

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO BLACKS IN AMERICA & DALITS IN INDIA AND CRITICAL APPROACH FOR ANALYSIS

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain.”
- Kahlil Gibran

The chequered history of humankind has been marred by the unjust oppression of certain groups of people based on qualities both inherent and extraneous, such as race, caste, class, colour of skin, hair and eyes, hereditary occupation, religion and language. Minority groups have at all times and everywhere been marginalised and rendered voiceless and invisible by the dominant groups.

Caste and race are two different sociological constructs, even so they share a lot of similarities in practice. While race has political boundaries, caste has social boundaries. Whereas racially people are identified by phenotype criteria such as physical characteristics like skin colour, caste is related to one's descent and occupation, and based on the pollution-purity principle. Race is hereditary, based on the way people are born, but caste is man-made apparently having religious sanction. The caste system is comparatively of much older origin and is found in different forms in some Asian countries. Despite differences caste and race are both existential problems. Both have created groups of people who are stigmatised and discriminated against.

Race is based on colour of skin, and similarly, although it is argued that the word 'varna' in the *chaturvarna*, or the Hindu caste system in India,

does not refer to colour, yet Brahmins based on their lighter skin colour assert their Aryan descent by naming their organisations as *Arya Brahmin Samajam* and *Arya Vaisiya Samajam*, as Kancha Ilaiah points out; and the Dravidians are distinguishably dark-skinned and belong to the lower castes. (Hindu 21 Aug 2001)

W.E.B. Du Bois was not far from the truth when he wrote with great foresight in 1903 in his book, The Souls of Black Folk, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia, Africa, in America and the Islands of the Sea” (10). In estimating the worth of a person, the color of his skin, descent and occupation were of paramount importance, rather than his intrinsic worth as a human being based on qualities of the soul.

Due to several socio-political and economic factors, in recent times subalterns and marginalised people have gained centrality of interest. This phenomenon has made it conducive for the subalterns to speak candidly and in unambiguous terms about the gross injustices meted out to them by the dominant groups of people. The hegemony of race, caste, class and gender has become the focus of discussion and study in international and national fora. The World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, from 31 August to 7 September 2001, enlarged the question of race and racial discrimination to include work and descent-based discrimination, thus aligning caste with race.

The situation of the Blacks in America has often been compared with that of the Dalits in India. Slavery, segregation, untouchability, inequality,

invisibility, illiteracy, ignorance, forced labour, bonded labour and poverty are issues common to both the Dalits in India and the Blacks in America.

The practice of Untouchability in India, like the race and colour problem in the West, was based on the assumption that some people are superior to others on account of their birth. The Untouchables in India and the Slaves in America were considered the flotsam and jetsam of humanity. While today both Slavery and Untouchability are past history, evidences of these barbaric and uncivilised practices are still found in the myriad ways in which society continues to discriminate against, marginalise and even oppress these erstwhile Slaves and Untouchables.

Any enlightened human being cannot help being sensitive to the palpable problems of people who are relegated to the fringes of society. The perception that we share a common humanity and a common destiny would lead one to explore the causes for this pandemic problem and try to clean out the Augean stables of unjust social structures, restoring balance and harmony to society. This research is the outcome of such a concern for transforming oppressive structures of domination.

It was inspired by a series of documentary films titled "EYES ON THE PRIZE," which was screened at the American Consulate, Chennai, during the Black History Month in the year of the millennium 2000. Beginning with the Civil Rights Years, 1954 –1965, it presented the struggle of the African Americans in the United States for justice and equality. It highlighted the contributions of both simple people like Rosa Parks, a seamstress whose determined refusal to give up her seat in the bus to a white man led to the decree that "separate but equal" was unconstitutional, and also of the great

Black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., who followed the Gandhian principle of non-violence, and Malcolm X, who promoted "Black Power" in the 60's, as also the participation of the students in the Civil Rights Movement that added color and verve to it.

Watching these films was a moving experience, which led to forays into the history of these people and the sufferings they have endured through the ages. The similarity between the discrimination and oppression meted out to these African Americans in the United States and to the Dalits in India is all too obvious. Although the former is based on racial and the latter on caste distinction, the fact that both these people were treated as less than human, led the researcher to go deeper into this study by analysing the autobiographies of one writer representative of each group, in order to discover how their situations have impacted their lives, and to see how similar and how disparate are their experiences. The two writers chosen are women for apparent reasons.

An outline of the socio-historical and political background of the Blacks in America and the Dalits in India would illustrate the similarity in situation between both these people.

Richard Wright's essay, "I Chose Exile," describes the American Negro as "an American who is not accepted as an American, hence a kind of negative American." Historically, the advent of the Negro in America dates back to 1619 when the first batch of Africans arrived in Jamestown, involuntarily transported from across the Atlantic, in order to transform the English Colonies in the Newfoundland into a land of prosperity that was to become the United States of America. And so W.E.B. Du Bois poses the

rhetoric question in The Souls of the Black Folk in 1903, “Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed, we were there.” Then, how did it happen that these early inhabitants were degraded to the position of Slaves, to be bought and sold like cattle for the aggrandisement of the Master’s wealth and for the gratification of his biological needs? The cause for this of course was the colour of the skin – the race; it was indeed White versus Black. The frustration at the injustice of the whole situation is evident in Malcolm X’s exclamation, “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock, my brothers and sisters – Plymouth Rock landed on *us!*”

The misery experienced by the Slaves is poignantly narrated in the life story of Frederick Douglass and also of Booker T. Washington. Herschelle S. Challenger in the newsletter of the American Information Resource Center, Chennai, 2001, traces the history of the Blacks in America from the time they were brought as Slaves from Africa. The South being largely agrarian depended on the Negro slaves to work on the farms and the cotton plantations. But being industrial in the nineteenth century the North was opposed to the system of Slavery practised in the South. The pressure of the Abolitionist Movement in the North undermined slavery. Hence seven southern states (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas) threatened to secede from the Union. In order to preserve the Union, the Federal Government waged a war.

This Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865; and one of the important outcomes of this war was the abolition of Slavery through the “Proclamation of Emancipation” by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, and the passing of the XIII Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. Slaves were liberated by the

law but in reality their position only worsened now, with no means of livelihood, no training to equip them for it and surrounded by hostility and racism, and to cap it all with no help from the Government. The assassination of President Lincoln, just two days after the Civil War had ended, heightened tensions not only between the North and the South, but also between the Republican dominated Congress and the new President, Andrew Johnson, who was a Democrat.

The situation worsened, and by 1866 the southern states passed the so called Black Code by which the ex-slaves were disenfranchised and only allowed to work as agriculture labourers or domestic workers. The emancipated Slaves had the unwelcome prospect of having to work for their former masters for a wage, which was no more than a pittance. Being illiterate and unskilled they could not look for employment elsewhere. It is in this scenario that Booker T. Washington's foresight helped to found the Tuskegee School to provide technical training to these emancipated Slaves in order to improve their economic status.

It was only in March 1867 that Congress passed the first Reconstruction Act guaranteeing civil and voting rights to the Negroes. In the southern states of Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana, Black voters outnumbered White; and many Negroes were even elected to local and congressional offices. But the southern States strongly resisted the sharing of power with Negroes. Mississippi, Texas and Virginia did not allow any Negroes to be elected until forced to in 1870. The success of the Negroes did not last long as White Conservatives reclaimed political control of the State Governments between 1869 and 1877 in Tennessee,

Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia; and between 1874 and 1875 in Alabama, Arkansas and Mississippi. Consequently, the elected Negroes were not only removed from office, but they were also subjected to restrictive measures and violence.

World War II marked a turning point in the lives of the Negroes. The Atlantic Charter, enunciated by Churchill and Roosevelt, spoke of the right to self-determination; and the United Nations Trusteeship influenced by the Negro Ralph Bunche, provided a platform for dependent peoples to articulate their grievances. In 1954 the Supreme Court passed the verdict, in the Brown versus the Board of Education case, declaring that segregation in public schools in America was legally wrong.

It was in the following year that Rosa Park's refusal to yield her seat to a White man instigated the Montgomery Bus Boycott in which four national organisations played an active role. They were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), all of whom set aside their rivalry and joined together for a common cause. Public sympathy for the Negroes demanding equality was won by newspaper articles with photographs, and television coverage of the peaceful protesters being brutally attacked by the Whites. "We Shall Overcome" became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, and it began to be used by peoples all over the world who were struggling for freedom and justice.

The Black Power Movement launched by Stockely Carmichael of Alabama in 1965 encouraged the Blacks to identify themselves with their

roots in Africa. Some of them even changed their names and took on African names, wore *dashikis*, and created a spate of angry literature instigating action. They also started clamouring for a separate State for Blacks in America. The pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., emerged as the spokesman and the towering charismatic leader of the Civil Rights Movement. It was his dauntless courage, his remarkable oratory, and his extraordinary modesty that endeared King Jr. to both Blacks and Whites of good will. He was asked to head the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) that coordinated the bus boycott and other civil rights activities. King's commitment to the cause and his dynamic leadership inspired the civil rights activists to be disciplined and use only moral persuasion and economic pressure like Gandhi's struggle for independence in India.

One very extraordinary phase of the Civil Rights Movement began with four Black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina. On February 1, 1960, these four young men sat in at a Woolworth lunch counter for four hours, protesting the practice of the "White Only" policy of this chain of national stores. This simple daring act of four students grew into a massive demonstration involving 50,000 people who participated in 'sit-ins' at lunch counters, stores and movie theatres, 'wade-ins' at pools and 'kneel-ins' at churches in nearly 100 cities demanding voting right for Blacks and also desegregation of schools and public places. Although these student demonstrations strictly followed the Gandhian principle of non-violent resistance, the protesters were attacked with both verbal and physical force.

A document titled "An Appeal for Human Rights", giving statistics of cases of racial inequalities, was published by the students as a paid advertisement in the Atlanta Constitution and other newspapers on March 9, 1960, under the inspiration of President Rufus Clement of Atlanta University, who encouraged them to work for legal action. Many students willingly courted arrest. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was also invited to join the 'sit-in,' and he even went to jail with the students. In spite of being heckled, spat upon and even whipped, the demonstrators and picketers continued their struggle perseveringly and courageously.

'Freedom Rides' were started in 1947 in order to test whether the Supreme Court decision to end discrimination in inter-state travel was in fact being implemented. It was resorted to once again in 1961 in Washington DC when the Supreme Court extended desegregation from carriers to the passenger terminals in a particular case. There were thirteen participants, seven of them Black and six White. The group divided itself into two; one of them taking the Greyhound and the other the Tramway bus, and they left Washington DC to New Orleans through the southern states. The Whites of Alabama and Mississippi reacted very violently to this, and it resulted in military action. That summer 300 Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, and some of them spent 49 days in the notorious Parchment Jail.

The Black Power Movement gave rise to the Black Panther Party. Seeing that King and non-violence were achieving nothing, Malcolm X spearheaded militant activism. He converted to Islam because he felt that Christianity was only deceiving the Blacks by teaching them docility and blunting their militant spirit. Malcolm X even changed his name to El-Hajj

Malik El-Shabazz to symbolise his new identity, because he said that after the illumination at Mecca he felt "like a complete human being" for the first time, thus giving credit to the Muslim religion that he had adopted which did not discriminate people based on colour of skin. But Malcolm X was finally assassinated in the late sixties. (Eakin 188)

Pained by the toll of violence and searching for a new approach to the struggle, in 1966 Martin Luther King Jr. began to concentrate on economic justice. He denounced the war in Vietnam and colonisation in Africa. In Chicago he provoked greater hatred and opposition than in the South. It was while he was campaigning for the poor people in Memphis that King was assassinated in March 1968.

The Blacks lost many lives and much property before the March on Washington in 1963. About 100,000 people participated in it, and finally the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

But a decade or two later there was a reversal of fortune for the Blacks. Racism was practised blatantly and much of what had been gained in the late sixties and early seventies was lost. Affirmative action programmes relating to jobs and university admissions were discontinued both in the private and public sector. Today although Blacks form only thirteen percent of the population of America, fifty percent of those in prison are Blacks. Police brutality against the Blacks has reached a peak. Crimes provoked by hatred are also escalating. Many Black children are born to single mothers, which increases poverty among the Black community.

Despite the fact that the Blacks in America have gained much by collective bargaining, much remains to be done. As a Black preacher from

the Deep South is said to have remarked once, "We ain't where we wanna be, we ain't where we gonna be, but thank God, we ain't where we were" (Challener 2-11). And Martin Luther King's "dream" remains largely an unfulfilled dream. At the Lincoln Memorial on August 26, 2000, the son of Martin Luther King Jr. brought up his father's call to America's conscience and said, "I dare you to fulfill the dream;" and on that day the Black Panthers took out a "Redeem the Dream" rally.

Name-giving has always been indicative of power on the part of the one who gives the name, and a sign of submission on the part of the one to whom the name is given. The Africans who were brought from across the Atlantic to work in Newfoundland were Slaves. They were contemptuously called "Niggers" or "Negroes" because of their skin colour. The Black Power Movement helped these people to take pride in their black skin, and they even began bragging about their blackness with the slogan "Black is beautiful". Later going back to their roots in Africa they opted for the new identity of "Afro-American." After some time, finding that even that was not very appropriate they preferred "African American" as it specified the dual reality of their place of origin as well as their land of birth. But in this study I have deliberately chosen to refer to them as "Blacks" as it better denotes their race, which is brought into comparison with the caste of the Indian Dalits.

As for the Dalits in India, they were formerly known as the "Untouchables" based on the pollution-purity principle of the Hindus. They were also called "Outcastes" as they were not included in the framework of the *chaturvarna* or caste system. Gandhi, the father of the nation, gave them the name "*Harijans*" (God's people), but they rejected it as they found it

patronising. They took on the new title of “Dalit” which they felt better described the reality. The word “dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root “dal” which means, “Crushed, broken, torn, split, destroyed, dispersed.”

The *chaturvarna* is the hierarchy of four ‘*varnas*’ or castes in the Hindu social order. Incidentally one of the meanings of ‘*varna*’ is colour. It is given a different explanation by V. Ramanathan: “the white, red, yellow and dark (colour) of ‘*varna dharma*’ have nothing to do with the colour of the skin, but are symbolic of work and attitudes prescribed for the four castes.” According to this theory, the red symbolises the bloodshed in war and stands for the *Kshatriya*, the warrior or ruling caste. Yellow the colour of gold stands for the wealth of the trader, the *Vaisya*. The purity and spirituality, which is supposed to be the way of life of the priestly caste – the Brahmin – is represented by white. And the dark colour symbolises the *Shudra* who is denied access to knowledge. (Hindu Sept. 25, 2001)

Later there developed a so-called “fifth” *varna* which referred to the Untouchables. In the South, the name given is “*Panchami*” or fifth color, to denote those below the four *Vedas* in the *Varnashrama* system. They were also called the *Ati-Shudras* (extreme *Shudras*) *Avarnas* (outside the *varna* scheme) and *Antyajas* (the last-born). Another name given is *Achchutas* (the Untouchables), because it was closely related to the Hindu principle of pollution and purity and the belief in reincarnation and *Karma*. The Hindi word “*jati*” is used to denote caste, which is etymologically derived from the Portuguese word “*casta*.” The Portuguese used this word to describe all the social stratifications they found among the Indians in the fifteenth century.

The caste system as it is practiced in India is a unique phenomenon in the societies of the world. The origin of this caste system in India is shrouded in mystery, controversy and polemics. Suffice it to say, that this pandemic problem of caste evolved, from both the culture of the Aryan invaders and that of the indigenous conquered peoples. Hinduism gave sanction to this specious theory and the Manusmriti prescribed its practice. Thus caste membership came to be fixed rigidly with the Brahmin at the apex of the pyramid. The Banias or the rich merchants along with the Brahmins reinforced the indestructible social structure as they benefited most from it. Those who soiled their own hands in order to purify everything for others in society were ironically denounced as ritually impure.

The Bhakti Movement that flourished between the tenth and thirteenth centuries to popularise Hinduism on the continent included some Dalit saints too who opposed caste distinctions and asserted equality before God. The Bhakti songs taught the low castes and the *achchutas* the doctrine of spiritual salvation through *bhakti* or devotion and humility (Shah 198).

In the days of colonialism, the British favoured the Brahmins as they were the most educated and could help them in the administration of this vast country with diverse languages and cultures. The White masters were indifferent to the caste system and even welcomed the outcastes into the Christian religion. As Christianity preached a religion of love and justice many of the lower caste Indians embraced Christianity hoping to enjoy equality and respectability.

In the twentieth century, Gandhi, an ardent champion for the removal of untouchability, deplored this unjust practice saying "I regard Untouchability

as the greatest blot on Hinduism.” He called the Untouchable “*Harijan*” or ‘man of God (Hari),’ who he says, “has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we *Durjana* (men of evil) may live in comfort and cleanliness” (Gandhi 245). But this term ‘Harijan’ was rejected because of its religious connotations and also because it smattered of a patronising attitude by the Upper Castes. The term ‘Dalit’ was first used by Jyotibhai Phule in the nineteenth century, and later popularised by none other than Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and the man regarded as the saviour of these downtrodden people. It gained popularity and literary currency in the 1960s through the works of the Marathi writers. Today the word “Dalit” has acquired a wider connotation to include *all* the oppressed and exploited sections of society (Shah 22).

Besides working as labourers or cultivators, many of the Dalits, but not all, were traditionally bound by certain caste occupations such as scavenging which was part of the '*jajmani*' system of the past (Shah 196). This system was a form of serfdom more akin to slavery. The *jajmani* system was originally a concomitant distributive system that evolved in an agricultural background. By this every group in the village was given a share of the agricultural produce. It was, of course not an equitable distribution, nevertheless nobody was left out. In fact it was a cooperative system in which each group was mutually interdependent and there was decentralisation of power through caste councils functioning in a democratic atmosphere. These caste councils also functioned to protect the people from governmental tyranny. (Hindu 25 Sept 2001). But through the passage of time this *jajmani* system degenerated into exploitative machinery with the

lower castes, especially the Dalits, becoming unjustly and mercilessly victimised by the Upper Castes.

In the South, E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, fondly called "*Periyar*" (Elder), began the Self-Respect Movement among the Dravidians to fight Brahmanical hegemony. He opposed the Hindu Brahmanical notion of "*Rama Rajya*" with the notion of "*Dravida Rajya*" or "*Ravana Rajya*" (Ilaiah 109). He was acknowledged as the Dalit ideologue in Tamil Nadu.

During India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule, many of the leaders imagined that once political independence was achieved all other problems would automatically sort themselves out. But Dr. Ambedkar insisted right from the start that Hinduism should be redefined and that the place of other religions in the country should be made clear. He was certain that the gnawing issue of caste had to be first of all resolved. He was convinced that the Hindu *chaturvarna* system, and the debilitating practice of untouchability, had to be completely eradicated. But he was wary about the unity of the lower castes to fight against the system. So while some Dalit leaders were clamouring for rights such as admission into schools, walking on public roads, entry into temples, and also dressing like caste Hindus, Dr. Ambedkar demanded for the Dalits a separate electorate, reservation of seats in Legislative Councils and in local bodies, and reservation of posts in the Government.

Gandhi, and M.C. Rajah of Tamil Nadu, opposed a separate electorate for the Dalits fearing it would destroy the unity of the Hindu society. After two inconclusive Round Table Conferences, Ambedkar was forced to give up his demand. But Gandhi for his part generously allocated 148 seats

reserved in Parliament for the 'Depressed Classes' for a period of ten years, in the famous Poona Pact of 1932. It became an Act in 1935, guaranteeing reservation for the Scheduled Castes in various legislatures and also forbidding discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and race. This had a great impact on the framing of the Indian Constitution (Shah 33).

In Independent India the category 'Dalit' in administrative parlance includes Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) identified by the President of India according to Article 341 of the Indian Constitution and put under a Schedule (Shah 17-18). According to the 1991 Census of India, Dalits, (SCs) form 16.48 percent of the population of the country. Almost 82 percent of them live in the villages. Their literacy rate is 37.41 percent as compared to 52.2 percent in the whole of India. Over 75 percent of the Dalits are engaged in agriculture as against 60 percent of the non-Dalits. Of these 45.4 percent are agricultural labourers and only 23.6 percent are cultivators who own less than 1 acre of land each. However a small section of these, less than 5 percent, fall into the category of 'big' or 'rich' farmers.

The Dalits in India are not homogeneous, but are further divided into 400 *jatis* or sub-castes and are spread over many States in India. They are found in larger numbers in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the North, West Bengal in the East, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the South, and Rajasthan and Maharashtra in the West of India (Shah 18).

The Indian Constitution provides "reservation" in educational institutions and in jobs to these Dalits hoping to reverse the injustice done to them through the centuries. This affirmative discrimination favouring Dalits is

a phenomenon that is similar to what is known as “reverse discrimination” favouring the Blacks in America. Yet in India even after more than fifty years of Independence there has been no amelioration in the lives of these Dalits. This is because what is enshrined in the Constitution has not been translated into affirmative action. In fact election to the village panchayats has been reduced to a mockery. The elected representatives are merely puppets in the hands of the dominant castes, and atrocities against Dalits in villages continue unabated.

There are several safeguards in the Indian Constitution including the ‘SC and ST Prevention of Atrocities Act’. Yet recently, ‘The Hindu’ reported that out of 1,47,000 cases a meager 1.14 percent have resulted in convictions and 19.9 percent resulted in acquittals! Furthermore ‘The Times of India’ reports that over 50 cases of atrocities against Dalits are reported daily. Of course many more go unreported, as the police are unwilling to register a complaint against upper caste people for fear of jeopardizing their own positions, or the victims themselves are afraid to report such crimes for fear of repercussions. Three Dalit women are raped and six disabled every day. Five cases of riots against Dalits and their families are reported daily, while two cases of arson take place against Dalits everyday. The latest statistics reported by ‘The Hindu’ on 20 July 2004 show that crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are steadily increasing. In 1998 it was 7,445, and in 2002 it is 33,507!

Some of the crude and blatant forms of oppression and discrimination in public have been reduced though, due to socio-economic factors such as capitalist economy, technological advancement and mass media. Yet it is not

surprising to come across sporadic cases of Dalit women being stripped naked and made to parade in public, or of Dalits being made to even eat human excreta! Most of the upper caste people who still hold on to their old prejudices do so because of vested interests and not on principle.

Globalisation and a liberal economy have ensured upward mobility for only certain of the Dalits. The benefits of State economic reforms do not percolate to the grassroots. Many OBCs have grabbed many of the benefits (reservations in educational institutions and government jobs) for themselves; thus creating a middle class among the Dalits, who dissociate themselves from their roots and do not work for the upliftment of other Dalits. Because of the stigma attached, most of the educated SCs who acquire white-collar jobs try to hide their caste identity. They change their personal and family names. They adopt the dress and life style of the Hindu upper caste people. But they prefer to hold on to their caste identity only in order to enjoy the benefits of reservation and for purposes of collective bargaining.

Inspired by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and the Black Panthers in America (1968), Dalit activists, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal and J.V.Pawar launched the Dalit Panther Movement in India in 1972. Raja Dhale's article "*Kala Swatantriya Din*" (Black Independence Day) published in August 1972 became controversial and with it the word 'Dalit' came into vogue. (Shah 209)

Of late Dalits have become more politically conscious of their rights. Non-Dalit writers, such as Munshi, Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand, initially fostered this radical consciousness, but now there has emerged a new Dalit voice and Dalits themselves have begun writing and revolting against the various forms of injustices meted out to them. They have realised that self-

help is the only way to achieve social transformation. Following the clarion call of Dr. Ambedkar “to educate, organise and agitate,” they have begun to strive towards greater unity and to organise collective action. They have debunked some of the myths of Brahmanical ideology. They have also begun to evolve a new ideology of their own in order to bring about an egalitarian society.

This sharpening of political consciousness among the Dalits is borne out by the voting percentage of the SCs, which has steadily increased. In a survey conducted by Pushpendra after the General Elections of 1996, the SC voter turn out was 89.2 percent as against the national average of 87.3 percent and a corresponding figure of 85.6 percent in the case of upper castes. This trend was repeated in the elections conducted in 1998, 93 percent of the SCs voted while only 91.9 of the upper castes voted. These figures belie the popular notion that most SCs refrain from voting because of ignorance about elections or due to fear of violence. The possible reasons for this active participation of the SCs in the election process are education, awareness of rights, realisation of the stakes in the outcome of the election, and the lowering of the voter age from 21 to 18 drawing in the enthusiastic youth into the election process. All these factors have contributed their share to making the exercise of casting votes, an issue of social status for Dalits.

(Pushpendra 317)

Despite discernible progress in educational, economical and political spheres, the social scourge of the Dalit stigma remains nevertheless indelible. There are several subtle ways in which the self worth of the Dalit is constantly being challenged and eroded. Popular media like the cinema and television

contribute much towards this by constantly portraying Dalits and their culture and traditions as vulgar, uncivilised, shameful and even criminal. This degradation of Dalit culture makes Dalit youth join the 'rat race' and emulate mainstream values such as materialism, consumerism, greed and selfishness. Sanskritisation, saffronisation and the engineering of partisan hegemonic representation of history in textbooks and curricular in the academic field have each contributed their share to ensuring stasis in the power structures of society.

Superimposed on the discrimination based on race and caste is the gender bias. Dalit women in India, like the Black women in America, were largely made invisible in the cultural landscape of the country. The systematic rape of Dalit women and the perpetration of forced prostitution in the name of religion through the *Devadasi* system have reduced the Dalit women to the state of an object meant for the gratification of the sexual and rapacious needs of Upper Caste men.

The Dalit writer chosen for this study being a Catholic whose life story is interwoven with the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu as she had entered a religious order, it would be appropriate, at this juncture, to examine the status of the Indian Catholics who form a miniscule of the billion plus population of this country. India is a land of religious pluralism where the vast majority are Hindus. Other religions found in India are Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism.

Of the estimated 20 million Christians in India nearly 70 percent, that is about 14 million, are Dalits. In India, conversions to Christianity took place in different castes between 400 and 100 years ago. Conversion to

Christianity almost ceased after Independence (Lobo 247). In Tamil Nadu, as Dr. Nandi Joseph points out in his speech "Dalit Reality of the Indian Catholic Church," it is mostly the Pariah's who converted to Christianity. In the Catholic Church over 80 percent are Dalits. Dalit Catholics suffer discrimination and oppression within the church as well. These Dalits, like Dr. Ambedkar and those who converted to Buddhism in 1956, and those who converted to Islam in Meenakshipuram in 1981, all gave up Hinduism and embraced a new religion (Christianity, Buddhism or Islam), with the hope of liberating themselves from the pernicious practice of the caste system.

Unfortunately, although Christianity preaches an egalitarian society, the reality is very different. The Christian Dalits are segregated in churches, not allowed to actively participate in the liturgy and in parish councils. Dalit priests also suffer discrimination. It is only recently that Dalit priests have been raised to the position of bishops and Archbishops. In many cases this was the result of struggles by the Dalit community. In several dioceses the upper caste priests whip up partisan feelings in order to perpetrate caste discrimination within the church. Although 70 percent of the total Christian population in India is of SC origin, there are only 3 percent of Dalit Catholic priests in the church of Tamil Nadu (Lobo 247). According to recent statistics of the 17 Catholic bishops in Tamil Nadu 14 belong to the Upper Castes. The appointment of the first Dalit Catholic Bishop in 1972 was the result of the agitation of Dalit Catholics. The upper caste clergy, who monopolise all privileges and positions in the diocese, administer the rich city churches and shrines. The Dalit priests are normally posted in poor rural areas. Thus discrimination against Dalit Catholics has been institutionalised.

The Catholic Church has only offered a pietistic, ritualistic and cultic Christianity to its Dalits and taught them to pray to God and be humble and docile. This only diminishes their militant spirit and discourages them from fighting for their rights. The religious Congregations of Priests and Sisters also reflect the unjust discrimination of secular society. Most of these Congregations are highly structured societies rigidly following their own Constitutions. Those founded by foreign missionaries who were men and women of vision desiring to serve the poor and the downtrodden, and those that are local, all seem to have lost the initial zeal and have become materialistic in their outlook.

The Jesuits of the Madurai Province (Tamil Nadu) are one of the few who have a policy of 'a preferential option for the poor'. Consequently they have allocated 25 percent of seats in their institutions for the Dalits. Far from this concern for the poor Dalits, the religious Sisters, by and large, not only cater to the needs of the upper castes and wealthier people, but they also display scant regard for the Dalits in their institutions. In the Convents, the Religious Sisters who are Dalits have been marginalised, deprived of opportunities to improve themselves and often assigned menial jobs in the community. Religious Priests have fared a little better than the Sisters, but they too have not found the path to success smooth.

As for the political situation, Gail Omvedt points out that politically the Blacks and Dalits are excluded from representation in parliament by the practice of the FPTP electoral system (first-past-the-post or winner-take-all), in which the winner is the one who gets the largest number of votes in a territorial electorate with a vast majority and a small minority. This ensures

that minority social groups like Dalits in India and African Americans in the United States are totally shut out from the power structure. Other countries practise the PR (proportional representation), which would ensure proportionate representation for the minority social groups, and protect them from the tyranny of the majority in politics (Hindu 23 Aug 2001).

In the United States African Americans form thirteen percent and have just seven percent of seats in the Congress. As for the Dalits in India, the lack of representation takes on a different form. Dalits have a percentage of MPs (Members of Parliament) equivalent to their proportion of the population, but as Dr. Satinath Choudhary argues, this is not a true representation because the upper caste majority, whose ideologies are different from those of the Dalits themselves, chooses these representatives. And so this representative in Dr. Ambedkar's words, "instead of being a champion of the minority is really a slave of the majority." (Ambedkar 347)

The Ku Klux Klan in America and the Hindu fundamentalists such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal in India, violently oppose the eradication of social evils such as discrimination based on race and caste. The Black Panthers and the Dalit Panthers alike wage an unceasing epic battle to rid the nation of this social leprosy and to establish a new egalitarian society.

In modern times it has been seen that social mobility is possible only for individuals and not for the group (race or caste). This is borne out by the fact that only a few Dalits in India have succeeded in reaching the topmost echelons of society; like the former President, K.R. Narayanan, the first Dalit to hold this high position in the nation, and Mayawati, the first Dalit Chief

Minister of one of the States in India. Even when the Dalits become educated and acquire wealth and respectability in society, the stigma of dalithood remains with them until their death and even after. The anthropologist, Gerald Berreman spoke against the “sentence” which birth deals out to a Dalit “for life.” William Ward commenting on the caste system in India says, “(it) has operated like the Chinese national shoe; it has rendered the whole nation cripples.” Despite the policy of protective discrimination the vast majority of Dalits are still grovelling in illiteracy, poverty and oppression, while the Brahmins continue to dominate the power structures.

In America at least everyone has fairly equal opportunities for education and occupation and so success and upward mobility is not such a pipe dream as it is for the Dalit in India. Although the Blacks do suffer severe discrimination and exclusion, there is at least no feudal social structure in America according to several sociologists and anthropologists such as Riesman, Williams, Whyte, Moore. Besides Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, and Condoleeza Rice, the National Security Adviser, there are quite a few Blacks who have made a mark not only in art and sports but also in the corporate world. The fact that more of Blacks in America than Dalits in India have climbed the social ladder is perhaps due to greater opportunities being available for most people in America for economic development and self-realisation.

The choice of writers for this study is not arbitrary but has been influenced by three major factors. Maya Angelou and Bama have been chosen as representative of African American women and Dalit women respectively. First of all they have both suffered “double jeopardy” being

exploited and oppressed by Whites/Upper Castes and also by their own Black/ Dalit men. Secondly they are both women who have experienced oppression also from their own womankind, namely White women and Caste women. Lastly, both Maya Angelou and Bama are popular as autobiographers; although Angelou has varied achievements to her credit – she has published several collections of poems, performed as a singer and dancer, composed music, and written, directed and acted in plays and films; and Bama too has published a collection of short stories and also a novel. Both of them are living writers who have published serial autobiographies (Maya Angelou six volumes, and Bama two); and they both shot into fame with their very first book.

The argument of this thesis is that both Dalits in India and Blacks in America have come a long way in self-realisation and self-fulfillment and have now reached a stage when they feel proud of their selfhood. The Dalits celebrate their dalithood and the Blacks their blackhood. Of course this does not mean that they are fully content with their lot as marginalised people carrying the stigma of their caste/race and class wherever they go and despite all the success they achieve. My argument is based on the premise that both Black and Dalit literatures in the beginning were definitely 'protest literature', expressing anger, frustration and impotent rage at the social injustices these people had to suffer. Then after some time they evolved into a 'literature of affirmation', asserting against all odds, the identity and selfhood of the writers. And now, both black literature and dalit literature have progressed into a 'literature of celebration' in which the writers exhibit a certain sense of pride in the fact that they are Blacks or Dalits. It is this mood

of celebration that is the focus of this study, which compares the six volumes of the serial autobiography of Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart of a Woman, All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes and A Song Flung Up to Heaven; with the two volumes of Bama's autobiography, Karruku and Sangathi.

Now for a brief outline of the critical theories used as interpretive tools in this study. As the texts under consideration are autobiographies, the traditional historical-biographical approach cannot be ignored. For this approach the nineteenth century French critic H. A. Taine's yardstick "*race, milieu, et moment*" is of paramount importance. (Guerin et al 22)

Since discrimination of peoples is based chiefly on material prosperity or rather the lack of it, this study will adopt a Marxist approach to criticism. Marxism lays stress on material living conditions for the well being of human beings. Marx used an architectural metaphor to describe this – the 'superstructure' (ideology, law, politics) stands on the 'base' (socio-economic relations). According to Marx, the economic structure or 'base' of society is the capitalist class, which owns the means of production, and the proletarian class, whose labour power is appropriated and exploited by the non-producing sections of society. The essential function of the 'superstructure' is to legitimise the power of the social class, which owns the means of material production. Understanding literature therefore means understanding the total social process of which it forms a part. Art cannot be produced in an ideological vacuum; hence for Marxism an ideological concept of the world is

an integral part of any work of art, and 'canons of great literature are socially generated' (Seldon and Widdowson 72).

Individual psychology is seen as a social product based on the relations between classes of people and the modes of production. Marxism, according to Terry Eagleton questions "the withered values of liberal bourgeois society" (Eagleton 8). Hence, Marxist criticism is committed criticism, which is unapologetically personal and focuses on *matter* rather than *manner*.

While most traditional Marxists not only ignored the form of literary works, the Hungarian critic, Goerg Lukács follows the Marxist tradition, borrowed from Hegel, of the 'dialectic' view of history. According to Lukács's defense of realism, the writer by presenting the whole complexity of life reveals the underlying pattern of contradictions and tensions of social existence. Lukács was interested in the 'sociology of literature'. Lukács sees all great art as a dialectical drawing together in order to combat the fragmentation and alienation caused by capitalist society. The writer depicts in microcosm the rich many-sided image of human wholeness. He thus finds all art to be socially progressive, in that the author, whatever be his political affinity, realises the vital 'world-historical forces of an epoch' which make for change and growth. (Eagleton 27-29)

Lucien Goldmann, the Rumanian disciple of Lukács, based in France, stresses the need for the text to completely and coherently articulate the 'world vision' of the social classes in response to the changing reality before them. This distinct variety of Marxist literary and cultural analysis he calls 'genetic structuralism'. Eric Auerbach, an exile from Hitler's Germany who

later moved to America, endorses Lukács's concept of realism. He considers the artist as a link between the individual's life and the social and historical forces that shape his behaviour. This modern realism gives the work of art a 'totalising' view.

Louis Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher and theorist, states that although a literary work forms a part of an ideological structure, it transforms it and distances itself from it. He talks of the 'social formation', which he sees as a structure in which the various levels exist in complex relations of inner contradiction and mutual conflict.

Pierre Mackerey is more interested in what the text leaves unsaid rather than in what it says. He finds the silences of a text significant. It is these silences, which the critic must make 'speak'. Like a psychologist, the critic must attend to the text's 'unconscious' or its lapses and omissions. Unlike Goldman who finds a central structure in the work, Mackerey finds no central essence, only a continuous conflict and disparity of meanings. It is the critic's task to find out the principle that lies behind the conflict of meanings. (Eagleton 33-36)

Stephen Greenblatt, a key figure in the rise of the New Historicism, believed in "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." Corresponding to New Historicism in America, is Raymond Williams' Cultural Materialism in the British tradition of Marxist cultural analysis sees culture more as a battlefield with its struggles, tensions and contradictions. Williams stressed "the co-occurrence of subordinate, residual, emergent, alternative, and oppositional cultural forces alongside the dominant, in varying relations of

incorporation, negotiation and resistance.” For Cultural Materialism what is important is not the text, but the birth and life of the text in culture and history.

As both these writers, Maya Angelou and Bama, are Christians, Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed is also an appropriate tool for analysis. Freire insists that in order that the struggle of the oppressed to regain their humanity be meaningful, they should liberate themselves and their oppressors and thus restore the humanity of both.

Feminism is one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. Feminist critics aim at exposing patriarchal premises and prejudices and challenging the exclusion of women from the literary canon. Lillian Robinson calls feminist criticism as “criticism with a cause” or “engaged criticism.” (Guerin et al 202)

The two writers chosen for this study being women, the Feminist approach would inevitably be one of the approaches adopted for analysis. The year of publication of Maya Angelou’s first autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, 1970, also saw the publication of the French feminist theorist Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own, which established ‘Gynocriticism’ – a complete change in women’s experience and women’s writing.

Showalter divides the literary history of women writers into three periods. The first is the ‘feminine’ phase (1840-1880), when women writers imitated and internalised the dominant male aesthetic standards and its assumptions about female nature. The second phase is the ‘feminist’ phase (1880-1920), when women were enfranchised and so enabled to reject the accommodating attitude of femininity. They now protested against male

values and redefined the woman artist's role in terms of responsibility to suffering sisters. In the third or 'female' phase (1920 onward) women reject both imitation and protest as forms of dependency, and encourage autonomous art as expression of the female experience of self-discovery. Showalter also draws a distinction between the different types of feminist criticism in different nations: "English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism essentially textual, stresses expression." (Showalter 186)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Feminism developed in Western Europe and the United States of America as a socio-political movement, which led to several permanent changes in the developed countries and also affected developing countries like India. A conscious struggle to challenge patriarchal culture and establish gender parity has established Feminism more as cultural politics. Virginia Woolf criticised the nineteenth century ideology of womanhood: 'the Angel in the House' (Coventry Patmore's condescending term), and the taboo about expressing female passion.

Breaking out of the tradition of the patriarchal construct of femininity and negating male approval and validation, several women writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Cora Kaplan constructed a female framework for the analysis of women's literature. Beauvoir's work, The Second Sex, distinguishes between sex and gender, between being female and being constructed as a woman. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," says Beauvoir. Some radical Feminists even go so far as to

celebrate women's biological attributes as proof of their superiority over men. Dale Spender's Man Made Language reveals how women are trapped inside a 'phallogentric' male discourse. Millet's Sexual Politics points out that sex is biologically determined, but gender is culturally acquired sexual identity. This leads to a system of sex-role stereotyping. (Guerin et al 198-200)

Marxist Feminists have emphasised the complex relations between gender and economy. They point out how the changing social and economic conditions of life have led to changes in the balance of power between the sexes. Marxist Feminism displays a powerful political orientation and hence attacks capitalism, which is seen as sexually as well as economically exploitative. Personal identity is not seen as separate from cultural identity. Because Marxism stresses the historical and economic contexts of literary discourse, they draw attention to the politics and economics of production of literary texts. (Guerin et al 202-203)

The early 1970s was the New Black Renaissance marked by a proliferation of writing by Black women like Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Louise Meriwether, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou. The revolutionary character of this Renaissance was totally different from the bourgeois nature of the Harlem Renaissance (1917-30), which was dominated by male writers, and in which women who wrote, like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, were relegated to the background. This literary outburst in the 1970s was due to movements such as the Civil Rights, the Black Power and the Women's Liberation of the 1960s, and of course the influence of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

The women brought to the movement a special universal perspective, which is candidly expressed by June Jordan in "Where is Love":

As a Black woman I exist as part of the powerless and as part of the majority peoples of the world. I am powerless compared to any man because women are kept powerless by men. I am powerless compared to anyone White because Black and Third World peoples are kept powerless by Whites. And because I am Black and a woman I am the most victimized of the powerless. Yet I am the majority because women constitute the majority gender. I am the majority because Black and Third World peoples constitute the majority of human beings. In short, I am a member of the most powerless majority on the planet. (174)

Alice Walker substituted the concept of 'Womanism' for 'Black Feminism'. Race is not an added problem as identity is basic to notions of sexuality. Multiple identities then is a common link between Black women in America and other coloured women in Asia and the rest of the world. And so the struggle of these women is anti-racist as opposed to White Feminism and anti-sexist as opposed to the Black Civil Rights Movement; and in India, we may add, it is anti-caste as opposed to Caste Feminism.

These women also brought nurturing and love to the whole community as is evident in Sonia Sanchez's exhortation in an unpublished interview:

When we're trying to effect change, we must always maintain a sense of humanity and a sense of love, because when we get what we want and we are incapable of love – we would be just like the people we're trying to displace or replace. So the idea of love is always important, the idea of humanity is always important.

Critics who adopt Psychoanalytic Feminism study female images that reveal the author's anti-patriarchal attitude. They describe a feminine utopia in which wholeness rather than "otherness" is a definition of identity. All these critics strive to shed the label of inferiority that is often attached to the feminine and attack male-centred literary values.

Based on Jacques Lacan's notion of the imaginary which he describes as a phallogocentric universe ruled by the "Law of the Father," French feminists like Helene Cixous speak of "exploding" the sign and creating a utopian place, a primeval female space, which is free of symbolic order, sex roles, otherness and the Law of the Father, and is linked to what Cixous calls "The Voice of the Mother, the source of feminine power." (Guerin et al 203-204)

This study being a comparative study of two writers who are representative of subaltern groups, namely the Blacks in America and the Dalits in India, the application of Psychoanalytic theories would be appropriate. The psychological approach is based on the theories of Sigmund Freud and one of his significant followers, Jacques Lucan, who laid emphasis on the unconscious aspects of the human psyche. The three psychic zones in an individual, according to Freud, are the *id*, the *ego*, and the *super ego*. The *id* is the reservoir of libido, the primary source of all psychic energy, which fulfils the basic principle of life namely the *pleasure principle*. The dangerous potentialities of the *id* are regulated by certain psychic agencies. The first of these is the *ego*, the rational governing agent which channels the instinctual drives of the *id* into non-destructive behavioural patterns. The *ego* is governed by the *reality principle*. The other regulating agent is the *super ego* or the conscience and pride, dominated by the *morality principle*. An over active super ego creates an unconscious sense of guilt ('guilt complex'). According to Freud the 'Oedipus complex' derives from a boy's unconscious rivalry with his father for the love of his mother. It also causes a fear of castration and an identification of the father with strict

authority in all form; and subsequently this leads to hostility to all authority. (Guerin et al 127-134)

Since Psychoanalytic theory has been used both by Marxists and Feminists it would help to study the texts not just as narratives, but also as historical, ideological and cultural discourses. Social Feminists, for instance, have used the concept of repression to explore female sexuality. Hence, like the Psychoanalyst, a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism is concerned with the story/narrative, the faulty syntax, the gaps, the contradictions in chronology and memories, which conceal repressed material.

The Psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva focus on the unconscious. Another very pertinent theory in this cross-cultural comparative study is that of Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychologist and founding father of Archetypal Criticism, whose concept of the "collective unconscious" along with his theory of archetypes helped to explain similarities in myths and archetypes found in diverse cultures in different periods of time. Sigmund Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex is also Archetypal Criticism, and since it is based on myth it is mythic or Mythopoeic Criticism. (Guerin et al 202-212)

Dalit women and Black women have both suffered triple oppression from Caste/White men, from Caste/White women and from their own men namely Dalit/Black men. For centuries they have suffered in silence and borne the brunt of unjust discrimination violative of basic human dignity, and cruel and inhuman atrocities committed against them with impunity. They have experienced the xenophobia of the Caste people and the Whites, which has wrecked havoc in their homes. Yet despite all this, both Dalit and Black

women have survived the ordeal and emerged stronger and ennobled by it. Many among them have even blazed a trail. Maya Angelou representative of Black women in America, and Bama of Dalit women in India, are two shining examples. Their autobiographies will be analysed in this study applying Marxist Feminist Psychoanalytic criticism.

Chapter I sketches briefly the socio-historical and political background of Dalit Indians and Black Americans. It also presents the argument of the thesis and traces the Marxist Feminist Psychoanalytic theories of analysis to be adopted in this study. Chapter II is a review of literature. It examines in detail the theory and practice of autobiography in the West and also in India. It deals with the autobiographies of subaltern groups, such as Black Americans, Dalit Indians, and Women, specifically.

Chapters III and IV introduce the life and writings of Maya Angelou and Bama; and then move into a detailed analysis of the autobiographies, namely Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas, The Heart of a Woman, All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes and A Song Flung Up to Heaven; and Bama's Karruku and Sangathi.

Chapter V compares Bama and Maya Angelou and points out the similarities and differences in their works. Chapter VI is a summary, highlighting the significant contribution of Maya Angelou and Bama. It also points to future directions in the study of autobiographical discourses of marginalised peoples.