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■ ART AND SOUL

■ BOOKS

MUSINGS

■ TIME OFF

■ YOUR OPTION

ENTERTAINMENT

■ BOLLYWOOD BHELPURI

■ TELEVISION

■ WIDE ANGLE

■ FITNESS

■ GARDEN LIFE

■ NATURE

■ SUGAR 'N' SPICE

■ CONSUMER ALERT

■ TRAVEL

INTERACTIVE FEATURES

■ CAPTION CONTEST

■ FEEDBACK

## The struggle to be "incaste"

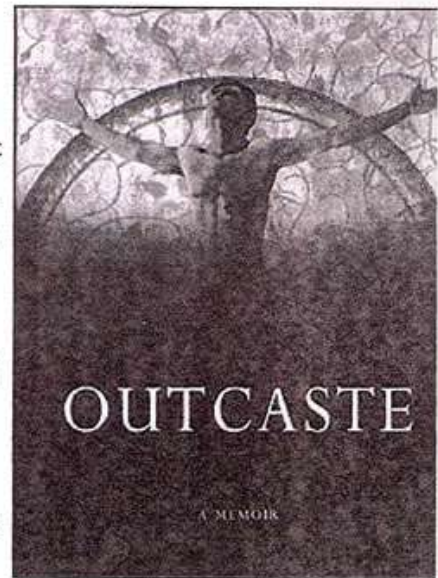
Rajdeep Bains

**Outcaste: A Memoir**

by Narendra Jadhav Penguin Viking. Pages 263. Rs 395

**P**UT together a story that spans three generations, with numerous characters intricately portrayed, then add to it just the right touch of social issues and you have a powerful combination. *Outcaste* is a dramatic piece of writing that forces us to acknowledge the inhumanity and injustice of a social order that treats humans worse than animals.

The author, Narendra Jadhav, is an eminent economist, banker, public speaker and social worker. He is at present the head of economic research at the Reserve Bank of India. He has also served as adviser to the Executive Director (India) at the IMF. *Outcaste* is an expanded version of Narendra Jadhav's best-selling Marathi novel *Amcha Baap Aan Amhi*, written in 1993.



This is a poignant first-person narrative written from the perspective of Damu and Sonu, Narendra Jadhav's parents, and, at times, from his own. It is a compelling tale of the transition of Damu from an ostracised Mahar, cringing with his sense of inadequacy, to a fighter with a sense of purpose in Dr Ambedkar's movement for the uplift of Dalits.

Damu comes to Mumbai to escape the tyranny of the upper castes in his native village Ozar. His struggle for survival and his transformation under the guidance of Dr Ambedkar, from servility to awakened self-consciousness, is the main theme of this book. It is also a personal account of the Dalit movement spearheaded by Dr Ambedkar during pre-Independence India, till the 1950s. Damu's life is seen in the backdrop of events such as Independence, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in 1956.

Damu was not born a leader, nor did he ever become one. But he had one exception—he chose to rebel against the prevailing caste system and create his own destiny. An intelligent man, with no formal education, he worked hard to be allowed to live with dignity. The author declares: "The caste system is so deeply ingrained that change can, at best, be cosmetic`85. The caste system was disposed by God and not by mortals. It has such a powerful sanction behind it that no laws, no reform movements, and no revolutions will ever change it

Change, however, does take place, little though it may seem. Damu is abused and severely beaten up by upper-caste people in his village, for refusing to take out a putrefied body from a well. His "forefathers were untouchables" required to wear clay pots around their necks to keep their spit from polluting the ground, and brooms were tied to their rumps to obliterate their footprints as they walked." He is denied entry to temples for fear of the gods getting polluted. Later in life, his son, as a high-ranking government official, is, however, treated like a VIP, in the same temple. The account of how the priests vie with each other for the privilege of performing *puja* for him would have been amusing if it were not so sad. Damu's granddaughter feels that she is "just Apoorva," without the tag 'Dalit' attached to her.

Throughout the narrative runs the slogan coined by Dr Ambedkar, which unites all Dalits, "Educate, Unite and Agitate". Damu sees this slogan as his personal mission and, though illiterate himself, he educates his children to the best of his abilities. He even tries to educate his wife Sonu, something that was unheard of in those times. Fortunately, the children all fulfil his aspirations and rise to high positions in their chosen careers, a great triumph for a man who has devoted his life to bettering their prospects.

Babasaheb Ambedkar's teachings have a profound effect on Damu and Sonu and they realise that they are beginning to develop a sense of self—"We sensed a change in the way we carried ourselves. We proudly proclaimed ourselves Dalits with our chins up, and we looked everyone in the eye."

The simplicity of the narrative brings out the pathos in the story. The tenderness with which Damu treats his wife is unusual for the times and extremely touching. Asked about the qualities she liked most in her husband, Sonu makes a telling comment on the poor expectations of women in her generation—"He never drank, never abused me. Best of all, he never raised his hand to me."

The book ends with the realisation that further change is required. The world has to stop treating Dalits as different. It is up to the present generation to carry the torch lit by the tears and blood of their ancestors.



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