

# Dalit Women Autobiographies: Contesting Caste and Class Oppression

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## Introduction

A recent incident that took place at a metropolitan city in India, of a university assistant professor being attacked and criticised online for being a Dalit has come under heated debate and discussions as to the prevalence of the caste system in the present era. The traumatic episode faced by the Dalit woman, who is an accomplished academician, and who met with this casteist wrath based on her identity, is a display of deep-seated malice and prejudices that exist in our societies in various forms and spits out a host of unanswered questions -What are the experiences of being a Dalit in modern, postcolonial India? What are the experiences of being a Dalit woman? Despite the presence of major constitutional provisions and social reforms, what power structures systematically subjugate the Dalits in educational and work spaces? Sagarika Ghose writes:

“Unlike racial minorities, the dalit is physically indistinguishable from upper castes, yet metaphorically and literally, the dalit has been a “shit bearer” for three millenia, toiling at the very bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy” (83).

Untouchability has been one of the major forms of subjugation and oppression of the Dalits in India. The other forms of this inhuman segregation and practice have been the degrading jobs that the Dalits were/are made to carry out, such as, manual scavengers, cleaning of drains, collector of garbage, domestic workers, and so on. Education and respectable employment were denied to the lower-castes to restrict them from climbing up the social and economic ladders of the society. Reports of discrimination against the Dalits can be regularly found in various parts of India. Maria Preethi Srinivasan asserts that both the practices of race-based and caste-based prejudices and bigotry leave “dehumanizing” impact on the victims (112). Dalits have been subjected to institutionalised subjugation within the caste system prevalent even in the contemporary times. Ghose contends that the caste system, a structure of dividing labour in the society without the tenet of competition in it, shapes the occupation and production in the country (Ibid 88). The inadequate structural changes have fostered the continuation of caste discrimination over several generations of the Dalit communities.

## An Intersectional Approach to the Dalit Women’s Trauma

Caste and gender intersect in multiple ways in our daily lives- from educational spaces, work and employment, festivals, daily practices, private spaces, decision-making agencies, and so on. This paper focuses on the gendered experiences of Dalit women, and how patriarchy works across classes, castes, and, sometimes, even genders. This paper considers the autobiographies of three Dalit women and analyses the ways in which the

autobiographical genre serves the purpose of establishing the lived experiences of the Dalit women on the intersections of caste, gender and class. Along with the burden of poverty, Dalit women have had to endure extreme forms of discrimination by upper caste men and women through the prevalent practices of humiliation and inhuman treatment of the lower caste individuals, and oppression at the hands of Dalit men through acts of domestic violence and abuse. The paper foregrounds how the intersections of structurally unfair and divisive economic structures, socio-cultural bigotry, and gender violence lead to multiple levels of oppression as experienced by the Dalit women. As Shewli Kumar contends, the Dalit women face extreme forms of violence and abuse “as poor, as Dalit and as women” (162).

This paper takes into consideration three Dalit women autobiographies: *Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)* (1981) by Shantabai Kamble, *Aaydan (The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs)* (2003) by Urmila Pawar, and *Karukku* (1991) by Bama Faustina Susairaj. The paper attempts an analysis of how these autobiographical narratives of women from the margins challenged canonical autobiographical writings and how these Dalit women writers built a niche for themselves, creating a new genre of Dalit women autobiographical writings. The reconstruction of the pain and trauma of the lives of Dalit women through these narratives are studied in this paper. This paper argues that the Dalit women autobiographies are a major part of the South Asian women writings of protest, of carving distinct identities, and of breaking age-old stereotypes. The voices of Dalit women are an integral part of the South Asian narratives, and like the Dalit identities, the voices of the Dalit women's narratives, cannot remain invisible anymore.

### Intergenerational Trauma of the Dalits

With the deep-rooted prejudices and oppression that have been in play for centuries, the trauma of caste-based abuse and violence is transferred from one generation to the next in newer forms and moulds. Along with the trauma, the nature of work that was meant, or rather literally imposed, on the Dalits, were forcibly passed on to the next generations of Dalits, continuing the trail of humiliation and degradation. Badri Narayan writes that despite more than half a century of the Independence of the country, the caste system and the deep-rooted hierarchical structures the caste system propounds shape the “symbol and essence of Indian society” that distinguishes us from others (20). He goes on to assert that this caste system- that has defined the Indian society for centuries- systematically bestows privileges on the upper castes and robs the basic human rights from the lower castes or Dalits (Ibid). Nivedita Menon contends that:

“The body that is deemed to be inferior is caught up in the need to recognise its difference from – and simultaneously claim similarity to – the oppressive identity that marks itself as self – whether white, savarna (‘upper’-caste) or male” (138).

Menon further gives an example of how caste, labour and gender intertwine and operate in the Indian society. She writes how, in the context of paid domestic work, the nature of work and wages paid depend on the caste of the worker (usually women):

“Cleaning of toilets would be a Dalit's work, while Dalits would not be permitted into many Hindu middle-class kitchens. Where they are, it is not uncommon for the dishes they have washed to be ritually cleansed again by their savarna employers” (Ibid 144).

ShaimaAhammed, while writing on the role of *Theyyam* (a form of folk ritual from the State of Kerala) for Dalit expressions, emphasizes how the inflexible caste system, with

its basis in sacred texts, created and continued the demarcated social and caste status on people and did not allow for any movement or transformation in this fixed status for centuries (90). The Brahminical notions of supremacy and pollution pushed the lower castes to the fringes of the society and ensured they remained at the peripheries with their human labour being exploited for the upper castes' needs.

### **Dalit Movements and Protests: Unmuting the Silenced Voices**

Dalit protests and movements for equality, justice, and rights in every sphere of life have been crucial to bring about constitutional changes in India. Hugo Gorringe asserts that people in a social movement are heterogeneous in nature, and each social movement, including the Dalit movement, must be studied keeping the categories of gender, religion, caste, class, region, language, and so on (40). Dalit movements in India are crucial to fight against the forces of upper caste prejudices and wrongdoings, and the experiences and expressions of Dalit women need to be studied and understood as struggles against multiple levels of marginalisation, from their own as well as other communities.

The women's movements in India since the 1980s saw an uprising in women's literature, and the forms used by the women were varied. Even Dalit women began to write about their experiences and a body of Dalit women writings developed. Uma Chakravarti writes in her article "In her Own Write":

It took some years for the caste question to 'hit' the consciousness of the largely city-based women's movement, even as the issues the movement took up in its first phase did focus on the 'subaltern' woman. The rapes of Mathura and Rameeza Bee, around whom the campaign against sexual violence by the police in custodial contexts triggered off country-wide protests at the judicial bias evident in the judgement which was understood as an imposition of normative standards drawn from upper-caste Hindu notions of female virtue. . . The marginal woman and the city-based activists were united in a common cause against the imposition of outrageous standards drawn from archaic 'Hindu' but decisively upper-caste notions of virtue. It took a decade for questions of caste to surface in the '80s and early '90s, especially when the Mandai agitation introduced what was perceived by urban India as the emergence of identity politics over the supposed unity of people forged by the Left. (136)

Writing has become one of the powerful tools to ensure that the marginalised voices are heard and remains a part of the larger narratives. Maya Angelou's "I know Why the Caged Birds Sing", Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical "The Bell Jar" (1963) are few of the examples of women's autobiographies that have left a deep impact on the literary world. Dalit women's autobiographies are instruments of un-silencing their muted voices. The act of writing by women is a process of constructing women's own distinct narratives and histories through the use of their agency. Dalit women's autobiographies are ways through which these marginalised women have reclaimed their own histories and rights to narrate their lived experiences.

### **Autobiographies of Dalit Women Writers: Memories, Trauma, and Power**

Cielo Festino contends that Indian Dalit writer, Bama, had confronted the literary canons, moulded the autobiographical form of writing to accommodate and deliver power to the Dalit women narratives, thus, becoming a voice for the people whose voices went unheard till then (26). The agonies of a Dalit writer's lived experiences in the past can come alive through the act of writing. "Within the Dalit literary tradition, the narratives

by the women writers of the community stand out since their alienation is twofold as it is caused by both Brahminical and patriarchal values." (29). Uma Chakravarti feels that Dalit women writers have a "dual readership comprising those who read the work in the original languages used and others who read them in English translations" (134) and hence they began speaking to a wider audience; both national and international. Even before Dalit writings caught the attention of the scholars and academicians, the life history of Viramma, a Dalit woman grabbed the eyeballs of the world:

Viramma's recounting of her own life is significant for the graphic account of how her identity is shaped by the performance of labour, her caste location, the class relations that subject her to the power of landlords, and the workings of the State. It also vividly depicts the mythologies, histories and culture of the paraya community, the struggle for survival, the subversions, the refusal to consent to the hegemonic ideologies by which class and caste power are maintained and reproduced, and the attempts at resistance whenever possible (Racine and Racine, 1997). It mirrors, nuances, enriches and deepens the fine anthropological account of labouring women in Tamil Nadu (Kapadia, 1996).

A point that emerges from the account narrated by Viramma is her awareness that she is telling her story to someone who is not of her own caste or class, or indeed someone who shares her culture. (136-7)

*Aydan or The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar is the real-life account of the author's own life as a Dalit woman from the Konkan region. She traces her life and the life around her, and recounts how the identities of caste, gender, and class shaped and affected their life experiences. Urmila Pawar, in this powerful and insightful autobiographical narrative, has recollected the struggles and pain of being categorized as the "other", as the ones who are "untouchables", as the ones who are not to be allowed into upper caste houses, and to the ones who face discrimination and humiliation on the Brahminical notions of purity and cleanliness. The privileges endowed on the upper castes by the caste system can never be exaggerated.

Laura R. Brueck makes the observation that, several scholars consider the Dalit women autobiographies as testimonies:

"...testimonio, a critical category originally created to describe the life narratives of Latin American women such as Rigoberta Menchu during times of political persecution, has emerged as a popular catch-all category for Dalit women's life narratives as well." (34)

But, Laura argues that, the Dalit women's autobiographies are more than the mere category of a testimonio (Ibid). Shantabai Kamble's "The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life (1983/88) is considered as the first autobiographical narrative by a Dalit woman. Sharmila Rege notes, "The autobiography was first serialised in *Purva* magazine in 1983...The word *Chittarkatha* literally means a picture story but also indicates a sense of pieces of pictures being put together like a jigsaw puzzle." Bama's *Karukku* is the first autobiography in Tamil and as Lakshmi Holmstrom writes in the "Introduction" to her translation of *Karukku* that it is an "unusual autobiography" (xv) and "grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author's life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman, a Christian, and a Dalit" (xv - xvi).

### **Dalits and the Politics of Space**

The caste system has established spaces that are accessible and inaccessible to the lower castes. Most privileged spaces of the society were restricted for the Dalits, and needed

“purification”, in case of any violation on the part of the lower caste person. The restricted spaces could be the temples, the homes of the upper caste people, wells and other basic resources, schools and work spaces, and so on. Inter-caste marriages were discouraged and, tragically, the situation hasn’t altered much in recent times. Pawar describes how the houses of Dalits were positioned in the villages in the Konkan region:

“Dalit houses in the Konkan region were usually not located on the margins of the village but found at its center, probably as a matter of convenience for the upper castes, who could summon us at any time and wanted us at their beck and call. The community was haunted by a sense of perpetual insecurity, fearing that it could be attacked from all four sides in times of conflict” (Preface 10).

Public spaces had been major sites of discrimination for the Dalits, and the reclaiming of these public spaces through speech and activism still remains a critical way to fight the existing caste prejudices in India. Antagonism exists in the public spheres in the form of criticism against the Dalits occupying high-profile job roles, or violence against Dalit men and women in rural areas, and so on. Wandana Sonalkar, in the *Introduction* to Pawar’s “Aaydan” highlights a crucial element, amongst other strategies, that helped maintain the caste identities in the society. She asserts that, the act of public speaking and the access to sacred texts, were dominated by the upper castes. For the Dalit Women to speak on podiums and make public speeches were mediums through which patriarchal forces were challenged (18).

Another theme that runs through the narratives of these autobiographies is “Caste stigma . . . the offending touch, the association with dirt, labour, ‘unclean’ occupations, and finally the quality of being polluting that inherited in certain castes. The most powerful exclusion that is ever present in Dalit writing is from access to the otherwise common resource of water, the very basis of life without which the possession of land itself would be rendered meaningless” (Uma 138) and as Bama says “I lamented inwardly that there was no place free of caste” (25)

### **Dalit Women, Gendered Experiences, and Narratives**

An International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) Report informs: “For centuries Dalit women have been targets of violence and rape. If Dalit women, or other members of their community, dare to challenge caste hierarchies and traditional caste roles it is often Dalit women that bear the brunt of the reprisals from the dominant castes.” (7) Pawar narrates the extreme difficulties that Dalit women of her village, living in abject poverty, had to suffer. The Dalit women of her village were the ones who travelled to markets in the town, on foot, crossing difficult terrains, enduring physical agony, to sell their wares and earn a meagre living. These women were also subjected to frequent berating and beatings from their men folk. Pawar’s descriptions of the daily lives of these women: “With their emaciated bodies covered in rags, bony sticklike legs, bare feet, pale, lifeless faces dripping either with sweat or rain, sunken stomachs, palms thickened with work, and feet with huge crevices like a patch freshly tilled, they looked like cadavers floating in powerful streams...” (30), evoke images of unimaginable struggles yet an incredible quest to survive against all odds. The women had their ways to tackle their miserable lives through jokes, laughter, gossips, use of unrestraint language, and so on. But, the burden of their marginalised lives always remained with them. Even in *Karukku* Bama narrates the difficult lives that women had in her village:

It wasn't that easy to go into the jungle. We had to climb the steep mountain slopes one by one, pick up the dried pieces of wood that lay here and there, and then tie them together into bundles. Before you could manage to do this, the twigs and thorns would scratch and tear your face, your hair, your arms and legs. Sometimes your skin would all torn and bleeding. . .

In those days, my mother too used to go collecting firewood. On one occasion she brought she brought home a bundle of firewood, leaned it against the wall, and then began vomiting vast gobs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could survive. (51-2)

The narrative of untouchability is established through multiple levels by different castes and not just the brahmins, as Pawar writes:

"Sometimes, a bunch of Kulwadi women coming from behind would cross them, taking care to avoid their touch. Someone 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!" (38).

The varying levels of humiliation and insults meted out to the Dalits ensured their voices and their existences remained buried under the demands and notions of superiority of the upper castes. The degree of suffering doubled when it came to the lives of Dalit women. Pawar describes:

"We belonged to the Mahad-Rajapur belt, which forms the central region of the Konkan...this region is quite backward. I was born in a backward caste in a backward region, that too a girl! Since Father died when we were quite young, Aaye had to be very thrifty to make ends meet" (106).

The Dalits, without access to good education and jobs, lived in miserable conditions, struggling to make ends meet. After the untimely death of Pawar's father, the family survived on extremely limited resources.

Pawar narrates how education was discouraged by many in her own community as:

"...the women complained, "Bah! What do women have to do with education? Ultimately she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she?" or "Is she going to be a teacher, a Brahmin lady, that she goes to school?" (Ibid 44).

In Bama's *Karukku*, the deep rift between the Christian practices and beliefs has been blatantly exposed through her own spiritual awakening and her realization of herself as being a Dalit:

Far worse is the attitude within our own Church. They have made use if Dalits who are immersed in ignorance as their capital, set up a big business, and only profited their own castes. In the churches, Dalits are the more in number alone. In everything else, they are the least. It is the only upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all, before the rest go about their business. It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there. (80)

### **Conversion to Buddhism: A Break from the Shackles of Caste**

A momentous moment in the histories of the Dalits in India has been Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, which gave the necessary impetus to the Dalit

Buddhist Movement in the country. For Pawar, the conversion to Buddhism has been a significant act in regaining the rightful place in the society, which had been denied to the Dalits for a long time. She recounts how idolatry was discouraged, and the pictures of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses were no longer worshipped in the now Buddhist households:

“...it meant renouncing the lowly place that was accorded to Dalits in the Hindu caste hierarchy and it also entailed giving up superstition and ritual in favor of a more enlightened view of the world. Buddhism gave the Dalits a new vision of life, the possibility of living in a totally new way, free of bondage and subjugation.” (19).

The everyday humiliations that were meted out to the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, especially the brahmins, were countered in various ways, after enduring the insults for centuries. The conversion of the Dalits to a system of faith that gave them equal status and respect as human beings, was a step towards bringing about structural changes in the society. Jayashree B. Gokhale asserts the conversion of the Mahars to Buddhism initiated major shifts in the lives of the Dalits (270). The Dalits followed Ambedkar's example and freed themselves of the chains of the caste system, but major structural transformations in the larger society and the acceptance of the other castes of the converted lower castes still remained, largely, a rarity. The structural changes for the removal of caste barriers from our social fabric remains unfulfilled even today.

### **Caste Identifiers: Tools of Subjugation, Dominance, and Notions of Purity**

There were, and still exists, markers that demarcate the lower castes from the upper castes. The markers are the ways ceremonies are performed, the rituals, the occupations, the food habits, etc. Food was an important marker of the demarcations in the society. As Pawar narrates:

“The upper caste girls always used words like ladu, modak, karanjya, puranpolya... But I never asked myself the stupid question “Why don't we make such dishes at home?” We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste, in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly (106).”

Pawar describes how, even though she spent time with friends from other castes, she was kept at a distance, and certain caste barriers always existed:

“They were going to cook at the house of a girl called Tarulata Sawant, as her parents were away...cooked a simple but tasty meal of rice, dal, and vegetables. They did not allow me to touch anything, though we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal” (113).

Untouchability was performed and practised vehemently during the festivals through stark differences between upper castes' and lower castes' customs and traditions. The lines drawn between different castes, especially between the upper castes and lower castes would be manifested in the name of age-old rituals. Pawar narrates the customs and traditions around Holi which were casteist in every form:

“It was an honor given to the Mahars to deliver the first blow to the tree...People from the Maratha, Bhandari, and Kulwadi castes would just touch the tree in name, but the real tough labor would be for the Mahars to perform: they would have to lift the heavy tree trunk and make it stand. But once the Holi rituals and celebrations started, the Mahars would be simply ignored. They had no place in them” (68).

Pawar further describes how the Dalit youth would be beaten up if they dared to touch the palanquin; and one of the rituals entailed cursing the Mahars and praying for all the

bad luck to befall on the Mahars and not on the rest of the village (Ibid). The humiliation and pain the Mahars were subjected to by the upper castes were endured without any opposition from the Mahars. The absence of protests and silent reception of beatings by the Dalit communities were a result of the institutionalised casteist structures that provided no space for the Dalits to question the upper castes' inhuman treatment towards them.

The themes of untouchability and discrimination are underpinned throughout the narrative of Bama's life. She confesses that during her third class she had not yet heard anybody openly speaking about untouchability yet "I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is" (13). Both her grandmothers worked at the Naickers' place and it was a belief that "Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (15) and she, in detail, analyses the humiliation that they went through on a daily basis:

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for the Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this. Even the way they were given drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naicker woman would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the other received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. (16)

Even the children were not free from the clutches of caste and untouchability as the Brahminical forces needed to condition and ingrain, from a very young age, the place of inferiority that Dalits were/are forced to occupy in our society.

Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school. (18)

In *Majjya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, Kamble reminisces about being a bright student in class and getting a scholarship in her schooldays. Although she was a bright student the very fact that she belonged to the lowest rung of the societal ladder, the "untouchables", perturbed her and haunted her. Once she went to call her classmate, Shaku, because the principal had called for her:

I went to Shaku's house. There were rangolis outside the door. Seeing me Shaku's Ai shouted, 'You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You'll trample the rangolis.'

I stood there scared. . .

Shaku and I came to school but her mother's words were humming in my ears.

'You daughter of a Mahar! Stay there.' (Dangle 107)

The ideas of purity and superiority form the basis of racist as well as casteist narratives. The notions of "Clean" upper Castes and "Unclean" lower castes persisted in the society. Pawar narrates how upper caste teachers used to teach and check what the lower caste students have learnt from afar, maintaining a distance. The Dalit children were never allowed inside the classrooms, and had to sit in the courtyards of the schools. Pawar describes how the caste system was structurally inculcated in everyday lives:

"The houses of the Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from our house. Bhandari and Kulwadi women could drink water from their wells, but untouchable women were absolutely forbidden to do so." (Ibid 48).



One of the foremost inhuman and derogatory notion that define the caste system is the idea of “pollution”. The polluting of the upper castes by the touch or shadow of the lower castes act as the force behind several of the Brahminical practices, still relevant, against the Dalits. The “smell” of the food of the Dalits, the “impurity” of a Dalit’s touch, are instruments of belief that keep the upper castes prejudices and privileges thriving.

### **The Abuse and Violence of Dalit Women in Public and Domestic Spaces**

Although violence against women is prevalent in almost every society, the violence and abuse that the Dalit women face has not yet caught the full attention of the academicians and scholars. Moreover, the abuse that they face is multilayered – male alcoholism, dowry demands, complex social relations, violence inside the house and marginalisation outside the house. D. Sujatha writes about the growing violence against Dalit women in her article “Redefining Domestic Violence: Experiences of Dalit Women”:

The urgent need to study domestic violence against dalit women received momentum due to the National Family Health Survey - nfhs (2006) which showed that the prevalence of violence is much higher against women belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes (SC/ST) as compared to women outside these categories. The percentage of sc women facing physical violence is 41% while that of st women is 39.3%, Other Backward Classes (obc) women is 34.1% and that of other women facing physical violence at the domestic level is 26.8%. In terms of emotional violence, sc women account for 19%, st women 19.5%, obc women 16.9%, and other women 20.9 %. (19)

The incidents of domestic violence were prevalent in several Dalit homes, as it is in the houses of other communities. Pawar writes that a woman was beaten up not just by her husband or her family, but if she was suspected of committing any mistake, she was humiliated in front of the Panchayat, and publicly beaten up by distant relatives as well, if found guilty (Ibid, 159-60). She narrates two such incidences at her village when she was an adolescent, when two women suspected of compromising the village’s “honour” was mercilessly beaten up by other women:

“...One day some women from the village came reporting that a widow was found to be pregnant...The village ordered her to abort the baby. She did not listen to them. So she was judged before nine villages and punished in keeping with their verdict...and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery...had protected the villages’ honor!”

Pawar narrates of another traumatic incident of gender atrocity on an eight-month-pregnant woman, who was punished in the same manner, for publicly accusing her husband of wrongdoing, as “Women, mad with excitement, kicked her till the baby died inside her, and the woman died in pain in a week’s time...” (Ibid). The pain and trauma of the Dalit women of Pawar’s village were etched on their bodies, psychology and memories. The next generations of Dalit women carry these painful memories and demand their voices to be heard, clamour for equality and justice, and demand for an equal place in the mainstream narratives of the nation.

Even in the autobiography of Kamble, the discrimination and the poverty that they faced becomes transparent when she talks about how suddenly she had to stop going to school, both because they did not have enough money and the principal thought that she was not suitable for an agricultural school because of her gender (108). She had also seen her sister getting tormented and being victimized by her in-laws, being starved and being

made to work like an animal (109). Bama also writes how girls' education suddenly came to unfortunate halts because "In the face of such poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores" (79).

### Conclusion

The Dalit women autobiographies resonate the pain of being marginalised on multiple levels and layers. The Dalit women writings- explicitly or implicitly- seethe with anger and pain at the extreme injustices endured by them and their previous generations. The need for stronger constitutional changes, effective implementation of policies against caste crimes and differences, and ensuring resources and public spaces remain accessible to the lower castes as well, could be the first few steps in the direction of structural changes. The collective and intergenerational trauma of Dalit women need to be addressed through constructive, structural socio-cultural and socio-economic changes to every aspect of a Dalit woman's life. Till equality is achieved, the Dalit women must make their voices heard through the first-hand *testimonies* of their lives. As violence against Dalit women continue in extreme forms, such as the Hathras incident of the gang rape and death of a young Dalit woman, whose body suffered severe injuries at the hands of four upper caste men, these acts of inhuman violence remind us of the brutalities that the Dalit women are forced to experience, many a times, succumbing to the ghastly crimes.

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