

Development of A Dalit Self: Vasant Moon and the Aura of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar¹

Saswati Biswas²

The development of self and a sociological approach to the study of self-identity are informed by mutual relationship between self and the society. The former impacts the society through individual actions reflected in the working of groups, organizations and institutions. Society on the other hand influences the individual through shared meanings and values which enables one to participate in social action and reflect upon oneself as the other. In the case of India where the Hindu society considers a group of people as avarnas also referred to as dalits or untouchables there is a great deal of complexity and layering in the interaction between self and society. The selves of the dalits evolve in constant interaction with the wider society through the complexities which till today are characterized by a great degree of exploitation and humiliation exercised by the upper castes. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the life of Vasant Moon which shows how a dalit person overcame the obstacles of life and evolved as a worthy member of his community under the influence of B.R Ambedkar who inspired and moulded the lives of innumerable dalits of a whole generation.

Keywords: Dalits, Ambedkar, Buddhism, Self, literature, exploitation

The discipline of Sociology as it evolved in India is increasingly coming under the scanner for its near total disregard for the existence of a community of people within or periphery of the caste system that is the dalits who have always lived in the bottom or outside the caste hierarchy, were considered as untouchables and were at the receiving end of intense humiliation and extreme deprivation and exploitation. It is only recently that we find that scholars like T. K. Oomen, Vivek Kumar, Paramjit S. Judge,

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² Professor, Department of Sociology, University of North Bengal, Siliguri, WB, INDIA.

Ghanshyam Shah and a few others trying to incorporate them and making knowledge creation about them a part of sociological endeavour.

We read of Indian tradition of community social life and a sense of regret that this community life is breaking down with the emergence of atomized self-seeking individuals even in the writings of the pioneers of Indian Sociology. The fact that there was another side of this community life which looked down upon a section of society as less than humans and which got religious sanction to denigrate, humiliate and exploit them has not been noticed by the scholars who in the name of value free sociology have contributed to the pattern maintenance where the higher castes have continued with their privileges keeping large sections of society at the mercy of the higher castes. However, for a long period of time starting from the medieval period individuals have come up who protested against the systemic violence and exploitation by the upper castes by overcoming many obstacles and put some hope in the lives of the others who considered them as leaders.

In this paper an attempt has been made to understand how under the leadership of B.R Ambedkar a *Dalit* self-evolved in the first half of the last century when provided with the proper socio-political environment and a role model towards whom he could look up for guidance and leadership. This has been attempted by taking up the life story of Vasant Moon which he narrates in his book, *Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, originally Vasti in Marathi but translated into English by one of the very well-known sociologists, Gail Omvedt. The introduction to the book was written by Eleanor Zeliott, a well-known scholar on Dalits, who was a friend of Moon and was helped by him in her research on the dalits of India.

This narration of Mr. Moon is an example of auto ethnography giving us an idea of his own life experiences *which could be extended to the generalized other. What were the life experiences of the Dalits? How were they treated by the higher castes? how the conditions in which they were forced to live contributed to the inculcation of values in their lives all come out clearly in this autobiography.* However, what is most significant is not the deprivations and humiliations which the dalits have been forced to undergo since times immemorial, but how under the leadership of B.R Ambedkar the same people who were driven to the margins recognized their self-worth, fought for their rights and rose up against the tyranny of Brahminism. It also shows the character-building nature of movement-based politics as against the current politics of electoral gains.

The spread of literacy among the Mahars added to their determination to rise against the injustices and ultimately paved the way for their making a mark in the history of

the period. There is a lot in the story of Moon's life, it is a story of his Vasti, his growing up under different types of privations but struggling intensely with himself and evolving as an intellectual and activist under the leadership of Ambedkar and the other leaders who evolved as Ambedkar's co-workers.

Development of the self in current sociological literature reflects upon the emphasis on power, reflexivity and social constructionism. The power relations and the place which one occupies in the realm of power whether as having power in whatever form political, social, cultural or economic which may also be termed as different types of capital plays a very important role in the development of a self. Thus, it has become common in reviews of the sociological self to argue that the self is both a social product as well as a social force. In the first instance the self is examined as a bounded structured object- Mead's 'me' whereas in the second instance the self is examined as a fluid agentic and creative response, Mead's 'I'.

The distinction captures the core principle of a socially constructed self namely that the self is a joint accomplishment, neither completely a production of society nor an individual agency. However, the I and Me are interrelated in such a way that the agency to be exercised is very often determined by one's position in society. When a person's self-estimation evolves in interaction with others it is difficult for a person to evolve a self which is capable of exercising agency when he/she gets a feedback of being addressed as an inferior and made a subject of humiliation. On the other hand, a person treated with respect and acceptance evolves with greater self-esteem, a greater feeling of security and a greater ability to exercise agency. Hence when we study the life of Vasant Moon who belonged to the former category, we understand what intense struggles he went through suffering poverty and humiliation and what great a role was played by B.R Ambedkar in nurturing Moon's ability to exercise agency and stand up against injustices and fight for the rights of the *Dalits*.

In this paper it is intended to focus upon the influence of Ambedkar on Moon's life and hence some other facets of importance in his life mentioned in the book has been kept out of purview. In this first autobiography of a so called 'untouchable', we learn about the inescapable hierarchy imposed by caste based on ancient principles of hereditary pollution. We see the unmatched importance of the heroic Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for India's awakened dalits who were increasingly realizing the injustices which were mated out to them for ages and rising up to demand a place of equality in Indian society.

Moon grew up in a vasti and its social identity as a community space was much more important to him than its geographical location. He had an abusive father who was also

a drunkard, his mother had left his father with Moon and his sister when Moon was only four years old. They stayed with his grandfather in the vasti but fell into very difficult times after his grandfather died.

First encounters with Ambedkar's ideas

The first influence of Ambedkar is found in relation to the worshipping of a goddess, there was a temple of Matamai and the goddess was worshipped when there was an outbreak of epidemics like cholera, diarrhea and small pox. After 1930 the wave of Ambedkar reached Maharpura as the area was then known as and the worshipping of Matamai stopped and people understood that the goddess could not really cure the diseases. Another thing that happened was seen in the realm of inter-caste relations. Presence of subcastes and even disagreements among them on norms of purity and pollution existed but these came to an end with the struggle of Ambedkar who always made his followers conscious about not practicing brahmanism with other *Dalit* castes. The space which he refers to as vasti gives us a picture of Moon's childhood neighborhood where in the midst of dire poverty members lived in close interdependence helping one another with whatever means they had. A neighbor would always come in with food if Moon's mother was unable to get any food for them or if the neighbors got to know that the children were going to sleep with a hungry stomach.

The book in all its pages shows the influence of Ambedkar in the self-development of Moon and the awe in which Ambedkar was held. Maharpura as the name suggests was predominantly inhabited by the Mahars and the word Hindu is not used for the members of the community, it is used only for the savarnas or caste Hindus. The Mahars are nowhere mentioned as Hindus, the word Hindu carried with it an element of aversion and was associated with the relations of oppression, discrimination and humiliation which the *Dalits* had with them. Right from his childhood the treatment of an abusive father at home and the discrimination from the higher castes got a medium in the teachings of Ambedkar which moulded him with a spirit of defiance and an urge to stand up for justice with an intense sense of self respect and dignity.

The above was reflected in an incident in primary school. The followers of Ambedkar did not like to be addressed as Harijans a term used by Gandhi as they found it condescending. Even during his life time one correspondent told Gandhi that it instilled into the minds of the people to whom it applied a feeling of inferiority however sacred the name may be (Guha 2015).

In his primary school a notice for Harijan students was put up and it was also read out

in the class, the teacher then asked the Harijan boys to stand up. There were six Mahar boys in the class but none stood up. They were asked to give their names as a scholarship would be awarded to them. Moon rose up and said: 'Sir, we are not Harijans, and we don't want the scholarship of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. None of us are Harijans' (Moon 2001: 37). This happened when Moon's mother could hardly provide them with two square meals. His school uniforms came from benevolent friends and books from some kind neighbor. "The pants he wore otherwise were made from tent cloth given to him by a neighbor".

The dreams which Ambedkar aroused in a child's mind can be seen from the way how poems taught in the class brought images of their own life world in their minds. They were enchanted by Sir Walter Scott's poem, "Breathes There the Man", taught to them which provided to them a shared meaning in the following lines.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead

Who never to himself hath said

This is my own, my native land.

Moon had questions and hope, he thought, the dream of Bhim Raj was before them and he wondered, 'where was our share in our native land'?

(Moon 2001: 37)

Giving up Hindu rites and rituals

The young at Maharpura read the weekly named Janata which was founded by Ambedkar. In one of the issues there was a writing on Hindu gods, and it was said, "The Hindus' gods were not brought for us; don't do their pujas, their festival is not for us; do not observe them." (ibid: 42) this was a part of Ambedkar's movement to protest against the indignities suffered in the realm of religion, their not being allowed temple entry and being considered as carrying the stigma of pollution which denied them any scope in the performance of activities related to religion.

An organization of the *Dalit* youth had been formed and it was named Samata Sainik Dal (Henceforth SSD), this organization carried on many welfare activities, and organized and participated in all the programmes organized by Ambedkar and his associates.

The SSD organized a door-to-door campaign urging people to give up, 'Hindu' rites and rituals, Moon was a child then, and though he could not have participated in the programmes, his memories which were refreshed by repeated reference to the occasion by others brings out a vivid description in his writing.

One of the leaders of the SSD Wamanrao Godbole carried the movement forward, asking people to celebrate, Ambedkar Jayanti, Chokamela Jayanti, Chokamela was a saint in Maharashtra in the fourteenth century and belonged to the Mahar community members were asked not to celebrate Janmashtami and Ram's birthday. Janmashtami was close by and it was very difficult for the elders of Maharpura to give up the worshipping of "Hindu" gods. But the socio-political environment was suitable for the purpose of doing away with them.

Ambedkar had led the Maha satyagraha in 1927, the backlash from the caste Hindus clearly pointed out that they were not ready to give dignity to the dalits or allow them to rise above the stigma of untouchability, The effort of Ambedkar to lead his followers and draw water from a tank used by the caste Hindus was met with a lot of violence and economic persecution from the caste Hindus even though it was not illegal for dalits to draw water from the tank. Every house had a volunteer of the SSD and they were all called for a meeting by their leader Waman Rao Godbole, they were all asked to stop the 'Hindu' festivals in their own homes.

The young ones were successful in convincing their parents and most houses did not observe Janmashtami that year. Moon was in the sixth standard and the duty of children like him was to report if anyone was celebrating Janmashtami. There was already a mood of discarding Hinduism among the *Dalits* and this attempt to give up participating in Hindu religious occasions was thought to be a preparation which would make it easier for them to accept a new religion.

Many festivals came after Janmashtami but they did not receive much importance. The Holi festival was stopped and this was related to a tragic incident revolving around a Brahmin giving his daughter in marriage to a Mahar school teacher. The village caste Hindus boycotted the Brahmin, and the newly wed were burnt in the Holi fire, The SSD stopped people from buying colors and Moon never played holi for the rest of his life. He writes, "the culture that had been stamped on people's minds for years and years began to be wiped out, and a new generation emerged" (Moon 2001:45).

The Poona Pact which was signed on 24th September 1932 left an indelible mark on the minds of the *Dalits* as they had to forego their demand for a separate electorate. Their reasoning was that the Muslims were given separate electorate as they were judged to be a different community. The caste Hindus did not consider the dalits as equal and were not willing to give up the practice of untouchability, hence Ambedkar had demanded that the *Dalits* should be considered as a separate community and be given separate electorates just like the Muslims. Gandhi was very much against the division of the Hindus and went on a fast. Ambedkar had to give in to the wishes of Gandhi and

the Poona Pact was signed on 24th September 1932 at Yerawada Central jail in Poona between Ambedkar on behalf of the *Dalits* and Madan Mohan Malaviya on behalf of the caste Hindus. Instead of being granted a separate electorate, seats were reserved for the 'depressed classes', out of general electorate.

This incident built up a feeling in the minds of the *Dalits* of being let down by Gandhi. It was looked upon as a betrayal to the realization of justice for the dalits and they believed that Ambedkar was forced into submission. They were aggrieved by the fact that while Gandhi spoke against untouchability, he never spoke up strongly against the caste system nor did he express strong opinions on the domination of caste Hindus over dalits. As Arundhati Ray quotes Gandhi 'Caste is another name for control. Caste puts a limit on enjoyment. Caste does not allow a person to transgress caste limits in pursuit of his enjoyment. That is the meaning of such caste restrictions as inter-dinning and intermarriage... these being my views I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the caste system' (Ray 2014: 41).

There was also an anti-Congress feeling among the untouchables as the former was looked upon as operating in the interest of the higher caste, as Ray writes (Ray 2014:41) 'in 1931 when Ambedkar met Gandhi for the first time, Gandhi questioned him about his sharp criticism of the Congress which it was assumed was tantamount to criticizing the struggle for Homeland 'Gandhiji, I have no Homeland', was Ambedkar's reply.' He went on to say, 'no untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land'.

It was in such a background that the refusal to worship Hindu gods came up, the *Dalits* were caught in a quagmire, neither were the caste Hindus allowing them equality in the religious order nor were they being allowed to establish their identity as a community outside the Hindu society. It was in such a background that the next incident in Moon's life happened which was also related to the aversion which the *Dalits* had for Gandhi.

Gandhi and the expression of resentment

By the 1940s there were people among the *Dalits* who started participating in the activities of the Congress and the incident which will be taken up here is related to the situation emanating from such participation. Sometimes differences cropped up in the community and the Congress was interested in drawing to its fold some of the disgruntled members who were also interested to join because of their differences with Ambedkar.

There was a school located rear the railway lines close to Moon's Vasti and it was called Chokamela school after the name of the dalit poet saint. In 1941 the Chokamela

hostel management with the collaboration of some Harijan students as the *Dalit* student followers of Gandhi were called decided to call Mahatma Gandhi for an annual gathering of the hostel. The students most of whom were Ambedkarites opposed this. The SSD started thinking how the programme could be stopped, one of the members of the SSD, Sadanand Dangare lived in the hostel but thinking that he could not chalk out a programme staying there he took a room nearby in a hostel for the Mahars where he could lay out the plans. The youth from neighboring places also joined him.

A huge pavilion had been erected in the centre of the yard and a strong line of police was placed. A few Mahar opponents of Ambedkar were members of the managing board. The president was Chatur bhajabhai Jasani who was a member of the Congress. He brought Mahatma Gandhi from Delhi but they got down two stations behind their destination, and the people of Nagpur were made to believe that Gandhi had not come. Gandhi was brought in from behind the hostel, and members of the reception committee were waiting to welcome him, while they called out "long live Gandhi", at that moment thousands of demonstrators raised their voice saying, "Mahatma Gandhi go back", and as this slogan was heard by people in the neighborhoods they started running towards the hostel, there were many followers of Ambedkar among the students and once Gandhi rose up to speak the students shouted out, "Gandhiji, we have many questions for you," Gandhi replied asking them to raise the questions, but the turmoil continued to increase, and the large gathering of people started throwing stones at the hostel and the stones fell inside the pavilion too. Once the stones hit the pavilion it started to collapse and no one was giving Gandhi a chance to speak and in the midst of the confusion the organizers brought Gandhi out from the pavilion, and he left through the back door just as he had come. Moon writes 'with the shouting of, "Long Live Ambedkar Bhim Raj is coming soon," Mahatma Gandhi's car departed...The incident showed the ferocity of the anti- Gandhi sentiments of the people.' (Moon 2001: 63). The major difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar rose from the difference they had around the question of untouchability, Gandhi thought untouchability was an aberration of the caste system which could be corrected without destroying the system. Ambedkar thought that untouchability was intrinsic to the caste system and unless the caste system is annihilated and blind faith on religious scriptures is done away with untouchability would continue to exist. It was Ambedkar's ability to convince his followers about his ideas regarding the caste system around which much of their deprivations revolved that contributed to the antagonistic feelings which his followers had towards Gandhi.

Very often questions are raised around Ambedkar's support to the freedom movement,

Ambedkar always doubted about the consequence which independent India would have for the *Dalits*, he spoke in favor of political, social and economic freedom. The attitude of the caste Hindus was clear to him from the way they responded to his attempts at acquiring justice for the *Dalits* and the doubts he had have been justified when we observe how dalits are made the subject of humiliation and exploitation and see how difficult it is even for the educated *Dalits* to be treated as equals today in many parts of our country.

Influence of Ambedkar in the field of creativity

There was another dimension in the life of Moon and other members of his community which was influenced by Ambedkar and that was in the sphere of *art, literature and poetry* which played an important role in the birth and unfolding of *Dalit* literature. Moon had started participating in the activities of the SSD in his third standard. They had a flag which symbolized their pride and a lot of effort was taken to establish branches of the SSD in Nagpur. By that time the Scheduled Caste Federation was founded by Ambedkar in 1942 to campaign for the rights of the *Dalits*. As such, there was a great fervor in the community around which many activities were organized.

The first representation of creativity was reflected in the flag which was a united symbol of the Scheduled Caste Federation and the SSD. One of the leaders of the SSD Wamanrao Godbole made the flag with his own hands. He bought silk cloth for a blue flag, in the center of the flag was a sun which symbolized Ambedkar, in the middle of the sun SSF was etched out in a round form. On the left side of the flag eleven stars were sewn from white cloth and the letters SSD were sewn in the bottom corner. This was the united symbol of Scheduled Caste Federation and the SSD. The eleven provinces of India at that time were represented by the eleven stars.

Songs written by poets about the blue flag were famous. One of these read as follows:

We will give our life for the blue flag
 Millions will bow before the blue flag
 If you still plan to fight us, think about it.
 We will sacrifice all for the blue flag.
 Whatever Bhim wants we will do,
 We will see our blood flow for the blue flag.

Such songs inspired the youth and made them ready to make sacrifices for their cause. Thus, the *Dalits* were carrying out a parallel freedom struggle that to become free

from age old persecution, exploitation and humiliation of the caste Hindus without which national independence would have little meaning for them.

All these activities with which Moon was associated from childhood was accompanied with hunger and poverty, He writes: 'we started going hungry for two days at a time. At first, we were troubled by pangs of starvation. However, once the body gets in the habit of fasting, hunger is not felt. Hunger slowly begins to die. If food wasn't their clothes would be too much to expect' (Moon 2001:75). It was in 1946 when he was fourteen years old that his mother got a job as a cotton mill worker and some semblance of normalcy prevailed as far as meeting their basic needs was concerned. A flag song was also written at that time, the first stanza of which goes as:

Waiving always in the skies
Our beloved flag of freedom
The seventy millions of Dalit people today
Vow their lives to the flag!
The sight of you inspires us.
We'll uproot tradition in an instant.

The SSD evolved as a very well-organized frontal unit of the *Dalits* with a sense of responsibility, loyalty and strict discipline among its members. They put their heart and mind in its activities and here too Ambedkar's teachings inspired them, and slowly activities extended from organizing meetings and gatherings to broader programmes of confronting social evils, injustices and atrocities. They were inspired by Ambedkar's sayings one of which was, 'sheep and goats are sacrificed not lions and tigers' (Moon 2001: 68).

The writing of songs is mentioned in another context also, where members of the dalit community would visit households or move around in the community fairs spreading their message of protest in the form of song accompanied sometimes with dance too. One of such songs starts as:

No one respects us in the market, We live in mud huts.
When we live in Sitabardi We get only blows and insults
Don't go without showing the wisdom of your guru, Roar out your challenge (ibid: 80).

There were theatre performances also and as early as 1927, when Ambedkar was actively engaged in organizing protests a play named, 'Uplift of the Downtrodden', was

performed. Ambedkar thus, was able to exercise an all-embracing impact on the lives of the *Dalits*, their dream for a better life, a life without indignity and exploitation was aroused and this provided them a chance to express all their creative capabilities. It was the life and teachings of Ambedkar that brought out the intellectual and the writer in Vasant Moon too. Thus, the impact of Ambedkar's movement on the cultural life of the *Dalits* was overwhelming.

The stories written around their urge for social reform were shown to the common people in a way that they could understand. Hymn singing groups came up which were known as Bhajan Mandalis and street drama groups moved around performing plays. All the poems and songs of the Das Mandalis were very popular and one Hindi qawaliwas sung everywhere. The first stanza reads:

From the moment that the glance of Bhim fell upon the poor
From that day our strength also grew
To win freedom Gandhi and Jinnah met each other
They did not ask Ambedkar, nor were they going to ask,
Pandit Jawahar also tried a new trick
When Bhim learned the secret his eyes also opened.
The tyrannical Hindu people wanted to destroy us
Hearing the voice of Bhim they lost their zest,
Pandit Jawahar Nehru himself fell silent. (Moon 2001: 110).

This was happening in the forties when the freedom movement was in full swing, Moon was very young then but the wordings of the song as well as its popularity shows how intense was the feeling of anger towards the caste Hindus and the leaders who were thought to be protectors of their interest. The behavior meted out to Ambedkar by the nationalist leaders was something which saddened and angered his followers. There was a consistent refusal on the part of the nationalist leaders to take up the issue of untouchability, exploitation and humiliation of the untouchables as important issues which required serious steps to be taken in the form of a socio- cultural movement no less important than the struggle for freedom.

Thousands of poets wrote verses on Ambedkar just like the saint poets of the medieval times, one of them described Ambedkar, the poet Manohar Nagarle wrote: (Moon 2001:113)

He is the beloved of our hearts, the crown on our heads
He lives and will live tomorrow, our Ambedkar
There will be words of gold and his name will remain
Whenever our history is written.

The satyagraha against the Poona Pact in 1946 was dealt with harshly by the government, many were treated inhumanely in the prisons after being arrested and this also aroused poets to write verses. Moon writes: 'these singers were young men, who would experience an upsurge of rage about atrocities and the battle for our rights. They were not striving to publish books of poetry. They went from neighborhood to neighborhood, village to village to raise consciousness through their songs' (Moon 2001: 114).

Moon himself was very much inspired and the influence of Ambedkar which was building up in him as a young boy of twelve lasted throughout his life. He goes on to write: 'I was so mad over qawwali that I would listen to them in the morning...I would forgo sleep, sitting and listening to the singing throughout the night and take examinations during the day. There is no other medium more popular and effective than the qawwali for people's awakening' (Moon 2001: 117).

Acceptance of Buddhism

Moon entered college in 1949. By the time he left school he had become a rationalist humanitarian due to the Ambedkar's movement, this was carried forward through his college education which also taught him to question religious ideas. After graduation he got a job in the office of the Deputy Accountant General, Post and Telegraph. He left the job in 1955 to register for post-graduation.

Ambedkar's teaching and the rationalism with which he was trained in college had already shaped an anti-Hindu self in Moon. One of the leaders of the Scheduled Caste Federation brought the news that Ambedkar was going to convert to Buddhism even earlier. In the 1940s a person named Anant Ramchandra Kulkarni had started propagating Buddhism in the Vasti among the *Dalit* community. Kulkarni was secretary of the Nagpur branch of the Mahabodhi Society based in Calcutta. Kulkarni propagated Buddhism, the news that Ambedkar would convert to Buddhism had reached Moon's Vasti before 1950, and sensing the mood of the community Kulkarni started meeting the representatives of the SSD, and Wamanrao one of the leaders asked him to come and teach the thoughts of Buddha.

The thoughts and religious tenets of Buddha as taught by Kulkarni had a lot of impact

on the community, but the fact that Ambedkar was going to convert to Buddhism was a stronger driving force. This fervour around Buddhism released creativity among the members of the community and plays were enacted on the life and teachings of Buddha. The first play Moon wrote was inspired by the same.

In 1950 it was decided to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti and Moon decided that a drama would be performed, he was advised by Wamanrao Godbole to write a play on Buddha which would be acted out. There was a lot of activity around the enactment of the play which was named, 'Welfare of the World', based on the life of the Buddha, he writes: 'It was an attempt to link the story of Jesus Christ's birth to that of the Buddha. But on stage this event was so impressive that people remained absorbed in the play for three hours. The Buddha's sight of an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a sanyasi, leading to the renunciation of his home, was shown in a tableau, which the audience liked very much' (Moon 2001: 126).

If we try to go back in Moon's life, we find a person born in poverty, having an abusive father, brought up by his mother in the midst of great hardship., going hungry day after day now evolving as a person with great sense of dignity, self-respect and responsibility towards the community as well as rising up to fight the injustices towards the dalits, we understand how strong an impact the life and teachings of Ambedkar had made on him as well as the community as a whole. Moon went on to write other plays too after the first one. By 1942 Moon's community had given up all the Hindu festivals, and by 1950 there was a general mood of leaving Hinduism and getting converted to Buddhism. Around 1954 Ambedkar proclaimed that the ceremony related to conversion would take place in Mumbai, however one of the leaders Wamanrao Godbole thought that Nagpur would be a more befitting place as there was a long tradition of Buddhism there and there is also a mention in a book that a tooth of the Buddha was preserved in Nagpur (Moon 2001:149) Ambedkar agreed to hold the ceremony in Nagpur.

The death of Buddha is surmised to have occurred around the middle of October and it was decided that the conversion would take place around that time. There was also a lot of work to be done as it was expected that thousands of people would come for the conversion, Moon was given the task of recording the name, age, caste and religion of those who came, and also the task of overseeing the entire surroundings.

The programme in which Ambedkar and his followers converted to Buddhism was held on 14th October 1956, the whole process required a lot of preparation and volunteers came up in large numbers to perform the duties assigned to them. Ambedkar gave the diksha to all his followers and this bound them together as members of a Buddhist

community. They all took Buddhist conversion oaths in front of Ambedkar, who had entered through a secret road, and Moon writes, 'after performing the conversion, Babasaheb left by the way he had come', this path was a secret so that no one could see Babasaheb's car between the stage and the entrance road to the field where the programme was held.

Moon's freedom from a religion which inherently is not capable of treating all its members as equal and makes caste an essential quality of existence also came from Ambedkar who it is well known had been trying to acquire dignity and equality within the Hindu religion for a long period of time but finally came to realize that it would not come in the near future.

Vasant Moon matures as a writer

Moon from his school days had an ardent passion for reading, he would read all the papers in the temple trust committee's room. When he was in the eighth grade, the Chokamela hostel students published a hand written monthly magazine, and Moon had written an article on the childhood of Ambedkar. Moon writes: 'In those days, for that matter there were no facilities to give scope to untouchable boys in writing. As the Ambedkarite movement began to win renown, leaders such as Sankharan Meshram, N.H. Kumhare, Hardas Avale, N.K. Tirpude and Bhimrao Borkar were creative writers among the youth. However, they complained that their articles were not published in Tarun Bharat or in the Nagpur daily, Maharashtra. The movement of hand written magazines started among the students as a result.' (Moon 2001: 135).

The first elections in independent India were held between 26th October 1951 and 21st October 1952. Ambedkar toured the whole country and at Nagpur gave a stormy speech at a huge gathering of followers. The newspapers of the Congress party came out with disparaging articles on Ambedkar and criticized him vehemently. One member of the dalit community Raosaheb Thavare had shifted allegiance to the congress and wrote a booklet named, 'Dr. Ambedkar's Politics', and there he made a statement that, 'Ambedkar will have to live on crumbs thrown to him by the Congress' (Moon 2001:136).

Moon was very much angered by this comment and as he found that no one was responding he took up the task. He was studying at the intermediate level at that time, and at that young age he reviewed and responded to all the points mentioned in the booklet. The leaders of his community liked his writing and the result was a small booklet named, 'Beware Mercenary Propaganda,'. This book was published but Hindu shop owners would not sell such books and he began by selling copies in the streets. This was his first mature writing and may have paved the path for Moon's unfurling as

a renowned writer in Marathi and a pathfinder of what we now know as Dalit Literature specially in the realm of knowledge revolving around Ambedkar.

In 1953 there was a decision to bring out a hand written magazine in the community and Moon would also use pseudonyms to write for these magazines. He writes: 'The happiness that comes from collecting writings from students to include in magazines and writing much of it by hand, and then having the publication ceremony, is beyond the imagination of those who publish magazines today' (Moon 2001: 145). The foundation of *Dalit* literature was laid by people like Moon, Ambedkar also appreciated the writings which came out and encouraged them to carry on with their endeavors.

Ambedkar's death on 6th December 1956 created a despondent situation in the *Dalit* community. The death did not only mean the physical demise of a great leader, it also brought a great deal of uncertainty about the dreams which Ambedkar had woven in their minds about their future upliftment. Moon wrote an article titled, 'Baba and Death', he writes, "the tears and upsurge of feeling I saw were given expression in this small booklet".

It is said that there was hardly any researcher who could write on the *Dalit* movement without taking help from Moon. The noted scholar on Dalits, Eleanor Zelliott consulted Moon's library for her PhD work and developed friendship with him. She has also written the introduction to Gail Omvedt's English translation of Moon's autobiography.

Moon rose to the position of county counsellor but he never forgot his community, Moon edited the complete work of Ambedkar, he ardently and painstakingly took up work on twenty collected volumes of Ambedkar's writings and speeches in English and his autobiography. He could not however complete the last three volumes of which he prepared the manuscript only. The final version of the three volumes were completed by Mr. Hari Narke, another important contribution of Moon was on, 'Life of Women in Buddha's period,' this book as the name suggests described life of women during the times of the Buddha. The other book on Buddhism he wrote was, 'Buddha Dhamma Pradeep, 'it deals with different dimensions of Buddhist doctrine including the denial of the existence of soul in Buddhism, he also deals with the idea of nonviolence in Buddhism. He wrote another book on *Dalit* movement entitled, 'Dalit Movement in the Central Provinces Before Ambedkar', which came out in 1987.

The erudition that Moon cultivated throughout his life is reflected in his writings and one can only understand the magnitude of his contributions if they are understood in the context of his life, the economic hardships he went through which affected his education and the humiliation he suffered along with the members of his community in being regarded as untouchable by the wealthier and powerful caste Hindus.

The pervading influence of Ambedkar in bringing out the evolved individual in Moon is also expressed in the restive self-disturbed at the ignominy suffered by his community, participating in Ambedkar's programmes and looking up at the path shown by Ambedkar as the only path to freedom for his community. The writer in him was brought out from his ardent desire to rise up in protest and his writings became a medium which gave expression to his desire to fight for justice and equal rights for his community.

Conclusion

Vasant Moon's 'Vasti', or 'Growing up Untouchable in India' is a powerful memoir of a youth growing up in the slums of central India. It is a narrative of a youth growing up in a social, economic and political environment which was not without its contradictions even though the freedom movement was at its peak. The strong leadership of the upper castes was not looked upon without suspicion by the *Dalits*. They understood that their problems of existence which was characterized by humiliation, domination, exploitation and other elements of structural violence would not be resolved as long as power was exercised by the same people under whom they had suffered from those travails.

Moon's story traverses a world of poverty and deprivations through the unrelenting rise of the dalit movement under the leadership of B.R Ambedkar and then entering a world of intellectual endeavour and knowledge while at the same time remaining a social activist throughout. The other person who had an influence over him was his mother, who struggled indomitably to raise her children and inculcate the values of humanism in them.

Moon loved the *Vasti* and remembered it fondly throughout his life, his life shows how an individual can fight all possible odds and grow up with qualities which enables him to make contributions towards society as also in the world of knowledge. Moon's life experiences were invigorated by the presence of Ambedkar as a significant other in his life as also the movements he led to acquire human rights for the *Dalits*. *At the end of his autobiography, he fondly refers to his vasti, he writes, "even so I remember it from time to time I should again become small and go live in some earthen house in that Vasti, I should experience the love of neighbours, I should hear again the Buddhist and Ambedkarite songs sung by the new generation and be merged with the soil that nurtured the community" (Moon 2001: 176).*

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