

# Self-reflexivity in Dalit Women's Life Narratives in Maharashtra

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**Abstract:** Dalit life narrations in Maharashtra are primarily products of a search for identity, self-respect and dignity ignited by Ambedkar's ideology. However, these narratives do not merely provide monolithic images of hardship, discrimination, humiliation and struggle to fight adversity. They also offer interesting diversion from the Dalit movement agenda in asserting and highlighting gender concerns and urgent need to address them. The historical development of the Dalit movement and the presence of strong dalit politics in Maharashtra gives a unique edge to the emancipatory struggles of dalit women. Therefore, the politics of dalit women's narratives in Maharashtra is more nuanced and multi-layered.

Critics have commented on the ways in which the dalit women have depicted their experiences as women trapped within the layers of patriarchal and caste oppression but I would like to argue that there is lot more to these life narratives than a persistent undercurrent of gender concern and fervent protests against patriarchal oppression. As representatives of an emerging dalit middle-class in Maharashtra, the writers offer a valuable critique of slackening commitment to the Dalit cause, the pitfalls of internal caste hierarchies and divisions among dalits, the psychological vacuum after their conversion to Buddhism, the narrow-minded trajectory of Dalit politics in the post-Ambedkar era, and so on. Despite the ideological conditioning and censorship from the Dalit movement, they also offer a fascinating glimpse of the complexity and internal hierarchy in the subaltern discourse in India, and demonstrate how the vicious grip of caste patriarchy and exploitative practices against women collaborate in controlling and silencing dalit women. In this paper I will examine three life narratives written in Marathi by Urmila Pawar (*Aidan*), Kumud Pawade (*Antasphot*), and Mukta Sarvagod (*Mitleli Kawade*) and argue that this persistent note of introspection and self-reflexivity contributes to the layered complexity of narratives and enhances their significance.

*Keywords:* Dalit women, Life Narratives, self-reflexivity, critique of Dalit politics post-Ambedkar, Literature in Marathi, subaltern discourse, dalit feminism

The remarkable dalit autobiographies that emerged after the appearance of the Dalit Panthers and Dalit Sahitya in Maharashtra have played an important role in awakening the consciousness, and forging identities among the marginalized people across the country. More importantly, it has helped in the psychological emancipation of the dalits. Dalit life narrations are primarily products of a search for identity, self-respect and dignity ignited by Ambedkar's ideology. There is a significant element of anger and protest against the excesses of Hindu religion and the so-called cultural mainstream, and they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which silence and misrepresentation of dalits have been countered.

A steady stream of dalit women's life writings since the 1980s has successfully questioned the hegemonic dalit discourse and the basic assumptions of mainstream feminism in India. They have made the autobiographical discourse more elastic by wilfully transgressing the generic boundaries. Critics have commented on the ways in which the dalit women have depicted their experiences as women trapped within the layers of patriarchal and caste oppression; and a lot has also been written

about the polarised way theoretical studies have proceeded in the fields of caste and dalit studies and feminist studies. However, there hasn't been much focus on the element of self-reflexivity in the dalit women's life narratives.

In this paper, I would like to argue that there is lot more to these life narratives than a persistent undercurrent of gender concern and fervent protests against patriarchal oppression. As representatives of an emerging dalit middle-class in Maharashtra, the writers offer a valuable critique of slackening commitment to the Dalit cause, the pitfalls of internal caste hierarchies and divisions among dalits, a critique of post-Ambedkar Dalit movement and the leadership, their continued hostility to women's activism and insensitivity to their issues. They are also honest about the challenges posed by conversion to Buddhism and the issue of women's oppression within the family and at the hands of caste patriarchy. This persistent note of introspection and self-reflexivity contributes to the layered complexity of narratives and enhances their significance. I propose to explore this element of self-reflexivity with reference mainly to three remarkable narratives, *Mitleli Kawade* by Mukta Sarvagod, *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawade, and *Aidan* by Urmila Pawar.

### The Politics of Writing

The sheer range and versatility of marginalised women's discourse in Maharashtra is remarkable. It includes not just the voices of the dominant *mahar* community but also those written by women from nomadic and tribal communities. However, the three texts explored in this paper are written by the *mahar* women. The historical development of the Dalit movement and the presence of strong dalit politics in Maharashtra gives a unique edge to the emancipatory struggles of dalit women. Though all texts are written in Marathi, the writings vary in style, thematic content, and politics. While they all belong to the larger universe of the Dalit movement, their politics differ by region, and ideological position. They inscribe memories of various phases of transition from the *mahar* to the neo-Buddhist community. Though the politics of dalit women's writing has become more diverse over the years, it has retained its group identification.

Contrary to general expectation, these narratives do not provide monolithic images of hardship, discrimination, humiliation and struggle to fight adversity. Dalit women in these narratives are not simply long-suffering passive victims or subservient, docile stereotypes portrayed in the male dalit literature. They are lively and energetic individuals who come across as strong, compassionate, and rebellious women. They fight adversities with dogged determination. Kumud Pawade writes about life in the Varhad region characterized by the early entry by *mahars* in the textile labour, practices of Brahminical patriarchy, inter-caste marriages, 'sisterhood' in the movement and the question of class among the dalit women. Mukta Sarvagod has worked in both the urban centres like Mumbai and Pune and rural areas of western Maharashtra. As a social activist, she outlines the tension between Gandhian and Ambedkarite politics. She wishes to underline the wrong kind of 'social work' that is done, ostensibly to 'help' the community and the gap between this kind of work and the real needs of people. Urmila Pawar gives vivid details of the dalit life in Konkan region while also charting a woman's journey and the discovery of self through different social movements in Maharashtra.

Among the elements that go into the formation of their subjectivity is a new awareness of the Dalit history beginning with Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, going on to Ambedkar and the crucial struggles he led in the 1930s and the 40s. The Dalit literary movement and the Dalit Panthers movement were also vitally interlinked and had greatly influenced each other. Literature was to be used as an ideological tool to forge and sharpen the social and political consciousness of the dalit masses. Most dalit writers were first-generation educated, middle-class professionals who bravely struggled out of their lives of hardship and poverty.

The politics of dalit women's narratives is nuanced and multi-layered. There is an unmistakable undercurrent of concern with women's oppression within the family and the burden of patriarchal constraints on them. To dismiss these concerns by either ignoring or mainly focusing on the trans-

formative politics of the community as delineated by them is doing grave injustice to that politics itself. Therefore, the dialectics of self and community assumes further significance in the dalit women's life narratives. Situated as women in the community, they articulate concerns of gender and challenge the singular communitarian notion of the dalit community.

While most of the better-known life narratives by dalit men are written at an early age of late twenties or thirties, the narratives under study here are written by women at a mature age. Noted Marathi critic Pushpa Bhawe writes that while traditional autobiographies were written with a sense of achievement, the dalit writers chose to end their narratives at the crisis point in life where they crossed the peripheral existence to touch the so-called mainstream...but when dalit women started to write autobiographies, their understanding of society and experience ran deeper and they dealt with accounts of caste oppression on one hand and patriarchy on the other (Bhawe, 69-70). These narratives do not simply posit the 'good', 'innocent' Dalit in antagonism to the evil Brahminical patriarchy. There is no attempt to either hide or ignore the defects and flaws, hold of superstitions and ignorance within the community. Their criticism of the upper-caste attitudes is presented along with their admission of internal problems. There is a strong realization that, if the existing unjust social structures are to be changed, they first need to transform themselves and their community. In the course of narrating their struggles out of life of poverty and deprivation, they also identify features of their culture that are worthy and those that need to be discarded. There is a greater degree of self-reflexivity, introspection, and the realization that without proper education, progress is not possible.

### **Critique of Competitive Imitation of Upper-caste Modernity and Slackening Commitment to the Dalit Cause**

By the 1970s, Maharashtra witnessed many dalits who had benefited from the post-independence state-welfare policies and constitutional provisions. Inspired by Ambedkar and empowered by education, many of them occupied spaces in politics, administration, education, and other white-collar professions. Kumud Pawade and Urmila Pawar belong to this highly educated and self-aware section of dalits. While Mukta Sarvagod, a dedicated and fiercely committed activist, belongs to an earlier generation. As representatives of the emerging dalit middle-class, their life situations are removed from the masses. Education and economic comfort have produced a profoundly double identity for the educated dalit women. Access to modern education and salaried employment has removed them from the world of physical labour and struggle for livelihood. But these outward changes have not made them contented, for they are aware that though they have progressed, most of their community is still enduring the same degrading existence. They can't simply erase the pain and humiliation of early years and carry on with their middle-class existence. In all three narratives, one notes a strong sense of commitment to alleviating the pain and suffering of the dalit masses.

Both, Kumud Pawade and Urmila Pawar reflect on a growing number of dalits who seek the authentication of modernity on the terms set by the upper-castes. Pawade focuses on the slackening of commitment to the Dalit cause among the emerging dalit middle-class and challenges the validity of internal caste hierarchies among the dalit community. She notes the competitive imitation of the upper caste, high-income group in terms of clothes, jewellery, and mannerisms by the emerging dalit middle-class women in their conferences. She is painfully aware of how class also divides the dalit women bringing about both their embourgeoisement and Sanskritization. The writers feel that such futile search for modernity leads them to a purely amoral individualism that refuses to acknowledge any obligation to community. This imitative pursuit of modernity has come to be severely criticized by them on two principal grounds: it has failed to operate on the principle of intra-group equality, and this results in their abdication of responsibility and commitment to communitarianism.

There is also a note of self-mockery as Pawade examines the functioning of women's organisations. This regret about too much talk and very little work at the ground level is quite genuine. "We have formed an all-India organization of the Dalit women, which is not functional even at the district

level. We have perfected the art of imitating the upper classes. Hardly fifty people attend the meeting, but columns and columns in newspaper are filled with headlines like ‘The meeting was a huge success’, ‘Extensive Discussions on Dalit Problems’ and so on. Since we are supposed to ‘represent’ the poor, underprivileged Dalit women, we should at least attempt to reach her. But Professors like us can only give rousing speeches” (*Antasphot*, 8).

Pawar is disturbed by the tendency among educated dalits to hide their caste and place the figurines of Ambedkar and Buddha in less noticeable areas, taking upper-caste surnames to pass themselves off as upper-castes. She is disturbed by the dwindling participation of middle-class dalit women in the agitations. She found that during the 1977–78 agitation for *Namantar*<sup>1</sup>, many women from the rural and slum areas participated in the protest marches, but there were very few middle-class women. Educated women, supposedly more awakened and assertive members of the community, were not very keen on participation.

When Pawar began to work with dalit organisations in Mumbai, she observed that even in women’s conventions and functions, male leaders usually occupied most of the chairs on the stage. This made women feel inhibited. They could not express their concerns freely. Once in such a convention, a well-known, high-caste feminist expressed her displeasure about this, her statement stung the men present on the stage. One of them quickly retaliated in his speech that he didn’t know about “others” but they like to be with “their” women always. The women in the audience clapped loudly. Though she understood and supported the dictum that the dalit men and women need to stand united in the struggle against the caste system, she also felt bad that these men were unwilling to give freedom to the women at least to appreciate the point made in their favour (259). In the course of her work, she realised that in the case of the dalit women, the need to spread self-awareness (*Atmabhan*) is more significant than financial independence. She realised that a strong sense of self is a preliminary requisite in women’s struggle for dignity. Therefore, her organisation ‘*Samvadini*’ primarily focused on spreading self-awareness among women. She writes about the immense resistance to this very idea itself from within the community, their attempts to organise women were repeatedly dismissed as a ‘feminist’ fad unnecessary for the dalit women.

Pawar writes about many frustrating experiences during their attempts to enlist members and get funds for their organisation. They hoped to convince officers and well-placed dalit middle-class families for assistance, but people either dismissed them from the door itself or lectured them about the futility of such efforts. She writes that those middle-class dalits were actually shocked that despite their sophistication and changed lifestyles, they could be so easily identified. She confesses that they could not convince educated dalits who were in a slightly better financial position. “However hard one tried convincing them, they refused to be convinced. A sheer waste of time!” (*The Weave*, 274). Sometimes, the neo-Buddhists would explode at the word ‘dalit’, “How are we ‘dalit’ now?” They asked angrily. She also observes that people from the dalit communities have become sick and tired of giving donations to social causes and have become cynical. Some people questioned them, “What are your plans? The same as our leaders? Collect money and enjoy?” (272)

### **Dalit Movement post-Ambedkar, Chauvinistic Leaders**

During the heyday of dalit activism under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar, women had gained political consciousness due to their direct or indirect involvement in campaigns, protests, and demonstrations. But in the post-Ambedkarite period, dalit leaders have always subordinated and at times suppressed an independent political expression of the dalit women. Highlighting this fact, the writers vent their anger, and sometimes bitterness about the chauvinistic attitudes of the people from their community. One notes a deep sense of disillusionment with the political leadership of the day in Sarvagod’s narrative. They denounce the rampant factionalism, short-sightedness, and narrow-minded politics of their leaders. They rue their leadership’s impatience and dismissive attitude toward any practical initiative by women.

Sarvagod's *Mitleli Kawade (Closed Doors)* is a milestone in the history of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra for its persistent introspection and criticism of the dalit leadership. Through her personal experiences, she focuses on the difficulties and resistance within the dalit community for constructive social change. Her life narrative examines what goes on in the name of Ambedkar-inspired social work in the slums and its inadequacy and unsuitability for the dalit masses. It offers an objective and candid account of what is hampering the dalit mindset, a first-hand account of the narrow-minded, petty politics of the dalit leaders and the fragmentation of the Dalit movement in the post-independence era. Aarti Kusare Kulkarni writes, "*Mitleli Kawade* vividly focuses on the overall backwardness of the *Mahar* community, the general apathy toward education, the grinding poverty and slavishness of the community and efforts undertaken by her for the upliftment of this community" (Kulkarni, 80).

Sarvagod writes extensively about her work and related disappointments in Mumbai's BDD chawls. She found out that things such as adult literacy classes, slates, ration cards and other such welfare projects for the inhabitants of the BDD chawls already exist, but only on paper. She writes, "Now I understood the whole thing. Open classes for the benefit of friends... the classes are, however, only on paper. Only ration cards, only slates, the show went on. As if this was a pasture, reserved! If a Corporater or a Congress leader wanted a class opened, people would take care that it was opened only here. Other work was minimal" (trans. Maya Paranjape in *Writing caste*, 150).

After the death of Ambedkar, a wave of *Mahila Mandalas* came up in Maharashtra. Her first encounter with the Ambedkar *Mahila Mandal* completely baffled her. She was amused to find that a man was conducting the women's meeting and was directing the process of electing office bearers. She discovered that the *Mahila Mandalas* had turned into organizers of Jayanti celebrations, and their work was limited to routine felicitation of leaders. When she suggested that the *Mandalas* should primarily work for the improvement of women, open literacy classes, vocational training classes, and not to squander money on decoration, flowers, gift items, people simply dismissed her concerns. When Sarvagod insisted on initiating some concrete employment measures along with consciousness raising activities, it upset the local leaders a lot, and they started a slandering campaign against her.

Sarvagod writes about the deep regional divide among the followers of Ambedkar in Mumbai. The followers from the Konkan region dominated the movement because they thought they were superior as they, like Ambedkar, belonged to the Konkan region and therefore had the right to dominate other *Mahar* groups from different regions (*Mitleli Kawade*, 41). These Konkani leaders tried to dictate terms and harass people from other regions of Maharashtra. She strongly condemns such factionalism among the followers of Ambedkar, as she understands, it would only weaken the impact of his revolutionary ideas. Working in various slum colonies in Mumbai and Pune, she came to know about the deep internal divisions among the dalit communities and how the caste factor decided their response to her initiatives. She regrets the fact that the other dalit communities like *mang*, *chambhar*, *bhangi* etc, regard Ambedkar as the leader of the *mahar* community only, and cling to their respective caste identities instead of making a common cause with them. She feels frustrated that though Babasaheb worked ceaselessly and underwent hardships for all untouchable communities, he is branded the leader of the *mahar* community only (110).

Sarvagod is also critical of the dalit tendency to keep the non-dalit community at an arm's length. She writes how dalit leaders were fiercely protective of their turfs. They did not allow their followers to show any regard or affinity toward any of non-Dalit political leaders, or institutions. She used to be worked up because of a lack of entrepreneurship among the dalits. She writes that all educated men wanted government jobs only. Everyone preferred the security of a job, be it even a peon's, at some office. She felt this was against the grain of Ambedkar's prescribed method of self-development, self-reliance and direct action by untouchables themselves. Her efforts to bring funding from non-dalit organizations to promote self-employment, and entrepreneurship among the dalits were repeatedly thwarted. She had to work in different cities due to her husband's transferable job. But wherever she went, the local male dalit leaders never backed her because they could not accept that

there's no political ambition behind her activism. They were also suspicious of her middle-class mannerisms and even spread rumours that she was an agent of the Congress party. That she was sent to break the Republican party and harm the dalit cause. Sarvagod reveals how, many of her initiatives collapsed because of her naivety and failure to understand internal dynamics of the power politics within the dalit community. Fed up with internal politics and the politicians' inability or unwillingness to move beyond identity politics, Sarvagod asks a pertinent question, "Would the dalits like to persist as 'dalits', i.e., downtrodden or do they intend to end this dalithood?" She voices her anger at the attempts to ghettoize the community and the herd mentality of Dalit politics. She writes, "those who are out to abolish caste should themselves come out of the prison of their consciousness" (*Mitleli Kawade*,73). She is right in pointing out that this insistence that only dalits can/ should represent or speak for them, try to understand their issues will freeze the dalit identity in a closed, air-tight box. She warns against practising such essentialist and rigid identity politics.

Pawar too writes about many incidents when she was side-lined or simply ignored in conferences and conventions in contrast with the attention and respect given to male leaders and speakers. This, despite the fact that she has been invited to speak over repeated requests and phone calls. She takes recourse to dry humour to cover her sense of hurt. She writes, "The people from the dalit movement treated women in the same discriminatory manner, as if they were some inferior species, as they did the ones at home" (*The Weave*,235). She finds it quite disturbing that dedicated women activists from other communities, despite working for many years, have no place/ recognition in the dalit movement (263).

Both, Sarvagod and Pawar critique the dalit (*mahar*) leadership's wilful marginalization/ lack of representation or acknowledgement of other community activists fighting for the Dalit cause of social transformation and a more equitable social order. They warn that if such narrow focus and privileging of the *mahar* community continues, fragmentation of the movement is inevitable. All three writers express deep concern that the legacy of Phule and Ambedkar is being squandered by their followers who choose a very narrow interpretation of their ideas. They are also aware that their efforts to initiate introspection and correct caste bias among activists are taken as personal attacks by the leaders and activists in the movement. Their out-spoken nature has made them unpopular.

### Conversion to Buddhism: Aspiration, Changes and Challenges

Lack of separate and distinct culture and social order irritated Ambedkar at every step in the struggle for the emancipation of the dalits. He believed that conversion to Buddhism will act as a catalyst in bringing social equality. It will instil a sense of self-respect and bestow a new identity. He believed that conversion would offer a dignified exist and complete rejection of caste Hindu society. The conversion to Buddhism has a psychological dimension. As P. G. Jogdand writes, "freedom from the sense of being a polluted person is a major achievement of the conversion to Buddhism and it has also created an ethos to preserve group unity" (Jogdand, 153). The life narratives testify to the blow their ancient world has suffered, and how conversion replaced an old era of cultural practices with a new one. A reading of these life narratives also underlines the fact that religious conversion can remain merely a symbolic change until the torch-bearers of society at the grassroots struggle at every level to implement these changes creatively.

Memories of *Dharmantar*<sup>2</sup> are sharply etched in Pawar's mind. She writes extensively about the drowning of Hindu idols as an essential ritual to break the shackles of Hindu caste ideology from the psyche of dalits. She observes an increase in abuse after their conversion to Buddhism as they began to give up caste-based labour and protest against discrimination. Other people, particularly the powerful middle castes like the *marathas*, the *bhandaris*, and the *kunbis* reacted strongly to *Dharmantar*. The casteist slurs and insults did not stop with their improved standards of living that came in as benefits of education and job security. People looked for opportunities to vent their resentment and hostility because of their progress and self-improvement. Needless to say, the experiences were harsher in rural areas.

Pawar's narrative traces the period after conversion, where she honestly examines whether the community has been following the principles of Dr Ambedkar and Buddhist dhamma in a true sense. Buddhist rituals drawn up by Dr Ambedkar had made marriages a much more straightforward and more egalitarian process in which priests had no role. Getting used to a new religion and associated practices did not come easily to the neo-Buddhists. She writes about initial confusion regarding the prayers and rituals in practising Buddhism, the disappointment of women about discontinuing the earlier wedding rituals and festivities, singing and fun associated with it. She mentions how, over the period, Buddhism had become institutionalized through the Buddha Jana Panchayats that laid out rules and some monetary obligations for marriage. Conversion to Buddhism practically meant the adopting a rational and scientific way of life based on reason. However, she admits that the ideological change was by no means uniform throughout the community. Many people found it difficult to throw off the ideological baggage and cultural practices of Hinduism in the aftermath of conversion. She admits that the stark rationalism and absence of earlier ritual practices did create a vacuum for many. A lot of people, particularly those in the rural area were unable to cope with the emotional void and they were reverting to the assistance of the past ritualistic practices. She writes about her flip-flop between the cultural traditions of Hinduism and the rationality and scientific attitude based on reason advocated by Buddhism as well.

Many years after conversion, on a visit to her native village, Pawar found out that her sister-in-law had become a local God-woman dispensing holy ash and practicing exorcism and the same cousin, who was at the forefront of drowning Hindu idols, merely chose to look away when confronted. She writes about her inner turmoil "On the one hand, there was the rational, radically transforming aspect of Buddhism, on the other, superstitions' frightening hold on the human mind was back with a vengeance. It was not very long since Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had cleansed our minds of them, and yet people got caught in the same web of superstition again and again. It was alarming!" (The *Weave*, 290).

The dalit intellectuals proclaim that conversion to Buddhism is a mode of political dissent and a means of moving away from forms of social stigmatisation and subjugation. Pawar's account, however, seems to suggest that the most self-conscious Buddhists were the members of the newly-educated elite group while the rural *mahars* largely retained most of the habits and customs of their erstwhile faith. Lucinda Ramberg has observed that a gendered division of religious labour, in which men follow Ambedkar and women keep ancestral gods, is widely recognised and discussed among Ambedkarite Buddhists across India, as a problem for the community. She writes, "Conversion was supposed to be a radical break from the past, a break that somehow fewer women are able to make. In many Ambedkarite, Buddhist households, women are not good subjects of rational modernity. Over and over, they are placed and place themselves on the side of ancestral religion and efficacious ritual" (Ramberg, 46).

### Inter-caste Marriages, Caste Patriarchy and Domestic Violence

In the prime of dalit mobilisation, Ambedkar wrote that inter-caste marriage was the most crucial way of annihilating caste since it alone acknowledged the relationship between the maintenance of caste purity and the control of women's sexuality. However, these life narratives reveal that not only the inter-caste marriages with other upper-caste Hindus meet with stiff resistance and social harassment but marriages within various dalit sub-castes are also strongly opposed. The sense of hierarchy and one-upmanship among various dalit castes and their sense of individual caste honour has meant bitter fights and strong opposition to inter-caste marriages among the dalits themselves. The intra-caste prejudice among the dalit castes poses a formidable challenge to Ambedkar's vision of annihilation of castes.

Kumud Pawade's husband, Motiram Pawade, belonged to the *kumbi* caste, a predominantly landed community in Maharashtra. She writes about her difficulties and struggles for acceptance in inter-caste marriage. When Pawar's daughter decided to opt for an inter-caste marriage instead of the one

chosen by her parents, she was thrown out of the house by her father. She had to request a friend to take in her daughter till her marriage could be organised again, because her husband simply refused her entry into their home. Pawade's espousal of inter-caste marriages for social transformation as advocated by Ambedkar is interspersed with choices made by some of her friends or close relatives and the challenges thereof. She lauds the courage shown by Nandeshwar Aaji, an illiterate woman, in standing up to the miscreants in the community in contrast to the vacillating professor friend who tried to gloss his caste troubles as psychological problems. She contrasts this to the indecisiveness shown by her male colleague who fell in love with an upper-caste woman.

The narratives tell us about many instances in the community when dalits belonging to one caste took umbrage upon someone from another caste for marrying into their community. Even on a non-violent level, discriminations among dalits have been prevalent for ages. Taboos such as not accepting food, water, sharing meals from other communities and regarding them inferior may appear to be innocuous but they acquire ominous importance when inter-caste marriages take place in defiance of these conventions. Pawade reflects on the formidable notions of caste honour and pride and sense of hierarchy among the dalit sub-castes, which made even educated people behave in quite inhuman ways. In a way, understanding this social reality as an activist helps her to put her experience of inter-caste marriage in perspective, though the bitterness took long time to fade away.

Writings by dalit women makes us understand how the three interlocking systems of caste, untouchability and patriarchy and the implications of caste-patriarchy operate for the dalit women in the traditional society. The dalit intellectuals and activists in general, have perpetuated a myth about egalitarian intra-dalit gender relationships. One repeatedly comes across a rather dubious assertion that dalit men do not oppress 'their' women as much as upper-caste men do, because they are cognizant of the pain of oppression which they experience at the hands of the upper-castes. Countering this, Padma Velaskar writes, "The interaction of patriarchy with caste and class does not make for 'greater' or 'lesser' oppression but for a qualitatively different type of oppression." She explains how, despite the serious engagement with the question of Indian women's place by two great anti-caste revolutionaries viz Phule and Ambedkar, theories of caste paid scant attention to women's specific role and position in analysing the system. Dalit politics and scholarship have also remained gender blind. "The Phule-Ambedkarite critique of caste-patriarchy did not see the light of the day till Dalit women themselves recovered and re-appropriated it in the context of their daily experience of oppression and of a newly emergent gendered political consciousness" (Velaskar, 38).

Writing about the peculiarity of Dalit women's situation, Velaskar writes that Brahminical patriarchal ideology generally exercises formidable control in the relations of reproduction in the context of marriage and family, such patriarchal norms and practices are prevalent among the dalit communities as well. The Dalit woman's (especially in the role of wife/daughter-in-law) sexuality, fertility and labour are controlled within the private domain. Such control is fairly common among the so-called upper-caste women as well. However, the peculiarity of Dalit women's situation lies in that the control over domestic/reproductive labour is exerted not only by family/kin but also by caste (Velaskar 39).

The narratives reveal that marital violence against women in dalit households is rather a routine phenomenon. Pawar narrates some chillingly inhuman instances of punishments given to women by the caste panchayats and how sometimes women themselves carried out such harsh punishment in the interest of the rather dubious notion of 'honour'. Her narrative bears testimony to the social reality of dalit communities, wherein some forms of violence against women are deemed quite normal, and retributive beating is seen as acceptable and necessary to ensure the proper functioning of family and community life. Fears and suspicions of women's infidelity, ideas of honour, and the need to assert control by violence are quite common.

With the examples of various women known to her, Pawar demonstrates exactly how, untouchability, poverty, and gender servility combine to oppress women. The social practice of untouch-



ability imposes indignity and subservience. Deprivation induces a sense of dependency and helpless fatalism. Finally, womanhood as a condition of gender servility and social liability makes women put up with colossal discrimination and male violence. In doing so, she also exposes the Dalit movement's claims that the dalit women enjoy greater liberty when compared to other women. Through various examples, she illustrates how, for dalit men, women are inferior beings subordinated and controlled by actual or threatened violence. She also discusses the tricky question of women against women or what should be identified as the politics of the household. She tries to grapple with why women consent to certain practices which degrade them. She analyses how some women are complicit with men in oppressing other women. There is also an attempt to understand herself, and for her readers, how women's consent is produced in the right to control their lives. Because of Pawar's feminist orientation, there is a clear awareness of the various motives and methods underlying the suppression of women. She explains how the internalization of the male superiority ideology leads to varied discriminations. She also analyses her growth and change in her perspective after getting involved in the women's movement. One of the most remarkable aspects of Pawar's narrative is her honest exploration of changes and challenges in her relationship with her husband during the course of her journey. As she learnt more and got involved in both the dalit movement and the feminist movement, she demanded changes at home and strained the relationship with her husband. He was not willing to give away his privileges and found difficult to overcome his conservative expectations from her, from the marriage. There's a great degree of self-reflexivity involved in understanding one's standpoint by critically interrogating one's private and intimate space.

Dalit women are subjected to several levels of oppression, which operate as agents of censorship: poverty, lack of access to education, exposure to a wider world and finally, the control of their community. The narratives reveal how, when dalit women try to express themselves, they are often censored in the name of caste identity and warned against weakening the caste movement by their utterances. Pradnya Lokhande, a well-known critic in Marathi, confirms how dalit writers find it challenging to expose patriarchal attitudes within dalit society and the Movement. Praised and encouraged when they speak of caste and class oppression, they are accused of disloyalty and betrayal when they speak about the patriarchy that operates within the community (qtd in the Introduction to *Storylines*). Therefore, it is remarkable how, despite ideological conditioning and censorship from the Dalit movement, these writers have managed to document the helplessness and vulnerability of innumerable women to domestic violence and abuse, the convergence of caste and patriarchy that perpetuates oppressive practices against women.

To conclude, dalit women's life narratives are not simply stories of resistance and assertion against an oppressive social order. They also offer a remarkable degree of introspection and self-reflexivity. As representatives of the emerging dalit middle-class, they offer an insider's critical perspective on what is hampering the dalit mindset. They show remarkable courage in interrogating evil practices, hold of superstitions, internal rivalries, and divisions among the dalits. There is a genuine concern that the spirit of Ambedkar's movement should not be squandered by his followers. They do not hesitate to expose the hypocrisy, short-sightedness, and narrow-mindedness of the dalit leadership. This element of self-reflexivity is, therefore, one of the most significant aspects of dalit women's self-assertion in Maharashtra.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The agitation to change the the name of Marathwada University to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University.
- <sup>2</sup> Conversion to Buddhism.

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