

Addressing Identity: Ethical Virulence and ‘Becoming an Animal’ in Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s *I Could Not Be Hindu*

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Abstract: In this paper, I will look at Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s controversial life writing *I Could Not Be Hindu*, from the angle of projecting an ethical dialogue for Dalit consciousness. The paradigms of Dalit identity, as often debated by several scholars, are based on how they express their crisis in relation to political situations and sensitive marginalization. In Meghwanshi’s life writing, a new trope of identity crisis is provided based on systematic obfuscation from public spheres and participation such as marginalization, I argue, constitute a new ethical dimension of Dalit eloquence. However, this ethical stance is based on the Dalit subject’s internal addressing related to change her/ his perspective of the ‘given identity’. I will raise three fundamental questions relating to the above issue in this paper. First, an argument of private self vs the public sphere will be outlined to examine how the Dalit self in writing is prevented from the spheres of total expression. Next to this, I will argue that the ways of humiliation make the Dalit self ‘becoming an animal’ (paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s term) by reconstituting the self’s given notions of identity and transforming that construct for resistance.

Keywords: Life Writing, animal, humiliation, resistance, identity

Ever since the inception of multiple selves that occupy the construction of the Self in life writing, the corpus of knowledge concerned with the understanding of the self and society has changed totally. In contemporary life writing, the intermixing of the speaking subject with the other voices has opened up new ways of handling the issues of the self and the surroundings. Caught in the intricacies of the self’s addressing the other and how others intervene in its formation, the question of life in writing has become a matter of contestation. Succinctly defended by some philosophical discourse and other discursive practices, the self in contemporary life writing poses three major questions. The first is the existence of the autonomous self in life writing. Several thinkers from the time of James Olney have debated on this autonomy as a product of socio-cultural changes. However, in recent times, specific counterclaims have also been made. The second question is the way the self is fashioned concerning the contours of its expression. Devoid of any particular aporetic stance, the self in construction in life writing is articulated sometimes dubious and defensive. The third question is related to the relationship of the self with “others”, which is a far more debatable one in the context of the postcolonial discourses connected with identity, resistance and recovery. Perhaps this question is the most important one in our time that makes us rethink the “evolved self” in life writing. The difference between the “evolved self” and “self in evolution” is at the heart of the discourse of life writing as the latter is more concerned with the reader’s idea of the self and how it is outlined in the text. In this paper, I will critically analyze Bhanwar Meghwanshi’s *I Could Not Be Hindu* to explicate the above questions in relation to the deeply riven questions of caste and its socio-cultural problematization in India.

The challenge against the genre called autobiography has long been set by life writing in various ways. In the broad spectrum of constructing/ narrating one’s life, it undergoes

tremendous changes such as the principal narrator or the self, transforming into the unsteady trope of narration, doubts centred around the self's intricate relation to highlight what it is and the paradoxical questions evoked out of minute details. The departure from the generic convention of autobiography, therefore, is primarily a step to contextualize the self's desire to narrate the "unspoken". However, how this "unspoken" is spoken in contemporary life narratives is very much related to the background of the narrator, the space/place from where they hail, the conditions of vulnerability to which the person is submitted. Irene Kacandes argues that what the readers possess is "a high tolerance for experimentation that might be construed as revealing or representing the complexity of reality" ("Experimental Life Writing", 380–81). Though this statement edges toward a sense of reality the readers are looking for, recent examinations of the genre of life writing have very well dismissed such claims by linking life narratives to biographies and bio fictions. Most of the life writings in contemporary times share some concerns with these newly developed genres, which for most of the readers, is a crucial way to enjoy the forms of writing. In Indian life narratives, recently, we have come across a series of such experimentations. What matters significantly is not how such forms of investigation are practiced; but the expressions of different styles that go with them. Every life narrative, therefore, is an experiment to rewrite life in a new sense. This is where narratives get juxtaposed with imagination or with an excess of pain and vulnerability.

Bhanwar Meghwanshi's *I Could Not Be Hindu* is the life writing of a Dalit, which expresses the question of identity, political expression set against certain conditions of external interiority, the ways of understanding the fellow sufferers and above all, issues of pain and humiliation. Contrary to the detailing of personal suffering as the hallmark of the familiar Dalit life narratives, Meghwanshi translates his experience into straightforward political questions faced by the Dalits against the State. The State that obscures the Dalit lives is the fundamental pedestal of Meghwanshi's narrative. The personal set against the public forms of suffering is further accentuated by a set of crucial experiences – not at the family level, but at the level of some groups that try to build up a nation of their choice. The broader assumptions of such an orientation question the Indian state as a monolith of upper caste aspirations and desires. The silencing of the Dalits is the silencing of the nation at large, where a few try to gain benefits from the agendas of the ruling class. In this condition, the nation's postcolonial status is seriously questioned and critiqued.

Hailing from the Bhilwara district of Rajasthan, the journey of Meghwanshi, after having lured into RSS intending to create Hindu-Rashtra, is faced with a series of turbulences and internal contradictions. The distinct features of his make-up as a *karsevak* question the importance of citizenship and democratic creeds. Among the few questions that plague the construction of Nation– State here run Hindu masculinity based on *Kshatriya* (the princely and warrior caste) as the foremost one. To make sense of the multitude of Hindu texts, oral traditions and practices, orientalist had to divide them mainly into two categories – a "Fine Tradition" comprising all Vedic systems of knowledge, the schools, rituals and manners and a "Small Tradition", where we come across all kinds of castes including the untouchables as Hindus. Apart from these categories, there are other sub-sets of people in places such as Bhilwara who try to knock at the doors of justice. In many ways, such demarcations done by the orientalist act as the foundation stones of the Indian caste system, which reinvigorated later by gaining momentum from the colonial economy and other laws. The postcolonial Indian State owes a lot to such orientalist systems of thought to build up Hindu monolithic ideologies. In such a context, revisiting orientalist texts and notions give us enough examples regarding how the colonial administrations reasserted castes by elevating the "Fine Tradition" to its zenith. This involved a process of selection of particular texts, the dissemination of their contents and appropriation of all

classes of people to rely upon the disseminated knowledge. In “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Indian Historiography is Good to Think”, Gyan Prakash points out that how orientalism functioned as a “completely European enterprise” (255) fully engaging with colonial relations of power. This is an excellent point to begin a discussion on the ongoing condition of the Dalit conditions, their exclusion from several platforms and their life narratives filled with shame and humiliation. Behind the construction of the Dalit life writing, one can see a schedule of the orientalist discourse, which doubly marginalized them in post-independent India. Meghwanshi’s life narrative, therefore, offers us a passage to view the obscure past not chartered in his life and the present political condition of attempting to make the Hindu nation.

Meghwanshi’s identity in his life narrative is dubiously articulated. The text opens with his passion for chanting Lord Ram’s name for the building up of temple at Ayodhya: “Baccha baccha Ram Ka/ Janmabhoomi ke kaam ka (Every child must prove his worth/ work for the place of Ram’s birth” (*I could Not Be Hindu*” 15). This slogan slates his desire to establish the temple in the disputed site of Ayodhya. The consequent arrest and other issues he faces roots his identity despite being a Dalit with the majoritarian Hindu groups. The induction of Meghwanshi into RSS, the dominant youth movement of Bharatiya Janata Party in India, which is predominant in masculine constructions, marks the turning point of obscuring his immaculate Dalit past. Despite the concurrent doubts and sporadic anger emerging at times in his mind, the hierarchical question of the *shakha* makes him subservient to the overwhelming notions of class and nation. Pitted against a set of beliefs that obfuscates the identity of several Dalits and the doubly marginalized, the male subjectivities that emerge in the meetings of RSS and their ideology are in conformity with the masculine virility imposed by the colonial rulers. On the one hand, the dominance of the male workers in RSS subjugates women and other classes secondary in the construction of their discourse on nationalism. On the other hand, the identity concerned with the caste is heavily oppressed by the leaders of the organization, failing which their organizational impulses will have a severe setback. Meghwanshi’s understanding that the Sangh is everywhere makes him a component in the broader dimension of caste obfuscation. A dubious identity, thus constructed, ignores the vast array of sources that are available to seek and assert one’s identity in post-independent India.

One can find how RSS, as the Hindu organization, has developed the dominant masculine, and virile imagination from some of their central texts. Drawing from the Vedic times and the legends available, its ideologues have constructed the notions of the “male” superior to all genders. The equation of the Hindu with the male stands for defining a nation of power and superiority. The contested medieval and ancient times are revived by some thinkers. The *kaliyuga* (the time where we are supposedly living) is considered to be the worst time as the Hindus have lost their glory, charm and masculinity. The power to define the Hindu, in such a context, is strategically manipulated as the sub-castes and sub-classes are carefully taken out from the organization. How this masculine taboo is ascribed to the upper caste Hindu by RSS can be seen in M.S. Golwalkar’s *Bunch of Thoughts*, where he writes Hindus are “the men born in the land of Bharat” (107) and they are “sons of the soil” (208). The unity of the Hindus for Golwalker rests on the identity they carry as they have to perform the duties for the soil where they live. The male chauvinism constantly emerging in *Bunch of Thoughts*, needless to say, connotes not only the aspiration of viewing the country as male but also the idea that male is the centre of power, knowledge, domination and social status. Of course, this goes hand in hand with the concept of Hindu nationalism, as Paola Bacchetta argues: “the united Hindu nationalist men are a metaphor for the Hindu nationalist phallus: mighty, alert, invincibly powerful, and of course, erect” (“When the (Hindu Nation) Exiles its Queers”, 148). The

connotative significance of such a construction of Hindu and nationalism attached to it debunks the heterogeneous and plural adumbration of the country's ethos and culture. The contemporary life writing by the Dalit writers faces this issue as their narrative has to mediate between the overwhelming discourse that tries to view the nation as "One" by discarding the hues and cries of the multitudes and the severe identity issues that are at stake in their communities.

While the RSS tries to claim that the Hindus had their pristine glory in *satyuga*, the Dalits try to articulate their anger through different modes of propaganda. Most of the *shakhas* attempt to bring the glory back by cultivating the desire to recapture the past by obfuscating and sidelining those who do not fit for that. Dalits, Adivasis, sexually deviant communities, the doubly marginalized and a section of the subalterns are successfully marginalized from this. The sheer desire to construct the Hindu nation springs from the idea to obscure several sects, castes, sub-castes, the economically underprivileged and other weaker sections in the society as they never square with the agenda of a dominant Hindu Rashtra. The sidelined and unwanted section of people are thus considered racially inferior as the agenda further aims to create the "nation of purity". At this juncture, Dalit life writing seriously faces specific issues. Meghwanshi's description of how such notions are cultivated in the *shakhas* testify to the above statement. Meghwanshi writes: "It took the form of questions and answers, in which questions were asked like 'Who are we, whose is this country, who considers this their motherhood? The answers would be given, ' We, of pure Aryan blood, are Hindus, of Sanatana dharma, the eternal, most ancient religion, this country is ours, only we Hindus consider this our motherland, the land in which we are fulfilled through the work. This country is our sacred pilgrimage. Since ancient times our land was a bird of gold. Rivers of milk ran here, and of curd and ghee. We are the gurus of the universe" (*I*, 51). Furthermore, when the notion of purity and the flag that would stamp India as one nation, Meghwanshi writes: " My questioning mind would not be silent even on this occasion, and I couldn't help asking how a lifeless object like the flag could guide us the way a guru should" (*I*, 55). The ongoing doubts in the mind of a Dalit worker in RSS, as we see in the above descriptions, are first censored and then forced to forget. The tussle between forgetting and the compulsion to ask more is the bedrock of Meghwanshi's life narrative. In other words, what is forbidden by the majoritarian discourse is spelt out, as compulsory effusion in the life of a Dalit in RSS. This condition as we will examine, further opens up a new trajectory of the Dalit life narrative as their oppressions and humiliation take a different mode of articulating the protest.

Tropes of Humiliation

How the Dalit subject is getting humiliated is a matter of much contention. Humiliation does not mean the simple marginalization from the mainstream society and culture; on the other hand, it is matter of deep internalization that wherever the Dalit is, the world around is intricately structured to subject them to utter disappointment and sadness. Looking at the complexities involved in the humiliation of the Dalit subject, Gopal Guru argues that "karma theory based on the submissive fate is inexplicable and hampers the growth of moral vision into the knowledge of humiliation (*Theorizing Humiliation*, 15)". Set against Hegelian understanding of the master and slave relationship, the karma theory implicit in the caste structure of India, Guru argues, "effectively arrests the growth of moral insights into the experience of humiliation. It leads the victims to adopt an attitude of resigned fate. The theory of karma, from the point of view of those who are reduced to servility, seeks to manipulate the servile into acknowledging their contemptuous and repulsive image as the part of a natural social arrangement." (*T*, 5). Guru's arguments bring our attention to the familial, social and national level of humiliation the Dalit subject

undergoes as a daily routine. However, Meghwanshi's life narrative offers us another crude picture of humiliation, that is, after being inducted into the *Shakha*, how he has become minuscule or otherwise, how his trajectory of thinking received the deep wounds. When the desire to become a *pracharak* was expressed to an ascetic, the taboo that he is from the "marginalized community" (I, 64) articulated by the ascetic, deeply hurts Meghwanshi. A fractured notion of identity emerges here when Meghwanshi writes: "I was devastated by his reply. I felt intense pain at having been born in a lower caste community. But how was this my fault? What a predicament for me - here I was, ready to sacrifice my life for the sacred work of the Sangh, but my caste over which I had no control was proving an obstacle" (I, 65). When caste becomes the marker of humiliation, it compels the subject to rearticulate the desire to be with the open public, though social constraints obstruct the person to do so. Meghwanshi's leaving the Ambedkar hostel was an attempt to redefine himself. When he writes, "My idols in those days were not Ambedkar, Phule, Kabir, Buddha. I hadn't even heard of them. I knew only Savarkar, Moonje, Tilak, Gokhale, Hedgewar and Guru-ji Golwalkar" (I, 70), we find the unconscious desire of the Dalit subject to identify with the upper caste ethos of RSS.

On what basis can one study such an unconscious subservience of the Dalit subject to the upper class ethos and claims? Was the subject in the life writing stooping before a series of perturbations here? The plaguing questions give us another side of humiliation. Theorizing humiliation of the Dalit subject, one finds it appropriate to place the subject contrary to one's own making up of realizing one's identity. Since humiliation is inextricably connected to one's identity, it is essential to know how layers of identity imposed by different castes structure one's feelings and aspirations. Meghwanshi tries to redeem his self-worth by participating in all rituals and programs of RSS. While it is a temporal question of existence that the Dalit subject suffers the humiliation internally by succumbing to the majoritarian discourse of the upper caste Hindutwa ideology, the internal tensions of the subject never extinguishes the levels of humiliation despite its trends of subservience. The strange dialectic between the self and the community emerges here. On the one hand, Meghwanshi's stepping into RSS shackles his community beliefs that a Dalit will find his own ways to overcome the upper caste oppression; and on the other hand, the recognition of the Dalit inside the overwhelming majority of Hindus from the upper caste that constitutes the virile body of RSS never provides him the status of being "equal" with them or one among them. In both contexts, Meghwanshi being a Dalit, is rejected. The narrow binary construct between the self and the community is predicated here on the level of recognition. However, the subject of humiliation – the subject in life writing, is breached against a set of internal contradictions. As his Dalit community has never ostracized him, he finds it a solace to return to them, though he has deep doubts about that. At the same time, to be with the upper caste people who wield power in the organization, a daunting Dalit subject fails miserably correct their fallacies and to propel the winds of change. This is the most pervasive moment in the text. In other words, this condition is more internally doubly humiliating for a subject in life narration, who is already "doubly marginalized". Such moments in the text, where Meghwanshi desires to narrate multiple subject positions, but fails in doing so, create complexities regarding analyzing the motif of the life writing with resistance and reflection.

The social stratification that galvanizes humiliation can be seen clearly in different contexts of Dalit labour. In some sense, Meghwanshi's initial blind adherence to the Sangh Parivar reflects the notion of Dalit labour required for building up a nation. V. Geetha observes that "Born to labour, Dalits cannot claim the rights of knowing; and being denied that right they cannot know of or escape their condition of being labourers. Brahmins on the other hand, are the natural custodians of learning, but the knowledge

they produces is like a fetish, a mysterious thing which escapes – and transmutes the labour, which is instrumental in creating the conditions of knowledge in the first place” (“Bereft of Being: The Humiliation of Untouchability”, 98). In the modus operandi of RSS also, we find the labour rendered by Dalits acting as the fulcrum in building up the organization. The sheer negligence of their labour produce intense conflicts in their minds and many of them feel outside the system in crucial times. This negligence is further complicated when their labour gets no recognition. The organization builds up the power centres by accumulating the strength and energy of several people from the lower strata of the Hindu society. In due time, all those who helped to bring forms of agitation, protests and violence will be forgotten. Meghwanshi’s experience with the *karsevaks* during the Babri Masjid demolition is the best example of the above. In other words, the dimensions of untouchability perceived by Ambedkar can be seen at work here. Though in post-independent India, untouchability is not officially practised, its repercussions can be seen in the lack of recognition of the labour of Dalits. Extending Ambedkar’s and V. Geetha’s arguments, one can clearly point out that the public humiliation of Dalits leave them back to their once upon time practiced untouchability. The invisible untouchability, which still exists everywhere in India, is the most dangerous trope of humiliation.

The exclusion of religions other than Hinduism and castes that are considered to be oppressive and ignorant mark the notion of virile Hindu. Hindu nationalists reinscribe virile masculinity in several ways: by propagating their ideas concerned with purity, exercises in the *shakhas*, the parallel army they create by making certain sections of the organization powerful and by pamphleteering and propaganda. The idea of “purity” imparted only to Hindus and Hindu culture is propagated through songs, broadcast through programmes and funded by agencies to collect the middle class and upper class people in temples. As the RSS literature has hardly anything to talk about various other movements, the lower class uprisings and subaltern eloquence; their attempt to homogenize the virile Hindus, who are capable of changing the course of the nation – both politically and structurally, is considered to be the greatest feat. Golwalker’s description of territorial nationalism may help us to realize the notion of “Hindu purity” in relation to the crucial identity questions of Dalits and other marginalized sections in India. Golwalker writes: “It is like attempting to create a novel animal by joining the head of a monkey and the legs of a bullock to the main body of the elephant! It can only result in a hideous corpse.... If at all some activity is seen in that body, it can only result in a hideous corpse” (*BT*, 197–98). Such an idea stresses the agenda that the nation with fixed ideology and group can survive. To have such a nation, one should ward off elements of oppression and destruction. Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, sexually deviant categories and all doubly marginalized classes and castes are an anomaly to the set agenda. Such an understanding in the post-Mandal times of India opens up a set of other discourses connected to life writing. The most important of them is the question of compatibility – that is, how does an educated Dalit or someone driven by Ambedkarite ideas restructure their identity. In such a situation, life narratives vehemently articulate the desire for resistance. Shame and humiliation, undergone by Dalits, transform here to create a distinct identity.

Becoming Animal

In the conventional sense of life writing, the self in narration translates experiences and transforms them to the reader’s understanding. In this process, the self in life writing sets up the agenda to invite the “other” to partake in their experiences. The empirical experiences the self-narrates, however deviant and different, can never be appropriated by the intended “other”, the readers of the life writing. Since narrating the self is a highly complex and largely unexplored process, and particularly in Dalit life narratives, it is easily confused

with rejection, humiliation and discrimination, it is crucial to understand at what levels the rejected self appears inhuman. One loses the notion of “human”, when one is intermittently subsumed to the level of the animal. The very idea that an undignified human being is worse than an animal which undergoes bad treatment, makes the narrating subject even worse in the act of narration. The famous Aristotelian distinction of man as the thinking animal emphasizes the fact we humans are animals, but what distinguishes us from the other animals, is our sense of perception and understanding. But the human becomes the animal once we shed the coat of dignity and self-respect. Meghwanshi’s text conceptualizes this idea more effectively and succinctly, perhaps more crucial than other Dalit life narratives.

Looking at how the human turns out to be the animal and how such a condition is internalized by the victim, Giorgio Agamben writes: “by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human [,].... That is, the animal separated within the human body itself. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form” (*Open*, 37). Agamben’s postulations find extremely noteworthy when we look at the life of the aspiring Dalit thwarted by upper castes in various organizations. Meghwanshi writes about the rejection of food by the upper caste members in the *shakha*, when a Dalit delivers the same to them. When Meghwanshi realizes that upper caste members in RSS will not eat food served at his own home, that moment of realization that he is a lower caste Dalit pain him more than anything: “I felt defeated in my own home. But I didn’t know by whom. My father had won, but it was the Sangh that had struck the blow. What would I tell father if he asked why they wouldn’t eat in our house?” (*I*, 83). Later, when Meghwanshi finds out how the food given from the family of a Dalit is splattered all over the road by the upper class in RSS, his humiliation combined with his identity deepens. The thrown away food by human is usually consumed by animals and birds. The street dogs, crows and parrots are all the takers of such leftovers and discarded things. The food of the Dalit, unconsumed and disrespected by others, in this context equates to the animal status; in other words, to the leftover food given to animals. This experience, where the lack of love and respect toward food served by a Dalit, marks the moment of equating his life with the animal. The life of a Dalit reveals at great length how a human being’s presumably independent and autonomous self continually discovers itself to be constituted in and through external differences and arrays of cultural power exerted by the upper castes. Such an understanding stutters his belief in others, particularly in those fellow Sanghis with whom Meghwanshi was working. However, this realization, more than humiliation and shame attached to it, reduces him irretrievably to the level of an animal life-savage, uncouth and uncivilized.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observe that “a becoming-animal involves a pack, a band, a population, peopling, in short, a multiplicity” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 260) and that “we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity” (*T*, 264). Extending the above argument, one can further point out that Meghwanshi’s gory realization at the Sangh that he is a Dalit, where the sense of double marginalization and resonances of untouchability are attached, claims for the need of a separate organization, that is, the need to get organized as a different mode of atomic expression. As Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out, the “becoming-animal” results from the encounter with the other, aspire a reshaping, a reorganizing of their potentialities. Such a recognition is a mode of resistance. Meghwanshi’s text encounters an interesting paradox here, while it is

doubtful that Dalits can articulate their desire to counter the majoritarian views about them by the upper class in RSS, they also assemble to claim their animal existence by strategic interventions and resistance posed against the hegemonic and monolithic Sangh ideology and practice. This inherent paradox is a platform, where the Dalit subject in life narrating is breaching against the public, where the readers both as the other and participants in the Dalit eloquence shudder at the thought of creation of a new public domain. The construction of such a Dalit self in life writing is, as Deleuze and Guattari state indicate; the notion that “becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is essentially becoming-minoritarian” (T, 320). The rejection of Dalits from the public platforms and the consequent denial of their identity – as reflected in the text, by showing disrespect to food, clothes and even accompanying them, make their “becoming-animal” state more vibrant for resistance. In other words, shame and humiliation make them more minoritarian. Deleuze and Guattari contend that “man is majoritarian par excellence” (320). The majoritarian and dominant caste operate the notion of purity of the nation, space and place by eradicating the impure, vulgar, and lower caste. Seen in this context, the expression of “becoming an animal” in Meghwanshi’s text is loaded with many potential possibilities. By attaining the status of “becoming an animal”, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas, one can say that Meghwanshi leaves the “pack” of the majoritarian discourse of the nation construction. The realization that he is a part of “becoming a minoritarian” makes him think of a separate space and place in life writing. A minoritarian, thus constituted, threatens the status of a homogenized concept of the Nation-State.

As the life narrative of Meghwanshi further unfolds, we find the inherent tension of this “becoming animal” status contradicting how the narrative is outlined. However, this is a narrative tension – the one that encompasses some kind of narrative justifiability as the text wants to make things understand in its way. Contradicting the textual desire of making things understand, we find deep-seated anxiety of anger thrust against the majoritarian discourse of the nation. One such challenge in the text is when Meghwanshi doubts the tale of Ramdev Pir, a sage appropriated by RSS. The doubt is centred on the methodology of the perpetuation of the story. The Dalit saint Pir was appropriated by the Sangh to denigrate him further relating to free sex. The declaration that he is “Kanchaliapanthi” and the sexual innuendos attached to certain practices create the awareness that the Dalit seer, whoever they are, can never bring equality in society. The constructed tale of Ramdev Pir, Meghwanshi contends, opposes his familiar version of folk tradition. By challenging the epistemology of the Hindu majoritarianism, Meghwanshi tries to resist the belief systems woven around Dalit seers, thinkers and workers. Exposing the term “Kanchaliapanthi”, Meghwanshi observes that “This derogatory term comes from the calumny that the followers of this sect practices sex as worship. It is believed that its members, husbands, and wives, went for worship after 11 pm, where, after bhajans and puja, the women’s bodes were placed in a pot (kanchali is the word in Rajasthani for bodice or breastcloth). The men were blindfolded, and whichever women’s bodice they picked from the pot, they had sex with her. Semen is the Prasad and this sexual intercourse was believed by the sect to be sacred and to bring about moksha, or liberation from the cycle of reincarnation’ (I, 141-42). Such types of sexual promiscuities, Meghwanshi observes, are against the rationale of women liberation and equality of women, the contemporary Dalit societies aim for. By challenging the created assumptions around a particular Dalit saint by the majoritarian Hindu sects, the text engages in a single action – that is, creation of a rationale where Dalits will come together and form a pack, which would produce a deterritorialization or a movement from majoritarian to minoritarian that is irreversible. As far as Dalits are surrounded by such created epistemologies of majoritarian discourse, however much they try, their liberation seems to be a distant dream. In other words, Meghwanshi’s

life narrative opens up a trajectory that contradicts the claims of “constructed Dalit lives”. This epistemological break, vibrant and virile, produces fissures in the Hindu belief systems. The text, therefore, offers a tension of the bestial existence of a Dalit—constructed by the upper-class echelons and internalized by the desire to form a member in the pack of herds that constitute the minority status.

Theorizing Lived Experience

Meghwanshi’s text takes us to a central debate pertinent in our time: Can we conceptualize life narratives only because they are “lived experiences”. The question of fiction, deeply lurking within the life narratives, has for some time equated these narratives with fiction. As the distinction between life and fiction is fragile and relative, a whole range of doubts centred on the life narratives is in circulation in contemporary times. As far as the Dalit life narratives are concerned, theorists and scholars are of the uniform opinion that significantly few fictional elements are empanelled in such narratives. How does one solve the tension between fiction and reality in life narratives is a question worth pondering. However, one central feature in Dalit life narratives is the thrust on “lived experience” more than constructed and imaginary experiences, which veer toward fiction. At the same time, the “lived experience” of the Dalits is also widely contested. Pain and suffering at various points of time constitute an essential feature on the ongoing struggles of Dalits against all systems of oppression.

In the debate between Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, we have some glimpses of such ideas. Elaborating the theoretical premises of Gopal Guru and M. N. Sreenivas, Sunder Sarukkai analyzes the “lived experience” and its influence in life writing. Sarukkai first gives a reply to Sreenivas’s idea of autobiography by saying, “fiction based on lived experiences could actually be seen as a legitimate mode of theorizing” (*Cracked Mirror*, 37). Furthermore, Sarukkai finds problems with the publicly acclaimed “lived experience” outlined by Guru as the kernel of life writing. Life writing, in any conditions, colludes with certain forms of fiction, and thus, it achieves the status of empirical cum imaginary attestation of the self. In the debate with Guru, Sarukkai also asks the question: “What is the nature of authorship between an individual and the theory she constructs?.... A person who experiences is not an author of that experience like a person who theorizes about that experience” (C, 38). Implicit in the question of Sarukkai lies the difficulty to claim that “lived experience” should be the judgment of Dalit life narratives. Such a philosophical stance problematizes specific theoretical grounds of Dalit writing. More than in any other form of writing, Dalit writing, especially Dalit life writing is regarded as authentic due to the “lived experience” of the subject. Such excruciating experiences can never be spotted in other life writings as the subjects in such narratives do not have accurate experience of shame, humiliation, torture and pain. The question of “lived experience” contradicts elements of fantasy or other forms of cognitive imperatives. At the same time, one never can be certain that all “lived experiences” are valid to our understanding. The tussle between the empirically encountered “lived experiences” of Dalits and the methodology of internalizing them by the readers constitute another paradox. This paradox is where one finds the authorship of Dalit life narratives. Taking a cue from Sarukkai’s idea that “we own our experience but not author them” (C, 38) is what makes Dalit “lived experience”, a matter of contestation.

We find the pattern of “lived experience” of Meghwanshi approximating the authorship when he starts writing articles criticizing the Sangh. The outbursts of anger explicit in his writings are the products of his troubled “lived experiences” and they, without any pretension, challenge the hegemony of RSS. We find the subject of life writing here establishing a definite identity after he was oscillating between the majoritarian belief

systems and caste-based obfuscations within his caste. As experience is empirically articulated, the "lived experience" has in it the pathos of one's deep questions of an inward search. It is shame and humiliation that make Dalits search their identity and origins. Such a realization springs in Meghwanshi's mind when he says "... Personally I think it is a waste of energy to fight for Dalit entry into any place of worship. The thirty-three crore gods and goddesses of Santana Hindu dharma have not done a thing for Dalits. Not a single deity's heart melted at our pathetic situation; not one said to his devotees, include these Dalits too, after all, they worship me as well" (*I*, 210). Such moments of realization mark the "lived experience" something more intricate and compelling in the life writing. Such moments of recognition mark the crucial moment of "others" to come forward to understand the life of a Dalit. Yet another instance is when Meghwanshi asserts, "No Dalit fears a bomb-hurling Taliban terrorist as much they fear the terror of Savarna Hindus" (*I*, 179). Invoking the tale of Sambhuka and Ekalavya from the epics, Meghwanshi translates his experience to the contemporary situation of Dalits, where they are forced to eat cow dung.

Theorizing "lived experience" also makes us aware of the sensory experiences – sometimes overtly hidden due to internalized shame and some other times publicly shown visibly. Aniket Jaaware categorically states: "The one substance that cannot ever be contaminated is, paradoxically, the dalit body. Being the agent of contamination, it cannot itself be contaminated by something else. It does not have the power to be contaminated. In contrast, with increasing gradations, the non-dalit bodies have the power to be contaminated and thus must fear the contact with the dalit bodies" (*Theorizing Caste*, 99). By illustrating the cause of fear generated in the minds of the non-Dalits, Jaaware tries to offer a discourse of the Dalit body based on sensory perceptions. Touch, smell, sight and even shadow in Jaaware's analysis, turn out to be the basic codes of segregation. The inviolable codes of chastity, hence, face threats and dangers as Dalits are at the root of all empirical and civilizational existence of humanity. Meghwanshi's life narrative asserts Jaaware's theorization of touching and non-touching as it dismantles the question of "I" from the romanticized and social notions prevalent in other life narratives. The "lived experience", as the text tries to indicate, is the complex mechanism of the lives of several Dalits, those who struggle hard every day in public domain for getting justice and equal rights.

Conclusion

Meghwanshi's text, as I have argued in this study, opens up a new rationale for questioning the existing questions concerned with Dalit life narratives. As most Dalit life narratives contain issues of caste oppression and resistance, the ideological sleight of hand in them is Dalit upsurge. The subject in such narratives is centred on the narrator who, in her/ his narration, attempts to articulate the paradigms of identity issues. However, in Meghwanshi's narrative, there are attempts to move beyond such constrained and pre-ordained features of Dalit lives. Such attempts are the outcome of Meghwanshi's breach with the RSS and other dominant caste issues in society. The breach with the dominant castes and the forceful becoming of the minoritarian, makes him an essential element of the "pack", organized to fight the majoritarian discourse in our time. At the same time, the subject in the life narrative, embraces several similar and dissimilar subjects, mainly from the society, to articulate the desire of freedom. The text, undoubtedly, complicates the life narrating subject and suffering subjects outside. The strange connection thus brought out between "I" in the text and others, offers the possibility to chart a different discourse of life narrative. By doing so, the text maps the Dalit resistance in the history of Indian life narratives.

The issues of humiliation, shame, differentiation and “lived experience”, I have suggested, imply the basic notations of the contemporary Dalit experience, which fight caste oppression and the establishment of One Nation. In Meghwanshi’s text, unlike in other Dalit life writings, “lived experience” encompasses specific pertinent issues of various other Dalit experiences, most of them in relation to the public sphere from where Dalits are successfully evaded. More than the spatio-temporal issues of the locales in Rajasthan, such incidents do tell us the conflicts of the Dalits by aligning themselves with the majoritarian groups. The RSS that operates with the endowed extraordinary power to subsume the interests of the lower castes in their organization, Meghwanshi’s text suggests, puts into question the diversity and plurality of the nation. Seen in this context, Meghwanshi’s text is intended to articulate a different voice of the oppressed, which would ultimately question the ethos of the nation. In other words, the relationship between the life writing and nation-making, is more a virile act, which questions and shatters the assumption of nation as a monolithic construct. Moreover, the text sharply challenges ideas such as purity, divinity and homogeneity as they are the operative mechanism of the elite upper class of the nation and as they never provide an opportunity of reflection for the lower caste people. Such attempts conflate the creation of the one supreme Nation-State against the many, where the doubly marginalized and the subalterns fail constantly to articulate their voice. Finally, Meghwanshi’s text progresses from the striated conception of a regular Dalit writing as it invites a plurality of reading and heterogeneous critique from all quarters of the society. Such a progression marks the moment of the life narrative’s engagement with knowing the “Other”, who are its readers despite their class and creed.

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