

Educate, Resist, Write: Ambedkarite Consciousness and the Reconstruction of Dalit Selfhood in *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and *Changiya Rukh*

Rakshit Kesari T. S.

Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Mysuru

Email: rakshatk@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-7203-6827

Abstract

Dalit autobiographies have emerged as powerful forms of literary resistance that challenge the structures of caste-based oppression and social exclusion in India. Unlike conventional autobiographies that foreground individual achievement, Dalit life writing transforms personal experiences into collective histories of marginalization and struggle. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* through the lens of Ambedkarite consciousness. Drawing on the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar, the study examines how caste humiliation, educational aspiration, and autobiographical writing contribute to the formation of Dalit selfhood. It argues that both texts move beyond documenting suffering to foreground the emergence of critical consciousness and intellectual agency among marginalized subjects. Through education, literacy, and self-representation, Byapari and Madhopuri challenge caste-imposed identities and reclaim dignity, voice, and social visibility. The paper further demonstrates that autobiographical writing functions as a mode of resistance through which personal memory is transformed into collective history. Ultimately, these narratives affirm the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's vision of social emancipation through knowledge, self-respect, and collective empowerment.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiography, Ambedkarite Consciousness, Education, Literacy, Resistance, Selfhood, Manoranjan Byapari, Balbir Madhopuri, Caste, Identity.

Introduction

The emergence of Dalit literature in post-independence India transformed the literary landscape by bringing marginalized voices into mainstream discourse. For centuries, Dalit experiences were either ignored or represented through dominant-caste perspectives. Dalit literature challenged this exclusion by foregrounding lived experiences of caste oppression and transforming literature into a vehicle of social protest, dignity, and self-assertion.

Among the various genres of Dalit writing, autobiography occupies a distinctive position. Dalit autobiographies function simultaneously as personal narratives, historical records, and political interventions. They document the everyday realities of untouchability, poverty, and social exclusion while challenging dominant narratives that normalize caste hierarchies. As

Sharan Kumar Limbale argues, Dalit literature derives its authenticity from lived experience and social reality, making autobiography one of its most powerful forms of expression.

The growth of Dalit life writing is closely linked to the intellectual and political legacy of B. R. Ambedkar. Through his critique of caste and advocacy of education, Ambedkar inspired generations of marginalized communities to challenge structures of inequality. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he exposes caste as a system that perpetuates social fragmentation and denies equality and dignity to large sections of society. His famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize" continues to influence Dalit literary and intellectual traditions.

This influence is particularly evident in Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh*. Emerging from different linguistic and regional contexts, both autobiographies depict the lived realities of caste discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion. Madhopuri's narrative portrays life in a caste-segregated Punjabi village, where untouchability governed everyday interactions and reinforced social inequality (Madhopuri 10–11). Similarly, Byapari chronicles a life shaped by displacement, labour, and marginalization, revealing how caste and poverty intersect to restrict opportunities and undermine human dignity.

Despite these hardships, both writers refuse to remain confined within identities imposed upon them by caste society. Their narratives foreground education, literacy, and writing as transformative forces that enable them to challenge oppression and reconstruct their sense of self. Madhopuri associates education with dignity and social mobility, while Byapari's journey from manual labourer to writer demonstrates the emancipatory potential of literacy. In both texts, writing becomes an act of resistance through which marginalized individuals reclaim agency and narrate their own histories.

While existing scholarship on Dalit autobiography has largely focused on caste oppression, poverty, and social exclusion, comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of education and literacy in the formation of intellectual selfhood. This paper addresses that gap by examining how education, reading, and writing contribute to the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness in *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and *Changiya Rukh*.

The study argues that both autobiographies are fundamentally narratives of self-transformation. Through education, literacy, and self-representation, the protagonists challenge caste-based oppression and reconstruct themselves as intellectual and political subjects. By analysing these texts through the lens of Ambedkarite thought, the paper demonstrates how knowledge functions not merely as a means of social mobility but as a powerful instrument of dignity, resistance, and collective empowerment.

Review of Literature

Dalit autobiography has emerged as one of the most significant genres in contemporary Indian literature, providing first-hand accounts of caste oppression, social exclusion, and struggles for dignity. Scholars have emphasized that Dalit life writing differs from conventional autobiography because it transforms personal experience into collective social testimony. Sharan Kumar Limbale argues that Dalit literature derives its strength from lived experience and serves as a powerful mode of resistance against caste-based oppression (Limbale). Similarly, Arjun Dangle's anthology *Poisoned Bread* demonstrates how Dalit

writing functions as a literary and political intervention that challenges dominant cultural narratives (Dangle).

The relationship between caste and selfhood has been examined extensively by scholars such as Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai. In *The Cracked Mirror*, they argue that lived experience constitutes a valid form of knowledge and that marginalized voices must be recognized as producers of theory rather than merely subjects of study (Guru and Sarukkai). This perspective is particularly relevant to Dalit autobiographies, where personal narratives become important sources of social and political understanding.

Studies on Dalit identity and modernity have also contributed significantly to the field. Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* explores the ways in which Dalit political consciousness has evolved through struggles for recognition and equality. Likewise, Gail Omvedt's work on the Ambedkarite movement highlights the central role of education and political mobilization in the fight against caste oppression (Omvedt). Eleanor Zelliot's research further demonstrates how Ambedkar's ideas inspired generations of Dalits to challenge structures of social exclusion (Zelliot).

The transformative role of education has received considerable scholarly attention. Shailaja Paik's *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India* illustrates how access to education became a crucial means of empowerment for marginalized communities. Her work reinforces Ambedkar's belief that education is essential for social emancipation and provides an important framework for understanding the educational aspirations represented in *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* (Paik).

Several autobiographical texts have also shaped the broader discourse on Dalit life writing. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables* document experiences of caste discrimination while highlighting the role of education and perseverance in overcoming social barriers. These narratives, alongside the autobiographies of Madhopuri and Byapari, reveal recurring themes of humiliation, resistance, self-respect, and social mobility (Valmiki; Jadhav).

Recent scholars have drawn attention to the continuing relevance of caste in contemporary India. Anand Teltumbde's *The Persistence of Caste* argues that despite constitutional safeguards and democratic reforms, caste-based inequalities continue to shape social relations and access to opportunities (Teltumbde). Similarly, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd critiques the cultural and ideological foundations of caste hierarchy and advocates the recognition of marginalized knowledge systems (Ilaiah Shepherd).

While existing scholarship has examined Dalit autobiography, Ambedkarite thought, and caste-based oppression, comparatively little attention has been paid to a sustained comparative study of Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* and Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* through the framework of Ambedkarite consciousness. This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing how education, memory, literacy, and autobiographical writing contribute to the formation of Dalit selfhood and resistance in these two significant autobiographical narratives.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* through the lens of Ambedkarite thought, while drawing upon insights from Dalit literary criticism and critical pedagogy. The theoretical framework is primarily informed by the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, whose critique of caste and advocacy of education provide a crucial foundation for understanding the relationship between oppression, resistance, and selfhood in Dalit autobiographies.

Ambedkar's analysis of caste in *Annihilation of Caste* remains one of the most influential critiques of social hierarchy in modern India. He argues that caste is not merely a division of labour but "a division of labourers" that systematically denies equality, dignity, and freedom to marginalized communities (Ambedkar 81). For Ambedkar, caste operates not only through economic structures but also through social practices, cultural beliefs, and psychological conditioning. His insistence that liberation requires both social transformation and intellectual awakening provides an important framework for interpreting the journeys of Madhopuri and Byapari. Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a means of emancipation, expressed through his call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize," forms the conceptual foundation of this study.

The discussion of Dalit selfhood is further informed by Sharan Kumar Limbale's theorization of Dalit literature. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Limbale argues that Dalit writing derives its authenticity from lived experience and collective suffering rather than from conventional literary standards. According to Limbale, Dalit literature functions as a literature of protest that exposes social injustice while simultaneously asserting the humanity of marginalized communities. His emphasis on experiential truth is particularly relevant to autobiographical narratives such as *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, where personal experiences become vehicles for representing broader social realities.

The study also draws upon Gopal Guru's reflections on humiliation and dignity in caste society. Guru argues that humiliation constitutes one of the most enduring dimensions of caste oppression because it attacks the individual's sense of self-worth and social belonging. Unlike material deprivation, humiliation leaves lasting psychological consequences that shape identity formation. This perspective helps explain the significance of the everyday experiences narrated by Madhopuri and Byapari. The insults, exclusions, and acts of discrimination described in their autobiographies are not isolated incidents but mechanisms through which caste seeks to regulate human dignity and maintain social hierarchy.

Another important contribution comes from Sharmila Rege's work on Dalit testimonios and life writing. Rege argues that Dalit autobiographies should be read as collective social documents rather than merely personal narratives. Through autobiographical writing, marginalized individuals challenge dominant histories and recover experiences that have often been excluded from mainstream discourse. This understanding is particularly useful for analyzing the ways in which memory functions in both autobiographies. The narratives move beyond individual recollection and become testimonies that document the collective experiences of Dalit communities.

The study further engages with Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness as articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire views education as a process through which oppressed individuals become aware of the social structures responsible for their marginalization and develop the capacity to transform those structures. His understanding of education as liberation resonates strongly with Ambedkar's educational philosophy and provides an

additional framework for examining the transformative role of literacy in both autobiographies. The journeys of Madhopuri and Byapari illustrate how education enables marginalized individuals to reinterpret their experiences and emerge as agents of social change.

Bringing these theoretical perspectives together, this study argues that *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and *Changiya Rukh* are not simply narratives of caste oppression but narratives of self-transformation shaped by Ambedkarite consciousness. Education, literacy, memory, and writing emerge as interconnected processes through which the protagonists challenge caste-based identities and reconstruct themselves as intellectual and political subjects. The theoretical framework therefore enables a deeper understanding of how Dalit autobiography functions simultaneously as personal testimony, social critique, and a powerful instrument of resistance.

Ambedkar and the Question of Dalit Selfhood

The question of selfhood occupies a central position in Ambedkar's critique of caste society. For Ambedkar, caste was not merely a social institution that regulated occupations and relationships; it was a system that systematically denied dignity, equality, and humanity to large sections of society. Its most destructive consequence was not economic exploitation alone but the psychological damage it inflicted upon oppressed communities. By repeatedly subjecting Dalits to humiliation and exclusion, caste attempted to convince them of their own inferiority. Ambedkar therefore believed that any struggle for liberation must begin with the recovery of self-respect and human dignity.

This concern with selfhood is vividly reflected in Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* and Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Both autobiographies reveal how caste oppression shapes individual identity from childhood while simultaneously documenting the gradual emergence of a resistant consciousness. The narratives expose the everyday mechanisms through which caste attempts to regulate human existence, but they also demonstrate how marginalized individuals challenge and transcend those limitations.

In *Changiya Rukh*, caste discrimination appears not as an occasional experience but as an unavoidable reality woven into everyday life. Madhopuri's childhood is marked by repeated reminders of his social position. The village itself is spatially divided according to caste, with Dalit settlements pushed to the margins of the social landscape. Such segregation reflects the ideological foundations of caste society, where physical distance reinforces social inequality. The separation of living spaces symbolizes the broader exclusion of Dalits from social, cultural, and political participation.

One of the most striking moments in the autobiography occurs when Madhopuri reflects upon the treatment of Dalits in comparison to the animals owned by upper-caste landlords. Observing the care and attention given to livestock while Dalit labourers remained socially degraded, he remarks that "their animals are treated better than we human beings" (Madhopuri 33–34). This observation reveals the profound dehumanization embedded within caste society. The comparison is powerful because it exposes a social order in which Dalits are denied even the basic recognition accorded to animals. Untouchability functions by reducing human beings to a condition of social invisibility, making inequality appear natural and acceptable.

Ambedkar repeatedly argued that caste survives because it destroys the oppressed person's sense of self-worth. The experiences narrated by Madhopuri illustrate precisely this phenomenon. Dalit children grow up in an environment where they are constantly reminded that they are considered impure and inferior. Such experiences create psychological wounds that extend beyond material deprivation. The struggle against caste therefore becomes not only a political struggle but also a struggle for self-respect.

The psychological consequences of exclusion are further reflected in the reflections of Bhaia, one of the most influential figures in Madhopuri's life. Frustrated by the contradictions of caste society, Bhaia asks, "What sort of life do we lead? We neither belong to this side, nor do we fit in with the others" (Madhopuri 62–63). This statement captures the condition of social liminality experienced by many Dalits. They remain excluded from dominant social structures while simultaneously confronting divisions within marginalized communities themselves. The result is a profound crisis of belonging.

Bhaia's reflections gradually develop into a broader critique of the caste system. Rejecting the belief that caste is divinely ordained, he insists that social divisions have been created by human beings for their own benefit. At one point, he openly declares that "one must get out of this hell" (Madhopuri 63). This statement echoes Ambedkar's own rejection of Hindu social structures that perpetuated caste hierarchy. Just as Ambedkar eventually embraced Buddhism as an alternative ethical and social framework, Bhaia recognizes that liberation requires questioning traditions that normalize oppression.

The critique becomes even more explicit when he argues that "this caste system was not ordained by God, but has been made by man for his own selfish motives" (Madhopuri 101). Such a realization is crucial because it transforms caste from an unquestionable social reality into a human construct that can be challenged and dismantled. Ambedkar consistently maintained that caste survives not because of divine authority but because of institutions and practices that reproduce inequality. Madhopuri's narrative reflects a similar understanding, revealing the development of an Ambedkarite consciousness grounded in critical inquiry and resistance.

The politics of naming provides another example of how caste regulates identity. Madhopuri recalls the story of a Dalit family that named its child Udai Singh, a name generally associated with dominant castes. The decision provoked immediate hostility from upper-caste villagers, who forced the family to change the child's name to Buddhu (72). Although the incident may appear minor, it reveals the extent to which caste seeks to control even the most personal aspects of life. A name becomes more than a marker of identity; it becomes a symbol of social status. By denying Dalits the right to use certain names, dominant castes attempt to preserve symbolic boundaries that sustain hierarchical power.

The experience demonstrates that caste operates not only through economic exploitation but also through cultural regulation. The anxiety generated by a Dalit child bearing a dominant-caste name reveals how fragile caste hierarchies actually are. Any challenge to established distinctions is perceived as a threat to social order. Consequently, acts that appear ordinary in other contexts acquire political significance within caste society.

A similar process of humiliation appears in the derogatory language directed at Dalit children. Madhopuri remembers being called "maill peene" by upper-caste classmates, a term

intended to stigmatize and degrade Dalit identity (81). Such insults function as instruments of social control. Their purpose is not merely to offend but to reinforce notions of purity and pollution that justify caste inequality. By repeatedly associating Dalits with impurity, caste society attempts to normalize discrimination and limit aspirations.

Yet *Changiya Rukh* does not remain a narrative of victimization. Alongside experiences of humiliation, the autobiography records the gradual emergence of resistance. Every act of exclusion generates questions about justice, equality, and human dignity. These questions become the foundation of a critical consciousness that eventually leads the narrator toward education, self-awareness, and social engagement.

A similar trajectory can be observed in *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Although Byapari's experiences are shaped by displacement, refugeehood, labour, and imprisonment, his narrative reflects the same movement from marginalization to self-assertion. As a Dalit refugee struggling for survival, he occupies multiple positions of social vulnerability. Yet he refuses to accept the identity imposed upon him by society. Through reading, reflection, and writing, he gradually acquires the intellectual resources necessary to challenge the structures responsible for his exclusion.

The journeys of both Madhopuri and Byapari therefore illustrate a fundamental principle of Ambedkarite thought: liberation begins when oppressed individuals refuse to internalize the identities assigned to them. Selfhood emerges through the recognition that caste is neither natural nor inevitable. Once this realization occurs, the possibility of resistance becomes imaginable. Education, literacy, and writing subsequently become tools through which that resistance is articulated and sustained.

In this sense, Dalit selfhood is not a fixed identity but an ongoing process of reconstruction. It develops through struggle, reflection, and intellectual awakening. Both autobiographies demonstrate that the path toward dignity begins with the rejection of caste-based definitions of humanity and the affirmation of one's own worth. Their narratives embody Ambedkar's conviction that freedom is ultimately a matter of consciousness and that genuine emancipation requires the cultivation of an independent and critical mind.

Caste, Untouchability, and Everyday Humiliation

One of the most compelling aspects of Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* is its detailed representation of how caste discrimination operates through ordinary social interactions. Rather than presenting untouchability as a series of isolated incidents, the autobiography reveals it as a pervasive social reality embedded within everyday life. Through descriptions of labour, food, language, education, and interpersonal relationships, Madhopuri demonstrates how caste reproduces itself through routine practices that often appear normal to those who benefit from them. The narrative thus exposes the subtle mechanisms through which social inequality is maintained across generations.

Ambedkar argued that caste survives not merely through legal structures but through everyday customs and social habits that become internalized over time. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he contends that caste is sustained because society accepts hierarchy as natural and unquestionable. The experiences narrated in *Changiya Rukh* vividly illustrate this observation. Discrimination is not confined to specific institutions; it permeates every aspect

of social existence, shaping where people live, what they eat, how they are addressed, and even how they perceive themselves.

The relationship between caste and labour occupies a significant place in Madhopuri's narrative. Dalits perform essential agricultural work and contribute substantially to the village economy, yet they remain excluded from the dignity associated with their labour. Reflecting upon this contradiction, Madhopuri recalls working amidst heaps of harvested grain while simultaneously being denied the right to touch the produce once it was stored (Madhopuri 33). The same hands that cultivated the fields were later considered impure. This paradox exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of caste society. Dalit labour is indispensable, but Dalit humanity is denied recognition.

Ambedkar's observation that caste is a "division of labourers" rather than merely a division of labour becomes particularly relevant here. The issue is not the allocation of work alone but the unequal valuation of those who perform it. Labour that sustains society becomes detached from the dignity of the labourer. Consequently, caste transforms economic participation into a source of humiliation rather than empowerment.

The connection between labour and humiliation extends into the sphere of food. Throughout the autobiography, food functions as a powerful symbol of social inequality. Madhopuri recalls carrying sugarcane juice and being mocked by upper-caste classmates who associated Dalits with the consumption of "dirty juice" and the flesh of dead animals (102–03). Such insults reveal how poverty is transformed into a marker of moral inferiority. Dominant castes ignore the economic conditions that force marginalized communities to adopt certain survival strategies and instead interpret these conditions as evidence of cultural backwardness.

The humiliation associated with food reflects a broader pattern within caste society. Access to food is never merely a question of nutrition; it is closely connected to notions of purity and pollution. Dalits are often judged not for what they choose to eat but for the social position from which they eat. Hunger itself becomes stigmatized. Madhopuri's narrative therefore demonstrates how caste transforms even the most basic human needs into instruments of social exclusion.

Language constitutes another important site through which caste oppression operates. Throughout his childhood, Madhopuri encounters derogatory labels intended to reinforce social hierarchies. Among the most painful is the term "maill peene," used by upper-caste children to ridicule Dalits and associate them with impurity (81). Such language performs a disciplinary function. It repeatedly reminds Dalit children of their assigned place within society and seeks to discourage aspirations that challenge existing power structures.

Gopal Guru has argued that humiliation is one of the most enduring dimensions of caste oppression because it attacks the individual's sense of dignity and self-worth. Physical deprivation can often be measured and addressed, but humiliation leaves deeper psychological scars. Madhopuri's recollections demonstrate this reality with remarkable clarity. The insults directed at Dalit children are not isolated acts of cruelty; they form part of a larger social process designed to normalize inequality.

The educational sphere, which ideally should function as a space of equality and opportunity, often reproduces the same discriminatory practices. Schools become sites where dominant

social values are transmitted to future generations. Madhopuri's experiences reveal that caste prejudice does not disappear within educational institutions; rather, it frequently acquires new forms. The persistence of discrimination within schools highlights the extent to which caste is embedded within social consciousness.

The autobiography also exposes the symbolic dimensions of caste power. One particularly revealing episode concerns the naming of a Dalit child. When a family names their son Udai Singh, upper-caste villagers react with hostility and force them to change the name to Buddha (72). At first glance, the incident appears trivial. However, it demonstrates how caste extends beyond material relations into the realm of symbolic identity. Names carry social meanings, and access to certain names becomes a form of cultural privilege.

This episode illustrates what Pierre Bourdieu describes as symbolic power the ability of dominant groups to define legitimate identities and regulate social meanings. By denying Dalits the right to use names associated with prestige, upper-caste communities attempt to preserve social distinctions and maintain hierarchical authority. The incident reveals that caste functions not only through economic control but also through the regulation of cultural symbols.

Economic dependence further intensifies the experience of humiliation. Landlessness remains one of the most significant factors contributing to Dalit vulnerability in rural India. Reflecting upon this reality, Bhaia observes that if Dalits possessed even a few acres of land, they would not be forced to endure the arrogance and exploitation of dominant castes (68). His observation identifies the material foundation of caste oppression. Without economic independence, resistance becomes difficult, and social dependence continues to reinforce hierarchical relationships.

Yet *Changiya Rukh* does not portray caste as an unchanging or invincible system. Throughout the narrative, moments emerge that challenge conventional assumptions about superiority and inferiority. One such moment occurs when Rajputs, traditionally associated with power and prestige, are reduced to begging because of economic hardship. Observing this reversal, Bhaia notes the irony that those who once refused even to share water with Dalits now seek assistance from them (101). The episode exposes the fragility of social status and reveals that caste superiority is sustained through ideology rather than inherent worth.

Such moments play a crucial role in the development of critical consciousness. They encourage the narrator to question accepted social truths and recognize that hierarchy is historically produced rather than naturally ordained. This realization reaches its fullest expression when Bhaia declares that caste was created by human beings for selfish purposes rather than by divine will (101). The statement directly challenges one of the foundational myths of caste society and aligns closely with Ambedkar's insistence that social inequality is a human creation capable of being dismantled through collective action.

Through these episodes, *Changiya Rukh* demonstrates that untouchability operates through a network of everyday practices that regulate behaviour, identity, and social relationships. Humiliation becomes normalized, and inequality appears natural. Yet the autobiography simultaneously records the emergence of a critical perspective that refuses to accept such conditions as inevitable. The narrator's growing awareness transforms experiences of suffering into sources of reflection and resistance.

Ultimately, the significance of *Changiya Rukh* lies in its ability to reveal how caste functions at the level of everyday life. The autobiography shows that oppression is sustained not only through institutions and laws but also through ordinary habits, language, customs, and social interactions. At the same time, it demonstrates that awareness itself can become a form of resistance. By exposing the hidden mechanisms of caste power, Madhopuri challenges the normalization of inequality and prepares the ground for the transformative role that education and literacy will later play in the reconstruction of Dalit identity.

Education as Resistance and the Making of Dalit Consciousness

If caste oppression forms the central social reality of *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, education emerges as the most powerful instrument through which that reality is challenged. For both Balbir Madhopuri and Manoranjan Byapari, education is not merely a means of acquiring employment or improving economic status. Rather, it becomes a pathway toward dignity, self-respect, and intellectual freedom. Their narratives reveal that literacy and learning enable marginalized individuals to question inherited structures of inequality and imagine alternative possibilities for their lives. In this respect, both autobiographies embody the essence of Ambedkarite thought, which consistently viewed education as the foundation of social emancipation.

No thinker understood the revolutionary potential of education more profoundly than B. R. Ambedkar. Born into a community subjected to untouchability, Ambedkar experienced firsthand the barriers that caste imposed upon access to knowledge. Throughout his life, he maintained that education was the most effective weapon available to oppressed communities. His famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize" was not merely a political slogan but a comprehensive philosophy of liberation. Education, for Ambedkar, represented the first step toward freedom because it enabled individuals to understand the structures responsible for their oppression. Without knowledge, resistance remained impossible; with knowledge, the possibility of transformation emerged.

Ambedkar's conviction is reflected in another of his well-known statements: "Cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence." This principle resonates throughout both autobiographies. Education is valued not simply because it provides material benefits but because it transforms consciousness. It enables individuals to move beyond imposed identities and develop a critical understanding of themselves and their social environment.

In *Changiya Rukh*, the desire for education develops directly from experiences of humiliation and exclusion. Witnessing the hardships endured by his family and community, Madhopuri gradually comes to recognize that education offers a possible escape from the cycle of degradation that defines Dalit existence. Reflecting upon the harsh realities of agricultural labour and social discrimination, he recalls wishing that he "didn't have to labour like this" and dreaming that "somehow I should get some education and move to Delhi" (Madhopuri 33–34). This aspiration is deeply significant because it links education with freedom, dignity, and self-determination.

The dream of studying emerges precisely at the moment when the narrator becomes aware of the injustice surrounding him. Education is not presented as a neutral process of acquiring information; rather, it becomes a response to oppression. The young Madhopuri realizes that ignorance serves the interests of those who benefit from caste hierarchy. Knowledge,

therefore, acquires political significance. It becomes a means of challenging social structures that seek to keep Dalits confined to predetermined roles.

The relationship between education and dignity becomes increasingly evident as the narrative progresses. Although Madhopuri encounters discrimination within educational institutions, he refuses to abandon his pursuit of learning. Instead, each experience of exclusion strengthens his determination. Schooling becomes a site of struggle where the narrator confronts both external barriers and internal doubts. The very act of remaining within educational spaces becomes an assertion of his right to equality.

An important turning point occurs when Madhopuri learns about the life of Lal Bahadur Shastri. Inspired by Shastri's rise from poverty to national leadership, the young narrator begins to imagine that social circumstances need not determine one's destiny. He realizes that perseverance and education can create opportunities that appear impossible within the rigid framework of caste society (99). This realization marks a significant stage in the development of his self-confidence. The possibility of transformation ceases to be an abstract dream and becomes a concrete goal.

What makes education particularly threatening to caste society is its capacity to generate critical awareness. Madhopuri repeatedly observes the discomfort and resentment expressed by dominant castes toward educated Dalits. Such hostility reveals an important truth: caste hierarchy depends upon the unequal distribution of knowledge. The educational advancement of Dalits challenges long-established assumptions about superiority and inferiority. Once marginalized individuals begin to question inherited beliefs, the ideological foundations of caste become unstable.

Ambedkar understood this relationship clearly. He argued that the exclusion of Dalits from education was never accidental. It was a deliberate strategy designed to maintain social control. Knowledge empowers individuals to ask questions, challenge authority, and reject narratives of inferiority. Consequently, every educated Dalit represents a challenge to the structures that sustain caste inequality.

A similar process of intellectual awakening can be observed in Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Although his circumstances differ considerably from those of Madhopuri, the transformative role of literacy remains equally significant. Byapari's life is marked by displacement, poverty, manual labour, and imprisonment. Unlike Madhopuri, whose educational aspirations emerge during childhood, Byapari's encounter with literacy occurs under conditions of extreme hardship. Yet it is precisely within these circumstances that he discovers the liberating power of reading and writing.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Byapari's narrative is the manner in which books transform his understanding of the world. Having spent much of his life struggling merely to survive, he gradually realizes that literacy offers access to entirely new forms of knowledge and experience. Reading introduces him to histories, ideas, and perspectives that had previously remained inaccessible. More importantly, it enables him to interpret his own life differently.

Before acquiring literacy, suffering often appears as an individual burden. Through reading, however, Byapari begins to recognize that many of his struggles are rooted in larger social

structures. Poverty, discrimination, and exclusion are no longer perceived as personal failures but as consequences of systemic inequality. This shift in understanding is crucial because it transforms despair into awareness and awareness into resistance.

The educational journey described by Byapari can be productively understood through Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness. Freire argues that genuine education enables individuals to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive structures. Byapari's experiences closely reflect this process. Literacy does not simply provide information; it fundamentally changes the way he interprets reality. It equips him with the intellectual tools necessary to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim control over his own story.

Equally significant is the relationship between literacy and self-respect. Ambedkar frequently emphasized that freedom begins in the mind. His assertion that "Freedom of mind is the real freedom" finds a powerful echo in Byapari's autobiography. Reading enables him to escape the mental boundaries imposed by caste and poverty. Even when material conditions remain difficult, intellectual freedom opens new possibilities of self-understanding and self-expression.

For both Madhopuri and Byapari, education ultimately becomes inseparable from the formation of identity. Learning allows them to reject definitions imposed by caste society and construct alternative understandings of themselves. The process is gradual and often painful, but it represents a crucial step toward self-emancipation. They cease to view themselves through the eyes of those who discriminate against them and begin instead to define themselves according to their own experiences, aspirations, and achievements.

Importantly, the significance of education extends beyond individual advancement. Both autobiographies suggest that literacy carries collective implications. The educational success of one Dalit individual challenges stereotypes that have historically justified social exclusion. Knowledge becomes a shared resource capable of inspiring broader forms of resistance and empowerment. The protagonists' achievements therefore acquire symbolic value for entire communities seeking dignity and recognition.

The journeys narrated in *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* thus reaffirm Ambedkar's conviction that education is the foundation of liberation. Through learning, reading, and intellectual engagement, the protagonists acquire the capacity to question oppression, reclaim self-respect, and imagine alternative futures. Education transforms them from passive victims of discrimination into active participants in social change. It enables them to move from silence to speech, from exclusion to visibility, and from subordination to intellectual agency.

Ultimately, both autobiographies demonstrate that education is far more than a means of social mobility. It is a form of resistance. It challenges structures of domination, fosters critical consciousness, and creates the conditions necessary for self-transformation. In this sense, Madhopuri and Byapari embody Ambedkar's enduring belief that knowledge remains the most powerful weapon in the struggle against caste oppression and that genuine emancipation begins with the awakening of the mind.

Writing, Memory, and the Reconstruction of Dalit Selfhood

A defining characteristic of Dalit autobiography is its ability to transform personal memory into collective history. Unlike conventional autobiographies that often celebrate individual success or personal achievement, Dalit life narratives emerge from experiences of social exclusion and collective suffering. They do not merely tell the story of a single life; they document the history of communities that have long been denied representation within mainstream literary and historical discourse. In this context, writing becomes a political act through which marginalized individuals reclaim their voices and challenge structures of silence.

Both Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* and Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* demonstrate the transformative power of autobiographical writing. Their narratives reveal that writing is not simply an act of remembering the past but a process of reconstructing identity. Through memory and narration, the authors reinterpret experiences of humiliation, poverty, displacement, and discrimination, transforming them into sources of knowledge and resistance. The autobiographical text itself becomes a site where Dalit selfhood is recovered, affirmed, and reimagined.

The relationship between memory and caste occupies a central position in both autobiographies. For Dalit writers, memory is never neutral. It is shaped by encounters with untouchability, social exclusion, and everyday humiliation. Yet these memories are not recorded merely to evoke sympathy. Instead, they function as testimonies that expose the structural nature of caste oppression. Through autobiographical narration, experiences that might otherwise remain private become part of a broader critique of society.

In *Changiya Rukh*, memory serves as a means of documenting the lived realities of caste discrimination. Madhopuri's recollections of village life reveal how untouchability infiltrated every aspect of daily existence. The memories he records are often painful: the humiliation of being insulted by upper-caste children, the indignity of social segregation, and the frustration of witnessing economic exploitation. Yet these memories acquire significance because they challenge the tendency to treat caste discrimination as an abstract social problem. By grounding his narrative in lived experience, Madhopuri demonstrates that caste is not simply an ideological system but a material reality that shapes human lives.

One particularly significant memory concerns the repeated use of derogatory language against Dalit children. Being called "maill peene" remains etched in the narrator's consciousness not merely because it was offensive but because it symbolized a broader structure of social degradation (Madhopuri 81). The insult represents the process through which caste society seeks to define Dalits as inferior and impure. By revisiting this memory in adulthood, Madhopuri transforms a moment of humiliation into a powerful critique of the mechanisms through which inequality is normalized.

Similarly, the episode involving the forced renaming of a Dalit child from Udai Singh to Buddha reveals how caste regulates identity at the most intimate level (72). The memory remains important because it demonstrates that caste extends beyond economic relations into the realm of cultural and symbolic power. Through autobiographical reflection, Madhopuri exposes the absurdity and cruelty of a system that seeks to control even the names individuals are permitted to bear.

The significance of memory in *Changiya Rukh* lies in its refusal to allow such experiences to disappear into silence. Every remembered incident becomes a form of testimony. By recording these events, Madhopuri preserves histories that are often absent from official narratives of Indian society. His autobiography therefore functions not only as a personal account but also as a social archive of Dalit experience.

A similar process can be observed in *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Byapari's narrative is shaped by memories of displacement, refugeehood, labour, poverty, and imprisonment. Unlike dominant historical accounts that focus on political leaders and national events, Byapari foregrounds the experiences of those situated at the margins of society. His memories reveal how large-scale historical transformations are experienced differently by marginalized communities.

The experience of Partition, for example, is often narrated through discussions of nationalism, migration, and state formation. Byapari, however, records its consequences from the perspective of a Dalit refugee struggling for survival. His narrative demonstrates that political independence and national development did not automatically eliminate social inequality. For those already burdened by caste oppression, displacement created additional layers of vulnerability and exclusion.

Through memory, Byapari challenges dominant versions of history that frequently overlook the experiences of marginalized groups. His autobiography insists that history must be understood from below as well as from above. The voices of labourers, refugees, prisoners, and Dalits are essential to any meaningful understanding of the past. Writing therefore becomes an act of historical intervention.

The political significance of Dalit autobiography is closely connected to the historical denial of literacy and education. For centuries, Dalits were excluded from institutions of learning and prevented from participating in literary production. Ambedkar repeatedly emphasized that the monopolization of knowledge was central to the maintenance of caste hierarchy. Those denied access to education were also denied the ability to represent themselves.

In this context, every act of Dalit writing carries profound political significance. When Dalit authors narrate their own stories, they challenge centuries of cultural exclusion. They refuse to be spoken for by others and instead assert their right to interpret their own experiences. Writing becomes an act of self-representation that directly contests structures of domination.

Byapari's transformation from labourer and prisoner to writer illustrates this process particularly powerfully. His journey demonstrates that intellectual authority is not determined by caste but by access to opportunity and perseverance. Through literacy, he acquires the ability to narrate his own history and participate in literary discourse. The act of writing enables him to move beyond identities imposed by society and establish himself as an author and public intellectual.

Similarly, Madhopuri uses autobiographical narration as a means of recovering and reconstructing the self. The act of writing allows him to revisit painful experiences from a position of critical distance. Rather than remaining trapped within memories of humiliation, he reinterprets them as evidence of social injustice and sources of political awareness. Through this process, memory becomes a tool of empowerment rather than a burden.

The relationship between writing and selfhood is particularly important in this regard. Caste oppression often seeks to produce feelings of inferiority, shame, and self-doubt. By narrating their lives, Dalit writers challenge these internalized perceptions. Experiences that once generated humiliation are transformed into evidence of resilience and survival. The autobiographical act therefore becomes a process of reclaiming dignity.

This transformation reflects Ambedkar's belief that liberation requires psychological as well as political change. Ambedkar consistently argued that oppressed communities must reject narratives of inferiority and cultivate self-respect. Dalit autobiographies contribute significantly to this project. By presenting stories of resistance, perseverance, and intellectual achievement, they offer alternative models of identity that challenge caste-based stereotypes.

Furthermore, writing enables individual experiences to become part of a collective struggle. Although *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* are deeply personal narratives, they resonate far beyond the lives of their authors. The autobiographical "I" gradually expands into a collective "we." Personal memories become representative of broader social realities, and individual experiences acquire collective significance.

This movement from the individual to the collective is one of the defining features of Dalit autobiography. The narratives do not seek merely to celebrate personal achievement. Instead, they highlight the interconnected nature of oppression and resistance. The experiences of Madhopuri and Byapari reflect the experiences of countless others who have faced similar forms of discrimination and exclusion. Their stories therefore function simultaneously as personal testimony and collective history.

Ultimately, writing emerges as the culmination of the transformative journey traced throughout both autobiographies. Education creates awareness, literacy provides access to knowledge, and writing enables that knowledge to be shared and preserved. Through autobiographical narration, Madhopuri and Byapari reclaim ownership of their histories and challenge structures that sought to silence them. They move from being objects of representation to becoming subjects who represent themselves.

The significance of this transformation cannot be overstated. Writing allows both authors to preserve memory, challenge historical erasure, reconstruct identity, and foster collective consciousness. More importantly, it establishes them as intellectual agents capable of contributing to literary, cultural, and political discourse. In doing so, they embody the Ambedkarite ideal of self-emancipation through knowledge and critical awareness.

Thus, the journey narrated in *Changiya Rukh* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* is ultimately a journey from silence to speech. Through memory and writing, the protagonists reclaim the right to define themselves and their communities. Their autobiographies demonstrate that the struggle against caste is not only a battle for economic or political equality but also a struggle over representation, history, and knowledge itself. In giving voice to experiences that have long remained marginalized, Madhopuri and Byapari transform personal narratives into powerful instruments of social change.

Conclusion

Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* occupy a significant place within the tradition of Dalit autobiography because they move beyond the mere documentation of suffering and emerge as narratives of resistance, self-discovery, and transformation. Both texts provide powerful accounts of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, displacement, and social exclusion. At the same time, they challenge readers to recognize that Dalit life writing is not simply a literature of pain but also a literature of resilience, aspiration, and intellectual awakening.

Through their recollections of everyday humiliation, Madhopuri and Byapari expose the pervasive nature of caste oppression in Indian society. Their narratives reveal how caste operates not only through institutional structures but also through ordinary social practices that regulate labour, language, food, education, and identity. The autobiographies demonstrate that untouchability is not an abstract concept but a lived reality that shapes human relationships and influences the formation of selfhood. By documenting these experiences, both writers challenge attempts to minimize or erase the continuing impact of caste in contemporary India.

However, the significance of these autobiographies lies not merely in their representation of oppression. A central argument of this study has been that both texts trace the gradual emergence of an Ambedkarite consciousness that transforms experiences of marginalization into acts of resistance. The protagonists refuse to remain confined within the identities imposed upon them by caste society. Instead, they develop a critical awareness that enables them to question inherited hierarchies and imagine alternative futures. In this sense, their journeys reflect Ambedkar's conviction that liberation begins with the rejection of social inferiority and the affirmation of one's humanity.

Education emerges as the most important instrument in this process of transformation. Both Madhopuri and Byapari recognize that knowledge provides a means of challenging structures designed to maintain inequality. For them, education is not merely a path toward employment or economic advancement; it is a means of reclaiming dignity and self-respect. The desire to learn develops directly from experiences of exclusion and humiliation. Through education, they acquire the intellectual resources necessary to understand their social conditions and resist them.

Their experiences reaffirm Ambedkar's famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize." More importantly, they embody his belief that "cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence." The autobiographies demonstrate that intellectual empowerment is inseparable from social emancipation. Knowledge enables individuals to move beyond passive acceptance of injustice and become active participants in the struggle for equality. In this regard, education functions as both a personal and collective strategy of resistance.

Equally significant is the role of literacy and writing in the reconstruction of Dalit selfhood. The study has shown that writing serves as far more than a literary exercise. Through autobiographical narration, both authors reclaim ownership of their histories and challenge dominant narratives that have historically excluded Dalit voices. Personal memories become collective testimonies, while individual experiences acquire broader social and political significance. The act of writing transforms silence into speech and invisibility into representation.

For Byapari, the journey from labourer and prisoner to writer symbolizes the rejection of identities imposed by caste and poverty. For Madhopuri, autobiographical writing becomes a means of revisiting painful memories and transforming them into sources of knowledge and resistance. In both cases, writing enables the authors to emerge as intellectual agents capable of participating in public discourse. Their autobiographies therefore challenge the historical monopolization of knowledge and representation by dominant social groups.

The relationship between memory and selfhood further strengthens this process of empowerment. By preserving experiences of humiliation, discrimination, and exclusion, the authors ensure that these histories are neither forgotten nor dismissed. At the same time, memory becomes a means of reconstructing identity. Experiences that once produced shame are reinterpreted as evidence of resilience and survival. Through this act of reinterpretation, both writers reclaim dignity and affirm their place within history.

Viewed through an Ambedkarite framework, *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and *Changiya Rukh* reveal that the struggle against caste extends far beyond legal reform or economic advancement. It is also a struggle over consciousness, representation, and knowledge. Ambedkar understood that political equality would remain incomplete unless accompanied by social and intellectual liberation. The journeys narrated by Madhopuri and Byapari illustrate the practical realization of this vision. Their lives demonstrate that freedom begins with awareness, grows through education, and finds its fullest expression in self-representation.

Furthermore, these autobiographies contribute significantly to contemporary discussions of identity, social justice, and democratic inclusion. In a society where caste continues to influence access to opportunities and resources, Dalit life writing remains an important mode of resistance. The narratives remind readers that the promise of equality remains unfinished and that the struggle for dignity continues. At the same time, they offer hope by demonstrating the transformative power of education, critical thinking, and collective memory.

Ultimately, *Interrogating My Chandal Life* and *Changiya Rukh* affirm that Dalit autobiography is not simply a record of oppression but a powerful act of self-fashioning. Through education, literacy, memory, and writing, both authors challenge caste-imposed identities and create new possibilities for self-definition. Their narratives embody Ambedkar's enduring belief that true freedom begins with the liberation of the mind and that knowledge remains one of the most effective tools in the ongoing struggle for equality, dignity, and social justice.

The significance of these autobiographies therefore lies not only in what they remember but also in what they imagine. They envision a society in which human worth is not determined by caste, where education becomes a universal right rather than a privilege, and where marginalized voices occupy their rightful place within literature, history, and public discourse. In giving voice to experiences long suppressed by dominant narratives, Madhopuri and Byapari transform personal histories into collective acts of resistance and reaffirm the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's dream of an egalitarian and humane society.

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Navayana, 2014.
- Byapari, Manoranjan. *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Translated by Sipra Mukherjee, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2018.
- Dangle, Arjun, editor. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient BlackSwan, 2009.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th Anniversary ed., Continuum, 2000.
- Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–50.
- Guru, Gopal, and Sundar Sarukkai. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Ilaiah Shepherd, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. 2nd ed., Sage Publications, 2005.
- Jadhav, Narendra. *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*. Scribner, 2005.
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient BlackSwan, 2004.
- Madhopuri, Balbir. *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night*. Translated by Tripti Jain, Oxford UP, 2010.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications, 1994.
- Paik, Shailaja. *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*. Routledge, 2014.
- Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.
- Teltumbde, Anand. *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*. Navayana, 2010.
- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia UP, 2003.
- Zelliot, Eleanor. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. Manohar Publishers, 2001.