

## *Untouched Voices: Dalit Women's Autobiographies in Dalit History*

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### **Abstract**

This paper will engage with the idea of the self as a narrated, social identity, as this is explored and articulated in Dalit women's autobiographical writing. The category 'Dalit' came into use sometime in the nineteenth century to denote the oppressed and exploited 'untouchable' communities of India, traditionally considered so 'impure' that they were 'out-castes'; and yet, simultaneously, integral to defining the system, in being its 'lowest' component. However, this liminal position and status predates the emergence of the appellation 'Dalit' by millennia, is as old as the caste-system itself. 'Dalit' is a construction of singular political identity, out of large variety of 'outcaste' communities, based on the commonality of their oppression. This paper will examine Dalit women's autobiographies as the multi-layered articulations of their engagements with

- (a) oppressions effected by the commonality of being Dalit;
- (b) oppressions effected by the fact of being women in a profoundly patriarchal order;
- (c) the tensions generated in the intersections of these two.

Analyzing the writings of Baby Kamble, Sumitra Bhave and Kaushalya Basantrai, this paper will explore how, by virtue of these intersections, the routine narrative imperatives of the autobiographical confessional mode – e.g., emphasizing first-person perceptions and experiences – morph from individual stories of pain, into gendered narratives of oppression, and thereby into ineradicable archives of the suffering and injustice that constitute the histories of the community. The paper will thus reflect on the dynamics between gender, caste and class identities on the one hand, and on their narrativizations into histories of community.

Keywords: Dalit, caste, narrative, identity, autobiography,

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## Introduction

Dalit as a term denotes broken or shattered, a community which has been socially segregated across the Indian society according to the caste system, the composition of four castes in the Varna system came into being as per different body parts of Brahma, the Brahmins evolving from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas (peasants and traders) from the thighs. Dalits being the neglected and suppressed caste is assumed to have evolved from the feet of Brahma and therefore, occupy the lowest position in the society. 'Caste' was basically meant to serve the so called 'upper' castes.

The origin of caste has been described by different scholars and the most common and well accepted theory is by Ambedkar. Ambedkar's theory is based on the Varna system mentioned in the Manusmriti. According to the Varna system people are divided on the basis of occupation into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Though there is no mention of the fifth Varna (outcastes) in Manusmriti but it clearly explains the concept of mixed castes. According to Manu, the offspring of inter-caste marriages are to be considered the most degraded in the society and are forced to live on the outskirts of a civilization. Varna system showcases a rigid hierarchy which places Brahmins at the top and hence provides them a privileged position. Caste is determined on the basis of occupation. Certain groups are considered suitable for particular occupations, such as the Brahmins who have always enjoyed the right to study the spiritual texts and Sanskrit at the same time, denying the right to attain education to other lower castes. The Shudras have always been considered fit to perform only menial jobs, related to cleaning the 'filth' of the society.

The racial theory traces the origin of the caste system to the invasion of the Aryans in India around 1500 B.C. The Aryans thought of themselves as a superior race and were in constant conflict with the indigenous tribe of Dasus. But later intermarriages took place between the two races, giving rise to different identity groups and dividing the society further based on color and occupation.

The ritual theory describes a theosophical, moralist, ritualistic society in which people derive their identity in the performance of different rituals for distinctive purposes e.g., Kshatriyas perform rituals at the warfront. People belonging to the 'upper' caste status e.g. Brahmins perform rituals for the common welfare of people. There are various theories on which caste is understood. Caste is also understood and generally connoted equivalent to 'jati', which is often used in Indian society and often confused with the term 'Varna'. From Varnas, various jatis, castes and even sub-castes have emerged and each 'Jati' is different from other Jatis. Basically 'Jati' is an Indian word used for caste.

It was only in the last phase of twentieth century that Dalits were seen representing them with Dalit writings reflected in Dalit Literature. Dalit Autobiographies is an important genre of Dalit Literature, but recently lots of Dalit writings also include fiction.

The plight of Dalit women is even more deplorable who have been oppressed on the basis of caste, by both upper caste men and women, on the basis of class, including both social and economic and gender by both Savarnas and Dalit men. The

representation of Dalit women began with Ambedkar's efforts, his major concern being the right of self-representation, not only for Dalits but more for Dalit women, because of his staunch belief that only educated women can contribute to a progressive and prosperous society.

With the emergence of Feminism as a social movement showcasing the cause of women, there was hope for amelioration of Dalit women. But unfortunately, since most of the women in the women's movement were upper caste educated women, they generalized the concerns of women neglecting the difference in class and caste. These upper caste feminists failed to either understand or represent the experiences of Dalit women. This resulted in either marginal or no representation of Dalit women. Sharmila Rege correctly points out in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* about the partial representation of Dalit women along with the concerns of upper caste women, she asserts "In the women's movement too, caste was rarely discussed as it was assumed that caste identities could be transcended by the larger identity of sisterhood among all women"<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in case of Dalit men voicing the problems of Dalit women they talked about the universal atrocities on Dalits, thus making it a generalized victimization of women. Because a Dalit woman has been suppressed a lot more than a woman of an upper caste, there was a compelling need to voice the concerns of Dalit women by none other than Dalit women herself who have agonized the pain of being triply marginalized.

As a result of this resentment and dissatisfaction, it was during the 1990s that there was an upsurge in Dalit women's autobiographies in various languages like Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi. Now even English translations of these autobiographies are readily available. Dalit Women's Autobiography is used as a form of personal testimony by Dalit women in order to share their personal experiences; which are experiences of public humiliation and sexual exploitation in various forms.

My paper aims at analyzing autobiographies by Dalit women. One of these autobiographies *Dohra Abhishap* by Kaushalya Basantrai explains the plight of Dalit women focusing on the dual subordination of women by men on personal level and by upper castes on social level. It will chart out the personal instances that liberate women and works as a stepping stone towards their enlightenment and representation in the society. The paper focuses mainly on Baby Kamble's *Prison We Broke*, Sumitra Bhavne's *Pan on Fire* and Kaushalya Basantrai's *Dohra Abhishap*.

Baby Kamble's autobiography *Jina Amucha* originally written in Marathi narrates the tale of Dalit patriarchy, the plight of women and horrific conditions and day to day challenges that the community and especially women have to undergo in the class biased society. Kamble in her interview asserts that it is not her personal life that she intends to narrate in her autobiography. She transcends the boundaries of personal narrative and instead showcases the social conditions of the community. Kamble says that she finds it difficult to think of herself outside her community and exposes the real conditions of the Mahars of Maharashtra, dwelling in Maharwada. Kamble begins by talking about the month of 'Ashadh' which is the most treasured month for Mahars. This month involves cleaning of the houses, polishing of the walls, bathing

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<sup>1</sup> Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies*. Zubaan Books. New Delhi 2013. Pg 2.Print.

of the entire family along with washing of the rags. Kamble explains the elaborate ritual of cleaning and bathing that begins early in the morning and goes on till late afternoon. The woman of the house literally pushes the boys and girls to take a bath. Harsh reality of poverty and lack of hygienic conditions in Mahar community is discussed at length in the autobiography.

*The Prison We Broke* is a feminist critique of patriarchy, the text narrates how Dalit women are the 'other' for Dalit men, in the same manner in which Dalits are the 'other' to the Brahmins. How caste and patriarchy coincide and hence support in sustaining further violence and injustice for women. Kamble asserts that the poverty stricken conditions of the family are so bad that they do not use any soap for cleaning themselves, instead what the women do is to buy dried coconut and shilkakai worth one paisa. Since, the ritual of bathing comes after a long time; it exposes the fixation with the idea of cleanliness, which they avail only once a year.

Kamble while mentioning the exploitative set up of the society explains how women become enemies of their own gender. The mother-in-laws are the perpetrators of maximum domestic violence. In order to secure their own position of superiority they make the poor daughter-in-law thrashed by her son. The bitterness and violence take violent form by chopping off the nose of the daughter-in-law. Later she is thrown out of the house of her in-laws on the grounds of bad moral character.

Kamble devotes a large section of her autobiography of how Dalits even after being oppressed for centuries by other castes still cling to Hindu rituals, although they have no money to carry forward the over expensive rituals. The obsession of Dalit women with 'haldi', 'kumkum' is an example which establishes the fact that Dalits try their best to preserve whatever bit of Hindu culture they can. Irrespective of the fact that Hindu culture itself has discarded the Dalits completely and Brahmins used Dalits in order to maintain their own superiority. Kamble states that it was by worshipping the Hindu gods that Dalits found some solace and aspiring better future for them. Kamble lashes out at Hinduism stating that it perpetuates religion which is not meant for humans but animals. "What a beastly thing Hinduism is! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy – it is the very life blood of the Mahars!" (56)

Kamble narrates the rituals of Maharwada that went on for four weeks, the superstitions and the elaborate ceremonies that Dalits enjoyed. This further emphasizes the undying faith and the orthodoxy of the down trodden. The ritual of offering the eldest son as 'vaghya' or 'potraja' was considered very prestigious for the family. Especially fathers took great pride in looking at the son dressed in feminine attire with his forehead smeared with 'haldi' and 'kumkum'. Fathers praised boy's singing and dancing ability, stating that the boy looks good as a 'nachaya'. Another instance that Kamble refers at length is the instance of women being possessed with goddesses at prayer meetings with loud music and people approaching her to worship her and fulfill the demands of the goddess so that she blesses the entire household and does not curse them instead.

The vivid description about the condition of women during the course of child birth really shakes our souls. Lack of any experienced doctor and hygienic conditions pose a dangerous threat to the lives of the young girls married at an early age and middle aged women. Since there are no doctors, women delivering the kids rely on ignorant

midwives, who trust their hands and therefore keep inserting their hands into the poor women's vagina, in order to figure out the position of the unborn child. This continuous infusion results in the swelling of the vagina and hence obstructing the path for the child. The life of the delivering mother depends only on her luck. Her mother is requested to rush to the temple of lakhamai and pray for her child. The girl after enduring the pain of the delivery has to bear the pain of the swollen and wounded vagina.

Kamble mentions a practice under which parents are forced to feed their children cactus pods, removing the thorns and eating the fleshy part. The plant satisfies the hunger for a fortnight but next day cactus seeds become slabs of cement, one is unable to attend nature's call, no matter how hard one tries but this refuses to be pushed out. Poor Mahar families eat this deadly cactus pods themselves and offer it to their children, such is the picture of real poverty stricken condition which cannot go unnoticed.

The later part of Kamble's text narrates how Ambedkar illuminates the Mahars, how he added life to the lifeless status of the downtrodden. It was Ambedkar asserts Kamble, who gave the untouchables a human form instead of the god, the creator of humans. Who turned a blind eye towards the suffering of the Mahars. Kamble questions why is it that Brahmins still preserve and propagate their religious texts like Ramayana and Mahabharata? Whereas it has been just thirty years since Baba passed away but we have already wiped away his teachings.

Baba Saheb Ambedkar brought about a revolution for the Depressed Classes. Maharwada was elated to see acquaintances and were influenced among the lot, like many other folks of the community see a Mahar man's acceptance into the upper caste society. Baby Kamble and Dr. Ambedkar professed with the intent of promoting the spread of education amongst the Depressed Classes by opening hostels, libraries and by advancing the economic conditions of such down trodden castes by setting up schools. He was against the unquestionable acceptance of the caste system which emphasized on suppressing the suppressed, a practice which is both, morally and legally wrong. Babasaheb's main concern was that the untouchables should cease to be agricultural laborers and escape from their landlessness. They should either get industrial or white collar jobs or they should get land for cultivation. He criticized the Indian village system where the lives of the untouchables were dictated by the dominant 'touchable' community. Ambedkar stated, "I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?"<sup>5</sup> In Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, there are innumerable references which showcase that the action of a single individual or a group of Dalits, only if they stand up and question the traditionally accepted notions of morality and social behavior; the Caste Hindus not only get offended but take it as a grave violation of its ethics and also punish the offenders severely. And the punishment can go to any extend, be it naked parading of Dalits in the village or just setting fire to the household of poor Dalits and thus rendering them homeless. Hence, both the authority and the rule book stays only with the upper caste. Furthermore, any challenge to the caste hegemony is looked after by the caste makers.

It is worth noticing how the notions of two great leaders, Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, differed on the debatable issue of caste. Gandhi, a baniya by caste (a vaishya) imagined a utopian life for the Indians. *The Prisons we broke* portrays a very anti-Gandhian picture of the entire Dalit Movement. We learn that during her school days, Baby and her friends, used to torment and insult other upper caste girls at the slightest possible chance. This was a method to let the “upper” caste people know that the Mahars can no longer be suppressed. Innumerable instances can be picked up which clearly portray the retaliation and the process of annihilation among the Dalits. For instance, Baby and her mates deliberately “polluted” the drinking water of the school, and they intentionally entered the temples of the upper caste people. Baby Kamble describes the insults each caste group threw at each other’s leaders (Ambedkar and Gandhi) very effectively through songs. To quote a Mahar’s song:

“Our Ambedkar looks like a sahib. You know why your Gandhi is toothless?  
Because our Ambedkar kicked him in his teeth! Ha ha...That’s why your  
Gandhi has no teeth! And you know why Gandhi has no hair? Because our  
Ambedkar shaved it off! That’s the kind of man our Ambedkar is!”<sup>2</sup>

Maharwada is known for domestic violence where husbands beat up their wives and it is even more tragic if the girl is eight to nine years old newly married girl. Kamble explains the situation of Dalit women being beaten up by their male counter parts by quoting one of her personal experiences.

“Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely...The same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train”<sup>3</sup>

Another very interesting book is *Pan on Fire* by Sumitra Bhave. She has enlisted eight Dalit women testimonies. The Dalit feminist movement she stresses should begin with embracing ‘shame’ in order to put ‘honor’ of shameful caste into question. The most important aspect of the book is the idea of getting over with shame; by talking about issues which have always been a taboo, be it sex or menstruation but above all it how women feel about their lives and experiences. Certain sections in the book ridicule the practice of polygamy by men, stressing the fact if ‘purity of vagina’ is stressed, it should also demand ‘purity of penis’. In the book eight different Dalit women are portrayed as strong women who endure the sufferings of caste and patriarchy. But still rise above the hardships of their life and are able to make their families rise above and stay together. The book is in a form of collective interviews, more like informal ‘chat sessions’ where women and young girls open about their personal life and their future aspirations.

The book is one of its kinds addressing the life of Dalit women under different circumstances and how they deal or prepare themselves to deal with their present situation. Extremely important observations like the importance of women help groups come across. Women share, exchange and console each other which gives

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<sup>2</sup> Kamble. Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan. 2008. Pg 110. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Kamble. Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan. 2008. Pg 155. Print.

them confidence and support, whereas men lack such support groups, says Rukmini (one of the interviewee) in the book. The book discusses 'fire' in the literal sense of the term, in the sense that it openly talks about issues that were never discussed till date. Women are taught to stay repressed and not talk openly about their feelings. Rukmani mentioned in the book, whatever you say, a woman's life is pretty bad you were asking me why wear all these ornaments and kumkum. But if a woman does not people say look at that witch or if the sari slips from one's head they say here is a prostitute. Women are clearly looked upon as objects, who glorify the cultural traditions of the caste Hindus. Those who don't follow the customs are termed as sluts. Men in a patriarchal society have conveniently dumped to onus of tradition, entirely on the shoulders of women. Do we ever see men wearing a 'mangalsutra' or vermilion denoting that they are married? Certainly not!

Here issues like menstruation and the treatment young girls and women get when they are menstruating are discussed at length. They are ordered to 'stay away' and not mingle with others during their period due to the superstitious idea of 'impurity', instead of explaining it to the young ones about onset of puberty and hormonal changes, people start discussing about their marriage and their getting mature. Women are slowly progressing, they understand and acknowledge the value of education and are staunch followers of Dr. Ambedkar and his teachings. Therefore, they contribute to whatever little they could at both personal and social level.

One of the testimonies is by Chhaya, a Mahar girl who is just eighteen years old, stays with her grandmother and her maternal-uncle, who is a patriarch and Chhaya feels very uncomfortable when he asserts his authority. This girl exhibits an example of a free spirit who wants to take her own decisions in life, decisions related to marriage or career. She does not wish to get married at an early age instead she wants to continue school. She wishes to be independent by working on her own but somewhere the orthodox set up of the family and rumors about her being involved with guys really make her depressed. Chhaya has her own inhibitions about marriage. The domestic violence that she has witnessed and the taboo of inter caste marriages. Chhaya has to stand the suspicious nature of her family. Her autobiography ends with a bright hope for her future, she is shown to be working and the biggest achievement is that she takes a loan and renovates her house, which makes her grandmother very happy. She succeeds in implementing her belief of not getting married early but instead being independent is what counts more and adds meaning to a woman's life.

Dalit women are often considered 'thrice Dalits' as they are exploited by the forces of caste, class and gender. Kaushalya Basantri's *Dohra Abhishap* narrates the tale of Mahar women in Maharashtra. Various factors that subdue women are addressed here by Basantrai, she narrates her autobiography by charting the condition of women which she witnessed around her, Although her parents who worked as mill workers worked very hard all their life just to make sure that their children are educated and well placed in life. In spite of having such an assertive and independent mother; Basantrai as a child witnessed her mother cursing her for bearing so many daughters and no son. The fixation with the idea of male child is quite prevalent in Indian society, a male heir to the family, somebody who will carry on the family name and virtue forward. Wondering why can't women take family name forward? Also, our fixation with the male child comes from our religion and the shastras that have been ruling our minds. The very fact that the funeral pyre can be given light only by the

son and not a daughter I feel somewhere plays a crucial role. Religious sentiments reign supreme in Hindu religion. On top of that Dalits in order to look for someone to be the breadwinner emphasizes the value of a son.

Basantrai talks about an important aspect of widow remarriage, and brings in important aspects of gender bias in the concept of remarriage. Young widows were allowed to remarry but the marriage ceremony was different for both divorced females and widows. A stark difference between the rituals which even pricks the readers more is that after the second marriage of a widow she was sent away only at night and not during the day contrary to the newly wedded bride. Also, after second marriage widows were not allowed to participate in auspicious ceremonies like wedding or any ceremony related to god. Widowers or divorced males on the contrary were allowed to marry again with pomp and show, there were no such restrictions for them. The rituals of our society are the very basis of discrimination of gender, makes a woman feel small and downcast. Another prevalent practice which Basantrai mentions is that second marriage was common amongst men, even when the first wife was present in the house. In case of objection from the first wife for second marriage for her husband she was given good thrashing by the husband and kept quiet, her opinion never really mattered in the family.

The idea of educating women has been given due importance in Basantrai's narrative but women have to struggle more than men to continue their studies and have a good career. Even Basantrai's parents thought of halting the education of their daughter considering that they will not be able to find suitable educated match for their daughter if she is highly qualified. Education runs parallel with the idea of keeping matrimony at the center, Education for men is considered normative whereas highly educated wife of a man is still considered as an aberration. Basantrai showcases very common picture of abusive language and social boycott that a woman has to go through if she chooses to marry at a later age.

Basantrai internalized the essential educational superiority of males and married the most educated known Dalit, she became a victim of sexist ideology. All her hopes are shattered when she discovers that Devendra Kumar (her husband) is a self-centered and a cold human being. The kind of treatment that Basantrai gets from his end is extremely painful, Devendra leaves her when she is about to deliver their baby. She had to be accompanied by the maid to the hospital and even when Devendra came to visit her in the hospital, he comes to show off his status and post of an officer by shifting Basantrai to the private ward. His conscious does not even remind him to inquire about the health of his wife. He decides to leave for another tour by giving calculated amount of mere thirty rupees for the hospital. Basantrai couldn't continue to stay with her husband in the later years of her life and therefore, stays with her younger son.

Basantrai exposes a very relevant aspect in her life when she narrates her struggle to acquire a water tap for her family inside the house, as the atmosphere near the tap and the conversations followed by it were turning abusive and ugly day by day. She along with her dad had to bear the cultural bias of the employees and an officer, but on top of that she was also a victim of sexual harassment. Such examples reflect vulnerable condition of women and explore the hypocrisy of men at the official level. Even the



workers and other women from lower strata are taken for granted by men and hence ill-treated.

Basantrai in later period of her life keeps her occupied with the upliftment and betterment of women by organizing mahila sangs, but even after her constant requests, the husbands of the women of the sang; would do not allow their wives to be a part of such a propaganda. Basantrai like her own mother followed the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar and promoted the idea of uniting and educating women.

The autobiographies discussed in this paper portray the lives of Mahar community focusing on the marginalization of women in the society both at the social and personal level. Women narrators are mainly believers of Dr Ambedkar and follow his ideology of gaining education and that is the only tool through which the down trodden can represent themselves in a caste biased society and break the shackles of slavery. The above narratives end on a promising note where women have struggled to acquire knowledge and are involved with larger development of Dalits and women in particular. But even in the conclusion of their autobiographies, on professional front they seem happy and involved, but they share unhappy state in their personal lives. All these women at some or the other point have been a victim of severe male domination. They accepted their husbands as they are, they thrash them up, distrust them and even accuse them of their moral character, but there is nothing much that these women can do about it. Basantrai choose not to stay with her husband, Baby Kamble herself accepts in her interview that her husband used to distrust her and beat her up. Hence, we see a streak of unhappiness towards the not so co-operative male partners. It is only on the social front that these women became a part of progressive and supportive women communities. This comparative aloofness of women from the community is primarily due to ideological and structural nature of the society, which is mainly patriarchal.

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