

# Dalit Community and Self-Reliance: Reading Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir*

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## Abstract

The survival and progression of human society is the sum total of various factors. Man has successfully established his supremacy over the extrinsic factors but the battle with peers and one's self has always been a daunting task. For the Dalit community, however, the survival has been far more exasperating than it was for any other community in the Indian parlance. When viewed from the perspective of psychodynamics with special reference to Maslow's Pyramid of Needs, which forms the basis of this paper, it is evident that the community's trials begin from the first step of the pyramid itself. Consequently, to reach the penultimate level of 'self-actualization' of the pyramid, Dalits had to fight a long battle. The study examines an eminent Dalit public figure Dr. Narendra Jadhav's life narrative *Outcaste: A Memoir* to comprehend the social and psychological progression of Dalits in the teeth of all possible obstacles. Since the text showcases three generations of the author, the paper closely analyzes the situations and modus operandi of each generation individually to achieve the final stage as per Maslow thus, bringing out a comprehensive picture. The paper also investigates the specific response of the female characters in the said framework.

**Keywords:** Life narrative; Psychodynamics; Resistance; Self-esteem.

## Introduction

Human society is an objective translation of the Hindu mythological maze *Chakravayuh*. In revered Ved Vyas' magnum opus, the representative treatise of the *Tetrayug* and the seminal testimony of the humongous human tragedy of all times, the *Mahabharata*, *Chakravayuh* was a shrewdly planned military strategy in which a very young yet a skilled warrior; Abhimanyu lost his life while fighting valorously against the treacherous ways of the

Kauravas. The death of his beloved son Abhimanyu, enraged Arjun to wage a war against his own people who hitherto has been reluctant to do so. The *Chakravyuh*, designed to destroy the Pandavas, thus, engulfed the Kauravas themselves. The caste system, which has been eating away the vitals of the nation, is the *Chakravyuh* of *Kalyug* in which hundreds and thousands of *Achuts* (untouchables) have succumbed silently in an attempt to disrupt its each and every *vyuh* (ring). Fortunately, unlike Abhimanyu, they have succeeded to a substantial extent in freeing themselves from this vicious circle under the able aegis of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

The demigod of Dalits Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opines in his undelivered speech *The Annihilation of Caste*, "The assertion by the individual of his own opinions and beliefs, his own independence and interest—over and against group standards, group authority, and group interests—is the beginning of all reform" (Ambedkar, 195) It is this realization of self-worth, self-respect and self-esteem that empowered the *Asprashayyas* (untouchables), after regaining their lost inner strength like Arjun, to blow the bugle aloud announcing their preparedness for a bloody face off against their age-old oppressors, the upper castes.

### **Problem Statement and Methodology**

The present study examines Dr. Narendra Jadhav's life-narrative *Outcaste: A Memoir* in purview of the psychological concepts of 'self-esteem' and 'self-actualization', with special reference to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in order to showcases how the maze of the caste system is deadlier than *Chakravyuh*. Jadhav's memoir has been deliberately and carefully chosen to establish the rationale of the study since it encompasses three generations of the Jadhav family. The narrative shows clear transition across generations in terms of how they handle their self-esteem in order to reach at the top of the pyramid as depicted by Maslow. The study employs textual analysis and psychodynamic approach as its methodology.

### **Author and his milieu:**

Dr. Narendra Jadhav (b.1953) is not only an eminent economist of international repute having worked as an Advisor to the Executive Director for India at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), USA, a skilled policy maker and, with the sale of 4,00,000 copies of his memoir, he also became one of the best-selling authors. The critical worth of *Amcha Baap Aan Amhi*, the original Marathi version of *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) also written by Dr. Jadhav himself, may comfortably be gauged from the fact that

the former Prime Minister and himself a reputed economist, Dr. Manmohan Singh has showers praises on Jadhav's book stating, "Like the life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, or indeed the life of our beloved former Rashtrapati, the Late Dr. K. R. Narayanan, the life story of Dr Jadhav is also a story of change, of great courage, of progress, of hope. Narendra's autobiography must shape our social and political vision."

Narendra Jadhav penned his memoir keeping his parents at the centre of the narrative to highlight that *Outcaste: A Memoir* is a living history of a crushed community that endeavours to guard its self-esteem against a tyrannical social order which has been churning and grinding them for centuries altogether. The author proudly celebrates the consciousness of not only his parents and his community but of "all those anonymous men and women everywhere in the world who stood for Human rights" (Jadhav) which primarily provide a legal framework to the otherwise vulnerable concept of self-esteem.

### **Conceptual Framework:**

Human life, given its alluring, complex and challenging layers, has served as the fertile land on which all the branches of knowledge have flourished. It is the enigmatic nature of human life that all the tributaries of knowledge cross each other's path in an attempt to measure the depths of the elliptical ocean called life. The concept of 'self' is one such aspect of human life on which Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology have an equal amount of say and authority. The concept of 'self', here, is analyzed from the psychological perspective in the purview of a Dalit writer Narendra Jadhav's autobiographical text, *Outcaste: A Memoir*.

The intriguing concept of 'self' with 'self-respect', 'self-esteem' and 'self-worth' as its pivotal extensions, has always been in the ambit of psychodynamics. Even before Sigmund Freud presented his multi-layered concept of 'self' and created ripples in the world of Psychology, the concept brainstormed by giants like Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, John Locke, David Hume and the ilk primarily had philosophical underpinnings. In the contemporary times, however, the concept of 'self' is understood best when analyzed from the lens of psychology as well as philosophy.

Amidst the various efforts made by the psychologists and the philosophers to define 'self', the common grounds all of them seem to agree upon is that self is one's consciousness of one's being and identity. The keywords here are certainly 'consciousness' and 'identity' which may be

understood better with the extended version of 'self' viz. 'self-esteem', 'self-respect', 'self-worth', 'dignity' and the like. Renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow in his groundbreaking research paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation' prioritized human needs which is popularly represented as the 'Pyramid of Hierarchy of Needs', at the base of which lie physiological needs, least in terms of complexity and at the top; self-actualization that leads to a sense of fulfilment.



**Pyramid of Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow places 'esteem' at the second position, i.e. just below 'self-actualization' clearly highlighting the worth of self-worth in an individual's life. Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* rests entirely on this profound sense of 'self-esteem'.

## **Discussion:**

### **1.1 The Beginning**

Dr. Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* is an explicit record of the step-motherly treatment meted out to the untouchable community of Mahars. The economist while revisiting his turbulent past records that in comparison to his mother Sonubai, his father Damodar Runjaji Jadhav, fondly called Damu in the book, was a revolutionary at heart. Not only was he aware about his inferior status in the society but was also committed that this gruesome

reality must be changed. The inhuman incident that made him realize his challenged position in the society occurred to him at a very early stage of life when he received a backlash from an upper caste man as he stretched his hand to take the tumbler of water from his hand to quench his thirst while his father squatted in front of the man. The upper caste man, intolerant to young Damu's action reprimanded him saying, "Son of a bitch! How dare you try to touch this? You think you can take this from my hand? Down! Get your hands down." (Jadhav, 46) Unable to comprehend the casteist slur, Damu questioned his father, "Baba, he drank water straight from the vat. Why can't I?" (46) Damu's father tried to justify his position as the 'polluted one' to his son not realizing that the boy's thirst was quenched but his mind was still hovering over the question evident from his afterthoughts, "I didn't quite understand. I looked back, the dog was lapping up the water from the same vat! That was for the first time that I wondered if it were better to be born a dog than to be born a Mahar?" (47) Thus, the first seeds of rebellion were sown in Damu's mind because his self-esteem had been injured.

The story was not much different for Sonubai, Narendra Jadhav's mother. Jadhav recalls that the incident took place when his mother, along with other girls of her age, was summoned to extend a helping hand in the odd chores at a high caste wedding in the village. Since she was asked 'to work', she began by lifting one of the platters full of sweets to distribute it to the guests. No sooner had Sonubai started offering the sweets than the landlord's mother came charging at her and before she could understand the situation, Sonubai saw that the plate flung out of her hands and it landed on the ground, making a crashing sound and all the sweets lay scattered on the ground. The elderly woman shouted a volley of abuse at the girl stating, "You scoundrels, your caste will never change; give you an inch and you grab a mile" (Jadhav 47). The incident steered a train of questions in young Sonu's mind as is evident from her after thoughts, "Amidst my confused feelings, I could not figure out why the food was contaminated. I could never understand who had decided that things should be this way" (48) However, Sonu's reaction was contrary to her husband's as she evidently accepted her low status, "I would assume that as they said, I must have committed a terrible sin in my last birth to be born as an outcaste in this life" (48)

Jadhav brings to the fore the incidents of humiliation that were borne by his parents in the nascent stage of their lives as a testimony to the observation made by the psychologists in terms of human dignity and humiliation. "Humiliation," as Avishai Margalit explains, "is any sort of behaviour or

condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured" (Margalit 196) The intensity of humiliation experienced by an individual, according to the psychologists, is dependent on two factors. First, how an individual rates his self-worth and second what is his risk taking capacity against his tormentors who tend to tarnish his self-esteem. In this regard, the submissive attitude of Jadhav's grandfather and his mother is symbolic of the attitude and approach of many in the Dalit community who have been appropriating the attack on its self-esteem without even a thought of retaliation since the feeling of being a subordinate is deeply ingrained in the psyche of Dalits. The sole motive of Narendra Jadhav behind laying bare the life of his parents is only to revive the consciousness of his entire community as he urges them to cultivate a sense of individuality in order to live with self-respect.

Further, Narendra Jadhav, in unmistakable terms, underlines how larger than life persona of the saviour of Dalit community Babasaheb Ambedkar influenced and enhanced his father's valuation of himself and also helped him understand how to guard one's self-esteem. Ambedkar immensely shaped Dr Jadhav's own personality and as he scaled new heights in his life, he attributed his exponential growth to Ambedkar's philosophy. Throughout the book, Jadhav maintains that the first incident of humiliation made a permanent scar on his father; Damu's self-esteem. On his first visit to Mumbai as a 12-year-old young lad, he witnessed how Babasaheb Ambedkar was holding the baton of Dalits' progress in his hands and was making a case for his outcaste brethren. Damu also witnessed that the Dalit Movement under the aegis of Dr. Ambedkar was gaining grounds, and he was creating ripples in the upper caste quarters across the nation. This was the opportunity that Damu had always been looking for. Although he was still young to comprehend Ambedkar's agenda and purpose in its full might, yet with the initial understanding of Ambedkar's ideology, he enthusiastically started participating in his rallies. Each word that Ambedkar spoke, rubbed off the clouds of self-doubt from Damu's mind but more importantly he was gradually becoming an awakened individual because of the Dalit *chetna* (consciousness) which the Dalit movement infused in him. From the perspective of Maslow's pyramid, a strong sense of 'self-esteem' leads to 'self-actualization' and Damu was on his way to reach the goal i.e. to fulfil the desire of becoming the best version of oneself.

Damodar Runjaji Jadhav's frequent visits between Mumbai and his village was the prime factor that strengthened his sense of self-esteem. Damu could clearly gauge the startling contrast between the two geographical spaces, resolving firmly to gather his roots from his village

where the ground reality continued to be dismal and chart further course of life in the city as he believed it will bring “some touchability to his life” (Jadhav19). The incident that proved to be the game changing factor for Damu was when his job in Mumbai slipped from his hands due to the turbulent economic crisis; the Great Depression and he was summoned to perform his duties as a *yeskar* by the village headman. After Damu had participated in Ambedkar’s movements, he realized the worthlessness of performing the duties of a *yeskar* which befell the fate of his unfortunate community and included errands like removing carcasses of the cattle, sweeping and running as a human pilot either to escort a government official or carry a death message from door to door.

Damu under the pressure of his family grudgingly agreed to perform the duties but maybe for the last time. Having worked as a *yeskar* from the break of dawn without any consideration of food and water when Damu ‘disobeyed’ the inspector by denying to remove the dead body of a woman from the well, he found himself on the ground, unconscious “jerking and convulsing at every blow and whiplash as it landed on his body” (9). On that day, it was not only Damu’s body but his self-esteem also which was wounded when his mother and elder cousin also rebuked him for having ‘failed’ in keeping the ‘honour’ of the family. He charged at them saying, “What kind of a tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs? I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am a man of dignity, and I will not go from house to house begging for Baluta. What are all of you going to do? Kill me?” (18) In order to regain his lost self-esteem and to not allow it being injured ever again, Damodar Runjaji Jadhav along with his wife left for Mumbai. Awestruck by the stern decision taken by her husband, Sonu soon realized, “it was important for my man to be true to himself, to his thoughts and beliefs. It was the question of his identity – our identity” (19)

The realization of self-worth, says Maslow, is a crucial factor that empowers an individual to answer all the dubious questions about his identity and for Damu it was the beginning as he was a man of iron strong will and fierce attitude. His first job in Mumbai was with an English family which never treated him sub-humanly. Recalling his first encounter with the family he states, “As was customary for us in our village, I sat on the floor. The Saheb was surprised, and he gave me a hand to stand up and made me sit on the couch next to him” (Jadhav 92). Damu’s low and inferior social status had crippled his mentality to such an extent that even when he was treated in a just manner by the English, he failed to register how he, an untouchable, was being treated with respect. He honestly ac-

cepts, "I was very uncomfortable and felt totally out of place. My lowly place was so deeply etched in my mind that when I was treated well, I could not believe it" (38). The author, by exemplifying the mental status of his father, successfully establishes that the most fierce demon is alive inside ourselves and that the struggle with one's own self is certainly the most painful. The outer forces can be conquered only if we have crushed the devil within. It is this sense of respect for oneself that Maslow accounts for the stepping stone towards 'self-actualization'

Damodar Runjaji Jadhav marks coming to the city as his 'second birth' and truly a worthy one. Living in the city for a considerable period, he had imbibed Ambedkar's ideology and had a firm belief that the Dalits can themselves ameliorate their subordinate projection in society if they continue to assert themselves as they did during Mahad agitation. He retorts, "The symbolic march to the Chavdar tank had rekindled in us untouchables the flame of dignity and self-respect. It was the beginning of our awakening" (24). On the personal front also, Damu noticed visible transformation in his personality as is evident in his words, "The movement inspired by Babasaheb Ambedkar had fully seeped into me. I was imbued with new courage and self-realization. It had given me the power to question, reason and act" (25).

Damu's transformation from a mute to defiant being was the result of Dr Ambedkar's fiery thoughts. He recalls his argument in the village with inspector stating, "I looked back on my behaviour with the Fauzadar. I had not done anything in defying his authority. Babasaheb had inspired us to stand up and reclaim our dignity. I had done just that" (25) Dr. Jadhav delves deep into his father's transformation to ascertain the fact that garnering, realizing and protecting self-respect has to be initiated by the individual himself. He firmly maintains that his father's vision of educating his children so that they pave the way for an egalitarian society turned out to be true only because he was able to attain the top most level of self-actualization according to Maslow's pyramid. Jadhav's mother was also a pivotal pillar providing the support, moral most of the times and also financial as and when required and that has also played a vital role in his father's journey to experience a sense of fulfilment.

## **1.2 The Feminist Angle:**

One of the promising features of Dalit literature is the delineation of Dalit women as iron-willed individuals who are not easily bogged down by the stifling circumstances. Dalit writers while advocating the case of Dalit



women, strongly suggest that they are resilient not by choice, rather by force. A renowned activist and a prominent name in the Dalit feminist circles, Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar has visibly shattered into pieces the stereotypical, meek and docile image of a Dalit woman in her oft quoted poem 'Mother'. Narendra Jadhav, in his narrative, continues the tradition by portraying the women of his family, particularly his mother; Sonubai as a confident woman. Dr. Jadhav has convincingly portrayed how his mother evolved into an assertive individual guided by her husband's views.

Initially Sonubai was listless and whenever Damu, who was headed on a path of total transformation by Ambedkar's movements, stressed upon the significance of the same saying, "Soney, take more interest in these talks instead of the song and dance you like to see. They are about our community and about the uplifting of our people" (Jadhav 122), she would either listen to him indifferently or would feel "bored". Narendra Jadhav shows gradual progress in her mother's personality after she began participating actively in Ambedkarite movements, hand in hand with her husband. The Ganapati festival celebration marks the beginning of Sonubai's transformation. She reminisces the shocking reaction of the people on her 'unfeminine behaviour' when she began beating the miscreants who were misbehaving with the women during the peaceful procession. The fact that Sonu realized her "self-worth" is evident in her blazing words, "How long do we take things lying down? We are not allowed to worship Ganpati because we honour Babasaheb alongside... We won't let them bully us in Mumbai. This is a big city, not a village" (134). The incident stands testimony to the fact that every human strives to move up the pyramid and feels secure when the individual experiences a strong sense of self-worth.

Sonubai's journey to become a strong-willed woman continued hereafter and as the narrator records in *Outcaste: A Memoir*, there was a time when the couple faced serious clash of ideas. The reason being, following Ambedkar's footsteps in embracing Buddhism and renouncing Hinduism. The idea didn't go well with Sonubai and without mincing words, she had spoken her mind to her husband. Sonubai considered renouncing Hinduism like amputating a part of her conscious being and her agitation can be clearly felt when she says, "It's always you, you and you... Damodar Runjaji Jadhav. What about me? I am the insignificant Sonu, always nodding my head to whatever you say and walking behind you like your shadow?" (174) Sonu underwent bouts of depression until Oct 14, 1956 till Jadhav's family embraced Buddhism on Deekshabhumi in Nagpur. The entire ceremony had rejuvenated Sonubai's wavering self-worth as she

recalls her calm state of mind in the following words, "The serenity of the whole ceremony was present in my heart and I hoped it would never go away. All my earlier anxiety and doubts with which I had come to Nagpur seemed to disappear at the ceremony. I was proud to have achieved something and clutched the Buddha's idol throughout our journey back" (191-192).

Jadhav's family had embraced Buddhism but Sonubai instead of immersing the idols of Hindu gods, concealed them and continued to worship them in a silent manner. Sonubai's this act should not only be viewed as an act of resistance but it is also a strategy to safeguard her self-worth which is empowered by her unwavering faith and devotion to her gods. Narendra Jadhav, thus, presents Sonubai as a contended woman who succeeds in sustaining and reviving her self-esteem by continuing to pay secret homage to her gods and at the same time imbibing Dalit consciousness that she now fully accepted.

### **1.3 The author's experience:**

Dr. Jadhav states that he scaled heights in his life because from the initial stages of his life he had seen how his parents have guarded their self-respect with their lives but to say that the author was immune against any possibility of humiliation and degradation, is not true. Narendra Jadhav recalls the incident with remorse when after being appointed as the Advisor to Executive Director for India at the IMF, USA he was treated like a celebrity by the priests at Vithoba Temple in his locality when he reached there for a ritual worship. Dr. Jadhav painfully records, "Realization that I did not belong there flooded my mind... fear gripped me... I could be thrown out of the temple...whipped for violating time-honoured customs" (Jadhav 212). Narendra Jadhav is faced here with what is referred to in psychology as 'Autorky Problem' according to which it is questioned whether an individual should consider his self-respect being hurt because he was maltreated by his victimizers. Jadhav's father also grappled with a similar situation multiple times in his life. Psychologists believe 'Autorky Problem' is quite subjective in nature as it depends heavily on one's opinion about one's self-worth. The text, however, exemplifies that Damodar Runjaji Jadhav as well as Narendra Jadhav gradually overcome this problem as is evident in Jadhav words, "If others look down on me it is their problem, not mine. I certainly don't need to torment myself over it" (214) The author's assertion and strong will has helped him a great deal in rising up the pyramid in comparatively shorter period of time than his parents. In Jadhav's case, his education, which brought him his position in

the society, the visible improvement in the social and economic condition of Dalits and similar factors have been crucial to sail smoothly till the top of the pyramid.

#### **1.4 The younger generation:**

Jadhav's daughter, Apoorva, who had not experienced the hardships faced by her grandfather and father is, however, aware of her father being a 'Dalit' but that turbulent past doesn't seem to affect her the least. She proudly proclaims, "I think I know who I am. I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion or caste. My ancestors carried the burden of being a Dalit and bowing down to demeaning tasks even after India's Independence. I have the torch they have lit for me and nothing can stop me" (263). In this sense, it is clear that she never encountered the problem because Apoorva never defines her self-respect with how the people opposing her would think of her. Thus, she doesn't seem to give any power in their hands and let them control her self-esteem and eventually the future.

#### **Conclusion:**

Leary and Downs based on their verified hypotheses tested on the sociometer model of self-esteem conclude, "the self-esteem system appears specifically designed to detect real or potential changes in the individual's inclusionary status and to elicit emotional and motivational processes in response to threats to one's connections with other people" (Leary and Downs, 529). Related to this observation is a fact that inclusion is not a smooth process, it is heavily guarded by terms and conditions, subjective and sometimes irrational. The exclusion of Dalits is a case in point. Interestingly, in *Outcaste: A Memoir* none of the characters put any effort to regain and guard their self-esteem so that they may be included in the dominant fold of the society. On the contrary, their sporadic voices are heard, ascertaining their inalienable human rights. They emerge as modern day Abhimanyus who in lieu of 'acquired knowledge' dismantle the *Chakravayuh*, devising and depending on their own strategies. They truly relive APJ Abdul Kalam's view, "Self-respect comes with self-reliance."

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