

Caste and Gender: A Study of Dalit Feminism

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Abstract

Indian Social systems are characterized and operated through Caste which marks the graded inequality on a vertical ladder resulting out of the Hindu Social Framework with Brahmins being positioned at Top and Shudras, Untouchables at the bottom. Brahmins enjoyed their dominion over knowledge structure which gave them a superior position in the society, while the ones at the bottom (broadly Dalits) are the most suffered since they did not have access to education. In the post-independence with the constitutional frameworks being in place Dalits started acquiring Education. Thus their articulations have come in to being, at first through prose and poetry, later emerged in to a strong base for what is broadly termed as Dalit Literature.

Keywords- Dalit, Discrimination, Untouchability, Prosecution, Emancipation

Dalit women being positioned at the bottom of India's caste and gender hierarchies are the most vulnerable in the socio-economic sphere. They struggle under the twin framework of caste system as well as the gender hierarchy and are the most vulnerable in the social hierarchy, where cultural factors subject her to be inferior to the men and above it she is subject to discrimination, exclusion and violence. In the backdrop of such positioning the emergence of dalit literature marks a shift from the existing literature and understanding the contribution of dalit women literature is important to understand the hidden narratives of the problems of dalits as well as how dalit women gets juxtaposed with non-dalit women.

The situation of Dalit women in India is becoming worse day by day and it needs immediate attention of Government of India so that to form and implement such policies specifically dealing with problems of Dalit Women. Since ancient times, the violence against Dalits especially Dalit women are carried and after many ages, the eco of pains and problems can be heard in modern times also. These ancient practices needs to be stopped or banned immediately which force Dalit Women to indulge in prostitution or other immoral acts.

Dalit Women Contribution in Ambedkarite Movement is significant. It is impossible to think of the dalit movement without the women. Ambedkar said that no emancipative project can be possible without women's emancipation. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon

have documented the history of dalit women's contribution in Ambedkarite Movement. Dalit women participation and political activism in Ambedkarite movement starts from the Mahad Satyagraha. Ambedkars' speech and urge to women at the Mahad Satyagrah bought a revolutionary among 'Untouchable' women. The women's Organisations were formed in different parts of the region and they began to speak with vigour and passion at their meeting and conferences. In such conferences were of a serious concern and accordingly he was taking action in articulating them. In various, protest, conferences and meetings that Ambedkar called, he gave equal and appropriate opportunities to dalit women as per their capacity and limitations.

The Dalit Panther Movement emerged in the 1970s' with radical and militant approach against the atrocities happening on dalit across Maharashtra. While it presented the radical alternative vis-à-vis the ineffective leadership in the Republican Party of India, because of the militant and violent nature of the Dalit Panther Movement, Women's participation subsequently went down. This suggest that the masculinisation of dalithood had, caused the exclusion of dalit women's voices and thus decline in their participation in the dalit movement. This doesn't mean that the dalit movement did not address the dalit women's issues.

The Dalit Movement did address women's issues particularly related to assault, rape and violence. But dalit women have not been recognised for leadership and political participation. Even in the field of literature dalit men did not recognise the contribution of dalit women and they dominated the literary domain. In Post – Ambedkarite phase of the movement, except the major struggle for land rights (1964), led by Dadasaheb Gaikwad and the Namantar Movement (1978), dalit women's participation marked a decline. The reasons had caused the quest for an independent and separate platform for addressing the issues and questions concerned to dalit women.

In 1990s' the dalit women's organisations began to emerge across the various parts of the country. The 1990s' saw the several autonomous and independent assertions of dalit women's identity. In order to understand the dalit women's needs to talk differently that have bearings on this phenomenon. The external factors like the non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women, while the internal factor such as patriarchal domination within dalit domain informs the basis on which dalit women justify their need to talk differently and also in relation to the betrayal of promises that left forces had made to dalits and in the discourse of descent vis-à-vis the mainstream women's movement and also in the 'moral economy' of the peasant movement.

Taking idea from Rajini Kothari, by discourse of descent he mean, "with the erosion of institution, the unsettled controversies over public policies and the growing uncertainty over ideological issues. Also there was decline of democratic functioning of the political process and faith in the capacity of the modern nation – state to provide a frame work of both order and equity." ¹

Dalit Literature is indebted to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar whose ideology and activities provided necessary impetus for the development of Dalit Literature. Dalit Feminism argues for identity and representative for dalit women and doesn't agree to be swept under the category of women which almost all the times implies only upper caste women. Caste Hindu Women do enjoy the privilege of their caste position and cultural that is lacking for dalit women. Dalit feminism foregrounds the relationship between the control over upper caste women's sexuality by upper caste male as against the exploitation of dalit women's sexuality and labour by the upper caste men. It also criticises the internal patriarchy of dalit families and ways of initiating upper caste norms of control over the women and education. The penetration of upper caste norms of 'virtue', 'beauty', 'morality' in the contemporary era is another factor that dalit feminism critiques. Dalit feminism conceptualises caste system in relation to patriarchy both within the families and within the whole society.

Gail Omvedt argues that "The violence on dalit women in public spaces and at work place is a product of social violence, thus social patriarchy the men from labouring dalit families sometimes unable to protect dalit women at the work place and in public from the violence of upper caste men is called as a social violence or social patriarchy"²

Dalit feminist writing aims at bringing out the experiences of both physical violence and symbolic violence, which operate at two levels. Upper caste committing atrocities on dalits, patriarchal violence that the dalit women suffer from within and outside the caste. It is an important to understand the caste and gender dynamics of violence in the society to understand the caste violence.

Gopal Guru argues that "Dalit Men are reproducing the same mechanism against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them".³ While dalit women's experience suggest that local resistance within the dalit domain is significant. It is significant because it resists the patriarchy and not to let it normalise as we saw in the case nationalist patriarchy. Guru suggest the reasons why one should defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently, Dalit women autonomous assertion can be understood from an epistemological stand point.

Auto biography is one of the significant forms of dalit literature in documenting the authentic experiences of dalits and their expression. Ambedkar's auto biographical note can be considered as one of the early examples of dalit autobiography. Though it is not a fully pledged autobiography, it has a political significance in making the invisible caste discrimination. Ambedkar states that his idea behind writing these auto biographical notes is to enable the foreigners to understand the actuality of the experiences of untouchability.

Autobiography can be classified in two categories one as the life stories which inspires, stimulates and demonstrates personal achievements of an individual. Secondly the life stories which not only demonstrates the saga of individual but also the society as a whole depicts sorrows, sufferings, subjugation and socio-economical conditions. Dalit autobiographies belongs to the second category. They have portrayed the socio-economical,

cultural and political conditions of Dalit Community under the control and influence of Upper Caste Hindu society. Contemporary Indian Society was divided under the wrong notions of 'Purity and Pollution'. Dalits were treated as untouchables and polluters to the High Caste Hindus because they were born in the low caste 'Mahar'. They were intentionally kept ignorant and denied to take education and asked to live out of town in separate colonies by high caste Hindus to safeguard their control over Dalits. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave the message to take Education, Unite and demand for the rights to the Dalit Community. Dalit communities admitted their children to school and started to take education. Slowly, they were becoming conscious about their rights and demanding for liberty and equality. Autobiography came handy to them to demonstrate their age old suffering, exploitation and maltreatment. Writers like Daya Pawar, Shankarrao Kharat, Bandu Tupe, P. E. Sonkamble, Shrankumar Limbale, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad and Kishor Kale came forward and penned their experiences in the form of autobiographies. Like male autobiographies, female auto biographies like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Janabai Girhe demonstrated their life stories and experiences of trivial exploitation on the basis of caste, class and gender. Baby Kamble is the first women from Mahar Community to pen her life story as 'Jina Amuche' translated by Maya Pandit in English as 'The Prisons We Broke'. Through this autobiography Baby Kamble has depicted the pathetic condition of women and also how Dalit society is divided as Traditional and Modern. Traditional Dalit community members had denied the way shown by Dr. Ambedkar and accepted the age old customs and traditions and living life ignorantly. On the other hand Ambedkar's followers admitted their children to school which created a miraculous change in the society. Baby Kamble belongs to this second category. Her father was a civil contractor and influenced by Dr. Ambedkar he admitted all his children to school and forced others to follow the same.

Dalit auto biographies have depicted the experiences of untouchability in the society and distinct social values and culture whereas dalit women auto biographies have revealed the multiple oppression of being an untouchable, dalit women. They also have depicted the patriarchal oppression in dalit communities and movement.

Dalit women writing/auto biography help to understand the different layers of caste and gender ideology that operates behind the physical and symbolic caste violence. Caste violence is one of the important question for dalit feminism. Dalit women and men face caste violence and its manifestations at various levels in the society sometimes in the form of atrocities. Dalit women are often victimized and subjected to rape and sexual torture. Dalit women are also seen as "belonging" to the community in cases of caste violence, dalit women are targeted to "teach a lesson to the entire caste"⁴ or to emasculate the caste.

Dalit women are also the victims' of patriarchy control and dalit patriarchy. I would like to look at dalit women auto biographies written by Baby Tai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Moon and so on to discuss the concept of caste violence within the caste and gender dynamics.

- 1) **Baby Kamble** : “The Prison We Broke” (*Jina Amucha*) is the first dalit women auto biography. It points out the various forms of patriarchal violence within the dalit society. She describes the life of mahars in pre-Ambedkar period and the influence of Ambedkar’s ideology on dalits. It is an important documents on the women’s participation in Ambedkarite movement and the condition of dalit women during this period. The auto biography aims to proclaim how dalit women lived as slaves in the families and suffered lack of food, medical facilities and so on.

Kamble begins to describe the community in the context of Ambedkarite Movement and her active participation in the movement. To put it in Kamble’s own words,

“The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. *Jina Amucha* was the auto biography of my own community.”⁵

- 2) **Urmila Pawar**: *The Weave of My Life* (Aaidan) is another significant auto biography written in Marathi. Pawar described her difficulty in the education system being modelled upon the upper caste norms and nations of language, culture and values. She also discuss the internal patriarchy which makes dalit women victims of the patriarchal control by dalit men, physical abuse and economic exploitation. The auto biography deals with how dalit movement is carried away by the notion of “All Women being Untouchable” which further makes them not consider the issues of dalit women.

Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moons’ *We Also Made History* is a theoretical work of re writing the history of Ambedkarite Movement and the male dominance within the movement. The fact of dalit women’s participation in the movement itself is not recognised by Ambedkarite movement. The history of dalit women’s participation is brought by the work. It also fore grounds the violence within the family system of dalits and dalit patriarchy that entered the dalit movement.

Sharmila Rege Says “Thus as a self – consciously dalit feminist testimonio positioned against the brahmanical and neo – liberal practices of state, *The weave of my life* violates both bourgeois Individualism and communitarian notions of the singular dalit community, thus becoming a milestone in the archive of resources pro practicing dalit studies as critical and inclusive social science.”⁶

- 3) **Kumud Pawde** : *Dalit Political Assertion as Thoughtful Outburst* (Antasphot)

Antasphot is a Marathi word which literally means ‘outburst’. The author has clarified in her subsequent writings that by outburst, she does not mean only emotional outburst, but for her, this outburst is a thoughtful one. In her own words,

When a culture based on hierarchy as in the case of the Indian society literally bites the flesh off the minds of individuals and communities and wounds them, then how do I see my life and that of my wounded community as human beings? This question keeps eating at my brain.⁽⁷⁾

The narrator here reveals a critical awareness; an awareness about the self, about the social location of the self with respect to her immediate community and with respect to the power structures that marginalizes her and her community. And one senses this awareness throughout the narratives. Thus Limbale observes, “Our plight made us introspective”⁸ This takes back to starting point that, situations of marginality produce ideas of justice. The awareness about one’s situation of marginality, when expressed in words or action takes the form of outburst – thoughtful outburst. Pawde would argue that this trope of *thoughtful outburst* is helpful in understanding the Dalit political assertion and other modes of claiming justice.

The thoughtful outburst is only about the consciousness of one’s marginality or does it have the potential of becoming a violent outburst, seeking retribution? I came across only one such instance in Limbale’s narrative that hints towards such a possibility. Santamai (Limbale’s grandmother) and Pawde went to the moneylender. He was drunk. Santamai and pawde stood at some distance from him. Santamai’s blouse was torn exposing her breast. The moneylender kept staring at the peeping breast, but he refused to lend us the money. His look spread like poison in Pawde heart. Pawde wished that the blouse of this moneylender’s mother or sister was torn so that pawed could stare at *their* (author’s emphasis) breasts. Dalits poverty was detestable. Pawed wanted to rebel against such humiliation.⁹

The idea of a critical consciousness leading to thoughtful outburst in the form of assertion for dignity and justice, is relatable to Jotiba Phule’s formulation of the concept of *Tritiya Ratna*. For Phule, education was the source of liberation. He saw education, not as mere alphabetical knowledge but as the ability to be critical and see through the working of oppressive structures (Phule spoke about Brahmanism, patriarchy and the oppression of peasants by money-lenders). For Phule, education was the *Tritiya Ratna* or the third eye which could pierce through the veil of ideology and endow the individual with a consciousness that would eventually liberate her from oppression.

Dalit Women experiences of physical caste and patriarchal violence within the dalit society became one of the the important reasons for dalit womens’ independent struggle against caste and gender oppression. The invisibility of dalit women in dalit movement as opposed to their marginalization in feminist movement brought the necessity of dalit women fighting for themselves, violence question is one of the important points for dalit feminism violence is the weapon that establishes and preserves the power structure of caste and gender dynamics of the society.

Physical violence is more visible in the category of gender and caste, symbolic violence which is non- physical and invisible is more difficult to address. Hence, symbolic violence plays a vital role in preserving the power structure through the normative strands of caste and gender. One of the most important exclusions face by Dalit Women is that their issues are almost never parts of the struggles by feminists in India. Solidarity on the key issue of autonomy and choice, employment with dignity, wages, physically security should be

automatic. But the reality is that the Mainstream feminists have not foregrounded these very real issues of dalit women and girls in the setting of feminist agendas. Thus, there is a fresh articulation of their own issues by young women from deprived back grounds, both dalit and adivasi, which is in their language and based on their own experiences. While some use the term Dalit Feminism for these articulations, other have evolved a new terminology marginalized Indian Womanism for their articulations. Feminism in India has not been able to fully encapsulate their experiences and so a new term is in order, they feel. As more and more young dalit woman enter academic, political and governance through sheer talent and persistence, this will surely bring in salutary and much needed freshers into our jaded institutions.

Endnotes-

1. *Annihilation of Caste in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Writings and Speech*. Vol-01, p. 38
2. *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, Gail Omvet, p. 14
3. *Dalit Women Talk Differently*, Gopal Guru, Vol.30, Pgno.2428
4. *Annihilation of Caste in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Writings and Speech*. Vol-01, p. 32
5. *The Prison We Broken*, baby tai kamble, p. 09
6. *The weave of my life*, Urmila Pawar, p.31
7. *The Ourburst*. Kumud Pawde, P. 28
8. Ibid p. 83
8. Ibid p. 82

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