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Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Protest of Dalit Woman against Cast, Class and Gender Discrimination

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Abstract

Dalit are those people who have been marginalized and oppressed on the ground of cast, class and religion for centuries in the cast based Indian society. They are forced to live the life of poverty, social isolation and excommunication in the so called traditional Hindu social structure. They are considered to be impure and untouchable by upper caste Hindu and believed their presence polluting. They are denied their fundamental human rights and birth rights due to low position in the Hindu hierarchal social system. On the other side Dalit women are oppressed among oppressed, worst marginalized among marginalized and enforce to bear multi-dimensional exploitation and marginalization due to their caste, class and gender. Dalit women's personal narratives are the results of their sufferings and pains. By using them they angrily asserted and expressed their plight and put forth their resistance towards all kinds of discriminations they faced in terms of caste, class and gender. The present research paper aims at gender inequalities, caste and class discrimination, harassment, oppression, exploitation of Dalit women with special reference to selected Dalit women's autobiographies.

Keywords: Dalit, Discriminations, Exploitation, and Marginalized and Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit women are a large part population of Dalit community which has been neglected, suppressed and relegated to secondary position among male dominated Indian society. The depths of their pains and sufferings have hardly been taken up seriously either by political leaders or by scholars until recently. They are severely exploited outside and inside their home respectively by people of higher caste and by people of their caste due to their low caste status, class and gender position. Dr. Ambedkar in his 'Annihilation of Caste' states that, "the basic unit of the Hindu social order is neither the individual nor the family. The unit of Hindu society is the caste. If an individual suffers discrimination, it is not due to his or her conduct, but

it is due to the class he or she belongs to". It means that caste was the evil factor due to it they were made worst victims of humiliation, dishonor, and disrespect.

Male writers of Dalit community entirely ignored the pathetic and horrible life of Dalit women and did not provide enough space for the problems and issues of Dalit women in their writings. They did not mention issues of Dalit women such as domestic violence, slave like treatment by husband and his relatives, tremendous hard work since the first day of their marriage etc. Dalit men were victim of casteism and exploited only by upper caste. It was not in the case of Dalit women as compare to Dalit men they suffer more due to their triple disadvantageous firstly being Dalit, secondly being poor, and thirdly being women. They are not only oppressed by outer society but by men of their own caste. They were kept in enslavement and slavery by their own men. Inspired by the writings of Dalit male writers, Dalit women writers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and other like them found a powerful medium of self expression in the form of autobiography and started to write their personal narratives in order to raise their suppressed voices against caste, class and gender inequalities and discrimination .

Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prison We Broke* (2008) is one of the most important milestone in the Dalit writing. It can be called an important social document on Dalit life in which she tells the story of suffering of Dalit people, especially the story of miserable and pitiable life of Dalit women. The status of Dalit women in the society was not better than animals. They were treated brutally psychologically and physically at home by their husbands, cruel mother-in laws and by people of other caste. Caste and class were the worst factors for them, due to, they in every step of their life badly dishonored and humiliated by each and everyone. Kamble says that, on the one hand Dalit women were untouchable and impure but on the other hand they were highly employed for works by upper cast landlords. Dalit women despite their humiliation and insult had to work in the fields belonging to upper cast landlords as they had no other alternative available in their hands for surviving their families. Baby Kamble says that they were

RESEARCH ARTICLE

never allowed entry into the courtyards by Brahmin women at the time of buying of firewood from them. They had to maintain enough distance while talking to Brahmin women because mere touch of Dalit women considered polluting and impure. Before giving them a bundle of firewood they had to check it carefully in order to confirm no hair or thread left there in the bundle, Baby Kamble quotes them "Kaki, we have taken out every stand of hair and thread from the sticks. Each stick has been checked. Have we gone mad that we will pollute your house? You are God's people. Don't we know even that?" In other such incidents Dalit women were never allowed by shopkeeper to stand near the grocery shop, they were told to keep safe distance from the shop out of fear of polluting his shop whenever they comes there for things like shikakai and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin, shopkeeper with very scornful look would throw things towards them instead of properly giving to them. Dalit women like this way undergo severe caste discrimination and violence in their whole life.

Another aspect of Indian society is existence of patriarchy. Dalit women in patriarchal social system were expected to be subordinate to men and insisted to follow the rules and norms of the social structure. They had to follow patriarchal social order not only of Dalit men but also men of higher caste. Belonging to lowest cast they had to pay respect to men and even to child of higher caste. Baby writes, they had to say chants like "The humble Mahar woman fall at your feet master" number of times in a day. Dalit women even had to leave a road and walk through thorny bushes on the roadside whenever they see higher caste men walking from opposite direction. The existence of patriarchy in India made Dalit women insecure and dependent on men.

Dalit women work equally at home and at work place as their men do, but still there work, dedication and devotion towards wellbeing of their family was altogether neglected. The position of Dalit women in their family is like slave, no security to life, no freedom from daily unbearable hard work and no relief from regular domestic violence. They were worst victim of harassment, gender discrimination in their own caste. Baby Kamble states the importance of sons in a family. Sons were preferred in a family not daughters, so sons were the pride of the family. They were given high priority, received proper treatment from the parents, and on the other side, wellbeing of the daughters were completely neglected.

It could be said that nature, depth and gravity of problems and issues faced by Dalit women were entirely different from the problems faced by women of higher castes. Their life hardly had any pleasure and happiness. They had to face trouble in every step of their life. They had undergone severe exploitation and oppression. But apart

from it, women and writer like Baby Kamble inspired by the movement of Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar came forward with their writings and narrates the dilemma and sufferings of their own women.

Urmila Pawar is another Dalit woman writer famous for her memoir "Aaydan" published Marathi in 2003 later it was translated into English by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* published in 2008. Aaydan means weaving of cane basket used as utensils in the houses. Then that was business mostly done by Mahar community to meet their daily needs. Urmila pawar's mother used to do the work of weaving of baskets after her husband's death in order to survive her family. The Dalit women exploitation, caste discrimination and untouchability are the major themes of her memoir. Her focus is on the hardship and life struggle of Dalit. She narrates the how Dalit women from her village Phansawale would travels all the way to Ratangiri through thick forest, climbing up and down high hills to sell fruits, fish to earn their daily livelihood. Dalit women had to carry out all the responsibilities of their houses, in order to survive their family they had to work hard to earn food while bearing and caring of children, following the commands of husbands and mother-in-laws and tolerating all kinds of violence. They would carry on their heads loads of baskets full of fish caught at early dawn in the nearby seashore and walk the hard and difficult path to sell their products and fish in the market of Ratnagiri. That was their daily work. They were well aware about their status, work and position in their community.

Urmila Pawar also recounts in detail her own experience of caste discrimination she had faced as a child and as a adult woman. She states how she and other numerous Dalit girls were the victims of caste discrimination due to caste and gender position. She was treated inhumanly and abused in school by her schoolmates as well as by her class teacher. The teacher used to ask her to throw her notebook for checking on his table from distance, he used to force her to sit in last row, he deliberately insist on her sweeping the floor of the class after the class was over, he forced her to clear the dung from the courtyard. She states that she received this kind of inhuman and harsh treatment from teacher and classmates due to her caste. Her mother wanted to fulfill the dream of her husband by educating all her children. On his deathbed he instructed her mother to educate children so that they would be free from all humiliations of being Dalit. Though her father was not learned man but he was influenced by the thought of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar so he wanted all his children well educated and self independent. One day Urmila was mercilessly beaten up by her teacher for not cleaning the dung from courtyard of the school and ordered her not to come to school. Her mother noticed beating and very angrily

RESEARCH ARTICLE

warns the teacher (Guruji) in the public place. Urmila quotes her mother, "Look here, after this if your finger so much as touches my daughter, I will see to it that you will never walk on this road..." Even her classmates tried to find chance to harass and tease her in school. She remembers one such unforgettable and painful incident related to caste discrimination, one day all her classmates planned to cook food in the school, so everyone was asked to bring things needed for cooking food like rice, floor, chilly powder, turmeric, utensils and other necessary things but she was told only to bring money instead of bringing any material because of her belonging to Dalit caste. There were many such incidents of caste discrimination Dalit women had to face in their day to day life.

Urmila states that she has faced caste discrimination everywhere. She was also targeted by her upper caste colleagues in her office when she got promotion in her job. They believed that she got promotion because she was belonging to S.C. and due to implementation of reservation policy. They would pass comments like "they are not less than the son-in-law of the Government! Or they are such pampered a lot". In other such similar incident Urmila was abused by her neighbor when she comes to know about her caste. Her daughter Manini wanted to celebrate her 5th birthday and invite her friends Kishori and her brother of Maratha caste. When their mother come know about their caste through her son, she started abusing Urmila "we did not know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sat my children to you. From now on, don't you give my daughter to eat if she comes to your house? We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you" Urmila noticed that even in metropolitan cities like Bombay, New Delhi and Madras people were practicing caste system in high percentage.

She was also a victim of domestic violence and gender discrimination after her marriage with Harishachandra. Her husband did not like her outgoing for job. He wanted her at home for the wellbeing of their children and for household works. He always wanted to dominate her and established his authority over her but Urmila being educated woman quarreled with him and fight against injustice. She kept herself involved in the social activities and firmly stands for women's problem such as dowry system, harassment, violence and torture of women existed in Dalit community. She was actively participated in

many social programs like celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti, meeting of women and delivering public speeches etc. Her husband never understood her and her social work for Dalit women. Her husband just used to say that she had no brains and no heads for practical knowledge, "if somebody asks her five rupees, she will offer ten! That is how impractical she is!" Instead of encouraging and motivating her for her social work, he brutally tormented her psychologically and physically.

CONCLUSION

Dalit women writer has used autobiographies as an effective tool in expressing their protest and resistance against domination of the caste of Hindu, against oppression by caste Hindu and by men of their caste. They dared to oppose caste, class and gender discrimination as they wanted to tell to the world that they are also human. They want equal human treatment, honor and respect like men. Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar inspired by the thoughts and movement of Dr. Ambedkar, they without any hesitation and fear strongly addressed the problems and issues of Dalit and especially of Dalit women and with their all might opposed casteism, male dominance and exploitation of all types. They raised their voices to break down the slavery of centuries of Dalit women. Their writing has created new hope and new way of life for all depressed, marginalized and exploited women of the world.

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