

# EMERGENCE, EVOLUTION AND EXPRESSION OF DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN DALIT LITERATURE

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## Abstract

The term “Dalit,” derived from the Marathi language, means “broken”. It refers to communities traditionally placed at the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy. The emergence of Dalit consciousness is not merely a socio-political phenomenon but a deeply transformative movement aimed at challenging centuries of caste-based subjugation. This consciousness embodies a collective awareness among Dalits of their oppression and the need for assertion, dignity, and rights. The evolution of Dalit consciousness is intertwined with historical movements, literary articulations, political mobilizations, and theoretical interventions, most notably influenced by B. R. Ambedkar. This paper aims to examine the emergence, evolution and expression of Dalit consciousness by analysing its historical roots, literary manifestations, and socio-political implications.

**Keywords:** dalit consciousness; caste system; literary expression; and dalit literature.

## Introduction

The caste system, which has been governing Hindu society from time immemorial, is a traditional social hierarchy dividing people into rigid hereditary groups based on occupation and birth. Originating from ancient Hindu texts, it categorizes society into four varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—while Dalits fall outside this structure. Over time, it evolved into a complex *jati*-based system. Although the Indian Constitution bans caste discrimination and provides affirmative action, caste-based oppression and social exclusion persist, covertly in urban set-up and blatantly in rural set-up. Caste continues to influence marriage, politics, and access to resources. Despite modernization and urbanization, its impact remains deeply rooted in Indian society and culture.

The caste system in India, with its rigid hierarchical structure, has long relegated Dalits to the lowest social strata, subjecting them to untouchability and systemic exclusion. As R. S. Khare notes, “Dalits have been historically denied access to education, land, and basic human rights, reinforcing their subjugation” (Khare 84). This entrenched discrimination laid the groundwork for the emergence of a collective Dalit identity and consciousness aimed at challenging and dismantling oppressive structures. Dalit consciousness represents a collective awareness among Dalits of their systemic oppression and the need for social transformation. Rooted in centuries of caste-based discrimination, this consciousness has manifested through literature, political movements, and social activism.

### Emergence of Dalit Consciousness

The emergence of Dalit consciousness is not merely a socio-political phenomenon but a deeply transformative movement aimed at challenging centuries of caste-based subjugation. This consciousness embodies a collective awareness among Dalits of their oppression and the need for assertion, dignity, and rights. The evolution of Dalit consciousness is intertwined with historical movements, literary articulations, political mobilizations, and theoretical interventions, most notably influenced by B. R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution.

In his numerous writings, Ambedkar argued that the caste system was a form of social and economic slavery. He challenged Gandhi's paternalistic approach towards Dalits and insisted on political representation and legal safeguards. According to Eleanor Zelliot, "Ambedkar provided the Dalits with a new vocabulary of rights, dignity, and modernity" (Zelliot 142). His conversion to Buddhism in 1956, along with hundreds of thousands of followers, was not just a religious act but a radical rejection of Hindu orthodoxy.

Dalit consciousness began to crystallize in the early 20th century, influenced by reformers like B. R. Ambedkar, who advocated for the rights and dignity of Dalits. Ambedkar's assertion that "liberty, equality, and fraternity" are essential for social justice (Ambedkar 45) galvanized Dalits to recognize their shared experiences of oppression and to mobilize for change. This awakening was not merely political but also cultural, as Dalits sought to reclaim their narratives and assert their identities.

### Evolution of Dalit Consciousness

The post-Ambedkar era witnessed the rise of militant Dalit organizations such as the Dalit Panthers, formed in Maharashtra in 1972. Inspired by the Black Panther Party in the United States, the Dalit Panthers sought to challenge caste-based oppression through direct action and literary expression. Their manifesto proclaimed: "We are not Hindus, because we are treated as untouchables. We are not Indians because our human rights are violated."

The Panthers marked a shift in Dalit politics from Ambedkar's constitutionalism to a more confrontational and cultural form of resistance. As Satyanarayana and

Tharu argue, "The Dalit Panthers politicized literature and literaryized politics" (Satyanarayana and Tharu xxviii). Their writings were raw, confrontational, and deeply autobiographical, reflecting the lived experiences of caste humiliation and resistance.

### Expression of Dalit Consciousness

Dalit literature plays a pivotal role in the articulation and dissemination of Dalit consciousness. It emerged as a significant literary genre in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Marathi, and later spread to other Indian languages. Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature as "the literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits" (Limbale 30). This literature grew in parallel with Dalit movements, with the formation of groups such as the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. Their literary productions, often raw and autobiographical, broke away from the Sanskritized and sanitized language of mainstream literature. These writings provided a new idiom—one that was assertive, political, and emotionally potent.

Autobiographies have been a prominent form in Dalit literature. Texts such as *Karukku* by Bama, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, and *Baluta* by Daya Pawar provide first-person accounts of caste-based discrimination. These narratives reject the upper-caste aesthetic and insist on a new Dalit poetics rooted in truth-telling and social justice.

Dalit poetry has been a vibrant space for articulating anger, pain, defiance, and hope. Poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Meena Kandasamy, and Hira Bansode have used poetry to confront caste hierarchies and reclaim dignity. Dhasal's poetry is particularly notable for its unflinching portrayal of Dalit suffering and revolutionary fervor. In his poem "Man, You Should Explode," Dhasal writes: "Break this spine that bends at every humiliation, / Smash this skull that waits for miracles. / Man, you should explode" (Dhasal 44). This poetic call to arms encapsulates the revolutionary ethos of Dalit consciousness. Poetry, for many Dalit writers, becomes a form of performative resistance - meant to be heard aloud, chanted, and shared in communal spaces of struggle.

Dalit fiction - novels and short stories - has also played a crucial role in representing caste realities. These

narratives often blend realism with symbolic storytelling to critique the caste system and its multifaceted impacts. Baburao Bagul's short stories, for example, portray the psychological torment and existential dilemmas of Dalit characters in urban and rural settings. His work brought attention to the alienation of Dalits even in supposedly progressive spaces.

Urmila Pawar's stories such as those in *Mother Wit* deal with the nuances of Dalit women's lives, exploring themes of marriage, sexuality, and community. Through fiction, these authors reconstruct a Dalit worldview—distinct from Brahmanical literary traditions—and assert the legitimacy of Dalit life and culture.

### Language and Aesthetics in Dalit Literature

One of the hallmarks of Dalit literature is its linguistic innovation. Rejecting the polished, Sanskritized language of mainstream Indian literature, Dalit writers often employ colloquial, raw, and region-specific idioms. This aesthetic choice is political—it challenges the notion that literary language must be refined and detached from the everyday.

Sharankumar Limbale emphasizes that “Dalit literature cannot be evaluated using the same criteria as traditional literature; it demands a new aesthetic rooted in authenticity and social relevance” (Limbale 32). The aesthetics of Dalit literature are defined by their immediacy, urgency, and truth-telling. This literature foregrounds content over form, emphasizing the need to represent reality as it is experienced by Dalits.

### Intersectionality: Gender, Region, and Religion

The expression of Dalit consciousness is not monolithic; it is shaped by multiple intersecting identities. Dalit women writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble bring out the double burden of caste and gender. Their works expose how patriarchy operates within Dalit communities and critique the gender blindness of some male Dalit writers.

Regional variations also play a role. Tamil Dalit literature, for instance, differs in tone and themes from Marathi or Hindi Dalit writings. Writer like P. Sivakami addresses specific issues of land, labor, and caste violence in Tamil Nadu. Similarly, Dalit Christians explore

how religious identity intersects with caste, complicating the narrative of oppression and resistance.

### Critical Reception and Challenges

While Dalit literature has gained recognition, it still faces marginalization within academic and literary circuits. Questions about its literary merit, authenticity, and aesthetics often arise from upper-caste critics. However, scholars like Gopal Guru and Satyanarayana have defended Dalit literature as a crucial site of knowledge production and social critique. Guru argues that “Dalit narratives must be read not just as expressions of pain but as philosophical critiques of power” (Guru 108).

The inclusion of Dalit texts in university curricula and literary festivals has improved visibility, but the struggle for equal recognition continues. The mainstream literary canon remains largely upper-caste and resistant to the epistemological rupture that Dalit literature represents.

### Conclusion

Literary expressions of Dalit consciousness have profoundly reshaped Indian literature and social thought. These writings are not just testimonies of suffering but acts of resistance, reclaiming dignity and demanding justice. They challenge hegemonic narratives, expand the boundaries of literary aesthetics, and call for a more inclusive understanding of literature and society. Through poetry, fiction, autobiography, and digital writing, Dalit literature continues to assert that the personal is political, and that the literary is inseparable from the social. As Bama writes in *Karukku*, “Writing became a way of healing, of speaking out, of not being silent anymore” (Bama 89). In doing so, Dalit literature ensures that the voice of the oppressed is not only heard but remembered and honored.

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