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Educate, Unite and Narrate

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THIS is the story of Damu's journey from a small village in Ozar in Maharashtra to Mumbai, to escape persecution and reclaim human dignity. Damu first realised he was untouchable when he was a child. He was told he couldn't drink water straight from the vat because the water would get polluted. The child Damu was taught to observe strict rules regarding the river.

He grew up into the Mahar householder who challenged the daily indignities inflicted on him. He refused to perform the annual Yeskar duties when his turn came. To announce deaths and tend to the carcass of cattle in the village, and run as a human pilot, foaming at the mouth, ahead of the carriages of government officials, singing their praises. In return for being allowed to beg for leftovers from house to house, careful not to touch the hand that gives alms. Damu's story, his rebellion, is carefully preserved and meticulously recounted by his son. Narendra Jadhav is a distinguished scholar and career banker, who must, towards the end of the book, finally dredge up a transcendent inner resolve to overcome that nag of a question: "Why should the caste into which I was born count *now*?"

Outcaste is the story of an arduous journey and an incomplete arrival. It is a story that is mostly missing in the narratives of our times. The story of the Dalit has been left out because it has resisted all efforts to neatly stitch it into the dichotomous frameworks spun by modern India's chroniclers: Colonialism versus Nationalism in the era of the nationalist struggle. Or Secularism versus Communalism now. Dalit politics has always stood on the outside of these tidy binaries, always the awkward third.

The political milestones in Damu's story are different from those that are neon-lit in commonly bandied histories of his period. Mahad, March 19, 1927, when Babasaheb Ambedkar led a procession of untouchables, in

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rows of four, shouting slogans, up to a square reservoir of sparkling water, surrounded by houses of Brahmins on all sides, and "calmly bent down, cupped some water in his palms and drank". Ram Navami Day, April 1930 at Nashik, when he led a peaceful satyagraha to gain entry into the Kala Ram temple. Gandhi's threat to fast unto death on the question of separate electorates. "Well, that's emotional blackmail," exclaimed Damu's cousin, to be remonstrated by a patient elder: "Young man, you don't understand. Mahatmas don't blackmail. They only exert moral pressure." Dussehra day in Nagpur, October 14, 1956, when clad in white, Ambedkar and his followers renounced Hinduism.

As Damu determinedly shepherds his family through personal and collective turmoil, as he provides his children the education he was denied, his is the fortitude of a community that battles centuries' old oppression. By heeding Ambedkar's call to "Educate, Unite, and Agitate". By embracing the emancipatory promise of the city. It is in Mumbai that Damu makes his home, far away from the stifling prejudices of the village. Mumbai offers wide roads and skyscrapers, trains, steamer ships, anonymity.

Eventually, the story of Damu and his son is one of a promise not fully met. In Mumbai, as elsewhere, the ritual practices of untouchability have disappeared but casteism has taken on clever, new forms. This time, it will prove even more difficult to fight. It has discarded the used-up, discredited language of purity and pollution, it deploys the new idiom of modernity. It speaks of an abstract, unmarked citizenship. It invokes "efficiency" and "merit".

In the epilogue, Jadhav's daughter, and Damu's granddaughter, says: "No one reminds me that I am a Dalit. I mean, that's who I am — take it or leave it... I am just Apoorva." There's still too much defiance, and not nearly enough confidence in the young girl's challenge.