Space, Power, and Caste: A Foucauldian Analysis of Dalit Settlements in Select Dalit Autobiographies

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Abstract

This paper examines the spatial dimensions of caste oppression in select Dalit autobiographies by analysing Dalit settlements as heterotopic spaces within the traditional Indian village structure. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and his broader theory of spatial power, the study argues that caste operates not only as a social and ideological system but also as a spatial regime that organises hierarchy through geography. The ritualised layout of the caste village—structured through centre and periphery, purity and pollution, visibility and exclusion—places Dalit communities in segregated settlements located at the margins. The paper analyses autobiographical narratives such as *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, and *Karukku* by Bama to demonstrate how spatial segregation regulates the mobility, visibility, and social participation of Dalits. These narratives reveal that caste hierarchy is embedded in the material organisation of space through practices such as segregated settlements, restricted access to temples and public roads, and the concentration of institutions of authority within upper-caste areas. By documenting these spatial arrangements, Dalit autobiographies reconstruct marginalised spaces as archives of lived experience and counter-maps of the caste village. By situating Dalit life writing within the broader spatial turn in critical theory, the paper extends Foucauldian spatial analysis beyond its European context and applies it to the South Asian caste order. It proposes that Dalit settlements function as heterotopic spaces that simultaneously expose and sustain the hierarchical logic of caste society.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Space, Dalit settlement, Dalit autobiography

The organisation of space is never neutral. Social life is structured not only through law, ritual, and discourse, but through the material distribution of bodies across territory. In his seminal lecture "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault urges us to retrace "this history of space" in which societies produce "a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places." (Foucault). Space, in this formulation, is not a passive container of social relations; it is an active principle of organisation that partitions, classifies, and stabilises power. While Foucault's reflections emerge from the context of European modernity, his spatial analytics offer a productive lens for examining other historically entrenched systems of segregation—most notably, the Indian caste order. The caste system has long been analysed as a religious, economic, and ideological formation, but its spatial logic remains comparatively under-theorised in literary and cultural studies. The traditional Indian village is structured through a visible geography of hierarchy: religious places occupying prominent positions, upper castes arranged in graded proximity, and Dalit settlements located at the margins or even outside the periphery. This arrangement is neither incidental nor merely practical. It encodes purity and pollution into the landscape itself. The segregation of Dalit communities into separate hamlets like *cheris*, *wadas* and colonies, constitutes what may be described as a ritual geography, where distance is both symbolic and disciplinary. Such spatial partitioning transforms caste into an architectural fact.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia provides a powerful theoretical framework to interpret this arrangement. Foucault traces back to the history of spaces and finds a graded order. He comments, "there was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places: protected places and open, exposed places: urban places and rural places" ("Of Other Spaces" 1). Traditional societies maintained spatial boundaries that controlled the behaviour and customs of people. Sacred spaces exerted respect and restricted entry. Polluted or profane spaces was seen as inferior or outside the functioning of main society. Urban and rural divisions of spaces reflect the economic and social organisation of space. Space, as it seems, act out as a system of classification that strengthened notions of power and its manipulatory relations. Unlike the fixed and prominent places are the 'other spaces, which he calls 'heterotopia'. He describes heterotopias as "real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites" (3). These spaces are simultaneously inside and outside the social order: materially present yet marked as different, regulated, or exceptional. Crucially, heterotopias are not freely accessible. They are marked by a closedness that makes it deviate from normal or accessible places.

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place… Moreover, there are even heterotopias that are entirely consecrated to

these activities of purification—purification that is partly religious and partly hygienic. (7)

The entry to such counter spaces are controlled and kept under constant policing. It is deemed to policies of pollution because it is not thought as ritually or religiously clean enough. Read in this light, the segregated Dalit settlement emerges not merely as a marginalised locality but as a structurally necessary 'other space' that sustains the caste village's claim to ritual coherence. Dalit settlements function as heterotopic formations within the caste spatial order. They are economically indispensable yet ritually excluded; visible yet socially disavowed; accessible for labour extraction yet restricted in terms of mobility and belonging. As such, they embody what Foucault describes as spaces whose role is "to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned"(8). The Dalit settlement exposes the fiction of an integrated village community by making inequality territorially explicit. Caste segregation can, in one sense, be theorised through the concept of heterotopia, as it foregrounds the spatial technologies through which graded hierarchy is naturalised and reproduced, while also opening a critical avenue for rethinking heterotopia from the vantage point of caste modernity in the Global South. This dynamic is very clearly expressed in several Dalit autobiographical writings. These narratives offer first-hand accounts of the discrimination and suffering faced by the Dalit community in general, while also highlighting how such experiences are shaped by an individual's specific position in terms of gender, class, and place. Dalit autobiographies vividly depict the stigma produced by the caste system, which historically pushed Dalit communities to the margins of society. These narratives reveal how caste-based exclusion structures everyday life and social relations. As Ravi Shankar Kumar observes in his essay, "Dalit autobiographies are not simply accounts of one individual's life history. They are also representative of the life lived in a stigmatised community" ("Politics of Dalit Literature" 60).

Many autobiographies like *Akkarmashi* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawde, *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, *Upara* by Laxman Mane, *Jina Amucha* by Baby Kamble, *Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad, *Vasti* by Vasant Moon, *Karukku* by Bama, *I, Phoolan Devi: Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* by Phoolan Devi, *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, *Dohra Abhishap* by Kaushalya Baisantri, *Aaydan* by Urmila Pawar, etc showcase the immense strength and resilience of having to live a life of contempt and discrimination. These life narratives describe how Dalits were spatially discriminated and relegated to do the menial and unpleasant jobs which were often pushed out of the central space of village proper. Most autobiographies depict Dalit settlements as outside the village proper. This article would particularly focus on the spatial heterotopic formations of Dalit settlements as expressed in *Akkarmashi* by Sarankumar Limbale, *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, *Jina Amucha* by Baby Kamble and *Aaydan* by Urmila Pawar.

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Sharankumar Limbale published his autobiography *Akkarmashi* in 1984 and it was translated into English as *The Outcaste*. It came out as a revealing and touching memoir depicting how Dalit community has been deprived for ages. It was a shocking exposure on a society which had long held Dalits in contempt. Limbale painfully traces his identity in crisis through this autobiography. He says, "I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected?" (Limbale 38-39). This powerful metaphor expresses not only a personal identity crisis but also the spatial logic of caste society. Dalits are physically located within the village yet simultaneously excluded from its social and cultural core. They inhabit segregated spaces—often the outskirts or separate hamlets—symbolising their ambiguous status of belonging and non-belonging. Limbale's comparison to the mythological figure Jarasandh, who was split into two halves, reflects this condition of divided existence. His body metaphorically embodies the spatial organisation of caste, where the village is structured through boundaries that determine who may inhabit central spaces and who must remain at the margins. He exposes how caste oppression is deeply embedded in the spatial organisation of the village. The autobiographical narrative repeatedly shows that Dalit identity is shaped not only by social stigma but also by physical segregation and restricted access to common spaces. Limbale observes that "The untouchables live outside the village, in their own separate quarters" (12), a statement that clearly reveals how caste society structures space in hierarchical ways. The village is divided into zones of purity and pollution, with upper-caste groups occupying the central and sacred spaces while Dalits are pushed to the margins.

Religious spaces in the narrative further illustrate the operation of caste through spatial control. Limbale notes that "The Brahmins would not allow us to enter the temple. They said that we would pollute it with our presence" (65). The temple, which should function as a sacred space accessible to all believers, instead becomes a strictly regulated site where the boundaries of caste are violently enforced. He also describes everyday restrictions that further limit their movement ,"We were not allowed to enter the temples, drink water from public wells, or even touch the vessels of upper-caste people" (14). These prohibitions demonstrate how access to essential public spaces like temples, wells, and houses are controlled to maintain caste hierarchies. Limbale recalls that their school was conducted inside the temple of Ithoba, where seating arrangements reflected caste divisions: "Further down the temple hall sat boys and girls from the cobbler community, and then at the entrance sat we, the Mahar boys and girls. Ariya, a Mang, never sat with us" (4). This spatial arrangement demonstrates how caste distinctions are inscribed even within institutions of learning, an educational space.

Baluta by Daya Pawar is yet another landmark Dalit autobiography that narrates the lived experiences of the Mahar community in rural Maharashtra. The text exposes how caste oppression structures everyday life through systems of labour, humiliation, and spatial segregation. Pawar's narrative vividly demonstrates how caste hierarchy is reproduced through

the organisation of physical space. Describing the living conditions in the Mahar settlement, he writes,

> The Mahars lived in squalid homes, each the size of a henhouse, each henhouse having two or three sub-tenants. Wooden boxes acted as partitions. But they were more than that: we stuffed our lives into those boxes. At night, temporary walls would come up, made of rags hanging from ropes. (Pawar 7)

This description reveals how the Dalit settlement—often referred to as the Maharwada—is spatially and materially marginalised. The cramped and improvised housing reflects not only poverty but also the systematic exclusion of Dalits from the resources and infrastructure available to dominant castes. Spatial marginalisation is closely linked with the hereditary labour system that governs the relationship between the Mahar community and the dominant-caste village. Pawar explains: "We were supposed to run in front of the horse of any important person who came into the village… We dragged away the carcasses of dead animals… For all this, what did we get? Baluta, our share of the village harvest" (66). The practice of 'Baluta' refers to the traditional system in which Dalits performed essential but stigmatised services for the entire village in exchange for a small share of agricultural produce. Although the Mahars were indispensable to the functioning of the village economy, their labour did not translate into social inclusion. The regulation of movement within the village further illustrates how caste hierarchy is enforced through spatial restrictions. Pawar recounts an incident where dominant castes prohibited Mahar women from using a particular road

> One day the village woke up to the fact that the Mahar women were polluting the Maruti temple when their shadows fell on it as they passed up and down to fetch water. So they closed the road. The other route to our well went past the lake, a mile-long struggle against sludge and slime (71).

Here, the concept of ritual pollution literally restructures the geography of the village. Even the shadow of a Dalit woman is considered contaminating, resulting in the closure of a public pathway. The alternative route—longer and physically difficult—demonstrates how caste society imposes spatial hardships that regulate the daily movements of marginalised communities. These spatial practices can be interpreted 'other spaces' that exist within society but are separated from dominant social structures. The Maharwada in *Baluta* functions as such a heterotopic space: it lies within the geographical boundaries of the village yet remains socially and symbolically excluded from its central spaces such as temples, roads, and wells. Pawar's autobiography therefore reveals how caste oppression is not only a social or ideological system but also a spatial one, where the organisation of space itself reinforces inequality and exclusion.

Karukku by Bama is a yet another Dalit autobiography first published in Tamil in 1992. The work narrates Bama's experiences as a Dalit Christian woman and exposes how caste discrimination continues to shape everyday life even within religious and educational institutions that claim equality. Bama's narrative repeatedly reveals how caste operates through

the spatial organisation of the village. She observes that the village itself is divided into distinct settlements occupied by different caste groups

> I don't know how it came about that the upper caste communities were separated into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools—all these stood in their streets" (Bama 7).

This description clearly illustrates how social power is mapped onto physical space. Institutions associated with authority, administration, and education are concentrated in the upper-caste area, while Dalits are confined to peripheral settlements. The spatial segregation of the village thus reproduces caste hierarchy by regulating access to resources and mobility. Such spatial boundaries also govern everyday social interaction. Bama recalls internalising the invisible rules that dictate distance between caste groups: "I knew… I should never come close to where they were… These were the rules" (53). This awareness reflects how caste ideology is embedded in spatial practices, shaping the behaviour and movement of Dalit individuals from childhood. The narrator therefore concludes that "there is no place that was free of caste" (23), emphasising that caste hierarchy permeates every social space—from streets and schools to religious institutions. These segregated Dalit settlements are both inside and outside the village structure—essential to its functioning yet symbolically excluded from its centres of power.

Bama brings out a gendered aspect of space into analysis and reflects on how spatial marginalisation intersects with gender and personal vulnerability. Speaking about her life as an unmarried woman, she explains, "Because I live by myself in this society, without the support of my own such as a family, a husband, and children, I have to face many problems" (137). This statement highlights how the absence of familial protection further intensifies the insecurity experienced within caste-marked spaces. Thus, *Karukku* demonstrates that caste oppression is not only ideological but spatially organised, shaping where Dalits live, how they move, and the extent to which they can access social and institutional spaces within the village.

Across Dalit autobiographies such as *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, and *Karukku* by Bama, spatial marginalisation emerges as a central mechanism through which caste hierarchy is maintained. These narratives reveal that caste oppression is not only ideological or social but also deeply spatial. Dalit communities are consistently located outside the main village settlements, confined to segregated hamlets such as the Maharwada in *Baluta* or the *ceri* described in *Karukku*. Together, these texts demonstrate that caste society is organised through spatial divisions that regulate where people live, how they move, and which spaces they may access. These segregated settlements can be understood through the framework of heterotopia proposed by Michel Foucault. They exist within the boundaries of the village but remain excluded from its centres of power such as temples, administrative buildings, and markets. The Dalit settlements becomes a parallel social world—one that is

essential to the functioning of the village economy yet marked as impure and inferior. At the same time, these spaces also develop internal networks of solidarity and community life among Dalits, which further reinforces their heterotopic character. Thus, the Dalit settlement simultaneously reflects the hierarchical organisation of caste society and exposes the contradictions within it.

The spatial segregation described in these autobiographies can be further understood through Foucault's broader theory of power. Foucault argues that power is not merely exercised through overt authority but through subtle mechanisms that organise social life, particularly through the regulation of space. As he observes, "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (*Space, Knowledge, and Power* 252). In caste society, spatial arrangements—separate settlements, restricted roads, segregated seating in schools, and the prohibition of entry into temples—operate as mechanisms through which upper-caste dominance is maintained. These arrangements regulate the movement and visibility of Dalit bodies within the village, ensuring that social hierarchy remains physically visible and continuously reinforced. Foucault's discussion of disciplinary power also sheds light on how such systems function. He explains

> Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested and, paradoxically, found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force…Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility... It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection…In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. (*The Means of Correct Training* 199)

In the caste context, Dalits are constantly visible as 'untouchables' within the spatial organisation of the village. Their segregated settlements, designated routes, and restricted access to public spaces ensure that their identity is permanently marked and monitored. The power of the upper castes therefore does not always operate through direct violence; rather, it functions through spatial arrangements that continuously remind Dalits of their subordinate position. This dynamic can also be interpreted through Foucault's concept of the panopticon, where power operates through surveillance and spatial organisation. Foucault notes that "through spatial ordering, the panopticon brings together power, control of the body, control of groups and knowledge. It locates individuals in space, in a hierarchical and efficiently visible organization" (19). The caste-based village can be seen as operating in a similar way. By assigning different caste groups to specific areas and regulating access to central spaces, the village creates a hierarchical spatial order where Dalits remain constantly identifiable and controllable. Their location at the margins ensures that they are both visible as labouring bodies and excluded from positions of authority.

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Thus, the autobiographies of Limbale, Pawar, and Bama reveal that caste power operates through the spatial organisation of everyday life. Dalit settlements function as heterotopic spaces that expose the contradictions of caste society, while also demonstrating how power structures are embedded in the physical landscape of the village. Through their narratives, these writers transform marginalised spaces into sites of memory and resistance, documenting how spatial segregation has historically shaped Dalit identity and experience.

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