

An overcomer of caste discrimination



OUTCASTE
A Memoir

By Narendra
Jadhav
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Narendra Jadhav is a well-known economist, career banker, public speaker, and social worker. He is currently head of economic research of the Reserve Bank of India and has served as an international civil servant on various assignments abroad. He has been the recipient of many prestigious awards. When at the Indiana University, he won the best international student award and another for outstanding contribution to economic theory. His books, *Monetary Economics for India* and *Challenge to Indian Banking: Competition, Globalisation and Financial Markets*, have been revelations of economic theory. He was also awarded the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad award for his book *Dr. Ambedkar: Economic Thoughts and Philosophy*. His *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi* became an instant bestseller and the current book under review is its expanded English version. This book has a French version, *Intouchable*, and is being readied for publication in several other European languages.

Narendra Jadhav's memoir is an intensely personal journey of awakening and achievement. This book chronicles the events that lead to the marginalising of the abhorrent, 3,500-year-old stigma of the caste system. It is also a multilayered personalised saga showcasing the social metamorphosis of Dalits in India. In his opening note Jadhav writes, "There are around 165 million Dalits in India today, more than three times the population of UK or France. Every sixth human being in the world is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is an untouchable. This large mass of humanity has been trying to find self-

expression that has been denied them for hundreds of years. However late, the Dalits are awakening. They are mounting a slow and steady rebellion. Their struggle is against caste discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty, and their weapons are education, empowerment, and democracy."

Outcaste is a story of awakening. Of one Dalit family's struggle, inspired by our very own B.R. Ambedkar. Babasaheb Ambedkar touched the lives of millions of Dalits and Damu Damodar Runjaji Jadhav was just one of them. The author's father, Damu, was just an ordinary man who did an extraordinary thing — he stood up against the tyranny of the caste system by teaching his children to believe in themselves and reclaim human dignity. He steered them to educational heights and inculcated in them a spirit of excellence. Despite being humbled, more often than not, he maintained his equilibrium. *Outcaste* works on various levels. It is a loving tribute from a son to his parents. It appraises the caste system in India by tracing the story of awakening of Dalits traversing three generations, and it is also reflective of the aspirations of millions of Dalits in India.

While reporting on the downside of the caste divide, Jadhav closely examines various Dalit issues in the context of the social awakening spearheaded by Ambedkar. The struggle for Independence, the civil disobedience movement, Gandhiji's relation with Ambedkar, the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, and caste in its contemporary reality, also find mention. Through Damu's personal metamorphosis Jadhav hopes to educate about his own journey towards self-realisation. Damu was no doubt inspired by Ambedkar, but his transformation took effect only when he began to realise his own self-worth.

Triggered by his new-born self-esteem, Damu was able to set a unique example for many Dalits, not least his own family, to get inspired and replicate. His eldest son became a district collector with the Indian Administrative Service, while his youngest son Narendra managed even more illustrious growth.

In the 1960s Damu retired from his job with the Indian Railways. Thereafter the pensioner turned his hand to repairing all the household gadgets. It was Narendra who persuaded Damu to write his memoirs. And Damu, who was till then virtually illiterate, persevered informally with his own education. His struggle to educate himself bears testimony to the unforgettable character he became.

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Written in the first person, from three different perspectives — of Damu, his wife Sonu, and Narendra, — *Outcaste* traces the family's journey, from a small village at Ozar in Maharashtra to the megacity, Mumbai, in order to escape perse-

cution. Told with simplicity and earnestness, the memoir speaks of Damu's personal uplift and his penchant for overcoming great odds, with clever wit, good humor, and an amazing force of will. Damu's refusal to give in to any type of injustice and his iron determination form the heart of this book. *Outcaste* creates powerful imagery and is strong on sentiment. Composed of a simplistic style, it lacks the flair of literary masterpieces. This book is neither forceful nor lyrical. It is both artfully unaffected and coherent. For some it may seem like just another family drama, but for those who have experienced the social divisions this is a book that gives hope. A hope that in modern India dignity will live in the hearts and minds of her people — that obsolete practices and prejudices will not, hopefully, be of any consequence.

• JOHNSON THOMAS

