
***Uchalya* and *Ooru Keri*: Narratives of Dalit Resilience and Resistance**

Ashok Kumar Tanan

Assistant Professor, Government Arts College, Sikar (Rajasthan)

Dr. Sanju Chaudhary

Assistant Professor, Department of English, UOR, Jaipur

Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 25-04-2024

Accepted : 29-04-2024

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i1.9

Key words:

Dalit Literature, Autobiographies,
Resistance, Resilience,
Caste Discrimination etc.

Corresponding author :

sanju.choudhary07@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the themes of resilience and resistance in Dalit autobiographical literature through an analysis of Dr. Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* and Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*. These autobiographies vividly depict the challenges faced by Dalit communities in India, including caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. Siddalingaiah's narrative traces his childhood in a Karnataka village, highlighting his journey of education and activism amidst societal prejudices. In contrast, Gaikwad's autobiography delves into the harsh realities of the Uchalya community in Maharashtra, exposing systemic oppression and advocating for social justice. Both narratives serve as powerful critiques of entrenched hierarchies and offer poignant reflections on the quest for dignity and equality. Through their autobiographies, Siddalingaiah and Gaikwad reclaim Dalit narratives, challenge dominant societal norms, and inspire movements for change.

Introduction

Dalit literature is linked to a movement to raise awareness of the goals and perspectives of a new society and people. It opposes tradition and religion, which oppose self-respect and are in opposition to this rule and religion. This uprising is an opposition to the cruel system. The Dalit struggle gave rise to Dalit literature. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar opposes the Hindu religious customs and traditions and launches the movement for the self-respected Dalits. He starts evangelizing the Dalit community about fairness, equality, and brotherhood. The Dalit literary movement's founder, Dr. Ambedkar, disagrees with the idea that the caste system was created by God. He is adamant that it is man-made. Inspired by the social and ideological works of Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a new generation of Dalit authors, poets, critics, and so forth is emerging. Through their works and deeds, these Dalit writers challenge societal injustice and entrenched inequity. They come to understand that their pens serve as a weapon for social change. As a result, Dalit literature portrays the oppressed community's battle for self-respect.

The central idea of Dalit literature is to highlight the marginalized aspects of Dalit society. According to Prof. Pantawane, Dalits don't follow the so-called conventional literary tradition. Nothing matters more than the lives and sufferings of the guys from lower castes. Renowned Dalit short story author Baburao Bagul states that, "Dalit literature is not a literature of Vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not literature that spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's Freedom and for that reason, it is a historic necessity" (56-57).

Dalit literature, according to Baburao Bagul, is meant for all people. This literature's primary goal is to investigate humanity and togetherness. It inspires everyone from lower castes to live a normal life and to fight against prejudice.

The Editor of *Poisoned Bread*, an anthology of Dalit texts, Arjun Dangle observes, "Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people" (Dangle 266). Dangle acknowledges that Dalit literature demonstrates the group's distinct identity and sense of self. It strengthens the will to resist injustice and boosts self-assurance and empowerment. These literary works vehemently denounce the many forms of oppression meted out to Dalits by the *Savarnas*. In his essay "Indian Dalit Literature: Quest for Identity to Social Equality", Pawan Mandavkar discusses Dalit literature that,

Dalit literature is a creative and intellectual literary expression that transforms the social realities in various literary genres. It was an offshoot of Indian literature and represented an emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Dalit literature is primarily a social and human document, which deals with the people who have been socially and economically exploited in India for hundreds of years. (03)

Consequently, Dalit literature has developed into a potent vehicle for Dalits' cultural resistance in a number of Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka.

Dalits began writing autobiographies as a means of expressing their emotions via their writing, including sadness, empathy, rage, jealousy, and misery. Autobiographies written by Dalits serve as potent witnesses to the real-life struggles faced by those who are discriminated against in India due to their caste. These stories are important records of bravery, tenacity, and resistance against long-standing injustices that have been embedded in society. These memoirs reveal the terrible reality of systematic discrimination, economic exploitation, and social marginalization endured by Dalit people via the personal perspectives of Dalit writers. They shed light on individual paths filled with adversity and victory, providing a moving critique of deeply ingrained systems and promoting equality and social justice. By recording their tales, Dalit autobiographers affirm their legitimate position in history, reclaim their voices, and question prevailing narratives, forcing readers to face hard realities and imagine a more inclusive future.

This paper explores two classic Dalit literary works, *Ooru Keri* by Dr. Siddalingaiah and *Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad that have had a profound impact on Indian literature. These personal accounts strike a powerful chord with the challenges and victories of Dalit identity and existence. In Gaikwad's *Uchalya*, poverty, prejudice, and resistance in rural Maharashtra are explored in all its raw and unvarnished detail as the author uses his personal trip to illustrate the terrible realities of caste tyranny. In the meantime, Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri*, which depicts the social and economic struggles encountered by Dalit groups, beautifully recalls the author's boyhood in a Karnataka hamlet. In addition to being autobiographical accounts, both novels offer forceful criticisms of structural injustice that encourage readers to face hard realities and support social change. Gaikwad and Siddalingaiah demonstrate the significance of their voices in influencing Indian literature and culture while illuminating the intricacies of Dalit living via their personal stories.

Dalit Autobiographies as A Tool of Resistance

Protest and disobedience are only parts of resistance. It concerns sexuality, the search for identity, individualistic self-assertion, and 'control' over societal problems. *Satyagrah*, or passive resistance, was referred to by Mahatma Gandhi as a potent form of fighting injustice. Usha Bande believes that because resistance is non-violent and non-confrontational, it in turn influences the social order. It eventually turns into the despised weapon of the helpless. Reinterpreting is a necessary part of resistance in order to center the oppressed. It's a behavioral tactic with the capacity to topple the established order. It is a component of social dynamics. In Dalit narratives, resistance is represented in a way that simultaneously acknowledges the presence of the dominant power system and expresses the Dalit determination to reject and subvert it. Furthermore, because Dalit concerns are culturally distinctive, they must be handled in the context of South Asia.

Dalit autobiographies are a potent literary form that goes beyond simple personal accounts to act as tools of resistance, exposing the brutal reality of caste-based discrimination in India and claiming the humanity and agency of oppressed groups. Dalit writers make important contributions to literature and social movements by reclaiming their identities, questioning prevailing myths, and promoting social justice via their autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies are powerful instruments of struggle against India's long history of caste-based subjugation. These accounts, written by people who have experienced institutional prejudice and social exclusion firsthand, are powerful testimonials that subvert prevailing narratives and promote social justice. Dalit writers combat the widespread misconceptions and marginalization imposed by upper castes by reclaiming agency over their identities and histories via the documentation of their particular experiences. These memoirs illuminate the lived experiences of oppression and resistance among Dalit communities by exposing the harsh realities of economic exploitation, cultural hegemony, and prejudice based on caste.

The fundamental act of recovering agency is at the core of Dalit autobiographies. Dalits have endured systemic discrimination, marginalization, and silence for generations. They have also been pushed to the bottom of the caste system. For this reason, these memoirs are acts of resistance against this historical injustice. They give Dalit people a stage on which to make their voices heard, share their personal stories, and offer their opinions on society. By doing this, they contest the erasure of Dalit history from popular discourse and combat the widespread misconceptions and misrepresentations that are supported by dominant castes.

Dalit autobiographies have an influence on social activity and lobbying in addition to literature. Because they advocate for laws and practices that uphold equality and justice and increase public awareness of caste-based discrimination, these tales work as catalysts for social change. These memoirs force society to face its role in maintaining caste-based inequality and to actively seek to remove structural obstacles that support prejudice and marginalization. Dalit autobiographies also challenge the power of prevailing caste narratives and add diversity to literary canons. By providing viewpoints and experiences that have historically been ignored and suppressed, they enhance the cultural fabric. Dalit writers emphasize the value of representation and self-determination in reframing their futures, recovering their history, and influencing narratives about their communities.

Dalit autobiographies are therefore effective instruments of empowerment and resistance rather than just literary masterpieces. They address structural inequities, shed light on the real-life experiences of Dalits, and promote a society that is more welcoming and equal.

Dalit writers dispel prejudices, encourage group action, and open the door for a day when caste-based discrimination is totally eliminated via their stories.

Ooru Keri: Roots of Rebellion - A Memoir of Defiance

The autobiography of Dr. Siddalingaiah, *Ooru Keri*, which translates to *The Word With You, World*, is a potent example of fortitude and defiance in the face of ingrained societal inequalities and structural injustices. Siddalingaiah recounts the struggles and victories of his journey vividly via accounts of his upbringing in a neglected Dalit community in Karnataka, India. *Ooru Keri's* title depicts his close relationship with his roots in the midst of unrest. His story illuminates the ongoing fight for equality and dignity in Indian society while simultaneously acting as a personal biography and a call to action for societal change.

Siddalingaiah was born in 1936. He founded *Dalit Sangharsha Samiti* and is an Indian film director, writer, poet, folklorist, and scholar. He serves in that capacity as a former Karnataka Legislative Council member. In 1969, he directs *Mayor Muthanna* as his feature film debut. In addition, he directs motion pictures, such as *Bhootayyana Maga Ayyu* (1974) and *Bangaaruda Manushya* (1972). The autobiography *Ooru Keri*, written by Dr. Siddalingaiah, is the primary work of his fame. It is recognized as the first Dalit autobiography in Kannada Dalit literature, published in 1996. The autobiography was translated into English by Dr. D.R. Nagaraj and published in the *Deccan Herald* magazine in 1995. The author's vivid memories are scattered across its five sections. In 2003, S.R. Ramkrishna, the founder and editor of *The Music Magazine*, translated it into English once again and published it as a Dalit autobiography. Siddalingaiah portrays his autobiography as a tablet that takes readers from his early experiences to a highly successful professional life. His reluctance to pursue education, social, political, and economic standing in society is depicted in the autobiography *The Word With You, World*.

Dr. Siddalingaiah was born into a Dalit family of modest means in the Karnataka hamlet of Magadi. Due to his helpful relative, Siddalingaiah's family moved to the Srirampura slum in Bangalore, where he is studying in second class. *Ooru Keri*, the namesake of the sites, is the title of the autobiography. The village or town of Ooru is the home of all *Savarnas*, or non-Dalit people, such as Brahmins. Conversely, all Dalits reside in the village of Keri, which is ecologically isolated from the main community. The autobiography opens with a description of the layout of the author's home. He goes into detail on how Dalits' fundamental needs for shelter and subsistence serve as the foundation for their resistance. He acknowledges that the fact that their homes are located remote from the center of the hamlet is the reason they left their hometown.

Siddalingaiah and his family moved to Bangalore as their new city. He is quite excited to explore Bangalore; they reside in Srirampura, a shantytown. Bananas, drumsticks, and papaya trees were once grown in front yards in Srirampura. The major drain is located rather near to the author's residence. There is freshwater running next to this drain. Still, Siddalingaiah's family is relatively new to the impoverished district of Srirampura. Once, a noisy person was walking down the author's street at night. H's heading to the bathroom. A dog barks at the raucous at the moment. The author's mother yells at the raucous person as she exits the house at the same time. This argument between the rowdies and the slum dwellers escalates into a large-scale riot. The argument between the rowdy and Siddalingaiah's mother demonstrates her resistance to live.

Dr. Siddalingaiah has fought valiantly against his family's and his society's plight. Since he was little child, he has rebelled against the deplorable circumstances. Siddalingaiah attends the government elementary school that is close to the graveyard. He is accepted in the third standard since he has finished his first and second standards in Magadi and Manchable. He is bright academically, and Andamma, his teacher, adores him. She urges the underprivileged pupils to rise up one day so she may give them free pencils and books. Siddalingaiah remains seated as every other student in the class who is in need, stands up. When Siddalingaiah's father eventually shows up for class a few days later, the instructor realizes the true financial situation of his family, as he writes, "I hadn't responded when she had asked poor boys to stand up.... My father's tattered clothes, his submissiveness, and his unshaven, pleading face proclaimed his poverty" (Siddalingaiah 32). It is clear from the aforementioned incident that the writer develops a strong sense of self-respect from an early age. Siddalingaiah's early actions demonstrate his reluctance to pursue an education given his family's appalling financial circumstances. Siddalingaiah is hired to read letters to the illiterate while he is at school. A lot of individuals needed letter readers at that time. Thus, the writer satisfies their need. Because of the bad economy, he works for others, earns money, and uses it for his schooling, as the autobiography states:

Many people needed letters readout. I served that need well. Whenever a letter arrived, I would be invited over. With great respect, the family would make me sit down. ... Some would make me write letters to their relatives. I would then get, besides a generous amount of eats, some money as well. (Siddalingaiah 33)

The author's quest to find means of survival since his early beginnings is evident in the sentence above. He turns into his parents' obedient little boy right away. Reading and sending letters to individuals thus turns into the author's pastime and source of income. D. R. Nagaraj in the afterword of the autobiography "The Strength of Poor People's Laughter" writes:

Siddalingaiah's autobiography contains several elements that we may expect in a Dalit writer's work. Poverty, rage, and humiliation- all these are in it. But we also find something fresh and unexpected throughout the work: the absence of any dread of poverty and violence. The theme of this work comes naturally and is common to all Dalit works. But the voice that shapes this theme is different and invigorating. (111)

D. R. Nagaraj is attempting to convey here that, in contrast to previous Dalit autobiographies, Dr. Siddalingaiah does not just depict the plight of Dalits.

There is a constant reflection of the author's opposition to prejudice. After visiting Dalit colonies, Pejvara Swamiji begins to talk about the issues facing the Dalit people and how they might better. The author responds to Swamiji's comment as soon as he begins to talk on this subject. The question he poses to Swamiji is, "If you are concerned about the Dalits, make an untouchable the head of your religious order" (Siddalingaiah 107). Uneasy and unable to respond coherently, Swamiji ends his lecture. This knowledge of the author's responsibility to his community is what drives Swamiji crazy during the lecture. The author's opposition demonstrates his knowledge of and vigilance against untouchability.

Dr. Siddalingaiah narrates the days he spent fighting to obtain the funds. He is paid a little money from this employment once a week. Despite this difficult situation, Siddalingaiah never gives up his passion of reading. He used to spend his factory money to purchase books. He acquires the book *Asprishyaru* (Untouchable), written by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Kumara Venkanna's Kannada translation of the book is available. He works for three or four

months in this manner, using his pay to buy quality books. This represents the author's journey of resistance out of self-respect.

Siddalingaiah talks about his political battle in addition to the struggle for education. He entered and won the Karnataka Association contest during his undergraduate years to become the joint secretary. Siddalingaiah is chosen to serve as the Kannada Association's joint secretary. The author has begun to fight for political standing in his life in this passage. Thus, Dr. Siddalingaiah discusses the Dalits' political, social, educational, and economical opposition. the autobiography also documents the writer's lifelong battle against hardship, starvation, exploitation, utter helplessness, and humiliation endured as a kid and young adult, as Dr. Madesh N notes in "Dr. Siddalingaiah: A Revolutionary Poet and Pioneering Dalit Poet";

The autobiography resonates with readers, offering an intimate perspective on Siddalingaiah's journey from a marginalized background to a position of influence. It presents a narrative of resilience, determination, and the unwavering pursuit of justice. "Ooru Keri" serves as a testament to the power of storytelling in shedding light on the challenges faced by marginalized communities and inspiring others to challenge the status quo. (3746)

As a result, *Ooru Keri* gave readers a close-up view of his adventure. Siddalingaiah's story contained the power of education, the marriage of activism and poetry, and the tenacity of a disenfranchised group seeking justice, from the challenges of his early existence to the creation of the DSS (Dalit Sangaharsh Samiti).

Uchalya: Unveiling Defiance and Empowerment

Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*, which is translated as *The Branded*, explores the depths of personal resiliency and social oppression in the framework of India's caste system. Based on his personal experiences as a Dalit, Gaikwad's story courageously highlights the hard realities of marginalization and prejudice that his people have to deal with. Gaikwad skillfully navigates the difficulties of poverty, discrimination based on caste, and the never-ending fight for justice and dignity via colorful writing and moving narrative. *Uchalya* offers significant insights into the human condition and the desire for empowerment in the face of systematic oppression. It is not only a biting critique of societal injustices but also a monument to the resilient spirit that perseveres in the face of hardship.

Born in Dhanegaon in 1952, Laxman Maruti Gaikwad began his professional life as a social worker. He considered elevating the tribes he belongs to, the De-notified and the Nomadic. In Maharashtra, the community is referred to as DNTS. In 1976, he saw a death-defying fast in support of the millworkers in that location. His autobiography, *Uchalya: The Branded*, was published in the 1980s. *Uchalya: The Branded* discusses how individuals view public life.

The lives of the community are seen negatively. Laxman Gaikwad gives a genuine account of his life. As an illustration, he was enrolled in a school where the Dalit students were advised to sit on the cemented floor at the door's entry by the school. The guys received disparaging remarks. The lads from the higher caste would mistreat them. Laxman was mistreated here. The lads made an attempt to defeat him. He went by Lachhmantata. They labeled him an oldie, even though he is a boy. In a settlement, the Uchalyas set up camp. For years, they lived in villages. The wise ones had their kids registered in schools. The families resided in huts on the outskirts of settlements. They frequently interacted with SC-ST

individuals who maintained stable lives. They were employed as working-class individuals on the estates of landlords. Several of them were forced into labor bonds. A few of them engaged in theft. In this story, the topic of theft becomes more prevalent. Of course, they are branded as thieves because the autobiography *Uchalya* has a subtitle that reads 'Branded'. There is some background history. The ancient Uchalyas mostly subsisted on theft. They taught all of their children how to steal. Any youngster who disobeyed would face consequences. The current paragraph weaves this thread throughout. Individuals inside the groups, such as Laxman Gaikwad, maintain that not everyone in the community engaged in theft. For instance, because he disliked stealing, this author suffered many beatings. The author then queries why they are all branded as "Uchalya branded" by the public and police.

After completing his elementary schooling, Laxman Gaikwad fell under the sway of Dr. Ambedkar. He so readied himself to introduce his community to India's "trust with destiny". Everyone in India is granted basic rights under the constitution, which also imposes fundamental obligations on them. Here, Gaikwad wants to strengthen and enlighten the Uchalyas rather than exalt them as a people. The writer notes:

I have described in this book the details of the life of our community as I have experienced it during the last fifty years. The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Dalits and the indignities they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realise what ordeals of fire the Dalits have passed through. (Gaikwad x)

Gaikwad portrays his community's members as being in a state of mental and physical turmoil as caste is deeply disliked by Hindus. As Kumud Pawde notes: "The result is that though I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: What comes by birth but cannot be cast off by dying—that is caste" (21).

One day, Laxman entered a temple and was thrashed by the priest for entering. Then he wanted to read the books of revelation. "All are the children of God, then why do you not allow me to read the sacred book?" (Gaikwad, 83) he questioned a village Patil. Laxman never engaged in dishonorable behavior or theft. He even had a beaded necklace around his neck.

Laxman Gaikwad resided at a Babhalgaon boarding school. The disciples of Lingayats, Mangs, and Mahars remained with him. However, neither Vaisyas nor Brahmins sent their kids there. This is the social suffering of India. Ultimately, on their own grounds, Laxman's people construct a little temple dedicated to Tulajabhavani. Every year they sacrifice a lamb for her. The leaders of the higher caste once demanded 250/-per household from the Uchalyas at the village's annual Mahadev Fair because their neighborhood was one of thieves. Once more, the people had to take out and repay debts. This was not good. For instance, the moneylender refused to let the borrowers go. There is the idea of debtor's jail, which dates back many centuries to England. In one case, a moneylender severely battered Gaikwad's brother-in-law. After that, Laxman Gaikwad and his companions established an organization by following the example of the enlightened Uchalyas. No Mahadeo Tax was paid by them. They declined all large amounts except Rs. 11/-per person. The Patil, the Sarpanch, and the Marathas were infuriated by this. Later, these local bigwigs caused trouble if any Uchalya robbers were apprehended.

The father of Gaikwad was an enthusiast for giving kids a good education. He accepts a school admission on his behalf. The first person to attend school is Laxman. He gets harassed by the Brahmin and Maratha pupils, just like a helpless lamb walks into a pack of wolves. The boy is not afraid. Laxman Gaikwad eventually dropped out of school due to poverty. He started working in a mill. He worked really hard. It was a doffer's labor. Laxman continued his schooling by enrolling at Shivaji High School in Latur. He could attend this night school without having to quit his employment. He then made friends with members of the Wani, Gaurav, and Maratha groups. Here, he was referred to as 'Laxman Gaikwad' rather than 'Laxman Patrut'. At that point, the young man's status was improved.

Laxman Gaikwad brings up the subject of dignity and selfhood here. He laments India's intricate caste system, which impedes the advancement of Dalits. M. Koteswar Rao comments, "The Dalits are denied access to land, education and health facilities". (169)

They are maintained as Hindu caste dependents. By naming the Uchalyas, Pardis as branded, the British themselves committed an error. This branding is still going strong today. They are charged with being criminals. Maharashtra is still in a horrible situation. This is an uneducated, rural community. They experience political disadvantage, cultural enslavement, and economic exploitation in addition to living in subhuman conditions. It's an alienating and compromise-filled life. In this sense, no community has yet revolted against the government or society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narratives of *Ooru Keri* by Dr. Siddalingaiah and *Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad serve as potent examples of Dalit tenacity and defiance in the face of systemic social injustices. These memoirs shed light on the terrible realities that Dalit populations in India suffer, including social marginalization, economic exploitation, and prejudice based on caste. Siddalingaiah and Gaikwad not only chronicle their own travels but also question prevailing myths and promote societal change via evocative storytelling and introspective observations. The stories they share demonstrate the bravery and fortitude of Dalit people who, in the face of institutionalized discrimination, are fighting for justice, equality, and dignity. These writers enhance the body of Indian literature by recovering their voices and declaring their identities. They also encourage readers to address injustices and imagine a more inclusive future. Thus, *Ooru Keri* and *Uchalya* serve as prime examples of the transformational potential of autobiographical writing as a means of social and cultural change.

Works Cited

- Bagul, Baburao. "Dalit Sahitya: Man's Greatness, Man's Freedom". *Asmitadarsh*, Vol. I, 1973.
- Dangle, Arjun. *Poisoned Bread*. Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature. Orient Longman, 1992.
- Gaikwad, Laxman Maruti. *The Branded*. Trans. P.A. Kolharkar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998.
- Mandavkar, Pavan. "Indian Dalit Literature Quest for Identity to Social Equality". *Humanities and Social Sciences Reviews (HSSR)*. Vol. 3 (2): April. 2015.
- N., Madesh. "Dr. Siddalingaiah: A Revolutionary Poet and Pioneering Dalit Poet." *Journal of Research Administration* Vol. 5 No. 2, 2023.

- Pawde, Kumud. "The Story of My Sanskrit." Dangle, Arjun. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Longman, 1981
- Rao, Koteswar. *Dalit Autobiographies in English Translation: A Select Study*. Kakatiya Publications, 2009.
- Siddlingaiah. *Ooru Keri*. Sahitya Akadami, 2006.