

DALIT LITERATURE

Forging one's own destiny

AT the beginning of *Outcaste*, 20-year-old Damu, the chief protagonist of the story, is addressed contemptuously as "Mahar". Mahar is Damu's caste, stigma, destiny. It tells the world that he is the lowest of the low in the Hindu *chaaturvarna* system, the system of four castes. He is so low that his touch pollutes. He is an untouchable.

The place is Damu's ancestral village in western Maharashtra. The date is March 1, 1930. Three years before this Dr. Bhimrao (Babasaheb) Ambedkar has led thousands of Dalits to the Chavdar Pond in Mahad in a peaceful agitation for water rights; and soon after Damu's present ordeal, he will launch a *satyagraha* demanding entry for Dalits into the Kala Ram temple in Nasik.

Damu stands facing the *fauzdar*, the police chief, for refusing to do a task that falls outside his traditional village duties. Such defiance from an untouchable is not to be tolerated. The *fauzdar* abuses and whips him. Damu pleads for mercy, but will not give in. Incensed, the *fauzdar* turns his foul tongue on Babasaheb Ambedkar. For Damu, that is blasphemy. Babasaheb is his god. That very night Damu decides he has had enough. He will throw away the miserable crutches of traditional village duties that he has been saddled with and return



to Mumbai. He has worked there before and known the freedom and dignity of "touchability".

At the other end of Damu's story, is his 16-year-old granddaughter's epilogue. Born in Bloomington, Indiana, she writes with confidence, "Now I think I know who I am. I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion or caste." But her father, Dr. Narendra Jadhav, the author of *Outcaste*, is not so sure. He has a doctorate in Economics from Indiana university, has served as an international civil servant, written books, and is presently Head of Economic Research in the Reserve Bank of

Outcaste goes beyond the horrors of untouchability to narrate Damodar Jadhav's determination to forge for his children a destiny that was never ordained,
writes SHANTA GOKHALE.

India. Yet, at one point in his moving testimony to the moral powerhouse that was his father, Damu, he asks, "Will I ever be able to free myself from the bondage of caste?"

Outcaste is an expanded, rewritten version in English of Dr. Narendra Jadhav's *Amcha Baap Aan Amhi* (Our Father and Us) published in Marathi 10 years ago. There, Damodar Runjaji Jadhav's story was reproduced almost exactly as he had scribbled it in his diaries. The language was rough, the idiom rural and the narration unself-conscious. The language of *Outcaste* is refined, its structure consciously schematic and its narration fluent.

The story of Sonabai, the author's mother, is a valuable addition in *Outcaste*. She did not write a diary as Damu did, but Jadhav has presumably constructed her story from the things that he had seen and heard. She must have told her sons and daughters endless stories about her first days in Mumbai, her innocence as a pre-pubescent bride and her horrified reluctance to give up her old and

trusted gods for the unknown Buddha whom her husband had decided the family should worship.

In *Outcaste*, Sonu's story alternates with Damu's. The two viewpoints, sometimes concurrent, sometimes divergent, add a complexity to the narrative that was absent in the original. One of the most sensitively, (and humorously) written scenes in Sonu's story describes her scandalised response to Damu's sexual overtures after she has come of age and been persuaded by her mother-in-law to sleep behind the curtain with her husband and "make him happy".

Outcaste may not display the literary flourishes of Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, one of the first Dalit autobiographies to hit middle-class Maharashtra between the eyes; nor is it political in the same way as Vasant Moon's *Vasthi*, translated by Gail Omvedt as *Growing up Untouchable in India*, is. Though Damu works for the Dalit cause, sporadically in the early years and

more consistently later, he does not discuss issues of political debate as Moon does. For instance the bitter opposition of Ambedkarites to Mahatma Gandhi's description of untouchables as Harijans finds no place in Damu's story whereas in Moon's, even the anti-Gandhi demonstration during his visit to Nagpur, forcing him to turn back, is debated and described.

Damu's story differs also from those Dalit autobiographies which revisit and relive the horrors of untouchability without going beyond. Damu's guts and sinews are too strong, his response to Ambedkar's call to Dalits to "Educate, Unite, Agitate" too complete and all-consuming to allow him to live in the past. His story lives in the present. It is about his pride in his work, about stretching himself to the utmost to achieve perfection in everything he does, about the despair of not finding work, but also about his determination to forge for his children a destiny that was never "ordained".

There is a long note at the end of *Outcaste* on untouchability, the caste system and Dr. Ambedkar. Non-Indian readers and, I dare say, many Indian readers will find it a useful backgrounder. Dr. Jadhav has wisely retained many Marathi words in the text, thus avoiding plodding English circumlocutions such as "flat millet bread" for *bhakri*. There is a sufficiently exhaustive glossary at the back to help readers overcome these occasional obstacles.

Finally, *Outcaste* is an impeccably produced book, miraculously errorless. ■

Outcaste, Narendra Jadhav, king, hardback, p.283, Rs. 395!

