

Look Back in Languor

A restrained telling of atrocities against Dalits, but sans rage, self-pity or radical rhetoric

BY DILEEP PADGAONKAR

LET me declare an interest at the outset. I read Narendra Jadhav's book in the original Marathi nearly a decade ago. It captivated me thoroughly for here was a story of a man who had done remarkably well in life in the face of the horrendous odds that confront every benighted Dalit citizen of our Republic. Determined to see that it reached out to a wider readership, I played a bit part to ensure its publication, first in French, then in English.

Another reason explained my enthusiasm for the book: passage after passage stirred memories of my own past. I spent my childhood and adolescent years surrounded by Mahars, members of Jadhav's community, though they preferred to be known then as neo-Buddhists. I was familiar with their coarse food, their rough-hewn Marathi, their colourful expletives and rites of passage, as well as their foibles which, as you can well imagine, both amused and outraged the twice-born.

I got to know about the humiliations the Mahars had suffered at the hands of caste Hindu society, especially in the countryside where they were treated worse than animals. My neighbours, however, had acquired some education and had found jobs in the city. Signs of a growing awakening in their community under Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership were all around. They had become more assertive and self-confident even if the curse of untouchability never entirely deserted them.

Years later, in the early seventies, I repaid in some measure the debt I owed them for the affection they had showered on me beyond the call of good neighbourliness. Darryl D'Monte and I brought out a special issue of the *Times Weekly*, the Sunday supplement of *The Times of India*, devoted entirely to Dalit literature. The English-speaking world discovered poets, novelists, short story writers, essayists and play-



OUTCASTE: A Memoir

by Narendra Jadhav

Viking

Price: Rs 395

Pages: 283

wrights who narrated their experiences as untouchables with a rage and a sensitivity that commanded instant empathy. Very swiftly, however, this literature lost its shine, partly because the writers became repetitive and partly because rage, no matter how genuine, cannot by itself establish literary worth.

Jadhav's memoir, written from the

Jadhav: no hysteria here



Jadhav writes from his own and his parents' and daughter's perspective. It reflects the change in the mindset of a Dalit family in the course of a generation.

perspective of his father, mother, himself and his teenaged daughter, rather like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, does not suffer from the infirmities of Dalit literature. He chronicles the insults and indignities heaped on his kith and kin with admirable restraint. The rage does not rise to the level of hysteria nor does it ever descend to a stage of self-pity. And even as he exposes, through one telling anecdote after another, the inequities of the caste system and their devastating effect on the Dalit community, he avoids radical rhetoric. He is aware of the systemic flaws but his aim is to reform the system, not to overthrow it.

And with good reason too: a brilliant student (he won a medal for

scoring the highest marks in Sanskrit in his matriculation exam), Jadhav went on to obtain a doctorate in economics from an American university, worked in the International Monetary Fund in Washington, authored two books on monetary issues and is presently serving as the head of economic research of the Reserve Bank of India. This success he owes to his stubborn belief, inherited from his parents, that the emancipation of the Dalits, slow and partial though it might be, lies in the pursuit of academic excellence and efficacy of a high order in the upper echelons of decision-making, whether in or out of government.

The fountainhead of Jadhav's inspiration were his parents. The father worked in the railways, then in a textile mill, sold newspapers when out of work, served as a Man Friday in a gorasahib's home even as he took part as a small fry in the various struggles that Ambedkar launched to assert the rights of the Dalits. The mother, though illiterate, was an exemplar of resilience and courage. Both inculcated in the children a near-fanatical ambition to succeed in life through education and dedicated hard work.

The memoir thus bears testimony to the change of mindset in a Dalit family in the course of a single generation. A similar change has been underway in millions of other Dalit homes, not in full measure, not wholly reassuringly, but a change under way all the same. It is young Apoorva, Jadhav's young daughter, who reveals in the epilogue what emancipation truly means: it does not matter one whit to her that she is a Dalit for, in a resurgent India, she has no reason to flaunt that tag or to suppress it. She has become what her forebears had always aspired to be: just normal people who are neither aggressive nor apologetic about their identity. ■

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