



---

## **Dalit Identity as Lived Experience and Cultural Assertion: A Study of Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri***

**Megharaj Wadeyar C**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Hindustan College, Mysuru-570008

---

**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18695445>**

---

### **ARTICLE DETAILS**

#### **Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 28-01-2026

**Published:** 10-02-2026

#### **Keywords:**

*Dalit identity, autobiography, caste consciousness, subaltern history, Siddalingaiah*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

The question of Dalit identity in India is inseparable from lived experiences of caste oppression, historical silencing, and continuous resistance. While social movements and political interventions have attempted to address caste discrimination, literature, especially Dalit autobiography has emerged as a deeply personal yet collective mode of expression. This paper explores the crisis and assertion of Dalit identity through Siddalingaiah's autobiographical narrative *Ooru Keri*. The study argues that the text functions not merely as a personal life story but as an alternative historical record that challenges dominant narratives and reconstructs Dalit identity from within. By foregrounding memory, suffering, and social awakening, *Ooru Keri* articulates a Dalit consciousness rooted in dignity, resistance, and cultural self-definition.

---

### **Introduction**

Indian society has long been structured around rigid hierarchies that determine social worth, access, and dignity. Among the most affected by this structure are Dalits, whose lives have historically been shaped by exclusion, humiliation, and enforced silence. Although India has witnessed numerous social reform movements, the Dalit movement occupies a distinctive place because it directly challenges the moral and cultural foundations of caste itself. Unlike many reformist movements, Dalit resistance has consistently questioned not only social practices but also the ideological justifications behind them.



For Dalits, identity has never been a simple or stable category. Questions such as *Who is a Dalit?*, *How is a Dalit perceived by others?*, and *What distinguishes a Dalit from the so-called “untouchable”?* have persisted across generations. These questions have not received fixed answers; instead, their meanings have shifted according to historical context and political necessity (Shah 17). What remains constant, however, is the struggle to be recognised as fully human within a society that has systematically denied that recognition.

### **Caste, Religion, and the Burden of History**

Dalits are among the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent, yet their social positioning has been reduced to the margins through the logic of caste hierarchy. The notion of ritual purity, central to orthodox Hindu social order, has historically depended upon the construction of Dalits as impure. Their exclusion was not accidental but structurally necessary to preserve caste sanctity. As a result, Dalit suffering remained normalised, while their voices were ignored.

For centuries, Dalits were denied representation in dominant historical narratives. Their pain did not enter official records, their labour remained unacknowledged, and their cultural presence was erased. It is only through persistent resistance, often led by both Dalit and non-Dalit reformers that Dalits gradually entered public consciousness. As Shah observes, contemporary Dalit assertion involves a direct interrogation of India’s socio-economic structures and cultural ethos (17).

### **Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Divergent Approaches to Emancipation**

The struggle against untouchability gained national visibility through figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, though their approaches differed significantly. Gandhi viewed untouchability as a moral failing within Hindu society and sought its eradication through internal reform. His use of the term *Harijan* reflected his desire to integrate Dalits into a reformed Hindu framework (Kumar, *Essays* 166).

Ambedkar, by contrast, approached caste as a deeply political and economic system of domination. He rejected the idea that social equality could be achieved without dismantling caste itself. By foregrounding education, legal rights, and political representation, Ambedkar redefined Dalit identity as one grounded in self-respect and resistance rather than passive suffering. These ideological tensions shaped the trajectory of Dalit movements and continue to inform Dalit literary discourse.



## **Dalit Autobiography and the Rewriting of History**

Dalit autobiography has emerged as one of the most powerful literary forms within Dalit literature. Unlike conventional autobiographies that often celebrate individual achievement, Dalit life narratives foreground collective pain and shared struggle. The self in Dalit autobiography is never isolated; it is inseparable from the community and its historical experience.

As Raj Kumar notes, Dalit personal narratives derive their strength from lived reality and function as authentic testimonies of caste oppression (12). Autobiography allows Dalit writers to reclaim authorship over their own histories and challenge dominant historiography that excludes them. In doing so, these texts transform personal memory into political intervention.

### **Historical Roots of Dalit Resistance**

Dalit resistance is not a modern phenomenon. From figures such as Valmiki and Buddha to Basava and Ambedkar, efforts to challenge caste oppression have surfaced repeatedly in Indian history. Yet these challenges were often overshadowed by Brahmanical texts like *Manusmriti*, which legitimised inequality and reinforced caste boundaries. Power consistently worked to suppress emancipatory movements, rendering Dalits vulnerable and invisible (Yagati 1).

Despite this, the struggle for dignity never disappeared. It resurfaced forcefully during the Dalit movement of the 1970s, which marked a significant shift in Dalit self-expression. This period witnessed the emergence of Dalit literature as an alternative cultural force that rejected both silence and assimilation.

### **Siddalingaiah and the Significance of *Ooru Keri***

Siddalingaiah occupies a central place in Kannada Dalit literature. Known for his revolutionary poetry and sharp social critique, he has consistently used literature as a means of resistance. *Ooru Keri*, his autobiographical work, stands apart for its episodic structure and uncompromising portrayal of Dalit life.

The narrative begins without a fixed chronological frame, reflecting the fragmented and uncertain nature of Dalit existence. One of the most striking images in the text is that of the author's father being yoked like cattle, an image that immediately situates the reader within a world of dehumanisation. Set across villages and later urban spaces, the autobiography traces Siddalingaiah's gradual awakening to the realities of caste and power.



## Memory, Education, and Identity Formation

As the narrative progresses, *Ooru Keri* shifts from childhood experiences of humiliation to moments of intellectual and political growth. Siddalingaiah's years in government hostels, his exposure to books, and his early attempts at poetry play a crucial role in shaping his identity. Education emerges as both a site of struggle and a tool of liberation.

The later sections of the autobiography introduce influential figures and movements, particularly the Dalita Sangarsha Samiti. Siddalingaiah's engagement with activism marks a turning point where personal pain is transformed into collective resistance. His eventual entry into academia symbolises not closure but transition—an ongoing process of self-definition.

## Dalit Literature and Aesthetic Resistance

Dalit literature rejects the idea of a single, unified aesthetic. As Limbale argues, it encompasses diverse ideological positions while remaining united in its commitment to self-representation (*Towards an Aesthetics* 215). *Ooru Keri* exemplifies this diversity by refusing sentimentalisation and foregrounding lived truth.

The text challenges dominant literary traditions by insisting that Dalit experience itself constitutes knowledge. By narrating history from below, Siddalingaiah disrupts canonical narratives and asserts a place for Dalits within Indian historiography.

## Conclusion

*Ooru Keri* is not merely an autobiography; it is a cultural document that records the crisis and assertion of Dalit identity. Through memory, resistance, and reflection, Siddalingaiah reconstructs a self shaped by struggle yet oriented toward dignity and agency. The text dismantles inherited identities imposed by caste and offers a new framework for understanding Dalit existence. In doing so, it contributes significantly to Dalit literature and to broader debates on identity, history, and social justice in India.

## Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. Vol. 3, Government of India, 1987.
- Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives*. Orient Blackswan, 2012.
- Kumar, Raj. *Essays on Dalits*. Orient Longman, 2003.



- Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Longman, 2004.
- Shah, Ghanshyam, editor. *Dalit Identity and Politics*. Sage Publications, 2001.
- Siddalingaiah. *Ooru Keri*. Translated by S. R. Ramakrishna, Sahitya Akademi, 2006.
- Yagati, Chinna Rao. *Writing Dalit History and Other Essays*. Kanishka Publishers, 2007.