

The making of an icon

Barely a few months into publication, *Amcha Bap Aan Amhi*, the autobiography written by well-known economist Dr Narendra Jadhav published by Granthali, continues to make waves.

Testimony to the new upbeat mood among the Dalits, it is in this respect a new genre of literature, not "classical" yet qualifying as one of the best examples of Marathi literature coming from a true son of the soil. Mahar by caste, Ambedkarite by conviction and a qualified professional in career terms, Dr Jadhav has become a role model for an entire, newly educated Dalit youth who have entered the career market. It is thus a turning point in Dalit literature.

So much has the book become the talk of the town that non-Marathi readers are asking for copies of its translation and it has received accolades from giants like P.L. Deshpande and Vijay Tendulkar. It is also on its way to becoming a film, ensuring for its author the kind of stardom in less than a year that eluded most earlier Dalit activists.

On the surface, it is a straightforward and honest story of Damodar Runjaji Jadhav, beginning in a very poor family a village called Ozar in

Nashik district. But somewhere and sometime in his childhood he picked up the ideas that were to shape his life and those of his sons.

His exposure to modernity came almost by accident, when he worked with a British boss in the Bombay Port Trust, then a prestigious body. Working there even at the lowest level was a matter for pride. The hero of the story, Jadhav's father, acquired attributes like efficiency, quality, disci-

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Kumar Ketkar

pline and punctuality. But it was only when Dr Ambedkar entered his psychological and social life that his character took shape.

The new creative dimension provided by Dr Ambedkar's influence to this family included the characteristics of social awareness, education, striving for excellence and the recognition of the legitimacy of ambition.

Dr Jadhav himself is the personification of his father's commitment to the pursuit of excellence. He is successful both in the conventional as well as the unconventional sense. A

very senior official of the RBI and an economist of repute with a national scholarship secured in 1980 in his own area of specialisation, he followed this up with a doctorate in Economics and an assignment with the International Monetary Fund.

This is a graph that most Dalits do not aspire for though they would like to achieve. His brothers are IAS officials in equally powerful positions. Their wives too are working in very responsible positions. Indeed, the Jadhav joint family has announced from the rooftops (through their achievements) that to be Dalit does not necessarily mean to be underprivileged. They also declare the legitimacy of ambition as underlined by the fact that to achieve it, it is not necessary to resort to being culturally underprivileged.

In the modern world, the book declares, you can embrace the modern lifestyle. All four Jadhavs are strong defenders of the liberalisation of economy, all exude the kind of confidence that would be the envy of most established Brahmins in bureaucracy.

No wonder the book has made its author an icon of success.

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The Jadhav story: Following the father

Kumar Ketkar reflects on the character of the Dalit literary movement which has always had an unusual timbre

MAHARASHTRA has a tradition of 'protest literature,' but the Dalit literary movement which launched a veritable cultural-political revolution in the state was an altogether different expression of protest.

The young, educated Dalit was seeking in the mid-sixties not merely a job or a better material lifestyle but direct participation in the establishment itself. The term 'establishment', however, had various connotations in Marathi social life.

It at once meant a political class, spread out in different parties which ruled the state, as it also meant the dominance over the literary media by the cultural elite, primarily the Brahmin intelligentsia in Bombay or Pune.

The Dalit youth complained that the parameters of literature set by this class were narrow and reactionary and the paradigm set by the political class ignored the existence of the Dalits. According to these rebels, a kind of 'Chaturvanya' (four varna) system continued to prevail even when there was glib political talk that casteism had disappeared.

Maharashtra always pro-

claimed to be more progressive than other states and it was in this state this literary rebellion had been launched.

The Dalit literature expressed itself mainly through poetry. It at once focussed on the devastating aspects of their life as well as why that degradation could not be tolerated from now on. The progressive movement had compassion towards the poor and the underprivileged. But it had not brought to the surface their agony as a culturally underclass people.

What the Dalits demanded in the turbulent sixties was not compassion but understanding, not patronage but fairness and not largesse but the right to exercise power.

Though the vast Dalit population may not have benefitted from this movement, the establishment took notice of the changing mood in society. A very large number of Dalit activists, academicians, writers and artists acquired prominence. They were accepted now as partners in the elite itself.

Despite this achievement, in the late seventies and eighties, Dalit literature continued to use explosive language and highlighted the injustice of the by-

gone era. Not that they had received a fair share of the system but surely, despite poverty, their life had changed for the better in the past two decades. This was visible in the queues that were visible at Chaitya Bhoomi year after year to pay homage to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The book currently causing so much excitement, *Amcha Baap Aan Amhi* is a kind of 'collective autobiography' written by Dr Narendra Jadhav's father and his four sons and their wives. This is a unique experiment perhaps not attempted anywhere so far.

A hallmark of this collective biography is, of course, the unique character of Jadhav's father. He is not only the centre of the book, the main character but he also comes across as a kind of force of inspiration not only to the family but to the whole Dalit community.

One can say that this book changes track completely. Instead of seeking compassion and expressing protests, it sets out to achieve ambitions. The ambitions themselves are not modest. The father had told his sons that they must excel in whatever they do.