

## Utilizing Dalit Autobiographies in History

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### Abstract

In the academic field, debates in the discipline of history largely contest whether the people whose narratives are absent in the dominant archives of knowledge, including Dalits, can be considered as devoid of history. Such contestations raise queries about the ways in which these groups form a sense of their past. In this light, can we consider cultural forms of narrative as reliable and 'valid' means to form an understanding of past, and to what extent? Can the cultural narrative forms, particularly autobiographical accounts, be utilized to reflect on the past of these communities? What methodologies does such an approach demand, and what challenges does it pose? This paper shall grapple with these intriguing inquiries. It attempts to position Dalit autobiographies and their utility in locating the sense of their past and in the larger knowledge production. This paper fundamentally proposes that Dalit autobiographies can lend crucial insights into the history of Dalit communities and beyond. These autobiographies can provide a perspective 'from below' and contribute to understanding how Dalits made sense of their past into narratives. I argue that Dalit articulation of their life experiences in the form of autobiographies not only rupture the assumptions of a singular past but also foregrounds the multiplicities and specificities to their everyday experiences.

### Keywords

Dalit autobiographies, untouchables, history, caste, space, everyday, sub-castes, knowledge production

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“Softly but firmly she told him, ‘Look, Satyamurthy. Your caste and my caste are not one. You are Christians.’ She meant mala Christians, untouchables. ‘We are brahmins. You are have-nots, we are haves. You are a Communist. My father is for Congress. How in the world can there be anything between us?’”

— *Sujatha Gidla*<sup>2</sup>

“On one side of the road was (our community) settlement and on the other side were huge *pucca* houses (solid, built with durable materials) where high caste people used to live, who were employed in ‘good’ jobs (well paid, respectful, and secured). Within (our) colony (the dwellers) were mostly untouchables, illiterate and labor. On one side of the road were the poor, illiterate, and on the other side of the road were the rich (and) educated. Only one road divided them but it was a land-sky (like) difference among these two (sections).”

— *Kaushalya Baisantri*<sup>3</sup>

“...And in villages, a man may be educated, he may wear a shirt and pants, he may even have a job with a good salary, but the real prestige lay in owning land. Among untouchables, owning even a small piece of land is rare.”

— *Sujatha Gidla*<sup>4</sup>

“Let’s go to the park, I’ll eat some sweets,  
Eat some sweets, spread out my mat,  
If somebody tears up my mat, I’ll call an ironsmith,  
If the smith’s hammer breaks, I’ll call a repairman,  
Come on, let’s go to the park, I’ll eat some sweets.”

— *a Hindi folksong recited in Vasant Moon’s autobiography*<sup>5</sup>

## Introduction<sup>6</sup>

In the academic field, debates in the discipline of history largely contest whether the people whose narratives are absent in the dominant archives of knowledge, including Dalits, can be considered as devoid of history.<sup>7</sup> Such contestations raise queries about

<sup>2</sup>Sujatha Gidla, *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>Kausalyā Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*, 1. saṃskaraṇa. (Dillī: Parameśvarī Prakāśana, 1999), p. 28. Translation, emphasis, and supplementary explanations are mine.

<sup>4</sup>Gidla, *Ants among Elephants*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Vasant Moon and Gail Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, Asian Voices. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup>I want to express my sincere gratitude towards all those who made this research possible. I am especially grateful to Prof. Malavika Kasturi for her active guidance, support, and encouragement, which were fundamental to this paper’s development. I also want to thank my colleagues at the University of Toronto, particularly Sanchia deSouza, Madhavi Jha, and Shibi Laxman, for their crucial inputs and reviewing the paper.

<sup>7</sup>A note on Dalit terminology: Dalit term is used to refer to the ‘ex-untouchable’ castes collectively. ‘Untouchables’ are the historically marginalized and oppressed communities in

the ways in which these groups form a sense of their past.<sup>8</sup> As Antonio Gramsci has opined: for those who do not have history, have culture, thereby contesting the distinction between history and culture.<sup>9</sup> Culture and its manifestations are also intrinsically connected to power and shifting class relationships. In this light, can we consider cultural forms of narrative as reliable and ‘valid’ means to form an understanding of past, and to what extent? Can the cultural narrative forms, particularly the autobiographical accounts, be utilized to reflect on the past of these communities? What methodologies does such an approach demand, and what challenges does it pose? This paper shall grapple with these intriguing inquiries. It attempts to position Dalit autobiographies and their utility in locating the sense of their past and in the larger knowledge production. This paper fundamentally proposes that Dalit autobiographies can lend crucial insights into the history of Dalit communities and beyond. These autobiographies can provide a perspective ‘from below’ and contribute to understanding how Dalits made sense of their past into narratives. I argue that Dalit articulation of their life experiences in the form of autobiographies not only rupture the assumptions of a singular past but also foregrounds the multiplicities and specificities to their everyday experiences.

The paper intends to respond to the suspicions about whether Dalits can articulate in the existing power structures. In this light, the paper attempts to analyze Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument critically, ‘Can the Subalterns Speak,’ its reception, and its consequences for marginalized groups’ narratives and forms of articulation.<sup>10</sup> This paper further suggests that Dalit autobiographies demand to be referred to for not only the parochial purpose of retrieving the marginalized voices, but to treat them as alternative archives. With this approach, one can utilize the autobiographies for corroboration with the dominant archives, and to make sense of the past through margins with a bottom-up approach.

To make a case for the utility of Dalit autobiographies, this paper shall first contextualize it within the larger historiographical debate and comment on the marginalization of Dalit autobiographical narratives. Moving forward, I shall introduce

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the Indian society who are ascribed the lowest status in the ‘caste-based’ social hierarchy, and are considered ritually polluting based on the Hindu religious and ritual practices. Dalit term originates from ‘*Dalita*,’ fundamentally means ‘oppressed’ or ‘downtrodden’. This term was first used by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and then by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1928 in his newspaper *Bahiskrit Bharat*. Later, this term was revived during the Dalit Panthers movement by Dalit activists and intellectuals in 1970. I have employed the term to collectively refer to and make general conclusions in the context. For details, see: Laurence Simon and Sukhadeo Thorat, “Why a Journal on Caste?,” *CASTE / A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 1, no. 1 (February 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v1i1.159>.

<sup>8</sup>For details: Ranajit Guha, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009.

<sup>9</sup>A. Gramsci, in Q. Hoare (ed.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, New York, 1980.

<sup>10</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Routledge, 1994), pp. 78–123, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315656496-13>.

the three autobiographies chosen for analysis and discuss the methodology and approaches that the paper utilizes. This section will not only focus on the challenges in analyzing these autobiographies but also highlight the confines of disciplines in tackling them, thereby calling for a transdisciplinary approach. In the next section on knowledge, archive, and power, I foreground the thesis argument through a discussion on the conditions of knowledge production as well as the invisibilization of Dalit autobiographies. The section highlights the positivist influences, absence of Dalit narratives in the dominant archives, Brahmanical hegemony and Dalit exclusion in the knowledge production in Indian society, and subsequent non-recognition of narrative forms like Dalit autobiographies. It suggests how to navigate these challenges methodologically by treating Dalit autobiographies on their own terms. In the following section, I analyze the three Dalit autobiographies. By showing how Dalit autobiographies can help in gaining understanding primarily in themes of gender and caste, spatial differences in practices of untouchability, and intersectionalities among the untouchables—I provide support to my claim that Dalit autobiographies can be an indispensable source. Additionally, my analysis would reflect on the influence of translations on Dalit autobiographies and the politics of language to call for a critical and multidisciplinary approach for decoding Dalit autobiographies. Finally, I end the paper with a concluding note.

## Contextualizing Historiography

A debate exists in the scholarly discourse about whether the genre of autobiographies can be considered a valid form of historical source, particularly in the context of South Asia. On the one hand, positivist and Western scholars not only rejected autobiographies as fiction but also considered the genre as specific to the West.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Reynolds opined how the European critics, who were earlier not ready to take autobiographies beyond literary fiction, started to make claims about autobiography as an exclusively European or Western genre.<sup>12</sup> Such claims, therefore, rejected the legitimacy of autobiographical accounts outside of the West, including in South Asia. On a par, subaltern studies scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have questioned the ability of marginalized groups to articulate their narratives freely.

On the other hand, a body of literature has emerged which takes into account the significance of autobiographies. It includes works of David Arnold et al., Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Sharmila Rege, and Tanika Sarkar. This scholarship challenges the positivist contention of autobiographies as fiction and the idea of 'the truth.' This group instead argues for multiplicity of truths.<sup>13</sup> Malhotra and Hurley argue that one's version of truth can be fiction for the other.<sup>14</sup> Further, these works have shown how autobiographies, despite being a crucial genre in other

<sup>11</sup> Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds., *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

parts of the world, are specifically neglected in South Asia.<sup>15</sup> Such scholarship has particularly pressed upon the power dynamics in knowledge production in Indian society. Specifically, the works of David Arnold and Sharmila Rege underscore that in South Asia the authority over knowledge is monopolized by dominant caste groups, particularly Brahmins, as we shall discuss. Moreover, to highlight the genre's importance, Malhotra and Hurley have also argued that for certain communities autobiographies can be the only possible means of articulating their narratives.<sup>16</sup> Highlighting another importance, Tanika Sarkar argues that autobiographies provide a window for exploring the larger time period of the text and its readership.<sup>17</sup> Hence, this group of scholars has shown how autobiographies can be a crucial form of literature and a tool to articulate the differences politically.

While forms of narrative like autobiographies struggle to carve their own space, there are certain positive developments in the field. Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine in Arnold's book propound that there is a growing body of literature about untouchables which is primarily anthropological, including Freeman (1979), Moon (2001), and Viramma (1995).<sup>18</sup> In this paper, I shall build upon the scholarship signifying autobiographies. I support their contention, and through using Robert Darnton's and James Clifford Geertz's approach, I attempt to show how Dalit autobiographies can prove crucial sources for history. My work aims to contribute to the debate by showing how autobiographies can lend insights that can enhance the existing understanding of Dalits, their history, as well as practice of untouchability. Building on the idea of multiplicity of truth, I extend it to argue for a multiplicity of pasts as well. My analysis of the three autobiographies challenges the monolithic understanding of Dalit communities and the practice of untouchability by highlighting the intersectionalities within Dalit communities and differential practices of untouchability in different spaces and geographical locations.

## Methodology and Three Dalit Autobiographies as Case Studies

In this paper, I shall be closely engaging with the analysis of three Dalit autobiographies of diverse background as my primary sources to address their significance for history. I shall deal with Dalit autobiographies in both English as well as vernacular and the ones translated from the vernacular to English. The first one is Kausalyā Baisantri's *Doharā Abhiśāpa*, published in 1999. The second is Vasant Moon's translated autobiography titled *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, published in 2001, originally published in Marathi language with the title *Vasti*. The third one is Sujatha

<sup>15</sup>David Arnold, Stuart H. Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup>Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self*.

<sup>17</sup>Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*. New Delhi: Zubaan, an imprint of Kali for Women, 2013, pp. 36–37.

<sup>18</sup>Cited in Arnold, Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, p. 14.

Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, published in 2017. Here, I shall foreground the rationale for choosing these autobiographies, the challenges in decoding Dalit autobiographies, and the confines of the disciplines. By focusing on disciplinary limitations, I argue for a transdisciplinary approach to make sense of Dalit autobiographies.

The rationale behind the careful selection of these autobiographies has to do with a number of factors, including the specific perspectives and details that these texts have to offer. These accounts are chosen in the sense that they reflect on multiple intersectionality and diversity among the Dalits as well as Dalit autobiographies. Some of the parameters which I took into account while making the selection were—based on gender: including both men's and women's autobiographies; on the basis of language: autobiographies written in the vernacular, translated in English, and written originally in English; on spatial basis: reflecting on the experiences of Dalits based in different parts of the Indian subcontinent; on the basis of subcategories: different untouchable castes, different subcastes, and Dalits converted to other religions; on the basis of readership: addressing to local and global readership; based on the temporal and historical conjunctures these works came out; among other factors. This research design will enable highlighting the intersectionalities among Dalits and thereby help nuance the understanding of diverse Dalit pasts, and their everyday experiences. Therefore, this set of autobiographies is promising in many respects and demands careful analysis.

The task of making sense of these complexities in Dalit autobiographies poses many challenges. Clearly, these autobiographies consist of more complexities and pose unique challenges of analysis than the other narrative styles. To point out a few challenges, these autobiographies do not have a coherent, connected narrative. Second, in many cases, the author tends to focus more on the life narratives of other people rather than themselves, which was evident in Sujata Gilda's autobiography at many instances, as the paper shall discuss. Third, the idea of time in these narratives is different as they do not follow a linear sense of time. For instance, let us look at Kosalya Baisantri's autobiography. If judged from the point of the dominant historical narratives and writing styles, it possesses many inconsistencies. Her autobiography does not follow linear way of writing, idea of time, and lacks a proper sense of chronology. In her work, she switches across temporal junctures and spaces frequently, at times from paragraph to paragraph, without necessarily marking the shift.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, her notion of time and sense of the past does not fit into the linear way of history writing. Moreover, when these autobiographies are translated, it adds to the challenge of deciphering them. In the process of translation, as we shall discuss in the later section, the focus of the autobiography's narrative can shift, which may have implications for the autobiographical consumption itself.

Therefore, in many senses, these autobiographies challenge the confines and assumptions of different disciplines, including history. In this context, the paper raises the question—despite aspiring to gain an understanding of the past, does one need to

<sup>19</sup>Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

look at the Dalit autobiographies through the lens of history and its methods only? Here, I suggest that to deal with the challenges in analyzing Dalit autobiographies, one must move across the disciplinary boundaries. The above discussion—about the involved complexities and varied aspects of cultural, temporal, societal, location, and linguistic context—adequately makes it evident that the task of analyzing such autobiographical narratives requires a diverse methodological engagement. While highlighting the need for multidisciplinary in making sense of the cultural forms of narratives, cultural historian Robert Darnton beautifully opines:

Where the historian of ideas traces the filiation of formal thought from philosopher to philosopher, the ethnographic historian studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world. He attempts to uncover their cosmology, to show how they organized reality in their minds and expressed it in their behavior.<sup>20</sup>

This paper, therefore, proposes that understanding Dalit narratives demand a much broader and multidisciplinary approach. In this paper, I utilize the methods of historical anthropology to analyze these Dalit autobiographies and adopt the tools of critical linguistic analysis to comment upon the politics of language and translation. My primary methods and approaches include Robert Darnton's attempt to make sense of different worldviews through cultural history and their articulation into cultural forms (such as folklores).<sup>21</sup> Further, I attempt to investigate the utility of Dalit autobiographies through the methodology of 'thick description' as suggested by Clifford Geertz. I employ his method of analysis by systematically marking the structure of signification to contextualize the Dalit narratives and their reception.<sup>22</sup> Within Dalit narratives, like in doing ethnography—while faced with such an abundance of complex conceptual structures in Dalit autobiographies, Geertz's suggestion would be of critical importance:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the paper attempts to focus on how the life histories in the form of autobiographies get interpreted and made sense of socially, and are situated in the knowledge corpus. For a sound theoretical grounding, I make use of the scholarship emphasizing autobiographies, as discussed in the historiography section. With such a diverse, multidisciplinary, and alternative approach, one can engage with complex narratives like Dalit autobiographies.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Colson and Clifford Geertz, "The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays," *Contemporary Sociology* 4, no. 6 (1975), pp. 637–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2064031>.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

## Who's Writing about Whom and How: On Narrative, Power, and Knowledge

The positivist idea of scientific and objective history, dominance of Brahmins and upper castes in production of knowledge, and the contention about 'can the subalterns speak'—says it all. This is precisely the reason why sources like Dalit autobiographies have to struggle in finding legitimacy in the academic field.

Here, I examine the reasons for the marginality of Dalit narratives both in academia and outside. Not only is there a lack of narratives from the marginalized communities within the archives, but outside of the archives as well, articulations such as the Dalit autobiographies have been sidelined. It calls for questioning what percolates to us as knowledge, who controls its production and dissemination, and who provides legitimacy to it. Additionally, a pressing concern for me has been the way narrative and forms of narrative are perceived in a hierarchy of authority and legitimacy. Gramsci has highlighted the role and relation of knowledge, hegemony, and power in his works. Building on, I suggest that this narrative hierarchy clearly resonates with the existing power structure, and one needs to challenge it. In the context of Dalit autobiographical narratives, I suggest looking at the phenomenon of invisibilization at two levels. First, in the global context due to the influence of enlightenment and colonialization. Second, in the particular context of South Asia and Indian society, where Brahmins and their formulated societal norms, including the varna system, provided Brahmins the sole monopoly over charting and disseminating knowledge.

In the global context, the positivist 'archival turn' and the focus on rational 'fact' and scientific 'truth' had a significant impact on what came to be recognized as knowledge and how the disciplines were shaped. Given the emergence and shaping of the disciplines in Europe, followed by the colonial conquests, the worldviews about the colonies and colonial societies were formulated in the West. If we trace from European imperialism, the colonial regimes controlled the powers and produced colonial knowledge forms, including law and cultural ethnographies, which ultimately described the colonies and their people. In multiple aspects, these forms continue as knowledge or have influence over it.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, knowledge production has been controlled by those who hold power and is utilized to maintain their dominance.

In the case of South Asia and its society, Brahmins were the ones who exclusively enjoyed access to knowledge and controlled its production and dissemination. Brahmins—who are a minuscule minority in the population, yet dominate knowledge production. Brahmins and their formulated texts, such as *dharmasastras*, or codes of conduct for the society, continue to have an immense influence on the rituals and culture in Indian society. These socially prevalent codes already put the untouchables or Dalits outside of the varna order and prohibited Dalits from all sorts of education

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<sup>24</sup>However, this was not peculiar to the colonial empire. Similarly, even in the precolonial period, such as the Mughal empire in Indian subcontinent, the state controlled the knowledge production and produced court chronicles, law books, among others.



and knowledge, including reading and writing.<sup>25</sup> These long-prevalent societal norms have led to the creation of such hierarchal power structures which exist in the field of knowledge production till date. Even now, Dalit narratives, like their folklores and autobiographies, still struggle to find legitimacy and carve their space in the mainstream.

Sharmila Rege intensifies the discussion on the implication of this Brahmanical monopoly on the consumption of non-Brahminic narratives and on the discourse on caste in the public sphere. Rege has pointed out how Brahmins' dominance in knowledge production has had an impact on the public sphere as noticeable in the nineteenth century debates on caste. The discussion of caste in the public sphere was illegitimized and considered as the 'betrayal of the nation.' This strategy of confining caste to the private was challenged by the mobilization of Satyashodhak, non-brahmin and Dalit counterpublics.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Rege discussed how even many reformists and nationalists confined the problem of caste to only purity and pollution and the concept of untouchability. These groups saw these 'ills of the caste system' as a hindrance to 'larger "common good" like social unity.'<sup>27</sup> Therefore, they never really challenged the core exploitation of the caste system itself. Sociologist G.S. Ghurye too considered anti-brahman movement as a result of the divide and rule policy during British colonialism and was anxious about the decline of the priest system.<sup>28</sup> These views show how Brahmanical hegemony goes unnoticed in the public sphere despite its mammoth role, which I attempt to challenge here.

Writing on the autobiography of Dalits, the authors Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine discuss different kinds of silences. The authors warn that the title of their work, '*Beyond Silence: A Dalit Life History in South Asia*', is not indicative of the silence on the part of the Dalits. Dalits do articulate their expressions. But it is the silence on the part of the dominant castes in the society who do not acknowledge their voices and knowledge. It is the silence arising out of the higher castes' contempt and deliberate ignorance.<sup>29</sup>

Recent works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's have shown how Europe or the West has dominated the field of knowledge production for long and argue to do away with

<sup>25</sup>Manusmriti, or Manava-Dharmasastra is one of the primary societal codes of conduct that has significance in Indian society and its ritual practices. Though it does not mention untouchability, which was added later to the Hindu dharmasastras, it mentions the code for the lowest varna in the varna system, called Shudras. Some excerpts from the text on Shudras include: "IV – 99. He (the twice born) must never read (the vedas) — in the presence of the Shudras." and "I – 91. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Shudra to serve meekly even these other three castes." Source: Velivada, last access: 16 March 2023. <https://velivada.com/2017/05/31/excerpts-manusmriti-law-book-hindus/>

<sup>26</sup>Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., cited in Rege, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup>Cited in Arnold, Blackburn, and British Library, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, p. 252.

the fetishism with Europe and European dominance in academic discourse.<sup>30</sup> However, such works do not shed light on the Indian context, where similarly, Brahmins dominate the power structure in knowledge production. Therefore, there is a need to look beyond and utilize the critical approaches in different disciplines as a corrective. In this light, the works of Bernard Cohn (and his historical-anthropological approach), Nicholas Dirks, Ann Stoler, and B. Axels—make us think and move a step beyond.<sup>31</sup> These works trace a historical genealogy and characterization of what percolates to us in the form of archives and dominant forms of knowledge. Ann Stoler also draws attention towards the silences and violence in the production of the state archives and the ‘archival fever.’ Using these approaches can make us critical of the assumptions about pristine nature of the knowledge, and aware of the violent silences in it.

Gramsci aptly puts it that the history of the subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic.<sup>32</sup> Since these disadvantaged groups have not been largely a part of the existing archives, or their voices have been either appropriated, represented, or lost. Therefore, the traditions of memory in these communities are primarily performative and oral. However, recent forms of textual narratives, such as Dalit autobiographies, have emerged from these communities. Therefore, these autobiographies provide an excellent opportunity to explore and understand the worldview of these socially and epistemologically marginalized groups.

Gaining from the insights of the discussed scholarship and subsequently practicing the methods suggested along with a critical approach—I suggest that one can attempt to do away with the existing bias in the archives, disciplines, and academia. The idea is that one must challenge the positivist and linear understanding of the past that privileges certain narratives and genres. It must be done both at the level of disciplines and at the level of existing power equation within the knowledge production, where the dominant does not acknowledge the narratives of the marginalized and deny legitimizing it as authoritative knowledge. Hence, while understanding the Dalit autobiographical accounts, the Brahmanical dominance in the society and academic circles need to be acknowledged.

## Theory in Praxis: Analysis of the Three Autobiographies

When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead into a strange and wonderful world view.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Edition, Revised, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History Ser. Princeton: University Press, 2009.

<sup>31</sup>Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays / Bernard S. Cohn; with an Introduction by Ranajit Guha*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987; Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>32</sup>A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 1980.

<sup>33</sup>Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, p. 5.

Let us focus on the three autobiographies that are picked for the paper. Taking a cue from Robert Darnton, I ask: what do they have to offer, to unravel? Starting their analysis from historical context, these three Dalit autobiographies came out during or after the last decade of the twentieth century (1999, 2001, 2017). It is important to note that this was after the Mandal Commission, when identity politics was picking up in India and political parties were organizing around caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most prominent Dalit leaders whose enormous influence is discussed in all these autobiographies—was also awarded the most prestigious national award, Bharat Ratna, posthumously in 1990. This shows that, by this time, the nation state also attempted to recognize Ambedkar as a national figure and his contribution to society and the nation. This recognition was due to Ambedkar's charismatic influence among Dalits and other marginalized groups and their political organization. During this period, there was a growing sense of politics of numbers, organizing around identity, and pitching their voice among the untouchables. I suggest that this may be the possible reason why Dalit literature and autobiographies have picked up during and after the 1990s.

This section will be a theory in praxis, where I critically analyze the selected three Dalit autobiographies to make a case for their crucial importance for history. I shall focus on exploring the richness of these autobiographies through the three themes: space and differential practice of untouchability, gender and caste, and intersectionalities and subcastes among untouchables. These detailed discussions attempt to rupture the assumptions of a singular past and foreground the diverse experiences of untouchability and intersectionality among Dalits.

## Space and Caste

These autobiographies vividly show how Dalit experiences were diverse based on their geographical location and space, including region, classroom, basti or neighborhoods, temples, and nations. Sujatha Gidla's, who was based in a different geographical area and then moved abroad, had a different experience of untouchability and caste structure as compared to Moon and Baisantri. However, despite being within the same region, even Moon and Baisantri had a starkly different lived experience, given their location in different localities and neighborhoods. In Moon's autobiography, it is clearly enunciated how the Mahar world, particularly the community settlement of Maharwada in the Vidharbha region, was different from other localities even within the same regional area. Mahars in Vidharbha had a good standing and were relatively much more empowered and organized. They had comparatively better access to many basic rights and amenities as compared to the other untouchables, including Mahars themselves in other regions. They were better placed in aspects such as education, involvement in trade, and martial activities such as *akhadas* or wrestling grounds, among others.

“Mahars of Vidharbha were even better off than the Mahars of the regions of Maharashtra, 20% of the population, including in the city of Nagpur.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, pp. xii-xiii.

In contrast, despite coming from the same regional area of Nagpur (Vidharbha) but not Maharwada, Kosalya Baisantri experienced a significantly different level of challenges. The intensity of discrimination against untouchables was extremely high as compared to in Maharwada, where Vasant Moon grew up. On the one hand, Moon mentions how his Brahmin classmates from the school visited him at his house when he was ill and drank water. Contrary to this, in Baisantri's settlement, she and her elder sisters were the first untouchable women to join the school and receive an education. When she was attending school, no other girl students, who were all from the upper caste brahmins or low caste but upper class, were even ready to talk to her. She was ostracized by her classmates even when she impostored herself as a touchable Hindu low caste and poor, and not even revealed her untouchable identity. Evidently, she never had the courage to open up about her caste or invite her friends to her house because of the fear of being further discriminated. It was only at her marriage that she invited some of her friends at her neighborhood in the marriage function who were shocked knowing where she came from.

Moreover, the autobiographies highlight the differential practice of untouchability and caste norms in different spaces. This phenomenon corroborates the narratives portrayed in earlier works on untouchability, such as the portrayal of urban-rural differences in untouchable experiences in Mulk Raj Anand's novel.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in Baisantri's autobiography, she discusses how in different spaces the consciousness of untouchable identity and norms differed. Highlighting one such norm, she mentions how she was very uncomfortable with the way the saree's corner, *pallu*, had to be held above the head only by the untouchable women.<sup>36</sup> She points out the difference in how she walked freely like other brahmin girls outside her own settlement but within the settlement, she never had the courage to defy the norm. In another context, Baisantri mentions how untouchables were not allowed inside the temples, and they would make their prayers outside the boundaries of the temple premise. However, she also discusses how she and her sister used to go to a Ganpati temple after school to get *prashad* or eatable alms.<sup>37</sup> The temple was outside their colony, where no one knew their caste identity. Hence, the anonymity had spatially enabled her to defy the set norms of untouchability. In the guise of anonymity and for the lure of getting *prasad*/food, the author and her sister used to enter banned spaces like temples—signifying the kind of escapes and their own ways of dealing with untouchability in the everyday.

An interesting contrast of spatial experience of untouchability is visible in Vasant Moon's case. While discussing his childhood, he mentions that he did not experience much discrimination from his upper caste teachers and Brahmin friends in the classroom. However, outside of the classroom, when he went out to beg at a Brahmin settlement near his own, he was brutally rebuked and shooed away.<sup>38</sup> Further, in the introduction of Moon's autobiography, Eleanor Zelliot also notes the inconsistencies

<sup>35</sup>Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*. Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. London: Penguin, 1940.

<sup>36</sup>Baisantri, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*, p. 48.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>38</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. 22.

in the practice of untouchability: Mahars rolling *bidis* (cigars). Zelliott's argument is that caste is 'relevant in a specific language area'. However, I argue that it is relevant in a specific 'vasti,' in Moon's words, a socio-spatial setting. Though she is quoting the difference in the sociospatial setting but concluding it to be a different language region.<sup>39</sup>

Further, the aspect of private and personal sphere, and accordingly, different degrees of inconsistency in the practicing untouchability and caste norms emerge out in these autobiographies. As per the caste norms, while in public space, the practice of inter-dining and sharing food was not allowed among the touchables and untouchables. However, in the private, Baisantri mentions how an upper caste clerk used to ask for groceries and vegetables from her house, stay in her house to save money, but would not accept cooked food from her and even discriminate with her child. Similarly, while her mother would go and sell the bangles in the touchables' colony, the women would buy bangles from her because of cheaper and good quality but would take a bath after accepting them. When Baisantri's mother stopped selling bangles in the touchable colony due to an incident of discrimination, the women sent a messenger to ask for the bangles. Kosalya Baisantri, therefore, has opined that the upper castes and Brahmins are hypocrites and selfish since they selectively apply the caste norms as per their own benefits. These everyday occurrences underscore the complexities of the changing practices and varying degree of untouchability along with the time, space, and context.

## Gender, Caste, and Autobiography

Among multiple complexities involved, the intersectionality of gender within caste structures is one of the most crucial. Gender plays a decisive role in how one would experience the world despite being within similar caste and social structures. On the theme of gender and caste, the most recent work of Shailaja Paik, *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality and Humanity in Modern India*, highlights that it is not just the caste structures that were exploitative for Dalits, but also the gendered normative stigmatization of Dalits and their culture. Moreover, she argues that the masculinity of Hindu society depended upon controlling, taming, and exploiting the Dalit communities. Dalit women and Dalit communities as a whole could only achieve legitimacy if they followed the normative structure set by the upper caste for them. Therefore, her work puts forth the intimate sex-gender-caste equation existing in the society.<sup>40</sup> Another takeaway from her work is that one cannot view the Dalit caste studies as exclusive. To understand the non-Dalit communities as well, one must take Dalit studies into consideration to form a grounded understanding. Gaining insights from her work, this section underscores the role of gender in complicating one's understanding of Dalits and their everyday experiences.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>40</sup>Shailaja Paik, *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*, South Asia in Motion. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Not only how different genders may have different experiences, but recent works have also noted how different genders might articulate their lived experiences, and their narratives quite differently. Anshu and Siobhan discuss how women may have different narrative styles to articulate their experiences. Among the three case studies of this paper, the uniqueness or seeming ‘problem’ in Sujatha Gidla’s narrative is that she discusses more about the other characters than her own experiences. Her autobiography is characterized by storytelling. Gidla’s work may seem more like a novel which is written in such a way as to make the reader curious and keep them engaged throughout. At times, she has been making swaying comments and generalizations, and later responding to them through her narrative itself. However, what may seem like a problem might be a way as to how some marginalized and traumatized groups, such as women, articulate their narrative. As Malhotra and Siobhan’s book highlights, Uma Chakravarti examines three novels written by Pakistani women on the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 that she understands to be “deeply autobiographical in sentiment.” In particular, she makes the point that the novel form allows the female authors to “speak for a larger feminine self beyond personal experience,” thus amalgamating the individual self with history at South Asia’s “most intensely violent moment.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, despite coming from the same region and same caste, a stark difference in the writing style can be observed between Moon’s and Baisantri’s writing. Baisantri’s life history focuses on the struggles and dire realities of lived experiences as an untouchable. Contrary to this, Moon narrates his story focusing more on the aspects of resilience instead of the challenges, something that resonates with an element of pride in being able to escape the confines of untouchability. The differences in narration can be because of the location of the author. When Moon is writing his autobiography, the way he narrates probably has to do with his gender, location, and the moment when he is writing. After being actively involved in Dalit organizations for a while, he has risen to the position of being one of the most prominent Ambedkarite activist and scholar—the one who was assigned the task of gathering and editing the works and speeches of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Therefore, it is probably his way of expressing how he escaped the odds of untouchability and the sociocultural structures of exploitation.

A critical analysis of these autobiographies, that come from both men and women, reflects that certain taboos related to everyday and personal life were not brought up in the public discourse. The self in these writings is dissuaded from opening up about certain aspects which are considered ‘personal’ or tabooed and hence barred in public discussion. This includes the omission of discussion about the hardships related to maternity, menstruation, sexuality, and love affairs. Despite immense discussion about child marriage, normalization of frequent impregnation of girls at a young age, multiple births and death of children, diseases and disability being a common part of the life of Dalits, among others—the omission of relevant issues like maternal health, puberty, menstrual health, et cetera was striking as it went completely missing.<sup>42</sup> Such

<sup>41</sup>Cited in Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup>Baisantri, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

was the case even when Baisantri, in her narrative, describes that in her community, having children was as normal as ‘drinking water,’ and conceiving and having children were distanced from sexuality through a divine explanation. She describes the understanding prevalent in the society: “children are what the god gives as per its wishes, what can one do in such a scenario.”<sup>43</sup> It was considered as something natural, divine, and where the human did not have any say or control.

On the gender equation, the autobiographies highlight a strong sense of patriarchy within the untouchable communities too. Evidently, multiple marriages or widow remarriage seem to be a common practice within the community, and it is particularly smooth and favorable for men.<sup>44</sup> There were instances of discussion on the skepticism about the sexuality of women, adultery, and its consequences for women. In the case of the widows, women were also stigmatized and restricted through certain social norms. While on the other hand, a widower had no social restrictions. Additionally, it was normal for a man to have multiple marriages. In fact, having multiple wives was seen as a sign of prosperity and power. As Baisantri describes, it was considered that having multiple wives reflected that one could afford to take care of a larger family.

In the case of childbirth, despite having love for the daughters, there was preference given to the male child and male birth was celebrated. Daughters, or unmarried women, were considered as ‘*paraya dhan*’ or other’s wealth by the parents. In Kosalya’s family, a male child’s birth after six daughters was celebrated, and sweets were distributed in the colony. Still, the author’s parents were considered as exceptions given that despite the social mood, they ensured education for their daughters.<sup>45</sup> Besides, Baisantri’s narrative also reflects on the gender dynamics in the struggle for resources. It is reflected in the case description of the tap water contestations. It was mostly women who would be involved in the primary struggle and would attack the others not just physically but morally based on their normative “character” and use gender and normative behavioral based slurs against them.

Within the patriarchal structure, women’s empowerment significantly depended on the degree of autonomy, support, and power that women had in their own space, household, and domestic issues. In the case of Kosalya Baisantri, the author’s mother was able to take steps like educating all her daughters and son only because she had the autonomy and say in her own household. In addition, the author’s father was supportive of her mother, unlike in the case of her grandmother and grandfather or others in the community. According to her, this was the reason no other girl in her settlement could get proper education, and since no one else took women and their education seriously.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, internal autonomy of women and familial support are significant factors in developing prospects of women empowerment among Dalits. This kind of deeper reflection on the sensibility is absent in men’s autobiographies.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 51. Translations are mine.

<sup>44</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. 19; Baisantri, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

<sup>45</sup>Baisantri, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

Though Moon acknowledges his mother's contribution in his life and success, but does not reflect well on the larger gendered scenario.

For Dalit masses, most of whom were not only socially challenged but also financially deprived, education emerged as a means which was considered as one of the only ways to achieve social and economic mobility. While discussing women's education, these autobiographies suggest that despite being in the educational institutions, untouchables are not really included into the institutions or could do well in the existing system. In many cases, they were highly challenged and compelled to take different courses to achieve things like accessing drinking water and socializing with classmates—something that might appear very mundane, simple, or accessible for the rest.

The degree of challenges Dalit women faced was much higher and more complex. Even among Dalits, the sensibility towards women's education varied. The importance given to education also differed among different sub-castes in Mahars.<sup>47</sup> Kosalya discusses the additional challenges in the process of getting sensitization on the front of women's education. The task was onerous because, at that time, hardly anyone would believe that it was important for a Dalit woman to get an education. Moreover, given the poor economic conditions, paying for women's education was seen as an unwanted investment—something which was unaffordable for most Dalits any day. Therefore, the initial local schools (Jai Bai's school) and skill centres run by the missionaries were free of cost, and thus, attracted the aspirant Dalit women. As soon as Kosalya Baisantri's education started to depend on monetary investment, it again caused a backlash from the family due to the financial conditions. Even after getting into the institution, Baisantri's experience of education outside of her settlement among other caste students was also a cultural and class shock.<sup>48</sup>

An interesting thing to note is that the kind of education and training skills provided to women were also based on their normative role as a mere housewife or an assistant to other workers. The 'feminine' skill set based on gender roles that were provided to them included how to take care of a patient, what to be done in emergency situations, cooking, weaving, et cetera. Possibly, in some way, this supported and helped extend the existing labor distribution among the genders.<sup>49</sup> In addition to this, what added to the challenges for women in getting education and training was the practice of child marriage. Due to early marriages, women like Kosalya's elder sister were pushed into household, family structures, and motherhood. Having multiple children, among other responsibilities, at a very young age would have killed all the possibilities of even thinking about pursuing education, informally or remotely.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the existing odds, these autobiographies also indicate the emerging aspirations among Dalit women. Not only in the autobiographies of Kosalya and Sujatha, but in Moon's autobiography too, we catch a glimpse of women's aspiration

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 45.



towards education through her mother. In Moon's acknowledgment of his mother, he focuses on her education when women, particularly Dalit women's education was not a norm. He describes her aspiration and struggles in a patriarchal society. She worked as a laborer yet aspired to condition her children as the 'best' like the elites.<sup>51</sup> Such intricate inquiries into gender perspectives among Dalits are made possible through these autobiographies.

## **Diverse Untouchable Community (IES): Castes, Subcastes, and Power Hierarchy among Dalits**

While engaging with Dalit subjectivity, one must be cautious of the intersectionalities among Dalits. In this section, I attempt to deconstruct the shallow consciousness of Dalit-ness and foreground the diversity among Dalit communities. My aim is to generate consciousness about and encourage the narratives of the diversity within communities among Dalits—something that is unrecognized in the common understanding. 'Dalit' is not a homogenous entity. It cannot be traced in the past as it is a term that emerged for the political organization of the most marginalized castes. Therefore, there exist many differences, and even conflicts, among several untouchable castes and even within subcastes. Whereas the autobiographies highlight that the untouchables shared a bond of common lived experience—untouchability, identity and its stigma, and caste-based exploitation—they are also self-critical in reflecting on the varying differences within the communities. For instance, the autobiographies discuss the differences in the customary cultural practices among different untouchable castes and subcastes. The practices of inter-dining and endogamy were also practiced among the other untouchable castes, and at times among different sub-castes as well. Kaushalya Baisantri discusses how inter-subcaste marriage was not prominent in her caste. She discusses that in general if a inter-subcaste marriage takes place, it was not legitimized by the community. She also discusses how certain sub-castes have developed well and are seen as comparatively 'respectable', while some, like her own, were considered 'uncivilized' and further looked down upon. Besides, at the beginning of the paper itself, one of the quotes from Gidla's narrative shows how there were internal differences among Christian converts based on their original caste status.

At times there were internal hierarchies among the untouchables where they used to practice touchability and untouchability. Some of the untouchable castes would practice untouchability among other fellow untouchable castes. Kaushalya Baisantri depicts these internal differences. She also discusses how tribals were neither literate nor rich, yet they were not untouchables. Since these tribals provided labor at touchable houses, they also practiced untouchability with Dalit communities. Nonetheless, the higher castes and brahmins never used to let tribals touch them or their belongings. Even when the tribals were allowed to work and provide labor at the houses of these touchable, there was a separate washing area outside with a separate tap for cleaning activities. Once it was done, the touchables would perform re-cleaning with water and

<sup>51</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*.

only then take things back to their houses. Despite this, these tribals also practiced untouchability with the untouchable castes, probably because of their work.

Sujata Gidla also discusses the hierarchy among the untouchable castes as per their occupations. Malas, the author's caste, were village servants meant to do menial works, and Madigas carried dead animals and used their hide to make leather.<sup>52</sup> Malas practiced untouchability or despised Madigas due to their 'impure,' stigmatized occupation. Here, one can notice that the caste logic of purity-impurity was being replicated and seeping among the untouchables themselves to create an internal hierarchy. These hierarchies were internal among Dalits, since for the caste Hindus they were all untouchables, all despicable to the core.

Similarly, Moon mentions the differences among different subcastes and other untouchable castes at many instances. He further describes how internal caste differences hoped to be annihilated to form internal unity. This was one of the steps taken to organize the untouchables politically. He mentions how earlier separate subcastes had separate *akhadas* or wrestling grounds and there were internal contradictions, which were later resolved, and thus, the tensions among the subcastes were slowly waning.<sup>53</sup>

Moon also mentions the case of the priestly caste within the Maharwada. He discusses that even among the untouchables and under subcastes, there were priestly untouchables to perform rituals like brahmins. He mentions that it was because the brahmins did not provide their service to untouchables. However, these priestly subcastes were then considered as more pure and higher in the hierarchy as compared to the other subcastes among untouchables.

On a separate note, Baisantri discusses in her narrative how hierarchy was prevalent not only among upper castes and untouchables, but how lower castes also found it difficult to find acceptance among upper castes. She depicts how the two Kunbi women students in her class, who were neither untouchables nor economically challenged, were still not able to mix with the Brahmin girls.<sup>54</sup> This clearly displays the hierarchy among the students in the class and their circles based on the caste hierarchy existing in the society, which does not necessarily have to do with economic means and material gains.

## How do We Critically Read Dalit Autobiographies: Instances of Language and Translation

Language is the primary medium of articulation. However, its role is not limited to articulation alone. Language too has its politics and complexities. Naturally, then, the language influences the articulation and its reception. How does and to what degree does the language of articulation impact the narrative? What impact does translation have? Does articulation in a native language or in another language make any difference? While focusing on the influence of language and translation, this section argues for a critical reading of Dalit autobiographies.

<sup>52</sup>Gidla, *Ants among Elephants*.

<sup>53</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup>Baisantri, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*.

In the context of accessibility and politics of language, Sharmila Rege in her book opines Ravikumar's argument, an activist and writer of Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. He proclaims that though the increased translations would provide Dalit literature more accessibility and expose casteism, he also warns that there is a 'politics of selection at work in terms of what is translated and by whom.'<sup>55</sup> Further, Malhotra-Hurley's work also suggests that in the name of translation, the Whites influence and shape the narrative.<sup>56</sup> Their work suggests that translations are much more complex than what they might appear on the surface. It has to do with the equations of power, hegemony, racism, colonialism, gender, and masculinity.

Among the autobiographical texts analyzed, language prompts turn out to be one of the significant factors in shaping their narrative. It is important to note that none of these three autobiographies are in the native language of the authors. Vasant Moon's autobiography, though originally written in his native language Marathi with the title '*Vasti*' (meaning 'community settlement'), was translated into English by Gail Omvedt with an introduction from Eleanor Zelliot. This phenomenon had its own impact on the autobiographies and their consumption. A heavy influence of translators—their location, biases, and their perception of what stands as good articulation, probably to serve a specific type of readership, including mainstream academia—has varied consequences for Moon's autobiography. Eleanor Zelliot never fails to explain or connect how Moon's narrative has relevance for the Western audience. She clearly points out that Ambedkar's political rights and legal approach vis-a-vis Gandhi's change of heart approach has relevance in American culture.<sup>57</sup>

In the case of Gidla, as she moved out abroad, for her the audience consisted of North Americans. Therefore, it was natural for her to write in English. Since this Western audience barely had any idea about the caste system, it impacted her articulation and the narrative too. She would explain the caste system in comparison with slavery and racism and would provide her narrative with an exotic tinge through her writing style about Dalit lives and South Asia. In the case of Baisantri Devi, though her native language was Marathi, she explains that she is writing in Hindi because there is a dearth of Dalit autobiographies in Hindi. Therefore, she aspires to be one of the pioneers of Dalit women's autobiography in Hindi language.<sup>58</sup> Her limited knowledge of Hindi or attempts to translate her thoughts from Marathi to Hindi could have added to some of the incoherencies and incongruencies in her work.

In Vasant Moon's autobiography, one can conspicuously note the changes that the translation can have on the narrative. In his autobiography, the translation led to fundamental changes, including the change in the title, focuses, and emphasis on what the translator thought the people needed to know. Given that the translator of Vasant Moon's autobiography, Gail Omvedt, was a trained academic activist with a grounding in the understanding of caste, proficiency in English, and was from Europe—all these

<sup>55</sup>Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender*.

<sup>56</sup>Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self*.

<sup>57</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. x.

<sup>58</sup>Baisantrī, *Doharā Abhiśāpa*. She states this in the introduction.

factors have a lot to do with the kind of framing that the book finally has. For example, she has a section in the introduction describing what is untouchability, primarily targeting the non-Indian audience. This location greatly impacts and changes how the book is shaped and transformed. For example, Kosalya Baisantri never considered this vital as she was aiming at an Indian, Hindi-speaking audience who, by virtue, would know what the caste system is. In Vasant's autobiography, there are certain aspects that the translator problematizes. In her introduction, Eleanor Zelliott justifies the change of the title saying it makes it more 'understandable'. Also, she says that in Moon's story, many aspects are what you find in any poor urban neighborhood, but there is something "peculiarly Indian."<sup>59</sup> This, in a way, fizzles the distinctions and uniqueness of untouchable castes' living as labor. In my opinion, despite the translator being conscious of the fact, this approach or articulation probably does more harm than good to the purpose.

Further, there are multiple omissions and changes that come along with the translation. It also has to do with the impact of the intercontinental readership that shapes what comes out in the text. On the one hand, in the introduction of Moon's autobiography, the translator mentions that she has kept intact many names to retain the 'taste' of Moon's memories. Zelliott also raises the omissions in Moon's work. She points out that he did not mention that Mahars did not have the right to enter the temples until Independence and no Brahmin came to perform puja in Mahar temples till then.<sup>60</sup> However, Zelliott also mentions that she has left out many names and has altered several, including the names of the neighborhoods and caste. It comes across as highly problematic how the translators in Moon's autobiography are changing the names of the caste to the occupations possibly to suit the convenience of the non-Indian readers. How does it make sense not to mention the names of the castes themselves in a Dalit autobiography? Moreover, one of the names the translator used for the untouchable caste communities is the "Pickpocket caste."<sup>61</sup> Zelliott does not even provide any reference to the caste's actual name or any discussion about the category of 'criminal tribes,' thereby falling into the same trap of creating normative categories for different communities. Similarly, the translator has changed some of the names of the neighborhoods too. Further, in the context of the nomenclature of Dalit castes, Zelliott also mentions how certain castes prefer Sanskritized versions of their names.<sup>62</sup> I partially agree with this argument. However, it does not seem to be the case with the Chamars, who are highly active in the anti-caste politics.

It is important to note that despite all these differences, the autobiographies also highlight that the untouchable communities shared a bond of everyday lived experiences of untouchability—identity, stigma, and caste-based exploitation. The narratives tell us how, under Ambedkar's leadership, this shared experience ultimately helped unify untouchables in raising their voice against caste-based prejudice and

<sup>59</sup>Moon and Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India*, p. ix.

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

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. xvi.

exploitation.<sup>63</sup> Gidla's narrative also shows how Satyam, an untouchable, was trained to think more about the divisions around the class and not caste due to his affiliation with the Communist party. Nonetheless, he along with other untouchable communities joined Ambedkar in his quest to fight against the exploitative structures of caste.

### **Conclusion: Their Narrative, Their Truth, Their Past, Their History**

What do such traces and utterances in Dalit autobiographies tell us? Can their 'whispering' also be considered as the 'voices of history'?<sup>64</sup> Through this paper, I have shown that Dalit autobiographies are crucial sources which demand to be utilized for making sense of the past and history of the untouchable groups, and about the contemporary period and touchable society too. However, the paper has demonstrated how the conditions of knowledge production and power have invisibilized knowledge forms like Dalit autobiographies. In this paper, I have argued that the dual structures of positivist confines and Brahmanical hegemony need to be acknowledged and challenged.

My paper further presses upon the importance of Dalit autobiographies by foregrounding their uniqueness. This paper shows how these autobiographies challenge the idea of linear progression and the linear notion of time in history. These accounts help tackle the assumptions of a singular past, identity, and everyday experiences. Despite showcasing a sense of community, these autobiographies hold a remarkable level of consciousness of intersectionalities within their narratives, which makes them a critically rich historical source. They also provide a reflection upon such intricacies, including the challenges, struggles, aspirations, and escapes from Dalits' conditions in everyday. The cultural aspects and details in these autobiographies are so rich that are rarely found in any other archival sources. Apart from the three themes of spatiality, gender and caste, and intersectionalities among Dalits, there are many threads that these Dalit autobiographies unfurl. It includes reflections on the impact of national-international events and structures, such as World Wars and colonialism, on marginalized groups at the local level; intrinsic links of disease and disability with Dalit lives; differential perspectives on themes like nationalism as well as on leaders including M.K. Gandhi and Ambedkar; and socially practiced escapes for social mobility.

Responding to Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's contention on whether the subalterns can speak, this paper has presented a case of how Dalit autobiographical accounts can be considered as a repository of their voices and histories.<sup>65</sup> Despite all the challenges and limitations of the autobiographical accounts, this paper has built a case and has argued: yes, they can. Though the task may be daunting and onerous, however, as

<sup>63</sup>Both Vasant Moon's and Sujatha Gidla's autobiographies reflect upon the indispensable role of B. R. Ambedkar in fighting against untouchability and exploitative caste structures.

<sup>64</sup>Guha, *The Small Voice of History*.

<sup>65</sup>Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*.

the paper shows, one can decode these autobiographies through a multidisciplinary approach, suitable methods, and undertaking a critical analysis. I uphold that Dalit autobiographies are one of the critical forms of articulation of their voices, their truths, their sense of the past, and their history.

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