed by Badri Narayan while discussing the mission of Kabir Panthis in personal communication.

<sup>24</sup> Das, Abhilash (2009). *Kabir Darshan*. Allahabad: Kabir Parakh Sansthan.

teachings. They have their ‘Saint’ represented by Ravidassia rather than the Brahmin. They have their argument behind it that the purity of spiritual attainment is not based on caste and birth. Spiritual purity is open to all and it is equally accessible to all irrespective of their caste, birth, colour, race etc. provided one has a true devotion to their master. In this way they criticize the Hindu religious tradition and rejects all their essential attributes like ‘idol worship; Gods and Goddesses; Vedas and Law Code; belief in rebirth; Brahmanic rites, ceremonies and sacrifices; and the entire Varna and Jati-endangered hierarchical relations.’<sup>25</sup>

Very precisely, I can summarize religious view of Kabir Panthis as religion being related to *Jivatma* i.e. soul or inner knowledge. It helps in the inner development of an individual. It gives a certain direction of outwardly activities. Both soul (*Jivatma*) and God (*Parmatma*) are interdependent to each other. Inner development influences the external development and vice-versa. But the Dalit and a section of society which are downtrodden and exploited, victim of economic and social circumstances, can never progress inwardly. They are restricted by outward environment. They can never achieve inner growth until and unless external freedom and suitable environment are not created. Hence, in the attempt to gain this outer freedom and to end the humiliation and the exploitative environment of Dalits so as to remove all hindrances to inner development, right religion should be adopted. Now comes the question that how they institutionalize their religion to propagate their mission of social justice.

## 2. Institutionalization of independent Religious Practices in Dalit Communities

The Weberian concept of ‘the routinization of charisma’<sup>26</sup> can be applied to the Dalit religious organizations which evolve out of the specific common religious experiences of Dalit communities. From such common experiences a form of religious association of Dalit communities emerges which culminates in a permanent institutionalized religious organization. The common religious experiences of humiliation of Dalit communities by the mainstream Hindu religion as we have observed in the previous chapter itself marked the beginning in the creation of their

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<sup>25</sup> Khare, R. S. (1984). *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamar*. Cambridge: Chambridge University Press. P. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Weber, Max (1997). Routinization of Charisma. In Talcott Parsons (ed.). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Free Press. p. 363.

alternative religious identity and eventually their institutionalization. Taking the motivation from teachings and philosophy of their Dalit charismatic figures like Ravidass, Kabir and others, Dalit communities are doing nothing but evolving stable forms out of that philosophy. They are evolving a character of permanent relationship to form a stable community of followers of Dalit charismatic figures, what Weber defines it as the 'routinisation of charisma'. There are two factors responsible for promoting the institutionalization of Dalit religion. First; the imposition of restriction entering into mainstream religious institutions which left no option to Dalit communities except to install their own religious institutions to fulfill their expressive need concern. Second; there is a sense of spread, promotion and propagation of Dalit religious philosophy to create a kind of solidarity among their communities. Thus the development of specifically Dalit religious organization represents both the cause of general discrimination of Dalit communities and effect as in view of empowered Dalit to create their separate religious identity free from the encroachment of mainstream religion<sup>27</sup>. For example; Ravidassia dedicated to him temples, bhawans (memorial halls), educational institutions and chairs, cultural organizations, and hospitals. They founded several missions to accurately establish facts about his life and works and to disseminate his message of compassion, equality, and brotherhood in India and abroad. They worship his image, celebrate his jayantis (birth and death anni versaries), recite his hymns every morning and night, raise slogans such as "Ravidass Shakti Amar Rahe" (The spiritual power of Ravidas live forever), and put faith in his spiritual power.<sup>28</sup> Further he asserts that 'the establishment of a large number of Ravidass Deras by the Dalits in Punjab and in other parts of India over the last few years is a case in point. Ravidass has become very popular among the Punjabi Dalit diasporas as well, who have built Ravidass temples in almost all the towns of the world wherever they happened to live even in small numbers in order to assert their separate caste identity. The number of Ravidass Deras has been multiplying very fast, and has taken the form of an alternative socio-cultural Ravidass Deras movement for

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<sup>27</sup> *Dalit Sahitya aur Sanskriti ka Vaicharik Hastkshep*. Ekta Apartment, Geeta colony: Delhi. Retrieved from: [www.academicpratibha.com](http://www.academicpratibha.com)

<sup>28</sup> Ram, Ronki (n. d.). *Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the question of Dalit Identity in Punjab*. Chandigarh: Punjab University.

the emancipation of the Dalits.’<sup>29</sup> Now, let us analyze the various modes of Dalit religiosity and their importance in developing independent Dalit identity.

### 3. Various modes of Religiosity in Dalit Communities

Various modes of Dalit religious identity includes temples, memorial hall, educational institutions, library, Television channels, introspection camp, prayer, Aarti, greeting, celebration of birth and death anniversaries and slogans and many more.

#### a) Dalit Temples

Though Kabir believed in formless god, Ravidassia have constructed several temples in almost all parts of northern India. In Seer Goverdhanpur (Varanasi), Hadiabad (Punjab), Sirsagarh (Haryana), Haridwar (Uttaranchal), and Una (Himachal Pradesh) there is a clear indication of the concerted efforts of Dera Ballan toward the popularization of the social egalitarian philosophy of Ravidass.<sup>30</sup> Of all the major contributions made by Ravidassia the construction of a mammoth Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir (Temple of Shri Guru Ravidass s Birthplace) at Seer Goverdhanpur in Varanasi is the most significant. It was traced by Ravidass followers that the birthplace of Ravidass was in the village Seer Goverdhanpur in Varanasi. They constructed a mammoth temple and dedicated to whole Dalit communities of India. According to Ronki Ram ‘this temple has acquired almost the same importance for Dalits as Mecca has for Muslims and the Golden Temple has for Sikhs.’<sup>31</sup> One most interesting fact has emerged out that the birth place of Ravidass is traced in Varanasi, the place which is the center of Hindu religion. It is one of the seven holy places of Hindu religion. It is a place of pilgrimage for Hindu and their centre for religious celebration. It is the place where Hindu scriptures like Vedas, Shastras, Upanishad along with Manu’s code of conducts are followed in toto. In words of Dalits it is the place of Manuvadis. This place now also emerged as the headquarters of Dalit religiosity which has now initiated a kind of competition through their different religious activities against Brahminical rituals. Dalit communities demonstrate the intention of mission of emancipation from their

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<sup>29</sup> Ram, Ronki (2008, Nov.). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 67 (4), 1346.

<sup>30</sup> Ram, Ronki (2011). Guru Ravidass Prophet of Dalit Liberation. *Voice of Dalit*. 4(1), 29-47.

<sup>31</sup> Ram, Ronki (n.d.). *Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the question of Dalit Identity in Punjab*. Chandigarh: Punjab University. p. 29.



perpetual subjugation and establish and a parallel and equal respect to Dalit religion among their communities. ‘This temple serves an important purpose in reminding the Dalits of the Cultural Revolution led by Ravidass in Varanasi, the headquarters of Hindu religiosity. Its unique contribution lies in symbolizing a Dalit history of struggle for equality and dignity and a vision for the future. In the land of castes and religions, the Temple of Shri Guru Ravidas Birthplace has become an important cultural and religious site for the assertion of a distinct identity for the Dalits, where they can move about with their heads held high and without fear of being measured on the scale of caste hierarchy. In fact, this temple has turned out to be a repository of Dalit consciousness and identity.’<sup>32</sup> Thus it has generated a sense of solidarity among the Dalits.

#### **b) Dalit Channel**

In previous chapter I have mentioned a history of Raahu Bhagat, a Dalit icon of Gopalganj District of north Bihar whose followers have prepared a number of cassettes, CDs, and video compact disc of history and teachings of Raahu Bhagat for the glorification and wider circulation among Dalit communities. Similar to this the Ravidassia have also prepared a number of cassettes, CDs, and video compact discs of the bani of Ravidass for wider circulation among its followers. ‘They have also composed a Gurbani program based on the bani of Sant Ravidass. The program is called Amrit Bani: Shri Guru Ravidass ji. It has been telecast every Friday, 6:00-6:15 a.m., and every Saturday, 7:15-7:30 a.m., on DD1 channel of Jalandhar Doordarshan since October 13, 2003. This is the first program of its kind. This program has a unique importance for the Dalits. Now they feel proud of projecting their religion on national television on par with other mainstream religious bodies. It has contributed significantly to building their self-esteem and confidence and that, in turn, has sharpened their social and political consciousness.’<sup>33</sup>

#### **c) Dalit library**

Another important feature of Dalit communities that contributed the cause of the Dalits' uplift was its deep interest in literary activities. They have established libraries.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ram, Ronki (2008, Nov.). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 67(4), 1352.

The library contains books on the life and philosophy of Ravidass, Kabir, Guru Ghasi Das, Dr. Ambedkar, the Bhakti movement, Dalit literature, and other literature related to the Dalit's mission of emancipation.<sup>34</sup> The sole motive to establish Dalit library is to promote and preserve Dalit literary work and raise consciousness among Dalit scholars to make contribution for Dalit literary work. See fig. 01



Figure 01: This picture shows a Dalit Library where books and articles of Dalit icons and books and articles written on Dalit icons by Dalits and non-Dalits are kept and preserved to promote Dalit literary work. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

#### **d) Dalit Introspection Camps**

Dalit introspection camps are organized by Dalit communities at various places to discuss commonalities among the thoughts, missions, and objectives of various Dalit icons like Ravidass, Kabir and Ambedkar. In this Dalit introspection camp participants from all over India are invited which includes Dalit scholars, ministers,

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<sup>34</sup> Hans, Budh Sharan (2006). Daliton Ka Parerna sarott: Dera Sach Khand Ballan. *Himayati*. 44(17), 3-4.

members of parliament and state legislatures, Dalit leaders (local, regional and national), and others followers whose contribution is important to Dalit communities. Large number of Participation shares their experiences, discuss problems and map out the strategies for the upliftment of Dalits and further the mission of emancipation of Dalit communities through creating alternative religious identity. They map out the plan to break the hierarchical social structure based on caste system. It has proved to be of immense importance in building confidence among the Dalit communities who has been discriminated against in mainstream religious and social sphere for centuries. In fact, it is a sort of motivating camps for the inculcation of the distinct religious values of a separate Dalit community among the Dalits.<sup>35</sup> Dalit introspection centers are very much helpful to create and maintain the ‘Dalit counter public sphere’<sup>36</sup>. It helps to create a parallel ‘discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’<sup>37</sup> where Dalits from different parts of country having different perspectives and experiences interact each other regularly or after a fixed interval of days to discuss the problems related to the movement and decide the future strategy of movement. This is very effective tool in the mission of creation of an independent Dalit identity. See fig.

#### e) **Dalit Prayer**

Every religious community has unique way of prayer. The unique style of Dalit prayer is another important mode of their expression of religiosity. The format of Dalit prayer is different from the mainstream religion. It comprises couplets and hymn of Dalit Gurus like Ravidass and Kabir. They recite Ravidass Jivan Katha (The life story of Ravidass), called Ravidass Chalisa Sahit or Ravidas charitra, and Sri Guru Ravidass Vani Satik (see fig. 02 & 03). These formats of Dalit prayers are completely different from the mainstream religious prayers like Hanuman Chalisa, Durga Chalisa and other Vedic mantras. Their utterances are also different from mainstream religion.

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<sup>35</sup> Ram, Ronki (n. d.). *Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the question of Dalit Identity in Punjab*. Punjab University: Chandigarh. p. 18. This fact has also explained by Prof. Badri Narayan Tiwary at G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh in our personal communication.

<sup>36</sup> I have used this term ‘Dalit counter public sphere’ to talk about an attempt of Dalits to create an alternative public sphere to counter Hindu hegemonic public sphere. My use of this term is in consonance with the Eva-Maria, Hardtmann (2009) who uses the term ‘Subaltern counterpublic’ by quoting Fraser (1992). P. – 88.

<sup>37</sup> Fraser, Nancy is quoted In Eva-Maria Hardtmann (2009). *Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 88.

For example; Ravidassia in Punjab utter ‘Bole So Nirbhay, Sri Guru Ravidass Maharaj Ki Jai (Fearless is the one who utters: Victory to Shri Guru Ravidass), whereas in the Sikh religion, the Ardas concludes with Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal (Blessed is the one who utters: True is the Immortal One). Ronki Ram asserts that ‘the reference to nirbhay (fearless) in the conclusion of the Ardas of the Ravidass Deras has become a central motif of the Dalit consciousness. The inclusion of the word nirbhay in the Ardas of Ravidass Deras is thus not only symptomatic of the historical oppression of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, but also it is reflective of their determined willingness to confront it head on.’<sup>38</sup> See fig. below (02 & 03)

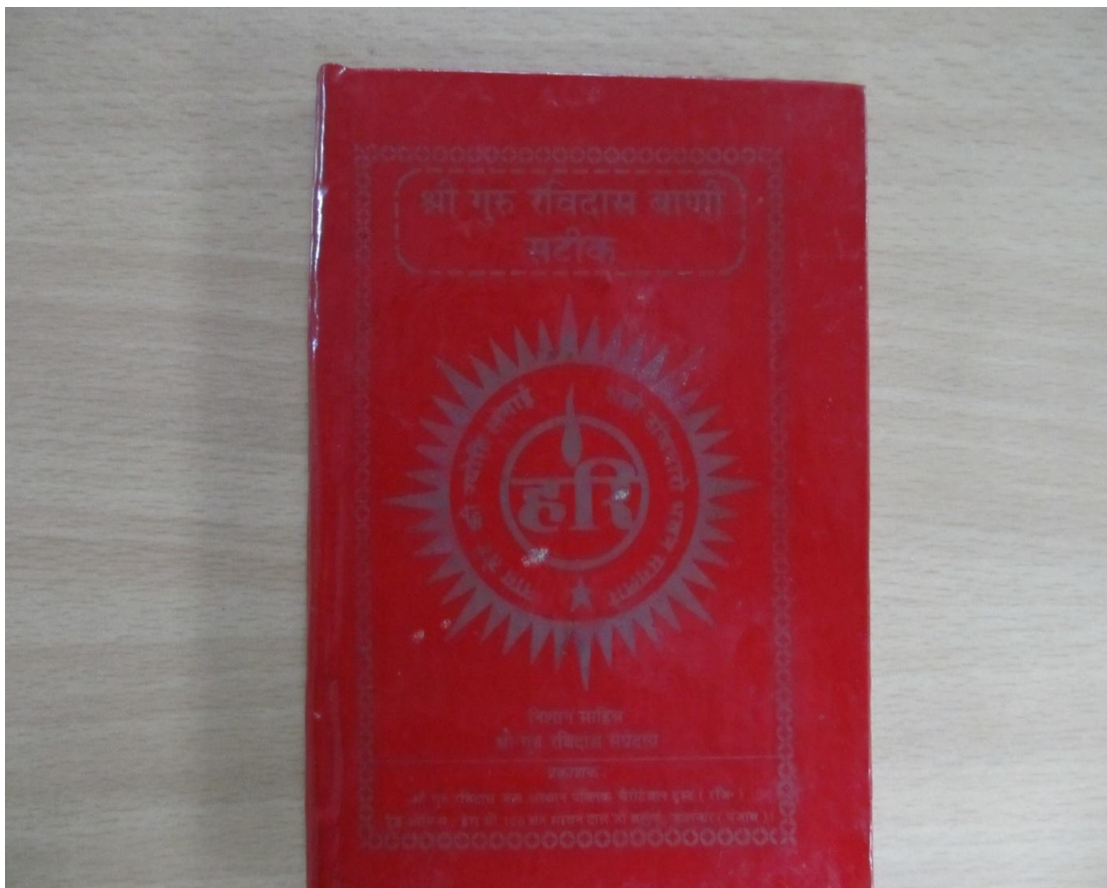


Figure 02: This is the Picture of ‘Shri Guru Ravidas Vani Satik’ which comprises Couplets and Hymn of Guru Ravidas. It is used as the Prayer book in Dalit communities, mostly by the followers of Guru Ravidas. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>38</sup> Ram, Ronki ( Nov.,2008), Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India), *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67(4), p. 1358.



Figure 03: This is the picture of the book which describes the life story of Guru Ravidas. It is used to recite in Dalit community (Ravidassias) as similar to the prayer being recited in the mainstream religion. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

#### f) Alternative of 'Ganga Gal'

In the Dalit ceremony animal sacrifice is very common. Nalini Rajan asserts that '... The ceremony ends with the sacrifice of four or five Pigs. A little of their blood is collected in new earthen pots, newly brought from the potter's house, and is placed inside the shrine. When the crowd has left, the priests mix this blood with boiled rice and throw the mixture in the four directions.'<sup>39</sup> This is contrary to the sprinkling Ganga Gal mixed with other substances on people in religious ceremonies for the

<sup>39</sup> Rajan, Nalini (2011). Dalit –Bahujan Rationality and the Persistence of Blood Sacrifice In V. Geetha and Nalini Ranjan(ed.). *Religious Faith, Ideology, Citizenship The View From Below*. New Delhi: Routledge. P. 103.

common good of the followers. The sprinkling of blood of sacrificed animal on people in Dalit religious ceremonies has the same concept i.e. common good of the Dalits and followers.

### g) Dalit Aarti

In Hindu worship Aarti is a holy flame. They worship this holy flame by burning Kapur (camphor) at the end of religious ceremonies. People wave around the head of an idol a plate containing five burning camphor piece. It is an important part of the many mainstream religious ceremonies. The Aarti is followed by recitation of Vedic and religious mantras. Like this mainstream religious Aarti, Dalit communities also perform Aarti, the holy flame but they neither wave plate around head of the idol nor they recite Vedic mantras. They recite hymn and couplets from Ravidass and Kabir Vani (based on participant observation). See fig. 04.

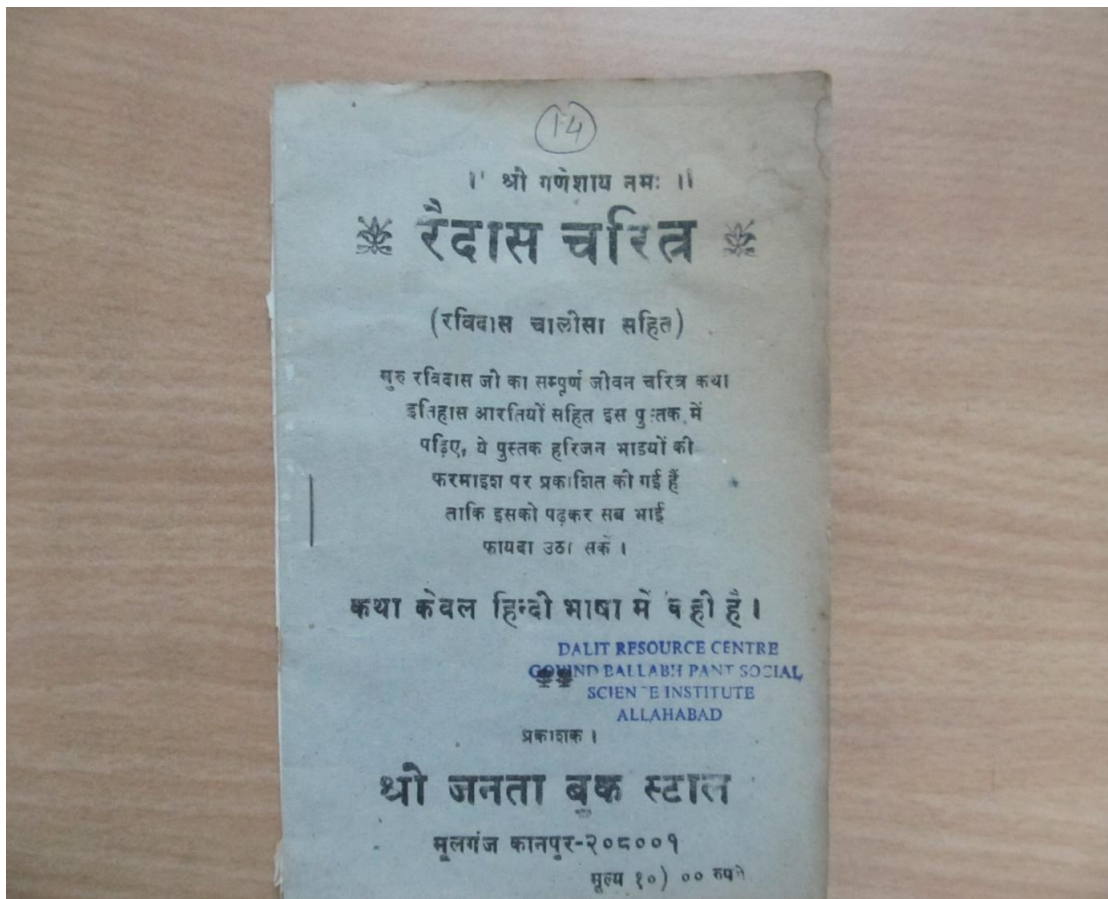


Figure 04: This is the picture of Ravidass Chalisa. It is clearly instructed that this book should be recited while the Aarti is performed in Dalit religious ceremony. This is published for Dalits only. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

## **h) Dalit Greeting**

Every religious community has its own way of greeting. Jai Ram Ji Ki or Jai Sita-Ram (Victory to Ram or Victory to Sita-Ram) is the greeting of the Hindus. Sat Shri Akaal (True is the Immortal One) is the greeting of the Sikhs. Assalam-wa-alaikum (I wish peace upon you) is the greeting of Muslims. Dalit communities like Ravidassia adopted the greeting Jai Gurudev or Jai Guru Ravidass (Victory to the divine guru or Guru Ravidass), to which the reply is Dhan Guru Dev (Blessed the divine guru). Kabir Panthis also use a typical greeting when they meet other Kabir Panthis. The greeting of Kabir Panthis is Bandagie Saheb (which means I bow to the Saheb who exists in you and me. A new greeting has also emerged in Dalit communities is 'Jai Bhim' which means victory to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. The forms of greetings and salutations adopted by Dalit communities have thus become distinct markers of the separate identity of the Dalits and their religion. It has evolved definitely and shaped the separate Dalit identity (based on the participant observation).

Hence, the institutionalization of alternative Dalit religion offers Dalits a new pattern of life to their members. In my view it works with four objectives. First; to preserve and glorify the contents, belief pattern and other religious tenets of Dalit communities, second; to establish a parallel independent Dalit religious identity in all respect of religiosity to make a perpetual counter attack to mainstream religion, third; to routine the Dalit religious practices or Dalit religiosity, and finally; to fulfill the expressive and adaptive need of Dalits. It represents the break with past and flight to modernity in terms of equality, liberty, fraternity, and dignity and self- respect of Dalit communities. This shows different religious orientation of Dalit communities.

## **4. Religious Orientation of Dalit Community**

After analyzing religious orientation of major Dalit castes of northern India, the Chamars, the Bhangi, the Chuhra, Dalit religion appears to be almost similar.<sup>40</sup> Their religious movements can be called 'local bottom up movements'. These movements were started by rural Dalits leaders in their villages first. These rural Dalit leaders try to convince and motivate Dalit communities to the various notion related to their cultural resources and true ethos of religion discarding irrational, discriminative,

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<sup>40</sup> Webster, John C. B. (2002). Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors. Pp. 74- 100.

exploitative and humiliating tendency of mainstream Hindu religion. They are rejecting the Brahminical notion of religion and raising personal conviction to their own cultural resources.<sup>41</sup>

Two things should be noted here, First; the 'relational nature' of Dalit religiosity. It maintains a relationship with their prophet as their master, guide and path-breaker in their mission of emancipation. Second; the newly developed alternative Dalit religious identity creates a new voluntary band of followers who work at local (village) level to teach the philosophy of their master. In religious gathering they express the basic etiquette in the relationship to their pattern of worship. They have deep notion of sacred and profane and they try to develop good relationship with sacred things identified by these local Dalit workers. They develop a new kind of belongingness and it acts as the first form of Dalit religious organization. Since, at village level the Dalits are more victimized by mainstream religion, when they find a similar and almost equal opportunity to express their religion, which has basic motive to denounce Hindu religion and their exploitative practices, they enjoy it more than upper level organization. At local village level it is observed that the religious worship is not simply a philosophical and intellectual expression but it involve the feeling, emotion and acts of men. It includes songs, sacrifice, sacramental feast, gesture, greetings, speech, bizarre sound along with sorcery and animal sacrifice. It may be irrational, not important for practical purpose but the development of social solidarity among Dalit is the most influencive effect of their various acts.<sup>42</sup>

Creation of belief system among followers comes at second level. It includes storytelling, poetry reciting, recitation of couplets, and inspiration to listen CDs, Cassettes, reading booklets and explanation of Dalit life world in the domain of the teaching of their masters like Ravidas, Kabir, Dr. Ambedkar and many more. At this level Dalits leaders provide alternative booklets like Ravidass Tikka, Ravidass Vani, Ravidass Chalisa, Dalits life stories, books like Kabir Darshan, and other Dalit scripture, poem based on Dalit heroic characters to read and recite in similar manner as Hanuman Chalisa, Durga Chalisa and other are recited in the main stream Hindu religion. At the last stage they are installing their religious institutions like Ravidass

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<sup>41</sup> Personal communication with Prof. Badri Narayan Tiwary at G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allhabad: Uttar Pradesh

<sup>42</sup> Singh, N. (1993). *Daliton ke Roopantaran ki Prakriya*. New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan.



temple, social institution like public charitable trust and statues of Dalit iconic figures like Dr. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phulle, Periyar, Kanshi Ram, Mayavati and catching leading Dalit icons to inaugurate these institutions.<sup>43</sup> See fig 05.



Figure 05: This Picture Demonstrates congregation of religious and non-religious Dalit icons on 16 July, 1998, where a Replica (gold plated model) of 'Sri Guru Ravidas Janm Sthan Mandir' is being presented to the then President of India K. R. Narayanan from 108 Saint Niranjana Das Jee Maharaj, The Chairman of Sri Guru Ravidas Janm Sthan Public Charitable Trust. In the presence of from the left, the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh and the then Governor of Uttar Pradesh Surajbhan. Other important Dalit icons are also seen in picture. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

These Dalit icons also participate in the annual celebration of festivals to show consolidation in introducing new rituals and religious practices of Dalit communities. At the intellectual level modern scientific mode of apprehension is developed. However people from diverse Dalit castes like Chuhra, Bhangi, Chamar and other belong to different regions but having common experiences of religious segregation. They feel same cultural contact when they meet in various religious and non-religious Dalit ceremonies. This has contributed immensely in the creation of a strong bond of fraternity. It helps in development of non-political common religious thought form with the common goal to emancipate them by creating an independent alternative Dalit religious identity. The development of such common thought pattern is part of

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<sup>43</sup> Chertier, R. (1987). Dalit Popular Booklets: Democratic Participation and Dalit Public Sphere. New Delhi: Princeton University Press.

the uplift in level of empowerment, dignity, self-respect among Dalit communities. That is the mission of emancipation of Dalit communities. See fig. 06.



Figure 06: this temple is great sign of Dalit alternative religious identity. Source: <http://www.google.co.in>



Figure 07: Statue of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji under construction at the Guru Ravidass Park. Source: <http://www.google.co.in>



Figure 08: K. R. Narayanan the then president of india inaugurates Shri Guru Ravidass Gate with remote control. Kanshi Ram (the then President BSP), Dr. Suraj Bhan (the then Governor U.P.), Kalyan Singh (the then Chief Minister U.P.) are also seen in this picture. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 09: After completion of the gate.



Figure10: The above picture shows the congregation of Dalits at Shri Guru Ravidass Park Varanasi, U. P. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

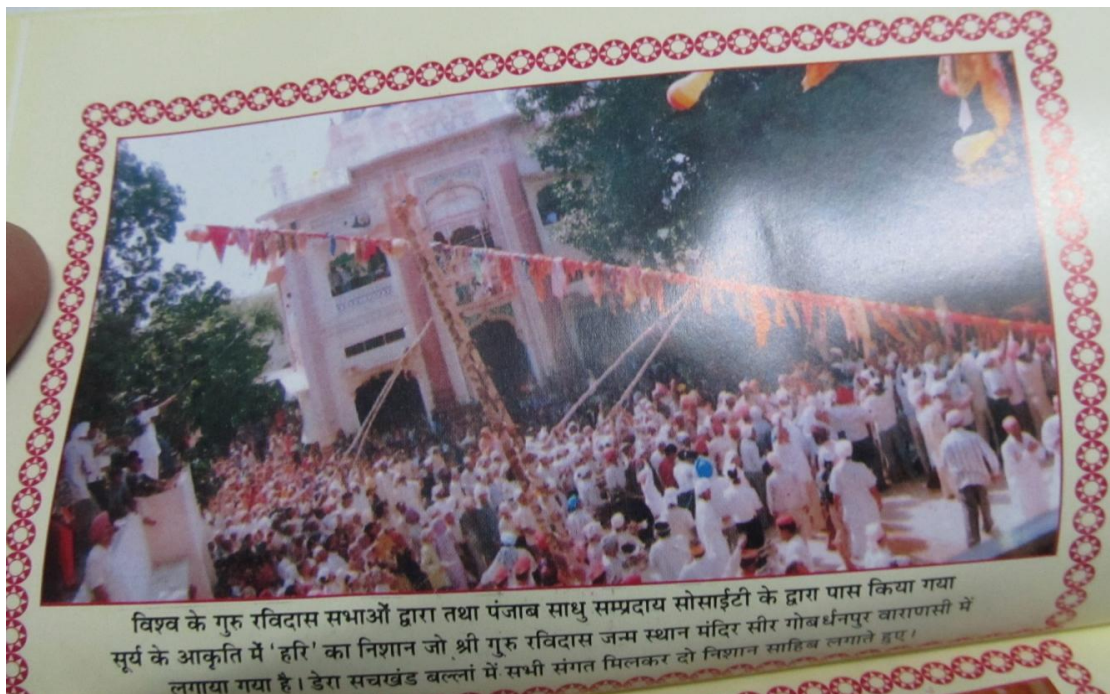


Figure11: This picture shows another congregation of Dalits to celebrate and share a model of symbol approved by Ravidassia diasporas of the world and Saint community of Punjab. Source: Dalit Resource Centre, Gobind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institutes Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 11: Dalit Introspection Centre. People from various places came to participate in the discussion of the issues related to Dalit communities.

The newly emerged Dalit religious groups differ from mainstream religious groups in respect of its rituals, its belief, and above all, in its types of organizations and institutions. The three stages help the process of institutionalization of Dalit religion. The pattern of worship which includes various modes of Dalit religiosity is framed at intellectual level of Dalit organization. All stages act as a part of whole. In this process they get a sense of freedom.

After analyzing the institutionalization of Dalit religion through the various modes of their religiosity and their distinct religious orientation in the process of developing an independent Dalit religious identity, I think, we need to see their psychological dimension of religiosity and its social significance to Dalit community.

##### 5. Psychological Dimension of Dalit Religiosity

Alternative religious practices of Dalit communities allow them to unshackle themselves from the clutches of social inferiority and indignity imposed by mainstream religious tradition in a way no other strategy can match its efficacy. In so doing this (alternative religious practices) not only help them shed the prejudices of

past, incapacitating them socially as well as individually but also give them a new sense of dignified freedom, in the universe of their own, which is a precondition for any creative pursuit. This free condition helps them achieve social mobility, a dignified fraternity, financial security and their well-being.

a) **Religion has Emotional Motivational power**

Given the social 'ethics at the core of religion' and as well given the motivational and emotional power it embodies, if cultivated steadily and systematically in a given religious community it can bring about cultural and civilisational transformation. Dalit religion, given its subordinated and oppressed background and its aspiration to achieve all the dignity and glory, life can get in religion, it (Dalit religion) can potentially scale cultural and civilizational height hitherto unknown.<sup>44</sup>

Further according to Ellwood as mentioned by Webster, for religion to perform truly the task of cultural and civilizational progress, it must get rid itself of metaphysical and theological baggage and be adapted to the demands of both science and democracy. Dalit alternative religious practices to a large extent meet the conditions led down by Ellwood. Dalit alternative religious practices are in many ways, itself the product of the protest from both at once too much emphasis on theology and metaphysics in mainstream religious traditions and at the same time too graded and superstitious to be compatible with science and democracy. Indeed the ideas of democracy, equality and dignity of individual characterize the essence of the Dalit religion.<sup>45</sup>

Psycho-Spiritual aspect of alternative Dalit religion reflects that the oppression as a consequence of hierarchical caste system may manifest in multiple dimensions. It may fracture and immobile the oppressed (Dalit) socially, culturally, economically, spiritually and psychologically. In fact very often than not oppressed may come out of aforementioned some consequences of oppression, to be precise, socially, culturally and economically, if we radically alter the existing customary framework of social intercourse into a concrete politico-legal framework which vanishes hitherto existing unequal indignant social life of oppressed. But it may be, indeed it is as so many

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<sup>44</sup> Webster, John C. B. (2002). (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors. P. 39-40.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 42-43.

research have shown over the years that, the altered egalitarian formal political promises may only touch the superficial level of thoughts and psychology of oppressed, 'there depth of experience'<sup>46</sup> which has gone century into making it may remain untouched. As a result every little hurt may act as a mirror of their past wounds of oppression.

In attempting to explain the consequences of oppression of Dalit psych in hierarchical caste structure, as Webster, referring to J. C. Heinrich, argues that 'there is a universal urge for self-expression and superiority inherent in human nature.'<sup>47</sup> It is this universal urge which is choked by hierarchical caste based social relation resulting in a chronic sense of inferiority, insecurity and meaninglessness which further produces anger and rage which may be either suppressed, expressed openly and directly, or expressed in directly in a passive aggressive manner according to circumstances.

Another relevant analysis is provided by Roland and Kakar. For them, peculiar Indian child socialization into household and its attendant social traits of love and respects among superior and subordinates extends far beyond this primary group into the secondary social environment of Jati where the same role they exhibit. But this socialization is highly asymmetrical among the upper caste Hindus and Dalits. For upper caste Hindus, they can be benign connections between their Home nurturing and the secondary socialization into the caste hierarchy. But for Dalit the same socialization is an experience of oppression. To explain this C. B. Webster elucidating for Roland and Kakar, remarks that:

The hierarchy into which by nature they have become immersed and emotionally (as well as economically) dependent upon is at the same time source of constant humiliation to their 'we-self'. The result can only be a seriously conflicted inner world where a deep sense of once own worth and loveliness rooted in a mother's nurturing and the happy early childhood is fighting with constant feeling of shame about the status of once 'we-self' ascribed by the outside world, where a deep dependence upon 'superiors' for validation and status are at war with an equally powerful anger at those 'superiors' for withholding these, where a deep desire to prove once 'merit' to those to deny with is mixed with a sense of helplessness. Hierarchy, dependency and conflict seem to be built into the inner world of Dalits as much as into the external world with which they must deal'<sup>48</sup> (Roland and Kakar in Webster, 2002, p. 136).

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 35-53.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.p. 136.

There is another explanation of distinctive experience of Dalit psych of oppression called trauma which results from all kinds of violence and atrocities unleashed upon Dalits within the operation of hierarchical caste based social relations. Now the question that begs is that through what mechanism can this ‘depth psychic experience of oppression of Dalit be healed?’<sup>49</sup> How the alternative religious practices can help Dalits to the new sense of freedom and dignity not something as superficial truth but an experienced reality?

To begin with as we have seen above that ultimately ‘self’ is the product of interacting factors of familial socialization and outside secondary environment of, in case of Dalit, unequal hierarchical oppressive caste structure. It is this ‘nurturing environment’ which creates and sustains the distorted and degraded notion of ‘self’ among ‘Dalit psych’ which has to be confronted with. This ‘nurturing environment’ can be altered, in my view, through a distinctively radical religio-universe of imaginations and practices. This is precisely what alternative Dalit religious practices is all about. As Webster rightly put it ‘the ethos of the nurturing environment is altered primarily by the introduction of a new religious ideology (e.g., egalitarian *bhakti*, ‘engaged’ Buddhism, Dalit theology) and its incorporation into the rites, rituals, customs and practices of the religious community.’<sup>50</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Hence, the social significance of Dalit alternative religious identity pervades every aspects of Dalit’s life right from their empowerment to a better and dignified life. It brings out the better adjustment between individual and society. It does not only give the emotional motivational social security but it also gives independent identity, solidarity and self-respect. The institutionalization of norms, values, rituals and symbols create new patterned network of social relationships at both ‘intra-public’ and ‘inter-public’ levels which manifests itself into broader sphere of religious grouping. This patterned network of social relationship is the part and parcel of Dalit’s ‘bottom-top-movement’ to create independent Dalit religious identity in their everyday ordinary lived experiences free from supernatural, metaphysical, transcendental and otherworldly reference.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 141.



## Conclusion

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Surveying the nature and dimensions of the 'Religious Exclusion' of the Dalit communities in Indian society, this work provides the empirical evidences on the practice of caste based religious exclusion and discrimination and denial of rights based identity to Dalit communities in social, cultural and religious spheres of life leading to their marginalisation and segregation. The three foregone chapters explain three important aspects of Dalit communities in India. These can be understood as the development of literary countersphere of Dalits, the actualisation of their religious imaginations/aspiration through various alternative rituals and practices and finally, the assertion of their identity through developing alternative Dalit religious discourse with the help of their own cultural resources existing within their domain of Dalit counterpublic sphere. These chapters must be taken coherently in order to understand their relative importance in the process of judging social reality which 'forms the larger context in which questions of faith and belief are continuously challenged, redefined and reasserted in new ways.'<sup>1</sup>

Since the religious deprivation of Dalits is closely linked with the processes of caste and Community based exclusion and discrimination, this work has discussed the role of religion in human life to develop their identity, a sense of empowerment as well as religion as an instrument to get-rid-of that discrimination and exclusion. As evident in the practices of Hindu religion, religion has potential for the multidimensional exclusion. Through Dalit autobiographies, as I have shown, two basic characteristics of exclusion are most evident. Namely, the deprivation caused through exclusion or denial of equal opportunity in multiples spheres. Second characteristic is that, it is embedded in the social relationship, and societal institutions. Both individual and groups are wholly or partially excluded from the participation in mainstream social, cultural and religious functioning of their life. Autobiographies also reflect various ways through which social exclusion cause a sense of otherness among Dalit communities from the mainstream Hindu society. The deeply embedded exclusionary and discriminatory practices functioning in different spheres of life creates dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Heredia, Rudolph C. (2010). Development as Liberation: An Indian Christian Perspective. In Gurpreet Mahajan, Surender S. Jodhka (ed.) Religion, Community and Development: Changing Contour of Politics and Policy in India. New Delhi: Routledge. P. 129.

and subordinate relationship between upper caste Hindus and Dalit communities engendering social inequality.

The central thrust of my dissertation has been if the theoretical and operating religio-cultural discourse of mainstream Hindu religion denied and demonized Dalits from participating in religious practices, how have Dalits themselves been responding to it? As I have shown Dalits did not simply bowed down before their masters by conforming to this discriminatory religious practices as their given fate. Indeed the grand religio-cultural drama of Hindu has itself been operating side by side of the little known alternative religio-cultural universe of Dalits.

One of the remarkable features in the alternative Dalit religious discourse has been its focus, away from the metaphysical and transcendental obsession of Hindu religious traditions to that of practical experiences of ordinary day to day life of Dalits. These features of Hindu religion also stress in the existence of soul, spirit and alignment with this metaphysical (perceived) truth by constantly raising oneself beyond the ordinary life of everyday. Hindu religion still further compartmentalizes life of a Hindu through the practices of varnashrama dharma. Dalit religion on the contrary is very much rooted in the very marrow of everyday ordinary existence. Far from seeking salvation by aligning with unknowable transcendental fetish, Dalit religion stresses on the love and compassion as the operative principles of religion. Humanity, dignity, self-respect and fraternity are the key jargons in the religious encyclopedia of Dalit alternative religion.

Autobiographical narratives of Dalits have had considerable influence in emancipating them from the shackles of dominant religio-cultural discourse of Hindu. Autobiographical narratives of Dalits have till now dominantly focused itself in expressing and sharing of the pains and sufferings they have undergone by the oppressive hands of Hindu religion. Given the liberative potential of autobiography writing, it should shift its focus away, from hitherto victimhood self to a more assertive self, where they are not only the passive victims of the Brahminical onslaughts but as well as the active agent of a new dignified socio-cultural and religious life. This is very much fact today that on the one hand dominant Hindu religious discourse is still wrecking havoc on Dalits, the alternative fact that Dalits have steadily been gaining respect in changed socio-political and cultural space. This

fresh self- respect of Dalits has as much been the product of changed political landscape, as the new discovery of their own forgotten (or perhaps buried by Hindu religious priests) histories and heroes, rites and rituals, legends and leaders.

This discovery on part of Dalits have given them not only a vindictive sense of dignified empowerment, they have started challenging the Brahminical hegemony with new vigor and agility with new weapon alongside the old. This has necessitated a logical shift in their mode of expression from earlier resistance to that of assertion in Toto. It is hence, imperative on part of Dalit autobiographers that they should shift their focus from mirroring only victimhood self of Dalit to the active assertive self of Dalit. Further, celebration being one of the central to any community lives. One of the offshoots of Dalit discovery of dignified life has been their new found celebration in community life. This changed aspect of Dalits should also be included in Dalit autobiography writing to make complete sense of changes taking place among Dalits as well as to make the mandate of Dalit liberation comprehensive.

The various movements in the history of the Indian ‘tradition of protest’<sup>2</sup> (Hardtmann, 2009) of Dalits are labeled by different names like social reform movement, protest movement, anti-caste movement, alternative movement etc. Since, the sole motive of this movement (alternative Dalit religious identity movement) is to create an alternative Dalit religion. This movement can be labeled as anti-Hindu religion/anti-Brahminism or counter Hinduism/ counter religious movement. They see Hinduism as the base of the caste system and aim complete separation of Dalits from the Hindu religion. It is the complete liberation movement for Dalits from Brahminical cultural code of conduct in India. It is aimed to carve out a broader Dalit public sphere to counter general Hindu public sphere. The religious and social institutions (local, trans-local, regional etc.) are the agencies to generate a new pattern of social relationships within Dalit counter public sphere.

This attempt of Dalit community to create a *counterpublic discourse* conveys a message that they are capable to launch a parallel ‘discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate

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<sup>2</sup> Hardtmann, Eva-Maria (2009). The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P. 45.

oppositional interpretations of their identities, interest and needs.’<sup>3</sup> Through this process leaders of Dalit communities want to turn Dalits, what Alvarez, Dagnigo and Escobar call, movement-based public or movement- inspired public or they may be called alternative social movement public. Once this counter-discourse public is created the Dalit movement will turn to a mass movement automatically. The fate of each and every Dalit movement perspectives lies in creation of same alternative counterpublic or what Nancy Fraser calls it ‘subaltern counterpublic’ be it the perspective of Dalit Buddhism, led by Ambedkar, the perspective of Dalit (Christian) Theology led by others and the perspective of Dalit politics lead by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). As such, attempt to create an alternative Dalit religious identity (religio-cultural universe) has same motive that is to create alternative counterpublic or ‘subaltern counterpublic’.

This may lead to the emergence of another strong Dalit movement perspective. It is well accepted fact that religion embeds daily individual life. This is well and easily cultivated common sphere where people holding different perspectives may interact regularly with each other without making an extra effort. This is helping to broaden Dalit network at both ‘interpublic’<sup>4</sup> and ‘intrapublic’<sup>5</sup> levels.

Apart from all above mentioned ways of broadening the Dalit *counterpublic space* the role of modern technologies is equally important. For instance: Hardtmann asserts that ‘Dalit discussion groups on internet have become the forums that most clearly show that the three movement perspectives belong, among others, to one and the same counterpublic.’<sup>6</sup>

Does this attempt to create an independent Dalit religious identity is not an attempt to create a countertheology in relation to Hindu religion? Of course, this will take time to develop a complete theology. Here, in this process the complete emphasis of Dalit communities is not on the choice of religion but to use it as an agency for their

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., As Nancy Fraser is quoted by Hardtmann. P. 88.

<sup>4</sup> The words Intrapublic and interpublic are taken from Eva-Maria Hardtmann (2009, p. 03). Where, she has taken from Nancy Fraser (1992, p. 121). The meanings of these words differ in qualitative way. Intrapublic means relations within a public, and interpublic means relations between public. Here the word ‘Intrapublic’ deals relations within the Dalit counter public sphere. It is exclusive in the sense that differences are expressed and debated.

<sup>5</sup> Interpublic relations, on the other hand, she explains, are built on the premises that the Dalit activists are excluded from the debates in public sphere that they are silenced in a unilateral way and for that reason have formed their own public.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

liberation. They want to use Dalit religious discourse to develop an independent identity. However, in this process success in both these spheres (Dalit theology and Dalit identity) together will be another milestone and durable achievement in the assertion of Dalit communities.

Increasing diffusion and deepening of democracy in India has one salient impact on Dalit psych and esteem and that is they are increasingly becoming self-conscious about their identity. It is now being felt among Dalits that they have distinct identity and if they have to gain respect and dignified life it can only be done through recognizing and practicing their distinctive religio-cultural lives. It is the recognition of this fact that today more and more efforts are being employed not only to recognize and celebrate their available distinct religion but also to discover their forgotten and buried symbols, myths, heroes and histories. Those symbols and practices which were/are denigrated by the Brahminical religious discourse, far from being discarded, are acquiring new and progressive meaning. These symbols are now being renovated, reinterpreted and even glorified.

In the above proactive exercise on parts of Dalits, it has brought forth the obvious shift in 'distinct Dalit psych'. In a very much realistic assessment of Dalit's situations it is very tough to comment on about how much their wounded psych has been healed in the process of developing alternative religious identity but one thing can easily be observed that the sense of self respect, level of empowerment, dignity and freedom has been uplifted. This perspective of creating alternative Dalit religious identity can be seen as an instrument of structural change which is very close to Ambedkar's sociological approach to religion. For him, religion is essentially social phenomenon and it is an instrument of structural change. Religion has immense power for social transformation and Dalits hope that through this process they can get rid of their inferior identity and they will surely come out from negative social conditioning provided by Hindu religion.

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