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ALL BOOKED UP

Cast(e)ing off the shackles

OUTCASTE

Narendra Jadhav

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Available at: Om Book Shop,
Vasant Vihar



ITS THE season for Dalit Issues again, what with another regime change in UP bringing to an end Mayawati's hold on power. Her legacy in bringing about Dalit transformation, will, no doubt be debated no end, as would be the reasons for her latest downfall.

Caste, clearly, is the political flavour of the month and Narendra Jadhav's book only adds to the dialogue. *Outcaste*, however, has nothing to do with Mayawati's actions. If anything, it serves to remind us of the tremendous positive impact her ideological 'guru' had on the Dalits of India, especially Maharashtra.

Strictly speaking, the book isn't about Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar either. It's a memoir of a Mahar family's fascinating journey towards a dignified, prosperous life. The story revolves round the author's parents, Damu and Sonu, who begin their lives under the dark shadow of their lowly caste, and struggle to bring beauty into their existence. Inspired by the towering presence of Babasaheb, the couple raise their kids, not as people weighed down by their caste identity, but as citizens striving for excellence.

Damu and Sonu's eldest son joins the IAS, while the youngest (the author) goes on to become an eminent economist and banker, serving in the RBI and IMF.

While the book begins in Ozar village of Maharashtra, where Damu lived in the early part of the 20th century; it ends in the US, where his 16-year-old granddaughter Apoorva is currently studying. The contrast between the two lives is striking. At Ozar, all of Damu's actions were dictated and constrained by the fact that he was a Mahar, an untouchable caste who were the traditional village 'servants'. Apoorva's caste identity is limited to the knowledge that she is a Dalit, one of the depressed classes of India. Beyond this and the stark stories told by her family, caste hardly touches her.

Between the beginning and the end, is an epic tale of transformation alternately told in first person by Damu and Sonu.

Jadhav writes with a straight pen, sans the élan of a writer. But what he has to say, must be read. For, it deals with a stark reality that brazenly infects the country even today, though most of us may not like to acknowledge its presence.

— Amit Bhattacharya