



Research Paper

Caste and Gender Issues in Dalit Women's Autobiographies

Preeti Singh

Research scholar

HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

The status of Indian Dalit women with respect to caste system has been a matter of concern as they are socially and economically alienated. They are subjected to exploitation in all forms and are victims of discriminatory social and religious practices, and therefore, their problems are distinct in many ways. A gendered demarcation has always existed between men and women which places men in superior and strong position while women are placed in inferior and weak position. Though in India many legislative changes have been brought for women's empowerment, gender equality still remains only a dream. For Dalit women, the yet another dimension of caste further deepens this inequality in society. Autobiographies written by Dalit women give us a firsthand account of the victim's experience of injustice and inequality in a male dominated, caste-oriented world. It is, therefore, pertinent to note that personal narratives written by Indian Dalit women writers reveal their everyday caste and class exploitations that call for the restoration of dignity and self-respect. The very emergence of Dalit autobiography is an act of resistance because Dalits are using this opportunity to assert their identities through their writings. The present paper attempts to explore the caste system and gender inequality inherent in Indian society revealed through the autobiographies of two women Dalit writers, namely Urmila Pawar and Bama, who, in their autobiographies have discussed the oppressive social milieu they have lived in and the discrimination they experienced due to their caste and gender, and how they have overcome these barriers in order to find self-fulfillment.

KEYWORDS: Women's autobiography, Dalit women, Caste, Gender, Resistance literature

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I. INTRODUCTION

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan* originally written in Marathi as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) deals with the difficulties she experienced in the educational system that has been Brahminical for centuries. She writes about the experiences of inferiority associated with her caste through her self-narratives which also critically engage in describing Dalit patriarchy (Saha 2017; Mahurkar 2018; Sreelatha 2015). She records a woman's discovery of selfhood and identity while she struggles with poverty, to finally empower herself and achieve happiness. Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, originally in Tamil, is a detailed story from her childhood to her early adult life as a nun, and beyond (Sivanarayanan 2002; Wankhede 2017). It deals with her experiences of being a Dalit woman and is about the conflict between herself and the community and her recovery from social and institutional betrayal (Behal 2003; Limbale 2004; Mangalam 2004). Presently, we'll discuss two of the common factors – caste and gender – noted in the narratives of Pawar and Bama that are narrated as hindrances to the socio-economic progress of women in India. The factors function as strong barriers in the path of women's emancipation in general, and of Dalit women in particular.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO THE EMANCIPATION OF DALIT WOMEN

(a) Caste Stigma

It's a well-known fact that Hindu society in India as a whole is divided into numerous castes, some of which are called 'upper' castes while the others are called 'lower' castes. The appendages 'upper' and 'lower' do not serve only as nomenclature upper castes are 'upper' since they enjoy a superior socio-economic and political status, whereas lower castes are 'lower' because they are bereft of socio-economic and political control in the national affairs. The centuries-old division of the Indian society into four *varnas* relegated these caste

groups to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, without any independent means of living, and therefore, they are most often landless peasantry doing menial jobs. For this and other associated factors, they find themselves in helpless condition to alter their socio-economic status. An individual in India is born into a caste with the power this cultural capital can buy, or deny, him or her. Caste and socio-economic status are directly linked. The 'low caste' communities are economically also low since most often they live on menial, low-paying means of subsistence. Urmila Pawar's community, i.e., Mahar community, traditionally takes up the job of weaving bamboo baskets (called *aaydan* in Marathi). She tells that outside the Konkan, the job of weaving bamboo baskets was traditionally assigned to nomadic tribes like the Burud. The Mahar caste undertook this task in the Konkan region. Her mother used to weave *aaydans*. Her mother's act of weaving bamboo basket and her act of writing provides a shared link to Urmila Pawar since, to her, the weave is similar. It was the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that linked them.

Bamboo basket weaving business can hardly provide for a family round the year. Similarly, most of the people in Bama's community are agricultural labourers working on the lands of the upper caste people since they don't own lands or such other property. Being a member of the outcaste community, Bama's experiences of untouchability are similar to those of Pawar, and she experienced that from her early childhood, though as a child she hadn't heard people speak openly of untouchability. But she had already "*seen, felt, experienced* and been humiliated by what it was" (p. 11). When she would enter the classroom, the entire class would turn round to look at her, and she wanted to shrink into herself as she went and sat on her bench, still weeping. The Mahar children, as described in Pawar's autobiography, were hit with stones if they committed errors (the teacher wouldn't touch them even to punish them physically), while Bama recounts similar experiences as people displayed their abhorrence to sit next to the people of her community. They looked at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever her people went they suffered blows, and pain.

The major issues affecting the lives of Dalit women, apart from poverty, that arise from their caste, and that find common expression in the two autobiographies, may be studied as follows:

(i) Social discrimination

The so-called 'lower' castes face social discrimination. The so-called 'upper' caste Hindus avoid all social contacts with them, denying them any opportunities of social integration. One glittering example of this phenomenon is that it is almost next to impossible for a lower caste family to rent an accommodation in the house of an upper caste Hindu. The emotional outcome of this situation is that the lower castes feel they are unwanted in the society around them. But, the women in the community are also aware of the contradictory nature of 'upper caste' men they come in contact with. 'Upper caste' society wants them for manual work and menial jobs, and some 'upper caste' men want them for sexual gratification as well. At that moment the upper castes fling aside their abhorrence for these "untouchable" women.

(ii) Psychological impact/trauma

The social discrimination, near-ostracization and inhuman treatment leaves a scar on the psyche of the lower caste individuals, and like in the heart of Bama, the questions surge in the hearts of all Dalits: Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do they lack? The anger against the caste Hindu society sometimes drives some of them to renounce Hinduism and embrace other religions, such as, in the case of Bama's family it was Christianity, whereas Pawar's family had converted to Buddhism. But, in most cases their caste status doesn't leave them alone to breathe in peace even after conversion. Bama narrates that casteism is blatantly prevalent among Indian Christian converts and the upper caste Christians treat lower caste Christians the same as they were treated by caste Hindus. In the words of Bama, it is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Her personal observation is that if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all. Bama is extremely angry with the office of the Church, without love for the poor and the lowly for whose sake the office stands, because of the way they cheat poor people in India, and she vents her anger as follows:

I am angry when I see priests and nuns . . . How long will they deceive us, as if we are innocent children . . . Dalits have begun to realize the truth . . . They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. (*Karukku*, p. 93)

As mentioned above, Dalits are wanted by upper castes for manual labour, but they are barred from joining in the Hindu festivities and celebrations of which they are claimed to be parts. Pawar narrates the incident of celebration of the festival of Holi. Young men would go to the forest to collect wood for the village Holi. To cut down the tree to burn for Holi, it was an honour given to the Mahars to deliver the first blow to the

tree. To drag the cut tree down to the village and to erect it in front of the temple were also the tasks of the Mahars. "But once the Holi rituals and celebrations started, the Mahars would be simply ignored. They had no place in them" (*The Weave*, 45). If any Mahar youth tried to sneak into the upper caste groups enjoying Holi festivities, there would invariably be a fight and the youth would be beaten up.

Pawar narrates the experiences of inferiority she had felt because of her caste. She records numerous such incidents that leave the reader bewildered about the mentality of upper caste Hindus in general. For instance, her elder sister (called "Akka" in Marathi) worked at a mental hospital, and there she had trouble because of her caste. She wanted to leave her job because of humiliation at the hands of some people. For example, the mad women in the hospital had come to know that she was a Dalit. A mentally disturbed woman was not willing to take food from her hands. She abused Pawar's sister because of her caste. The Mahars were specially the targets of caste discrimination, while some other 'lower' castes in her village were spared similar harsh treatment. For instance, Pawar describes that the houses of the Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from their houses. Bhandari and Kulwadi (other lower castes) women could drink water from their wells, but untouchable women were absolutely forbidden to do so. This discrimination was a permanent wound in her father's heart.

(iii) Economic deprivation

It is their caste that keeps the lower castes in filth since they own no property and it's difficult for them to move up the ladder without proper education. In Bama's words, life is difficult if one happens to be poor, even though one may be born into the upper-castes. If this is the case, the condition of those who are born into the *Paraya* community, as the poorest of the poor struggling for daily survival, doesn't need spelling out. Most of the lower caste youths, as depicted by Bama, wandered about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. She herself shares the difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. She shares to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain. The people from Bama's community, the landless peasantry, worked as agricultural farm labourers, and she describes the village farming activities and the people toiling in the lands as she herself witnessed them, like, driving a pair of cattle over the harvested crop to thresh out the grains (p. 12 and pp. 41-48). The work is hard but the wages are low. The only way to get out of this limbo is to get proper education and work on a well-paying job. Both Urmila Pawar and Bama realized the significance of education in their economic upliftment and upward social mobility. Fortunately, their family members also supported their efforts, and helped in their emancipation. Bama says that she studied hard, with all her breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As her elder brother urged her, she stood first in her class. And because of that, many people became her friends, even though she was a *Paraichi*. She became a school teacher after her graduation. Pawar also had a well-paying job and was later recognized as a good orator and social organizer.

(iv) Powerlessness, vulnerability, helplessness, defenselessness

Poverty, psychological trauma and centuries of oppression make the Dalits feel powerless and vulnerable. Pawar gives an apt description of this situation. She writes that Dalit houses in the Konkan region were usually not located on the margins of the village but they were found at its center, probably as a matter of convenience for the upper castes, who could summon them at any time and wanted them at their beck and call. The Mahar community was haunted by a sense of perpetual insecurity, fearing that it could be attacked from all four sides in times of conflict. She says that it was the reason why there was always a tendency in her people to shrink within themselves like a tortoise and proceed at a snail's pace.

Although Indian constitution grants equal status to all Indian men and women and states that no person will be discriminated against because of his/her caste, creed or gender, yet in Indian society there exists a strong prejudice and discrimination based on caste, and untouchability, declared an unconstitutional practice, is still practiced in some sectors. Urmila Pawar's narration of the experience she had at her school at a very young age is very moving. The condition was that a few others, children from other castes like the Bhandaris and Kunbis, started attending school with the Brahmin boys. Some Mahar children also went to school, but they had to sit outside in the courtyard. The teachers taught them and examined their slates from a distance. The teachers would hit these children with stones if they made any mistakes. Naturally, the Mahar children lost all interest in learning and bunked school. Pawar's family had converted to Buddhism. Her father, a teacher by profession, also functioned as a priest for the community and both of her parents ardently believed in the emancipatory power of education. Pawar inherited this thought and she herself excelled in education. But, her involvement in various activities also brought her some personal losses and tragedies she lost her son, her mother, as well as her husband within a short span of time.

Soosairaj Faustina Bama's autobiography *Karukku* chronicles Bama's life as a Dalit woman, and the psychological trauma she suffered as a woman from a lower caste, as the writer declares, "That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive." In addition, the book deals with the

life of Dalit Christians in Tamilnadu, and it is also one of the first autobiographies of Dalit women written in Tamil language. Her experiences of being a Dalit woman are the main, important parts in this self-narrative. She writes about the feelings she had working in the Tamil upper caste [Naickers] households, that all the time she went to work for the Naickers [upper-caste] she knew she should not touch their goods or chattels; she should never come close to where they were. She should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. She often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that she could do. Her story is about the conflict between herself and the community and her recovery from social and institutional betrayal ultimately breaking all shackles, domestic, social, religious and political. In this sense, her book is not the story of just an individual but the story of a community since there are so many actors there, and Bama also quite often uses the collective pronoun 'we' to indicate their collective struggle, as, for example she writes that, "We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change" (*Karukku*, p. 25).

Bama's family was a Dalit Christian family. Her grandfather had converted to Christianity. The situation is like that of Urmila Pawar's family, and the yet other similarity is that nothing much changed for them even after conversion as Pawar's family remained as poor and Dalit as it was before conversion to Buddhism and Bama's family remained equally landless labourers working for the upper caste Tamil families. The Church, as she describes it, was only for the upper caste Christians who sidelined the lower caste converts, rather treated them as pariahs. She adds further that "There was no love to be found in that convent . . . there was no love for the poor and the humble . . . In the name of God they actually rob from the poor who struggle for their livelihood" (*Karukku*, pp. 92-94).

Bama was influenced by the Church ideal 'service of the poor,' and therefore, she left home in her mid-twenties to join the convent with the idea of working for something larger than class, caste and self-identity. But to her utter shock, the conditions at the convent were even more oppressive than in the secular society and social institutions outside of it. She was forced to practice her daily life and her religious duties in a particular manner since she came from the lower caste; she was particularly singled out as a Dalit woman. Her admonishments were harsher than for others, and if she displayed an inkling of independence in her ideas or a favor for the poor, she was treated very severely.

(b) Gender

I believe that for gender equality, women need to be declassified as 'women' for all purposes jobs, schooling, training and the likes. The suggestion may seem atrocious to some who may feel women's classification and a separate identity is required to safeguard some of their rights, such as reservation in jobs and seats in trains and buses. But the fact is, their separate identity classifies women as different from, and therefore unequal to, men; it's like classifying a tribe as 'criminal tribe,' leaving them outside everything law, justice, expression, genre, and self-defense. Dalit women's autobiographies are part of the 'outlaw' genre. The term 'outlaw genre,' defined by Karen Kaplan (1992), means a literary genre that disrupts literary conventions and constitutes resistance literature. Kaplan coined the term for postcolonial literature, but it is equally applicable to women's literature in general and to Dalit women's literature in particular.

Women's literature, as is expected, in India is a record of the hardships they face because of their gender. Though the main issue here is not the hardships, but the issue, as raised by both Urmila Pawar and Bama is that despite taking on all sorts of hardships for the sake of her husband and her family, a woman's worth in her husband's eyes and to her family is just nothing. Her emancipation is an unheard of thing. Pawar's autobiography begins with her life from a very young age. They lived in a village in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, where life for all the people was only hard work and constant drudgery, but for women it was just hellish. Usually, in their village community women were mistreated by their husbands, commonly bashed up for reasons like, not being served meal on time, not getting money for liquor, being asked for money for medicine for a sick child, being asked money for household expenses, and so on. Every house had its own share of drunkards, says Pawar. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way. If someone asked her what was wrong, her anger gushed out, "Let his drinking mouth be burned off forever. Let his hands rot" (*The Weave*, p. 23).

Women slogged all day for a living or to collect food items from the sea, while their husbands went to toddy shops to have drinks. Pawar brings to life the woes of women at gossip on their lives at home where their mother-in-law waits for them. They laugh at their old women, someone lamenting that when her old woman was young, she collected basketfuls of crabs and shells! But the poor thing is really old now, can't lift a finger. The Bhandari and Daldini women do not leave anything in the rocks. The gendered society heaps all insults only upon a woman if something untoward happens to her, as if it is her sole responsibility to safeguard her reputation. Their lives were already difficult, and as if all this were not enough, there were freaks and perverts, hiding in shrubs and trees, who occasionally assaulted the helpless women. Women were tense not only because

of the obvious threat these miscreants posed but also because of what it would do to their reputations in the village. The upper hand of man is inbuilt in Indian culture and men and women are taught their gender roles very clearly. To highlight this, I would like to insert a long excerpt from the book where Pawar narrates an interesting game played during the marriage ceremony in her community to teach the groom how to deal with his wife.

The bride would be given a pot to carry water on her head and also a small jug and sent away with four or five *karavalis* or girl attendants to some distance. Then the groom would be made to sit on the threshold at the back door of the house, with a stick in his hand. They would teach him the lines he would have to tell the wife when she returned. When the bride came back with the water, he would strike the ground with the stick and demand an explanation, "Why are you so late?" The women would help the bride to come up with answers such as, "I was late because the cows muddied the water, so I had to wait till the water cleared," or "The rope fell into the well and I had to wait till it could be brought out," and so on. Then they would make her swear that she would never be late again. (*The Weave*, p. 53)

The thought process for women has been such that instead of loving and helping each other they rather despise each other and find faults with their close relatives, such as daughter-in-law/mother-in-law. Pawar writes that daughters-in-law were always despised and bashed up by their old women. There was a common expression that mothers-in-law would use about their daughters-in-law. "Trust the bitch to oblige you with a few drops from her private hair!" Pawar could not understand what the expression meant when she was a child, while laughed at the expression as she grew up. Sometimes, untouchability is noticed within the lower classes, and women may practice it more blatantly among themselves, as observes Pawar that sometimes, a bunch of Kulwadi women coming from behind would cross Mahar women, taking care to avoid their touch. Someone from the Mahar group would notice that and flare up, "Look at them! See how they kept far from us! As if they are wearing the holy cloth like the Brahmin women!" Then another would be sure to answer her, "Let me tell you, a Kulwadi woman I knew kept a dead snake in her sari for eight days completely rotten! And see how they show off as if we pollute them!" (*The Weave*, p. 26). The oppressive conditions for women are such that even the songs sung by women on festive occasions reflect only their suffering.¹

The Weave of My Life brings to light the patriarchal social ideology in India that firmly believed that a woman can be happy only at in-laws' place, however tyrannical they may be. Once again I'd like to quote Pawar at a great length since the incident is extremely relevant to the point:

I always remembered my cousin Susheela at such times. She was married to a man in Partavane. He was a drunkard and Susheela's mother-in-law was a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy dark nights. The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house at Phansawale. When she came like that, and if Baba saw her, he would bark, "Who's that? Susha? All right, give her something to eat and send her back the way she's come. She must stay with her in-laws!" (*The Weave*, p. 38)

Men have the liberty to do as they please but forbid women even small entertainment. They would go to see the erotic performance at a *tamasha*, while if women attempted to entertain themselves, they would beat them black and blue. (*The Weave*, p.38)

In an oblique manner, Pawar advocates for the equality and empowerment of women, referring to more than equal share of work, manual labour and physical endurance of women in her narrative. For instance, she gives a detailed account of the manual work done by all the prominent women character in her narrative, paying particular respects to their physical endurance and the unbearable work they did, despite the ill-treatment by their husbands, and most often than not, by their mothers-in-law. One particular portrait, of Parvati, a daughter-in-law in the household, is worth noting. Parvati looked thin, but was actually quite strong. Every day Parvati carried huge bundles that were too heavy even for aman on her head to Ratnagiri. She did all the household chores brought water from the river, swept the house and polished it with cow dung, cleaned the panes, patted cow dung cakes, ground grains all by herself. Besides, in the farming season, she got busy with everything, from farming vegetables to cleaning paddy. Such is the strength of women. Parvati's husband almost did not talk to her. The village women as well as Pawar's sister used to say, "God knows how they got their children!" (*The Weave*, p. 39). And yet, her mother-in-law always barked at her! Another woman from the village, Hiriakka, had returned home for good only a few days after her marriage because "she was ignorant about sex and terribly scared of her husband" (*The Weave*, p. 43). She lived in her mother's house without becoming a burden to her brother, earned her own living and lived with self-respect.

As a young girl, Pawar married against the wishes of her parents. Her would be husband was not as highly educated as Pawar was, and also he came from a family somewhat 'below' her family's social status. Later on, they moved to Bombay and Pawar got deeply involved in resistance movements, especially the Dalit rights movement. She devoted herself to the Dalit literary movement as well. Then there arose tensions in her

marriage because her husband didn't appreciate her social service and started emotionally abusing her, constantly criticizing her participation in the social activities as she was recognized as a leading figure in these movements. The incident is significant since it is not just a personal incident but it brings out a man's prejudice against a woman. Her autobiography also relates the tensions between Dalit rights movement, human rights movement and women's right movement because two of the three activities mentioned were controlled by men who didn't give much importance to women's right movement activities, Pawar writes that the people from the Dalit movement, however, treated women in the same discriminatory manner, as if they were some inferior species, as they did the ones at home. Probably it was unconscious behavior. Once Pawar was invited to a program organized by a group of Dalit activists in a printing press. They repeatedly called her on the phone and urged her to deliver a speech as a part of their program. Pawar accepted their invitation and reached the hall in time. But there was nobody to receive her there except the man whose loudspeaker was hired! (*The Weave*, p. 153)

II. CONCLUSION

women's autobiography in India is a rarely explored genre and within that genre too, Dalit women's autobiography is the rarest achievement, for various reasons. The two very significant reasons we explored in the autobiographies of two Dalit women in the present paper, namely Urmila Pawar and Bama, are caste and gender. For Dalit women the dimension of caste, apart from their gender, deepens their inequality in society. The two writers give us a firsthand account of the experiences of injustice and inequality faced by them because of their caste and gender. At the same time, the experiences are not just personal, but representative of the experiences of the community they hail from.

The present paper attempted to explore the caste system and gender inequality inherent in Indian society as depicted in the autobiographies of two women Dalit writers, namely Urmila Pawar and Bama, and concludes the caste and gender issues are realistic in the two narratives and reflect the ugly face of Indian society.

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