Dalit Autobiographies as Counter Publics: An Exploratory Essay

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This paper seeks to understand some Dalit autobiographies as counter publics through their narratives about the everyday lives of their authors as well as Dalit resistance to caste oppression.

Through a portrayal of some aspects of Dalit writings, I examine the double-edged nature of their writing as that of reproduction of identity as well as a base for antagonistic politics in the wider social domain. As Hannah Arendt argues, “the capacity of making new beginnings in the world is the fundamental human capacity to be free—a capacity possessed by each and every individual” (Thuma 2011). In other words, human beings are not born to merely die but are born to begin anew. At the same time, there is plurality in action as a “shared life” offers the space for interaction from which action springs. In other words, can we construct Dalit subalternity as not only an expression of shared experience but also as a political act of resistance through their autobiographical texts? Dalit writings are not anonymous individual tracts. Though authored by individuals, they represent a collective voice, about themselves, their complex identity and existence, as well as their quest for freedom in the shared space of struggle, voice, and agency. While this collective voice is indicative of a shared identity, this is not merely an expression of a homogeneous identity. Their subjectivity lies in the shared but diverse and complex “communal identity” their writing expresses (Beth 2007a). Undoubtedly, gender, caste, region would constitute Dalit experience differently and these diverse standpoints emerge in the writing. Reading and listening to an individual voice in the context of a shared identity thus represents a unique perspective on a particular common experience. Taking this view further, Sharmila Rege (1999) has argued that “Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual, and contest explicitly or implicitly
the ‘official forgetting’ of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.” This endows the narrative with agency and the affirmation of self in relation to others, in a collective spirit, as it were. It is this understanding of the Dalit autobiography, as simultaneously individual and shared, that lends it political agency, voice and power.

In the early 1970s, the Dalit Panthers became a leading force representing the voice of the Dalit subaltern in Maharashtra by organizing themselves as a mass socio-political movement. They also made a significant cultural contribution through their powerful resistance poetry and literary writings. Gokhale-Turner (1979) captures their impact: “The movement created a new literature of protest whose scope goes far beyond the confines of a single caste, striving to articulate the hopes, fears and aspirations of a whole class of exploited segments of Indian humanity, the Indian proletariat” (p. 77). This movement, which opened up the space for the voice of the subaltern that needed to be heard, also led to the dominant genre of autobiographical writings that allowed the unfettered expression of the pain, suffering and humiliation borne by the authors. The experience of subalternity was not locked into a compromise with failure or acceptance of fate but with the felt need to come out of an imposed silence into the public sphere. This coming into the public sphere has been a strong assertion of Dalit identity: It has given "previously marginalized Dalit writers access to the public sphere and thus, the capacity to debate and assert an influence over the public perception of their own Dalit identity” (Beth 2007b:548). This remarkable outpouring of their lives, through autobiographical writings, as an assertion of being Dalit, oppressed, humiliated and excluded, started in Maharashtra and has had inputs from the Hindi belt, Andhra Pradesh, and other parts of India.

Dalit literature includes not only autobiographies but also the rich array of fiction, short stories, narratives about personal journeys, poetry, journalism, and much else. While women, landless, the poor, the working class, laborers, the oppressed and others may make up the Dalit category, I am using the term in the context of the position Dalits occupy in the caste hierarchy. In this sense, Dalit literature is written by Dalits with a “Dalit consciousness” or “Dalit chetana,” as Brueck (2014) notes. She further adds, that most non-Dalit writers frame Dalit experience sympathetically but tend to objectify Dalits whereas Dalit writers shape an “agentive and transformative role for themselves as subjects” in their own writing (Brueck 2014:11). The “authenticity” of caste experience, in other words, relies on the voice of the subaltern who speaks, and not on whose behalf others speak. In this sense, my telling their story or interpreting their writing may not really be appropriate. I therefore acknowledge the inadequacy of this paper at the very start.

Autobiography, and Dalit consciousness

The genre of autobiography seeks to engage with questions of selfhood and identity, of memory and location, of voice and agency, of “truth” and authenticity, and of many other aspects of a self-revelatory method that seeks to conceal, in layered forms, even as it bares itself to the world. Subjectivity in its most intimate form is therefore central to this exploration into uncovering the subaltern’s experience of the social world. An awareness of this subjectivity, and engagement with it, allowing it to flourish, without suppressing it or indeed giving it undue weight, is in fact a movement into the
unknown through the known, a journey that encapsulates time as much as it moves through it.

Bourdieu (1987) is however wary of autobiography and biography and considers them an “illusion.” For Bourdieu, no life is a coherent unified whole with a linear, sequential trajectory, nor is its expression that of a cohesive, intentioned agent. He rejects the straight narrative of a life, possible in literature, but not in biographical forms. Identity does not rest in the autobiographical description of self in a linear narrative but in the play of self in relation to others in the spectrum of intersecting social worlds that interconnect with the self. Jackson argues, “truth is a function of relationship, not of identity. Accordingly, one has to free the personal voice from the conventional burden of tracing the development and career of a personal identity” (Jackson 2006:332, original emphasis). To erase identity, reaching for selfhood and voice from subjecthood is not what Jackson is telling us to do. Instead, he is pointing to the relationship between self and self, between a subaltern and the social world she inhabits, between experience and publics, focusing on intersubjectivity. Such intersubjectivity is present in encounters of different kinds, in physical spaces, in interactions of diverse kinds, and in those encounters of the mind that may not find expression in the everyday but remain at the edge of consciousness, in the periphery of the mind, emerging and reflected in understanding and expression. These are often revealed in the telling of particular incidents or encounters that are central to autobiographical writing. In her recent work, Gupta (2022) argues that “the autobiographical mode has been most apposite for the articulation of Dalit selfhood” (p. 5). Written in regional languages, and later translated into English for a wider readership, their narratives are deeply personal accounts. Dalit writers endow their own characters with not merely voice, but the ability to resist, reshape and re-articulate their condition as well as the possibilities for transcending caste. This is Dalit consciousness. This essay, somewhat tentatively, seeks to uncover the dilemmas and challenges in this process of writing that is about caste but also, about gender, age, class, religion and region.

The intersection of caste, gender and age result in further hierarchies and inequalities that mark the autobiographies through varied dimensions of experience and subjectivity. In an outstanding essay, Brueck (2019) examines two Dalit women’s autobiographies in Hindi to bring out the relationship between gender and caste and through the women’s focus on the domestic sphere, developing “a more capacious understanding of the individual self as the subject of autobiography” (p. 26). However, neither of the autobiographies represent a singular mode of life, and therefore disavow an essentialized gendered existence. Being a Dalit is a hugely diverse, and a complex experience of shame and humiliation, of struggle and strength, of submission and survival. It is not enough therefore to argue that Dalit autobiographies reflect a uniquely similar experience despite the fact that Dalit writers bring this out through thick description, affect, and rich experiential accounts. The narratives reflect not only their experience but also their desire to overcome this experience of being an outsider, of belonging to a particular identity, and simultaneously, to overcome the stigma and horrors of caste identity. Ganguly (2012) draws out the significance of Dalit writing as “an articulation of aspiration of personhood through the realization of full citizenship” (p. 148). Simultaneously, however, Dalit writers are aware of its “impossibility” and also of its failure to “address the singular nature of Dalit pain” (Ganguly 2012:148). The everyday-ness of the experience in the autobiographies starkly
brings out this pain, as well as humiliation and anger at that which begets this experience.

At the same time, a discursive space for the contestation of dominant publics emerges through the writings. Pandian (2008) refers to subaltern life-writings as a kind of “radical empiricism” that transcends “the divide between theory and fact and open[s] up spaces for alternative politics for subaltern groups” (p. 34). This is done through the narration of a “self-conscious ordinariness of the lives narrated” through representational forms such as poetry, fiction, autobiography, and testimony (p. 35). Dalit life-writings are however not mere literary texts. They are “communicative acts” insofar as they articulate “anticaste idioms, codes, and practices” (Gupta 2017:38), thereby foregrounding the complexities inherent in caste experience. It has been argued that Dalit autobiographies are unlike other autobiographies because they do not express a sense of fulfilment or contentment (Raj Kumar 2019:75). Instead, they communicate a sense of “insecurity” about their social position. At the same time, Dalit writings find voice through the text that has a complex outcome: “It is in exposure or appearance in the realm of the other, that life narratives find their affective destination” (U. Kumar 2009:347). In doing so, Dalit writers vividly communicate their lived experience of exclusion, self-doubt, forbidden sexual urges, unfulfilled hunger, as well as their agency as narrative subjects.

While life histories are no doubt individual in their description, they are “collective in their social practice” (Blackburn 2004:204). They establish a cultural category as well as a form of “narrative strategy” (Blackburn 2004:204) which is essential to their role as not mere recorders of experience but significant catalysts of change. It is through a shared knowledge of their collective experience, and the possibilities of resistance as emerging from the varying conditions, and forms of resistance in their lives, that their writing undoubtedly may be considered a “narrative strategy.” I must emphasize that despite the collective nature of their shared consciousness, there is nonetheless a diversity to their experience, marked by the exigencies of class, gender, location, and region. There is thus a tension between privilege and despair, poverty, exclusion, and access to resources, gendered identities and patriarchy, regional movements and local level aspirations for change.

**Autobiography, education, identity**

Before I go any further, a clarificatory note: I am not a scholar of Dalit studies so how did I enter and inhabit this space of reading and writing about Dalit experience? While teaching and researching in the sociology of education, I was struck by the fact that many sociologists use a slew of statistics and factual explanations to explain the situation of Dalit children in the context of education. The lived experience of Dalits undergoing schooling, for example, is recorded through brief narratives and factual information which is of significance, but hardly ever finds the space for rich ethnographies about their lives or experience.

Dalits form around 16.6 per cent of India’s population; the 2011 census recorded nearly 20.14 crore people belonging to various scheduled castes in the country. Although the Dalit literacy figures are 66.1 per cent as compared to 73 per cent of the total population, Dalit children experience discrimination, exclusion and marginalization at school that results in heavy dropout figures. Dalit girl children experience the greatest
forms of exclusion and have very low motivation to continue in schools. They are asked to sweep the school premises, clean toilets, sit and eat separately, drink water separately; they are also abused and humiliated. While this scenario is repeated in studies about the education of Dalit children, we seldom hear the voice of the Dalit child, sharing her experience of schooling in contemporary India. It has been observed that Dalit autobiographies focus on their experience in school as the school functions as “a transitional space between childhood in the village, portrayed as a place of unchanging oppression and minimal opportunity” and their adult life in a city or elsewhere (Beth 2007b:549). The educational experience of Dalit children is therefore critical to understanding their emergence from the home into the public space where education is valued as a source having the potential to equip them with the skills and knowledge that can free them from the oppression they have faced so far. In my teaching, I therefore turned to Dalit autobiographies and asked university students to read Valmiki (2003), for a first-hand, very powerful account of schooling for a Dalit child.

Valmiki (2003) tells us that no untouchable or “churha” as they are called in his village, has a social right to study in school but his determined father gets admission for him in the local govt. school (Basic Primary School) where every child has a right to gain admittance. Valmiki faces taunts on a daily basis, is asked to sit on the bare floor in the corridor, watches the teacher hurling abuses at students, hitting them, and is completely disabused of the idea of education as a good practice and of teachers as ideal mentors.

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember all those teachers who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them.

One day the headmaster, Kaliram, called me to his room and asked: “Abey, what is your name?” “Omprakash,” I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.

“Chuhre ka?” the headmaster threw his second question at me.

“Ji.”

“All right. See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.

“Go—get to it.”

Obeying the headmaster’s orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said,

“After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground.”

The playground was much larger than my small physique could handle, and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. I had dust inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers.

The second day, as soon as I reached school, the headmaster again put me to sweeping the school. I swept the whole day. I was consoling myself that I would go back to class the next day. The third day I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster’s loud thundering was heard: “Abey, Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding your mother?” I began to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi boy shouted, “Master Sahib, there he is, sitting in the corner.”
The headmaster pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: “Go sweep the whole playground—otherwise I will shove chilies up your ass and throw you out of the school.” Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried-up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks. Tears were falling from my eyes. I started to sweep the compound while my tears fell. From the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish. (Valmiki 2003)

Valmiki’s father withdraws his son from the school but then is determined to have him study there and gets him back in school by appealing to the village headman (pradhan).

The next day I went to school with fear stalking my heart. I sat in the class in trepidation. Every second I worried that the headmaster was coming … Now he comes … At the slightest sound my heart pounded. After a few days, things calmed down. But my heart trembled the moment I saw Headmaster Kaliram. It seemed as though it wasn’t a teacher who was coming toward me but a snorting wild boar with his snout up in the air. (Valmiki 2003)

I asked students to read this autobiography to understand the anguish, humiliation and sense of shame that accompanies a Dalit child’s experience of schooling. The inadequacy of available ethnographies about the lives and experience of Dalit children at school results in autobiography as a medium and tool to help us understand what life at school is about in a country that prides itself on a Constitution that celebrates democracy, freedom, fraternity and equality.

Autobiography as a genre thus opens up a hitherto limited understanding of Dalit experience due to the lack of sustained interrogation of, and investigation into, the atrocities against subaltern communities. This is due to the inability of social science research to penetrate human consciousness beyond a point and the experience of which emerges so lucidly through reflective engagement in subaltern writing about their lives. An alternative epistemology to the social sciences emerges through this non-investigative genre that seeks to understand lived experience through voice as memory and experience. It is perhaps appropriate if we acknowledge the significant contribution of this method, without the trappings of academic jargon or conceptual apparatuses, to enriching our understanding of Dalit lives. I turned to autobiographies as narratives of life histories from the subaltern perspective, in their own voice, to enable our understanding of their lives in “secular” and ostensibly equity-based educational institutions.

The opening sentence in Limbale (2003), resonates with simplicity and reveals the struggle, dilemmas and contradictions that Dalit children experience: “One day, all the boys and girls from our school were going on a picnic…” (Limbale 2003:1). What could be more banal, everyday and “normal” than going out for a picnic from school? Except that being Dalit, the picnic assumes a particularly dramatic rendering of exclusion and rejection.

One day, all the boys and girls from our school were going on a picnic, but we, the Mahar boys, did not know this, and so had to come to school as usual, our school bags on our backs. Then our teacher asked us also to go back and get our tiffin … we returned with our jowar bhakari and chutney tied up in dirty rags, and joined the group of boys and girls who were standing in rows… The Wani and Brahmin boys played kabaddi. Being marked as Mahars we couldn’t join them … we played one kind of game while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds.
Play over, we settled down to eat. Boys and girls from the high castes ... and all the teachers, about a hundred or so sat in a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar boys and girls, were asked to sit under another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn’t make any sense to us...

Even the tree we sat under was tattered like us. Whenever the wind shook its branches it produced waves of hot air that hit our faces. We sat in its broken shadow. Mallya offered us his bombil curry and, in exchange, we offered him our dry bhakari as he had not brought any. Dare I offer my chutney-bhakari to my teacher? Would he eat it?

My stomach was like a way to the graveyard that continually swallows the dead ... I always felt half-fed. Whatever was given I ate greedily and nothing was ever enough. Everyone in my house needed food so how could I alone think of eating till I was full? I had searched for every bit of leftover food in the house to make up my tiffin. I felt I had swallowed the whole land and was chewing stones...

The high-caste boys and girls from the village were eating together. The girls sat close to the teachers. They were all chatting and we sat like owls watching them. We had before us only the crumbs of bombil. With each morsel, I chewed the lips of the laughing girls. At last we finished eating...

When I went to school the next day, the teacher had already asked the boys and girls to write an essay on the picnic... When the teacher noticed me, apparently doing nothing, he grew annoyed and shouted, “You, son of a bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don’t you!?” I picked up my slate and pencil, spat on the slate, smeared it and wiped the slate with my shirt which was already dirty having been used like this many times before. I didn’t know how and what to write. I kept thinking of how we had squatted in a circle under a tree in the forest, eating. I remembered the hands of high-caste boys and girls offering us their leftovers, the withered tree in whose shade we sat, the bundle of leftovers, the question my mother had asked, and teacher calling me son of a bitch and a beef eater. How should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked me for? (Limbale 2003:1–4).

Limbale’s autobiography begins with his school experience as it inhabits the core of his memory about his childhood. In the representation of lived subjectivity, the experience of shame, humiliation and exclusion is foregrounded and heightened. In his rendering of his school experience, Limbale vividly depicts the reasons why children drop out of school, the regimentation of school life, the freedom outside; it is a perceptive and rich memoir that helps us engage with Dalit subjectivity much more intimately than NSSO data which so clearly and perhaps accurately presents the large numbers of SC children who still do not have access to school or drop out soon after due to discrimination, humiliation and exclusion.

In an afterword to Pawar (2015), Rege (2015) notes that in Dalit testimonios, “school” is an “important motif in the memories.” Often, men would be teaching at different places, would seek to convince everyone in the community about the significance of education, even beating up children who missed school, and importantly “sending daughters to live with friends' families in the towns since schools in the villages did not admit girls” (Rege 2015:333). Women’s autobiographies vividly remember school, its harrowing presence in their lives, and impact on not only their growing up years but also on other members of the community. Growing up in the Konkan region, Maharashtra, Urmila Pawar (2015), writes: “Herlekar Guruji was in our class. He was like our father, in another form. ... He practiced stringent discipline and half of that was directed at me. ... He always made me do the dirty work” (p. 67).

This dirty work included cleaning the school verandah which was used as a toilet by the village buffaloes and cows. The teacher believed that it was Pawar’s cow that was
ruining the verandah and would ask her alone to clean it. On one occasion, even when it was not the turn of the class to clean it, he asked her to do it because she had been late in coming to school. Pawar (2015) notes, “It was so humiliating that I refused even to budge. Guruji ordered me to clean up once again. But I did not move from my place. My friends—more foes than friends really!—turned to look at me and laughed. Guruji got up, I could feel the heat waves of his anger. … Guruji came close and slapped me hard. Then he told me to get out” (pp. 67–68). Although her humiliation and physical pain were difficult to contend with, it is Pawar’s mother who came to her rescue and did not fail to berate the teacher as he walked past their home. Pawar records that her mother’s anger is directed at the teacher not only because he has authority over her daughter but she appeals to his educational background that surely must prevent him from speaking so “foolishly” (Pawar 2015:68–69). Although Guruji did not beat Pawar again, the narrative is also a testimony to the divisive and caste-based peer culture at school that also encourages teachers who in any case have a disparaging attitude and behavior towards Dalit children. Somehow, through failure, and also some success, these children get through school which is not the most endearing experience for them.

Vasant Moon’s (2002) autobiography is the only one I have encountered that talks about his positive experience of schooling in Maharashtra. He tells us that teachers at his school were influenced by Gandhi and “had compassion for the Mahar boys” (p. 14). There were no divisions among the students either and this was thanks to the teachers “who took care that the poison of casteism never spread” (p. 14). This remarkable testimony clearly suggests that teachers hold the key to shaping classroom behavior and attitudes. Strikingly, for those who survive the system, education does not emerge as a resource that empowers the Dalit subaltern or allows them unmitigated upward mobility. At best, it is about being “educated” as opposed to being illiterate and Dalit. On the basis of fieldwork among the Manupur chamars near Banaras, Ciotti (2006), refers to “education as leading to the acquisition of a substance, often of a moral nature, which is seen as collectively shared (even though it is actually acquired by a minority) and believed to act upon an inherited Chamar substance” (p. 900). The latter is one that is characterized by ritual impurity, has been bolstered by untouchability practices, as the autobiographies so lucidly describe, denying agency to the subaltern. Hence, the imperative to acquire education, “cultural capital” as Bourdieu (1986) put it, is to remove the stigma of an essentialized caste identity. Inspiration for the faith in education as delivering Dalits from the curse of identity came from Ambedkar himself who argued that it could be used as a means “of intellectual liberation from the tentacles of a Brahmanical mythology” (as cited in Ciotti 2006:905).

This dilemma of caste identity versus castelessness, or sometimes, being this, inured in untouchability and pollution, at other times, being that, belonging to something else, perhaps linkages to an “educated” or “upper caste” identity, is brought out somewhat traumatically, by Limbale, in his query “Who am I?” (Limbale 2003:39). Limbale’s mother was a Mahar but his father was a high caste man in the village, who seduced his mother, so he experiences a kind of marked and nuanced liminality. Although his father is upper caste, he has abandoned his mother, and Limbale is therefore treated as a Mahar. At the same time, he does not disown his father: “Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected?” (p. 39). There is in this existential crisis a reaching out to an intermeshed and complex identity that sees itself as being both of caste, and yet,
somehow above it. Limbale's question “Who am I?” indicates his perplexity about his identity and its liminality, neither here nor there, trapped in caste. While this nuanced liminality is present and tugs at Limbale's self-perception and identity, it also urges us to question the relationship between caste and education and the struggle to break out of the impasse of identity in the context of caste.

We need to understand whether or not the emphasis on education in the community has in fact bettered the situation of Dalit children. Recent studies do not in fact indicate this due to multiple intersecting factors including the continued prejudiced attitudes towards Dalits and their subsequent stigmatization, marginalization and exclusion in education. A study of Dalit and tribal children by Ramachandran and Naorem (2018) concludes that “explicit caste-based discrimination” is, for example, less pronounced in schools located in highly stratified states such as Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, primarily due to strong social movements and youth-led movements against caste oppression. It is however very explicit in Rajasthan. There is thus great variation among the different states depending on multiple factors. Discrimination in some states is often present in the intersection of gender and caste, and remains similar to what was experienced by Valmiki (2003), Limbale (2003), or Pawar (2015) in their childhood almost forty years ago. It also takes different and more subtle forms as teachers find ways of covering up their perceptions with rationalized arguments that nonetheless reek of discrimination.

In recent years, it was doctoral student Rohith Vemula's death by suicide (in 2015) that rocked the higher education establishment, highlighting its lethargy and insensitivity in dealing with Dalit students' problems on an ongoing basis. In 2019, the death by suicide of a woman doctor Payal Tadvi in a well-known medical college in Mumbai further underscored the continuing issue of discrimination, isolation and sheer callousness towards young Dalit professionals, which drives them to hopelessness and despair. Vemula wrote in his suicide letter: “For some people life itself is a curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. I am not hurt at this moment. Not sad, just empty. That is pathetic. That is why I am doing this” (Vemula 2015). The pathos and evocative simplicity of the letter is not lost on the reader. Yengde notes, “Rohith Vemula gave us a moment of poetic reflection that at times remains missing amidst political reflection and social catastrophe” (Yengde 2019:95). Yet, we can see how peers and teachers often collude in this exclusionary process that drives educated young Dalits to the edge. The most recent case is that of a young Dalit student at the Medical College associated with the King Edward Hospital, Mumbai who has filed a FIR against his peers and is awaiting justice (The Quint Staff 2022). Such cases are evidence of the persistence of caste discrimination in educational institutions despite the Constitution, civil society initiatives and youth-led social movements. Above all, their own educational achievement, which Dalits work to realize against all odds, often do not meet with the deserved success due to the persistence of caste-based discrimination and violence against them.

To conclude this section, while Dalit autobiographies lucidly bring out the shared experience of schooling, and the trauma of exclusion, they tend to simultaneously “normalize” Dalit experience as being germane to schooling and life at school. It therefore emerges as almost “normal” for Dalit children to have such experiences in school, as several Dalit life histories and autobiographies express them. In the context of public institutions such as schools, this would no doubt indicate the involvement of the state in the perpetuation of caste inequalities and more importantly, of the
humiliation, emotional pain and scarring of the individuals. We begin to see a pattern
of what it means to be a Dalit in a social world that is dominated by not only caste
hierarchy but simultaneously at the intersection of poverty, patriarchy and social class.
While such autobiographies undoubtedly bring to the surface experience that would
remain unknown and tucked away in the underbelly of social life if it were not
narrated, we cannot help but note that there is a simultaneous ghettoization of the
heterogeneous Dalit experience as being that of a particular community in an age-old
hierarchized, custom ridden and polarized society. In other words, Dalit
autobiographies laden with the experience of humiliation, and exclusion, bring out
with affect, and poignancy, the experience of being in a zone that is marked by the
central fact of being a Dalit. This further stigmatizes the community as a distinct
community with an apparently homogeneous experience. In this construction of the
experience of subalternity, the Dalit experience remains one of wretchedness and
despair exemplified by narratives of a shame, mortification, extreme hunger, poverty,
and sexual exploitation.

Agency and Counter Publics

25 At this point, to revisit Gayatri Spivak’s complex question, “Can the subaltern speak?”
(1988); or contrarily, “Can the subaltern be heard?,” we perhaps need to pose a counter
question, “Does the subaltern voice speak with agency?”

26 It has been suggested that the narrative structure of Dalit autobiographies reflects
struggle, conflict as well as the overcoming of difficulties. This represents the “agentive
individualism” (U. Kumar 2009:164–65) that the Dalit autobiographical genre has come
to be closely associated with. It is also argued that these autobiographies open up a
“critical space by presenting a complex account of the subject’s inhabitation of the
world” (Kumar 2009:164–65). This presentation of the self in lived experience in
everyday life results in our understanding how Dalit men and women, through their
autobiographical writing, constitute a “counter public.” I do not however see these as
individual acts of agency; instead, I view them as constituting a collective
consciousness that emerges from their shared experience of oppression as a
community. Dalit women’s autobiographies offer a different understanding of Dalit
lives through the lens of gender, family and community dynamics. Women’s voices
articulate the experience of oppression not only by a focus on their identity as Dalit but
also of gender and status as women in the household and community.17

27 I turn to Dalit women’s autobiographies as illustrative of the powerful subaltern voice
for resistance and change embedded in their narratives.18 Nancy Fraser argues that
“subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians
—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” which she
calls “subaltern counter publics.” She further states that “they are parallel discursive
arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter
discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of
their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990:67). There is a certain agency in
Fraser’s formulation of the oppositional “counter public.” There is also the resultant
view that the public sphere is a place where contestation is central. Dalit subalternity
however constitutes publics in a two-fold manner: Being Dalit is an identity that in the
“life-writings” has deep affinity with the experience of being different, of being
untouchable, of being on the wrong side of the purity/pollution divide, of being therefore "outside," a thing, or a body apart, much like Agamben’s refugee (Agamben 1998). On the one hand, therefore, Dalit autobiographies, through their vivid and poignant portrayals, inadvertently reproduce themselves as those who are set apart. On the other hand, they express a need to assert themselves and break the walls within which they have been enclosed thereby constituting a discursive space for the contestation of dominant publics. There is a continuous interplay between the possible and impossible, the experience of containment and the perfume of freedom, in their writings, which makes Dalit autobiographies an especially fraught subaltern counter public.

28 The subaltern voice in Dalit women’s autobiographical texts articulates resistance and expresses the collective gathering up of strength to fight domination at home and in the community. Guru (1995) has argued that the Dalit women’s perspective “does not make a fetish of its own reality, and therefore prevents the ghettoization of dalithood” (p. 2550). Such an argument lends agency to their writing, which tries to overcome their seemingly permanent identity marked by caste. 

29 Kamble (1929–2012) was a remarkable woman from Phaltan (Satara district), Maharashtra. In her autobiography, Kamble (2008) meticulously records the experience of Dalit women who are not only outcaste by caste practices but also oppressed by patriarchy in their own community, and by poverty and illiteracy. At the same time, the text is animated by Dalit women’s concerted efforts to break out of the prisons of illiteracy, backwardness and poverty. She acknowledges the significance of Ambedkar’s role in this process of empowerment that allows Dalits to move out of the prisons that have been their fate since time immemorial.

Just as the farmer pierces his bullock’s nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. And the one who has taught us this, the one who has transformed us from beasts into human beings, is the architect of our Constitution—that shining jewel of sheel and satwa, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. (Kamble 2008:49)

30 It is Ambedkar with his western education, “across the seven seas,” as they share with one another with pride, his clothes and demeanor, who awakens them from their blind faith in stone idols who have never helped them and are in fact the cause of their suffering. Kamble’s narrative records Ambedkar’s visit to the village, his critique of Hinduism and blind faith. He urges them to “follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to school. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving … Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this” (Ambedkar, as cited in Kamble 2008:54).
Ambedkar particularly exhorts women to be at the forefront of change and take the first step in initiating transformation. Kamble (2008) says, “Gradually, the winds of Ambedkar’s thoughts turned into a whirlwind” (p. 57) and influenced the entire community. In writing about her schooling experience, she reveals how Ambedkar’s call for education and freedom inspired women like her and others as well.

Girls too felt thrilled that our caste consciousness, which had been dormant so far, was now awakened. Our school was predominantly high caste. A majority of girls in our class belonged to the higher castes. For the first time in their lives, they had girls like us—who could pollute them—studying with them. They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose, mutter “chee, chee,” and run as if their lives were in mortal danger. The teacher had allotted us a place in a corner near the door from where we could not move till school was over for the day. The blackboard would be in another corner. We could neither see what the teacher was writing on the board, nor could we raise our doubts, in the classroom. If we went to drink at the school tap, the other girls would raise hell. But we never listened to them. We were greatly emboldened by Baba’s brave spirit. We, seven or eight friends, would move together as one person. (Kamble 2008:83)

The Dalit girls were inspired by Ambedkar’s call to empowerment and change through education. Their identity was merged into one through bonding and a fierce desire to stick together and hope to defeat caste ostracism in school. This left many of them without fear but did not however free them from constant caste-based abuse and ridicule, grounded in the overwhelming dislike and abhorrence expressed by the upper castes.

The higher caste girls would hurl taunts and abuses at us, “These Mahar girls put on such airs. They have even touched the taps! Now where should we drink water from? Stupid things!” Another one would come up with, “You know, I have to bathe again after I go home from school. My mother has come to know that Mahar girls sit in our class and she doesn’t allow me to enter the house unless I have a bath. We have to go to the Ram temple. What to do now? Where do we drink water from?” They would hurl stones at us and throw dust into our eyes. Then we would get angry and attack them. Tucking up our long skirts, we would just barge into their groups like battering rams and scatter them. They would run away and those left behind would be prey in our hands. We would attack them furiously, pull their long plaits, push them to the ground, pinch their cheeks and hands, and torture them as much as we could. But we would get back all of this and more, once we entered the classroom. Then the teacher would hurl insults at us, hit us with a long ruler, and make us bend down and hold our toes till school was over. We would bend down, touch our toes and smile at each other. But when school was over for the day, it would be our turn again. When the bell rang, the hearts of these higher caste girls would turn to water. Some of them escaped our wrath by quickly running away, but we managed to catch quite a few of these girls. We, seven or eight girls from different grades, would get together in a group and start roughing up any girl whom we happened to catch. The higher caste girls also got together to surround us. They would hurl insults at us, “That Ambedkar has educated himself; that’s why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!” (Kamble 2008:83) In retaliation, we said, “You shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar’s name! You have your own baldy, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth! That toothless old bugger hasn’t any teeth! Ha ha ha!” Then we would sing a song from our *jalsa*: Where’s Gandhi’s spinning wheel gone? Bhim has shaved Gandhi’s head off. Our quarrels were nothing more than the hurling of insults at the two leaders. Finally, we would chase those girls away and walk back home, laughing and repeating to each other the things that we had said.
to them. These skirmishes were not short-lived. These fights continued till we finally left the school. In the morning, the higher caste girls hurled all kinds of insults and abuses at us in front of the teachers, “It’s really too much, that filthy Mahar educated himself! Ambedkar is so vain! Who does he think he is?” They would go on and on like this. Then we would respond, “Our Ambedkar looks like a sahib. You know why your Gandhi is toothless? Because our Ambedkar kicked him in his teeth! Ha Ha ... That’s why your Gandhi has no teeth! And do you know why Gandhi has no hair? Because our Ambedkar shaved it off! That’s the kind of man our Ambedkar is!” They could not counter us with anything. They would tell one among them, “Hey Athawale, come on. Don’t you talk to these filthy Mahars. They say such obscene things. They call our Gandhi ‘Gandi.’” Come on, don’t even talk to them. If our Gandhi just utters a curse, that Ambedkar will burn to ashes in a second.” How could we tolerate this? “Bah!” we would say. “Do you take our Ambedkar to be an oldie like your Gandhi? He will snatch your Gandhi’s cane and beat him to a pulp with it.” They would shout at us in chorus, “Filthy Mahars!” … We did not do exercises from our textbooks, but this recital was our daily routine! On the road to the school, in Mangalwar Peth, we would come across Gujjar women going to the temple. The moment they lay eyes on us, they would make a detour to avoid us. At least one of us would then run towards them, touch them from behind and come back running. Touching them would make us feel as if we were in the seventh heaven. (Kamble 2008:84)

Kamble’s illustration of resistance to caste-based exclusion does not rest on submission and indicates a continuous retaliation at both physical and political levels. She emphasizes the collective nature of the girls’ fight against caste, as they “move together as one person.” Moreover, defending Ambedkar by mocking Gandhi is a particularly trenchant way of asserting their point of view. In the narrative, “touch” becomes a weapon instead of a symbol for humiliation. “Touch” does not merely have a physical connotation to its use, it represents a powerful way of retaliating against the oppressor using the same tool which is used to signify their own oppression. Contesting untouchability through “touch” and mocking Gandhi whom they consider the dominant caste’s icon constitutes their resistance to the dominant caste, its culture, and establishes Dalit life-writing as a counter public. It is an attempt to hit at the root of upper caste identification with a political perspective, to undercut the ideology and the man who represents that ideology, and through their critique, to exhibit complete loyalty and commitment to their own icon, Babasaheb Ambedkar, who is a shining symbol of not only their identity and caste consciousness but also represents their ideal for change.

Concluding Remarks

The public sphere is not a homogenous space dominated by a bourgeois public or one based on an upper caste identity. Clearly, there are multiple and competing publics which may however be contestatory. Nancy Fraser argues, “Insofar as these arenas are publics, they are by definition not enclaves—which is not to deny that they are often involuntarily enclaved. After all, to interact discursively as a member of a public—subaltern or otherwise—is to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas” (Fraser 1990:67). Subaltern counter publics therefore fulfil two characteristics: they remain contained with a distinct identity that is reproduced through circulation and simultaneously they use the discursive space to contest identities and participate in wider arenas. This discursive space is represented through voice and an amalgamation
of multiple experiences at the intersection of caste, gender, poverty and other intersecting categories. These narratives further emphasize the shared experience and counter the tenacity of caste in different contexts. Jodhka (2015) for example has examined aspects of Dalit assertions for citizenship in Punjab as well as social mobility, and activism in the Dalit community in different contexts.\textsuperscript{22}

Dalit counter publics are created through their autobiographical writings in response to the politics of exclusion and social practices imposed by the dominant sections of society including caste, gender, and social class. This essay has tried to show how these function as both in essentializing Dalit subjectivity through the continuous shaping of Dalit experience as one of subjection, submission and harassment as well as a base for antagonistic politics in the wider social domain. Kamble’s writings fall in the second category and make a significant contribution to the constitution of Dalit autobiography as a counter public. It has been argued that “due to their publicist orientation, they [counter publics] widen the field of discursive contestation, meaning they bring to the fore issues that might have been overlooked, purposely ignored, or suppressed by dominant publics” (Kampourakis 2016). While this does not mean they are necessarily virtuous arbiters of an egalitarian ethos, they serve to unlock the potential for Dalit subaltern voice and agency in the face of centuries of oppression.

Together with the students in my class on the sociology of schooling, we began to understand the traumatic and often violent nature of the experience of Dalit children at school, and through autobiographical reflection, and engagement with the autobiographical texts we were studying, we better understood the inequities in education as well as the continuance of social attitudes mired in a tradition of caste-based exclusionary practice. At the same time, we developed a more nuanced understanding of the complex arena of caste-based violence, through the lens of gender, familial structures, region, and, importantly, of the possibilities for human agency and intervention in a changing society.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


1. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Sharmila Rege, whose work I unfortunately became engaged with only after her untimely passing. An earlier version was first presented at an International Workshop at Waseda University, Tokyo on January 16–19, 2020. I thank Professor Akiko Kunihiro for the opportunity to extend our work forward through this meeting and all participants for their insightful comments and suggestions.


3. Rege (1999) was one of the first scholars to coin the phrase “Ambedkarite counter publics.” Beth (2007a) emphasizes the modes of resistance Dalit autobiographical writing gave rise to, arguing: “Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance.” For a powerful summary of perspectives on the liberating aspects of Dalit autobiographies, see Rege (1999).


5. Based on fieldwork among Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu, de Heering (2013) points out that Dalit literature, including autobiographies assert their need to be heard, and not be silenced, and “by speaking out, they turn from being passive subjects into active agents” (de Heering 2013:40).

6. The term Dalit for the “untouchables” became popular in the 1970s and, in Hindi, comes from the word “dalan” meaning “oppressed,” “crushed” or “broken,” being associated with the experience over centuries of members of the untouchable caste. The Dalit Panthers defined it as such: “Who is a Dalit? Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion” (Manifesto of Dalit Panthers 1973). Gandhi had in the mid-twentieth century tried to give the notion a positive connotation by using the term “Harijan” (lit, child of “Hari”—God), but this was rejected by the majority of Dalits who view the term as “demeaning as well as apolitical” (Beth 2007b:546).


9. I am aware of the implications of this amongst different categories of students in a classroom. Students may not appreciate discussion around caste identities through personal life histories that may elicit memories of disturbing experiences for them. However, students in my class would often bring more such texts to my attention and we would read them together for a lack of available ethnographies on the subject.

10. Churha is another name for untouchable referring to the caste as that of sweepers and scavengers.

11. I also wanted them to understand the extent to which there is rampant discrimination amongst the teachers towards Dalit children where they not only openly discriminate against them, but as Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003) point out, they also build damaging “constructions about the ‘educability’ of particular dalit jatis” (p. 49).

12. Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003), Nambissan (2009) may be considered notable examples of efforts to bridge this gap in the literature.
13. At the same time, the interpretive turn in anthropology had already taken place in the late 1970s and the work of Crapanzano (1980) is an important marker of the change in anthropological efforts to understand subjective narratives.

14. I must add that reading and discussing such autobiographies in class empowered university students to share their own experiences of humiliation or exclusion and through engagement with their personal school journeys, and the texts they had read, expanded their understanding of the vast canvas of school education in India.

15. Sarangpani (2003) writes about the child’s aspiration to become a “bada admi” (literally, “big”/successful man) in her study of learning in rural north India. The perception among Dalits however is not only about being successful in terms of status deriving from occupation but of being empowered by education to transcend a caste identity that ascribes a low status to them.

16. See also Chitnis (2022).

17. Dalit women’s experience in different socio-cultural contexts has been captured by Kapadia (1995), Rege (1996, 1999), Anandhi and Kapadia (2017), Still (2017), among others. See Ciotti (2012, 2014) in particular for an understanding of the heterogeneity and multiplicity of Dalit women’s experience in an evolving India. Gorringe (2018) provides a succinct analysis of the intermeshed relationship between caste, gender and violence: caste and gender frame honor for Dalit women and men very differently, and as Gorringe argues, it is only “by grasping the interlocking and cumulative nature of disadvantage that we can explain the persistence of caste-based atrocities in contemporary India” (Gorringe 2018).

18. I am indebted to Sharmila Rege for her writings on Dalit women, especially on their autobiographical texts. See Rege (1999) for a powerful rendering of Dalit women’s texts as “testimonios.”

19. For an insightful analysis of the relationship between gender and caste through the autobiographies (in Hindi) of two very strong and inspiring women, see Brueck (2017).

20. Location is important in understanding Dalit women’s perspectives. For example, Maharashtrian Dalit women are more educated than those from Karnataka (Guru 1995:2549). Education and location both play a significant role in explaining Dalit perspectives. See for example Narayan (2014), Gupta (2017).


22. Narayan (2014) provides a rich description and analysis of how Dalit popular booklets are disseminated throughout a largely illiterate community, thereby raising their political consciousness. See also the collection of essays in Rawat and Satyanarayana (2016).

**ABSTRACTS**

Despite Bourdieu’s warning that autobiography is a form of narcissism and a decline into navel gazing, as it were, the genre of autobiography is a well-recognized medium in contemporary scholarship. In particular, there has been recognition of the autobiographies of subaltern populations as representations of their lived experience, which was hitherto unknown to broader audiences. Such autobiographical texts are increasingly popular ways of understanding the lives of marginalized, excluded “others” that are obfuscated by the veils of difference, entitlement and privilege. This paper seeks to examine this trend through the lens of some Dalit autobiographies and to examine how autobiographical narratives bring out, with rich insight, poignancy and great detail, the everyday lives of Dalit men and women. At the same time, such autobiographical
writings unwittingly push the Dalit subaltern into a narrative form that emphasizes the experience of wretchedness, isolation and exclusion. By bringing in the struggle, individual and collective acts of agency against caste dominance, the autobiographies simultaneously constitute “subaltern counter publics,” to use Nancy Fraser’s persuasive term. This confirms that autobiographies are a formidable medium for not only the representation of Dalit experience of subalternity but also of the possibilities for transformation as these emerge through the experience of Dalit writers. The conundrum is whether autobiography is an enabling genre for understanding lived experience or more worryingly poses the problem of reproducing subaltern subjectivity. I conclude that Dalit autobiographies indeed mark a movement towards change through the fierce struggle and independence that they also represent.

INDEX

Keywords: autobiography, Dalit, counter publics, education, resistance, agency

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