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**From Marginalisation to Emancipation: Education, Ambedkarite Consciousness, and
Rationalism in Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri***

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Abstract: *Dalit autobiography occupies a significant position in modern Indian literature because it transforms individual memory into a collective testimony of caste oppression, social exclusion, poverty, resistance, and self-assertion. Siddalingaiah's Ooru Keri is an important contribution to Kannada Dalit literature, documenting the lived realities of marginalised communities while articulating a vision of social transformation. The autobiography traces Siddalingaiah's journey from a childhood marked by poverty, hunger, caste-based segregation, and superstition to the development of an educated, rational, progressive, and politically conscious Dalit identity. This paper critically examines the interconnected themes of caste oppression, education, Ambedkarite consciousness, rationalism, atheism, identity formation, and social resistance in Ooru Keri. Particular attention is given to the symbolic distinction between the "Ooru," or dominant-caste village, and the "Keri," or Dalit settlement, as a spatial representation of caste*

hierarchy and social exclusion. The study argues that education functions in the autobiography as an instrument of both individual empowerment and collective liberation. It further analyses the influence of Dr B. R. Ambedkar on Siddalingaiah's intellectual development and his gradual movement from inherited religious beliefs and superstition toward rationalism and atheism. The paper also examines Siddalingaiah's use of humour, irony, realism, and collective memory as distinctive features of Dalit autobiographical aesthetics. Ultimately, Ooru Keri transcends conventional autobiography and emerges as an alternative social history of Dalit life in Karnataka. It demonstrates how literature, education, rational inquiry, and political consciousness can collectively challenge structures of caste domination and contribute to the assertion of human dignity.

Keywords: *Siddalingaiah, Ooru Keri, Dalit Autobiography, Ambedkar, Education, Caste, Rationalism, Atheism, Kannada Dalit Literature*

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Introduction

Dalit literature represents one of the most significant literary and socio-political interventions in modern Indian writing. Emerging from the lived realities of communities historically subjected to untouchability, caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and cultural marginalisation, Dalit literature challenges dominant literary traditions by placing oppressed voices at the centre of literary representation. It rejects representations of Dalits produced exclusively from outside their communities and insists upon the authority of lived experience and self-representation.

Among the various literary forms employed by Dalit writers, autobiography has acquired particular significance. Conventional autobiography frequently focuses on individual development, achievement, and personal identity. Dalit autobiography, however, often extends beyond the individual. The autobiographical self becomes inseparable from the social history and collective experiences of the community. Personal memories of hunger, humiliation, exclusion, education, labour, and resistance become testimonies to larger structures of inequality.

Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* occupies an important position within Kannada Dalit autobiographical literature. Siddalingaiah emerged as a major writer, poet, intellectual, and activist associated with the development of Dalit consciousness in Karnataka. His autobiography presents the world of marginalised communities with remarkable honesty while documenting the social conditions that shaped his intellectual and political development.

The title *Ooru Keri* itself carries profound symbolic significance. The Kannada term "Ooru" refers to the main village, generally inhabited by dominant social groups, whereas "Keri" refers to the settlement where Dalits lived, frequently outside the spatial boundaries of the main village. The distinction between these two geographical spaces represents more than physical separation. It embodies the social architecture of caste.

The separation between Ooru and Keri demonstrates how caste hierarchy becomes embedded in physical space. Social exclusion is reproduced geographically through segregated settlements, creating visible boundaries between dominant and marginalised communities. Siddalingaiah's autobiography transforms this spatial division into a powerful metaphor for the broader inequalities of caste society.

At the same time, *Ooru Keri* is not exclusively a narrative of victimhood. Siddalingaiah depicts poverty, hunger, untouchability, and humiliation, but his narrative also foregrounds humour, resilience, community relationships, education, intellectual development, and collective resistance. His autobiographical journey represents a movement from marginalisation toward consciousness and self-assertion.

This paper examines how *Ooru Keri* transforms personal memory into a narrative of Dalit emancipation. It focuses particularly on the role of education, the influence of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the critique of superstition and blind faith, the movement toward rationalism and

atheism, and Siddalingaiah's emergence as a progressive thinker. It argues that education and Ambedkarite consciousness function as interconnected forces that enable the autobiographical subject to critically understand caste oppression and to transform personal experience into literary and political resistance.

Objectives of the Study

The present research paper has the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of caste oppression and social exclusion in Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri*.
2. To analyse the symbolic significance of the spatial division between the Ooru and the Keri.
3. To investigate education as an instrument of liberation, dignity, and social mobility.
4. To examine the influence of Dr B. R. Ambedkar on Siddalingaiah's intellectual and political consciousness.
5. To analyse Siddalingaiah's critique of blind faith and superstition.
6. To examine his ideological transformation from theism toward atheism and rationalism.
7. To evaluate Siddalingaiah as a progressive thinker and social activist.
8. To study the literary significance of humour, irony, realism, and collective memory in *Ooru Keri*.
9. To assess the contribution of *Ooru Keri* to Kannada Dalit literature and Indian autobiographical writing.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology. Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* serves as the primary literary text. Close textual analysis is employed to identify and interpret the major themes, symbols, ideological concerns, and narrative strategies represented in the autobiography.

The theoretical orientation of the study is informed by Dalit literary criticism, Ambedkarite thought, theories of education and liberation, and critical perspectives on caste, identity, and social exclusion. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between individual memory and collective history.

The study examines *Ooru Keri* not merely as an individual life narrative but as a socio-literary document that records the experiences of marginalised communities in Karnataka. The research also considers the broader intellectual contributions of scholars and thinkers such as B. R. Ambedkar, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, Paulo Freire, and others whose ideas provide useful frameworks for understanding education, caste oppression, resistance, and social transformation.

Caste Oppression and the Geography of Exclusion

One of the central concerns of *Ooru Keri* is the pervasive influence of caste on everyday life. Siddalingaiah presents caste not merely as a social classification but as a structure that determines residence, opportunities, social treatment, and dignity. The title itself reflects this spatial inequality: “**Ooru**” represents the main village inhabited by dominant communities, while “**Keri**” refers to the marginalised Dalit settlement. Thus, physical separation becomes a visible expression of social exclusion and untouchability.

The boundary between the Ooru and the Keri reflects the caste-based ideology of purity and pollution, and of superiority and inferiority. Although Dalit labour contributes significantly to village life, Dalits remain excluded from equal social participation. However, the Keri is not merely a space of oppression; it is also a space of solidarity, cultural identity, humour, survival, and collective memory. By placing the Keri at the centre of his autobiography, Siddalingaiah transforms a socially marginalised space into an important site of literary experience, history, and cultural knowledge.

Poverty, Hunger, and the Struggle for Survival

Economic deprivation is closely connected with caste oppression in *Ooru Keri*. Siddalingaiah’s childhood memories reveal persistent poverty, hunger, and material insecurity among marginalised families. Such deprivation is presented not as an individual failure but as the result of social structures that historically restricted Dalit access to land, education, employment, and economic resources.

Hunger represents both the physical consequences of inequality and the struggle for survival. Nevertheless, Siddalingaiah does not portray Dalits merely as passive victims. Through humour, friendship, solidarity, and resilience, the community maintains its humanity despite severe hardship. Hunger thus becomes both a symbol of social injustice and a testimony to the strength and resilience of marginalised communities.

Education as a Tool of Liberation

Education occupies a central position in *Ooru Keri*, functioning as an instrument of dignity, intellectual independence, social recognition, and liberation. Historically, caste hierarchy restricted marginalised communities’ access to education, reinforcing their social and economic dependence.

Siddalingaiah’s educational journey therefore acquires political significance. His literacy earns him respect within his largely illiterate community. He recalls:

“People felt very happy because I not only read the letters but also explained their meanings. Some would make me write letters to their relatives. I would then get, besides a generous amount of eats, some money. For the handful who got love letters, I was equal to god” (*Ooru Keri* 33–34).

This passage demonstrates the transformative power of literacy. By reading and writing letters, Siddalingaiah connects community members with the wider world and gains social recognition. Education also develops critical consciousness, enabling him to question caste inequality rather than accept it as natural or divinely ordained.

His experiences reflect Dr B. R. Ambedkar's emphasis on education as essential to the liberation and self-respect of oppressed communities. Although poverty, hunger, and discrimination create barriers to learning, Siddalingaiah's journey demonstrates that education remains a powerful means of challenging caste oppression and asserting equality.

Ambedkarite Consciousness and Dalit Emancipation

Dr B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual and political philosophy forms an important ideological foundation of *Ooru Keri*. His emphasis on education, self-respect, equality, political participation, and collective organisation provided marginalised communities with the means to challenge caste oppression.

Siddalingaiah's journey from a marginalised child to an educated writer and activist reflects the transformative power of Ambedkarite consciousness. His narrative rejects humiliation as the natural condition of Dalit existence and instead asserts dignity and self-respect. His involvement in the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti further demonstrates the transition from individual awareness to collective political action. Thus, the autobiographical "I" becomes connected with the collective "we," representing the broader movement of Dalits from imposed inferiority toward dignity, organisation, and social assertion.

Blind Faith and Superstition

Ooru Keri critically examines blind faith, superstition, and supernatural beliefs prevalent within marginalised communities. Siddalingaiah connects such beliefs with poverty, illiteracy, insecurity, and limited access to education and scientific knowledge. Beliefs in gods, spirits, possession, ghosts, and local deities often provided psychological comfort but could also reinforce fear and fatalism.

Education gradually enables Siddalingaiah to question these inherited beliefs through rational inquiry. While recognising the cultural significance of community traditions, he criticises practices that encourage fear and unquestioning submission. His critique suggests that Dalit liberation requires not only social and economic transformation but also intellectual freedom and critical consciousness.

From Theism to Atheism

Siddalingaiah's transition from religious belief to atheism represents an important stage in his intellectual development. His journey moves from childhood beliefs in gods, spirits, and supernatural powers toward scepticism and rational inquiry. He states:

"By that time I had already lost faith in god" (*Ooru Keri* 72).

This transformation represents more than a personal religious choice. Rational consciousness enables Siddalingaiah to understand poverty and caste oppression as products of social structures rather than fate or divine will. His atheism thus becomes an assertion of intellectual autonomy and the right to question inherited beliefs. His journey demonstrates the close relationship among education, rationalism, intellectual freedom, and social consciousness.

Siddalingaiah as a Progressive Thinker

In *Ooru Keri*, Siddalingaiah emerges as a progressive thinker committed to equality, education, rationalism, human dignity, and social transformation. He rejects caste inequality as a natural condition and exposes its oppressive character through his lived experiences.

His critique of superstition and orthodoxy reflects his belief that traditions should be evaluated according to their impact on human freedom and equality. His involvement in the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti further connects his intellectual ideas with social activism. For Siddalingaiah, literature and activism function as complementary forms of resistance. His progressive philosophy therefore combines lived experience, Ambedkarite consciousness, education, rationalism, literary expression, and collective struggle.

Humour and Irony as Strategies of Resistance

Humour and irony are distinctive features of *Ooru Keri*. Although Siddalingaiah addresses painful experiences of caste discrimination, poverty, hunger, and humiliation, he avoids presenting Dalit life as entirely tragic. Humour becomes a strategy of emotional survival and resilience.

His humorous description of becoming “**equal to god**” while reading love letters illustrates how comedy humanises marginalised experiences. Similarly, irony exposes the contradictions of a society that claims to be moral while practising untouchability. Through humour and irony, Siddalingaiah presents Dalits not merely as victims but as complex, resilient individuals capable of preserving their dignity and humanity despite oppression.

Personal Memory as Collective History

Although *Ooru Keri* is formally an autobiography, its significance extends far beyond Siddalingaiah’s individual life. His memories preserve the social history of a marginalised community whose experiences have often remained absent from official historical narratives.

Conventional histories frequently privilege institutions, political leaders, dominant social groups, and major public events. The everyday experiences of marginalised people—hunger, housing, labour, education, discrimination, community relationships, and cultural practices—may remain undocumented.

Autobiography provides an alternative archive.

Through personal memory, Siddalingaiah documents social realities that institutional histories frequently overlook. His recollections preserve details about segregated settlements,

educational experiences, economic deprivation, religious practices, community relationships, and changing political consciousness.

The autobiography therefore transforms memory into historical testimony. Individual recollections become evidence of larger social structures.

This relationship between the personal and collective is fundamental to Dalit autobiography. The narrator's life is significant not because it is exceptional but because it illuminates experiences shared by a broader community.

Literary Significance of *Ooru Keri*

The literary significance of *Ooru Keri* lies in its combination of social realism and narrative creativity. Siddalingaiah uses simple, direct, and accessible language enriched by humour, irony, vivid descriptions, and collective memories. These elements give the autobiography its distinctive literary character.

The text also challenges conventional literary aesthetics by presenting hunger, poverty, untouchability, and caste humiliation as legitimate subjects of literature. Siddalingaiah transforms lived experience into a source of literary and political expression. Rather than focusing solely on individual achievement, the autobiography connects personal development with the collective struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community. Its English translation has further expanded its reach, bringing Kannada Dalit experiences into wider discussions of caste, identity, marginalisation, human rights, and social justice.

Major Findings

The critical analysis of Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* leads to the following major findings:

1. *Ooru Keri* transforms individual autobiography into a collective testimony of Dalit life and social history.
2. The spatial division between the "Ooru" and the "Keri" functions as a powerful symbol of caste-based segregation and social exclusion.
3. Caste oppression in the autobiography is closely connected with poverty, hunger, economic deprivation, and unequal access to social resources.
4. Education functions as the primary instrument of liberation, dignity, critical consciousness, and social mobility.
5. Siddalingaiah's experiences demonstrate that literacy possesses both individual and collective value within marginalised communities.
6. Dr B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy significantly shapes the autobiography's emphasis on education, equality, self-respect, rationalism, and collective resistance.

7. Siddalingaiah's critique of superstition reveals the relationship between social deprivation, fear, illiteracy, and blind faith.
8. His movement from theism toward atheism represents intellectual emancipation and the development of rational consciousness.
9. Siddalingaiah emerges as a progressive thinker who combines literary creativity with social activism and political commitment.
10. Humour and irony function as important narrative strategies that resist victimisation and affirm the humanity and resilience of Dalit communities.
11. Personal memory in *Ooru Keri* functions as an alternative historical archive, documenting experiences frequently excluded from mainstream history.
12. The autobiography makes an important contribution to Kannada Dalit literature by combining social realism, Ambedkarite consciousness, collective memory, and literary resistance.

Conclusion

Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* is a significant Dalit autobiography that transforms personal experience into a powerful narrative of collective memory, social criticism, and emancipation. It documents caste oppression, spatial segregation, poverty, hunger, and humiliation while emphasising resilience, education, dignity, and resistance.

The symbolic division between the Ooru and the Keri reveals how caste inequality is embedded in the social and geographical organisation of everyday life. By placing the marginalised Keri at the centre of his narrative, Siddalingaiah establishes Dalit experience as a legitimate source of literature, history, and knowledge.

Education emerges as a transformative force, enabling Siddalingaiah to develop self-respect and challenge caste oppression. Influenced by Ambedkarite thought, he moves from superstition and blind faith toward rationalism and intellectual freedom. His involvement in Dalit activism further demonstrates the connection between literature, political consciousness, and collective struggle.

Through humour and irony, *Ooru Keri* presents Dalits not merely as victims but as resilient individuals capable of preserving dignity and solidarity. Ultimately, the autobiography functions as social testimony, cultural memory, political critique, and alternative history. It remains an important contribution to Kannada Dalit literature, demonstrating that education, rationalism, self-respect, collective action, and literary expression are powerful instruments in the struggle against caste oppression and for social emancipation.

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Ultimately, all binary divisions between spatial, social, and ideological polarities within this study by Mrs. Mamta N. Gaikwad and Dr. Prasad Santosh Ramsundar dissolve into absolute equilibrium.

Through the mechanics of The Pramod Effect by Dr. Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar ($1 - 1 = 0 = 1$), historical marginalisation and resistance resolve into the singular essence of universal interconnectedness.

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