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(शिक्षण आणि समाज)

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May 2023

(Special Issue-1I/ Volume-III)



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Development”**

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Content...

1. कोल्हापूर जिल्हा पन्हाळा तालुक्यातील सामाजिक व आर्थिक विकास आणि स्त्री पुरुष लिंग गुणोत्तराच्या सहसंबंधाचा तुलनात्मक अभ्यास (२०११)
Ms. Ashwini Muravane, Dr. Omprakash Shapurkar and Dr. Sunil Bhosale 009
2. आदिवासी समुदायाच्या समस्या- एक समाजशास्त्रीय अभ्यास
Mr. Harishchandra Chame 017
3. रहमतपूर शहरातील अनुसूचित जातींच्या सामाजिक व आर्थिक स्थितीचा अभ्यास
Mr. Shivaji Sampat Chavan and Dr. Arun Patil 022
4. कोल्हापूर जिल्ह्यातील भुदरगड तालुक्यातील मेघोली व वासनोली वाडा या आदिवासी वाड्यांचा सामाजिक आर्थिक जीवनाचा भौगोलिकदृष्ट्या अभ्यास
Mr. Sanjaykumar Menshi 031
5. दलित जीवन का दर्दनाक यथार्थ : छप्पर
Dr. Dipak R. Tupe 039
6. Understanding The Tribal Population of Goa: A Socio- Demographic Overview
Dr. Harpreet Singh 045
7. Role of Traditional Knowledge and Folk Culture of Missing Tribe of Assam in Sustaining Environment: A Deep Ecology Perspective
Ms. Saikia Dhritisha, Mr. Prasad Riteish, Miss Aishwarya Hingmire and Mr. Mayur Goud 055
8. Unveiling the Voices of Resilience: Major Dalit Women Writers
Dr. Shruti Joshi 064
9. Educational Attainment for Sustainable Livelihood: Challenges before Marginalized Society of Sugarcane-Cutters in Maharashtra (India)
Dr. Shubhangi Kalè and Dr. Sambhaji Shinde 072

Unveiling the Voices of Resilience: Major Dalit Women Writers

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The caste structure in India is, undoubtedly, complicit in perpetuating gender oppression. Dalit women face multifield discrimination due to caste, class and patriarchal structures. While upper-caste women were anointed as agents of caste purity, lower-caste women are considered polluted and, therefore, targets of assault and crime.

—Chandrashekhra Azad

Abstract:

This research paper aims to explore the genre of literature written by Dalit women writers and their significant role in shaping the discourse of social justice, gender equality, and empowerment. It examines how these writings challenge dominant patriarchal narratives and empower Dalit women through literary expression. Dalit women writers employ their themes, motifs, and storytelling techniques to shed light on the unique struggles, experiences, and aspirations of Dalit women in India. Despite the oppression based on caste, class, and gender, faced by these women, they have found a powerful voice through literature to articulate their age-old plight. This paper tries to review select works of Dalit women writers like Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Bama Faustina Soosairaj among many others; and comments on the transformative potential of their works in fostering community solidarity, inspiring social change, and empowering Dalit women to reclaim their existence. The researcher hopes that this exploration may help readers of other marginalized groups in this nation to realize the potential of creating their narratives and influencing the community through cultural biographies.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dalit women's writing, oppression, self-realization, gender, caste, class, hierarchy, marginalization

Introduction:

The term 'Dalit' was used by the social reformist Jyotirao Phule in the late 1880s to address the outcasts of the Hindu caste hierarchy 'Chaturvarna'. These were the previously called 'shudras' or untouchable community which was oppressed (dalit = ground down), broken, scattered and divided. ('Dalit' in Sanskrit means all these attributes). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made the term popular to refer to the depressed classes. Scheduled caste is the official term used for Dalits in the constitution now.

Dalit Literature is the expression of a community consciousness of the

Dalits about identity and existential strife. During the 19th century, reformist campaigns began in several parts of India to fight back the age-old subjugation of the oppressed classes. The Dalit consciousness was given a voice in the literary outpour of thinkers, reformers, activists and poets. However, the literary expressions of oppressed consciousness may date back to the saint poets of the Bhakti Movement of Maharashtra and Punjab. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's speeches, books, documents of various social reformer organizations, newspaper debates, and letters also provided a stimulus to the literary body of Dalit experiences. Apart from the foundational writings by the thinkers like Jotirao Phule, B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar, we find select examples of Dalit life writing, fiction, poetry, and anthologies. The 20th century saw the establishment of Dalit literature as a new genre of academic studies. Dalit texts are increasingly being read as the literature of protest, resilience, sympathy, equality and social justice.

Background and significance of Dalit women's literature:

Dalit women actively participated in anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s, the Non-Brahmin movement in the 1930s, social movements of the 1970s and early 80s. As a result of all the unrest and awareness created by Dalit activism, autobiographies of Dalit writers were being published. In the 1970s, memoirs of Dalit women depicting their harrowing struggle, pain and fight for existence; their first-hand experiences of oppressed life began to be published. According to Dalit Feminists, the space and voice needed by the Dalit women writers is crucially different from that of the non-Dalit/higher caste/class writers. Dalit women are three-fold marginalized being - women, Dalit women and poor Dalit women. This intersectionality of gender, caste and class sets the experiences and narratives of Dalit women apart from the general feminist narrative. For quite a long time, depictions of Dalit women's lives were overlooked in the writings of Dalit men. Basically, Dalit literature itself was male-centered. Dalit men follow the upper-caste Hindu patriarchy even if they rebel against the oppression inflicted by these upper-caste men.

Dalit women face poverty, illiteracy and hunger which is worsened by the subjugation from men – not only belonging to oppressor castes but also from their Dalit men. The violence inflicted upon these women is specifically generated due to their lower caste position which centers around sexual exploitation. Most of the religious prostitution (the devadasi or jogini system) in Maharashtra is reserved specifically for Dalit women. In addition, these victims are not aware of their rights or laws. Their pleas for justice are overlooked based on their caste. The women of the Dalit community have always been 'outsiders within' (the term was used by P.H. Collins in her discourse on Black Feminism) (Collins, 1986). Their three-fold marginalized status made them a separate category. To add to it, the Dalit Movement was largely male-dominant and had no space for female voices.

Experiences of the marginalized disclose underlying problems that are to be voiced, made public, and explained; problems that can become research agendas and

raise questions to examine ways of life, social structures, and bigotry of the dominant social groups, the proposition that has previously counted as knowledge. (Harding, 2004)

Dalit women authors tried to voice the 'outsider within' position of Dalit women establishing a sisterhood through a common communal experience paralleled with the individual one. Narratives of Dalit women can be called auto ethnographies, cultural biographies, and social accounts of experiences of a long-silenced group; and realities that were never revealed before. These testimonies are mostly written in regional languages - Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Panjabi and then translated. Shanta Bai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chitrakatha*, Marankala by Janabai Kachru Girhe, Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot*, P.Sivakami's *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, Bama's *Karukku and Sangati*, Kaushlaya Baisentri's *Dohra Abhishaap*, and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* are a few examples of Dalit women's life narratives.

These Dalit women writers have emerged as powerful literary voices, boldly narrating their experiences and challenging social hierarchies in Indian society. As 'protest narratives' against the exploitation of Dalit women by upper caste people, as well as the internal gender hierarchies within Dalit families, through their poignant and evocative storytelling, these authors shed light on the unique struggles faced by Dalit women, intertwining themes of caste, gender, and intersectionality. In this review article, we delve into the profound impact of Dalit women novelists, discussing their contributions to Dalit literature and Dalit Feminist Movement.

- **Salient features of Dalit women's writing**

Authenticity and Personal Experience: One of the most striking aspects of Dalit feminist writing is its authenticity and raw honesty. Dalit women writers draw from their personal experiences of oppression and discrimination. Through their narratives, they expose the deep-rooted caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal systems that shape and marginalize their lives. They write unapologetically, often depicting the struggles, resilience, and triumphs of Dalit women, providing a perspective that is often overlooked or silenced in mainstream discourse.

Intersectionality and Resistance: Dalit feminist writing brings together the themes of caste, gender, class, and multiple forms of marginalization. Through the intersections of caste and gender, identity and oppression, these narratives challenge the notion of a singular/general feminist experience. In their stories, intersectionality is used as a tool for resistance against social inequalities.

Breaking Stereotypes and Challenging Power Structures: Dalit feminist literature challenges and dismantles deep-rooted stereotypes and power structures of patriarchy. It disrupts the dominant narrative that often portrays Dalit women as passive victims of injustice or objects of pity. Instead, these narratives present Dalit women as agents of change, actively challenging societal norms and advocating for their rights and dignity. The stories are filled with resilience, strength, and the pursuit of justice, inspiring readers to question and challenge oppressive systems.

Building Solidarity and Social Change: Dalit feminist writing not only aims to create awareness but also fosters a sense of solidarity and collective action. These narratives create spaces for dialogue, empathy and understanding; enabling readers to confront their privileges and biases. By centering the experiences of Dalit women, these writings facilitate conversations around social justice, equality, and the urgent need for change.

Unveiling Hidden Realities: Dalit women writers play a vital role in exposing the harsh hidden realities of caste-based discrimination. Their writing reveals the day-to-day struggles, challenges, and triumphs of Dalit women, bringing to light the lived experiences that are often silenced or ignored. They address issues like identity erasure, self-acceptance and the search for dignity. These stories empower readers to confront uncomfortable truths and actively participate in the fight against caste-based discrimination.

Major voices in Dalit women's writing

'An individual's story becomes significant in the exploration of group identity.' (Deo and Zelliot, 47) Dalit feminism contends the Third wave individualistic feminism which is self-centred. Dalit women writers like Shantabai Kamble are more shaken by the collective experiences of lives lived than individual traumas. She says, "...for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And, therefore, *Jine Amuche* was the autobiography of my entire community." (Kamble, 157)

Kumud Pawade (born 1938), an Ambedkarite activist and the first Dalit scholar of Sanskrit, wrote "*Anthasphot*" (Thoughtful Outburst) (1981) to comment on the gender and caste-based double exploitation of Dalit women. This book is a memoir of her suppression by the Brahmin as well as the Dalit community because she aspired to learn Sanskrit (the language of the caste elites) and become a lecturer. She was disliked by her kin for doing the forbidden; as it was a sin for women and Dalits to educate. Though her lawyer father was considerate and instrumental in her education, she suffered at the hands of her upper-class father-in-law who wouldn't welcome her newborn son, being born of a lower caste woman. *Anthasphot* is an "outburst" –of emotions, ideas and thoughts of women who have been silenced. In her opinion, to deem women-centric Dalit writings as emotional outbursts was to take a patriarchal/male-centric view of women's narration of their lives as lived and experienced as Dalit women.

"They treated us like lepers, really. They wouldn't even look at us. Our classmates were all upper caste girls and they too used to be afraid of us, constantly worried about our touching and polluting them. They used to scorn us as if we were some kinds of despicable creatures. We had no friends among Brahmin girls." -Baby Kamble.

(<https://feminisminindia.com/2020/11/24/book-review-the-prisons-we-broke-by-babytai-kamble/>)

In "*Jine Amuche*" (*The Prisons We Broke*, trans. Maya Pandit) (1987), Babytai Kamble (1929- 2012) poignantly portrays her life as a Maharashtrian Dalit

woman, a life lived in the poverty of Maharwada in the 1920s haunted by hunger, labour and caste. She goes deeper into Dalit women's intersectional experiences of caste and gender discrimination in a hierarchical society. Babytai underlines that if Dalits were marginalized and subjugated by upper-caste Hindus, Dalit women were subjected to the same treatment by men within their community. They imparted the pain and violence, they were inflicted by upper-class men, upon their women. These women in return vented out their rage of slavery upon their daughters-in-law (mostly small girls of 8-9 years). Babytai Kamble read old books and newspapers used as wrapping paper to pack groceries in her provisional store. She wrote her book hiding from her husband who tortured her in the name of 'honour' of the house. Her memoir is an outlet for not only her but her community's suppressed emotional turmoil - "I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered." (Kamble, 146) Kamble talks about the sexual division of labour where Dalit women are expected to work at home as well as outside to support the family, which however, goes unrecognized as does their **reproductive labour**. Through her powerful storytelling, Kamble raises awareness about the systematic oppression, poverty and labor exploitation, subjugation, denial of basic human rights, and physical and emotional violence; simultaneously focusing on these women's strength, resilience and ability to challenge the dominance of upper-class society. Babytai's autobiography opens avenues for the readers to face their own caste biases engaging them in the realities of marginalized communities.

Shantabai Kamble's (1924-2023) Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscopic Story Of My Life) (1983) is written like a picture story that picturizes her life lived as a Mahar woman. This autobiography was written when several autobiographies of Dalit writers were being published and discussed. Najabai Sakharam Babar was Shantabai's maiden name, (so Naja is the protagonist) and she was the first Dalit female teacher and education officer in Solapur district. Shantabai felt that her representative experiences needed a platform too. She talks about the scarcity of food and hunger faced by her throughout her childhood. In this book, she recalls her childhood memories of untouchability and humiliation at the hands of upper-class men and women who treated her as a 'subhuman'. (Pawar, 2) Later, Shantabai got educated and became a teacher, like her husband Kamble Master. Still, their humiliation and torture in the name of caste and subjugation continued at the hands of an upper-class leader of the village. This book is one of the first autobiographical accounts of Dalit women to be published, talking about their specific experiences faced in the public as well as private spheres. Mumbai Doodarshan serialized this work as 'Najuka' in 1990 and it has been translated into French.

Aidan (The Weave Of My Life) (1988) by Urmila Pawar (1945-) provides a poignant account of the experiences of Dalit women in rural Maharashtra. Pawar was born in a Hindu Mahar family in Maharashtra. The story revolves around

Mukta, who confronts the intersection of caste, gender, and class-based discrimination. Through Mukta's narrative, Pawar sheds light on issues like the practice of untouchability, patriarchal control over women's daily life, and their struggle for education and empowerment. She weaves together the lives of different members of her family, neighbours, and classmates to reveal the various aspects of Dalit people's life. Pawar says, "My mother used to weave aaydans, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us." The title of this book is Pawar's tribute to her mother (Aai +dan= sacrifice by mother) who, after the death of her husband, reared her children, on the meager money she earned by weaving bamboo baskets. This autobiography is an account of extreme poverty, striving to educate through hardships, and finally achieving an M.A. in Marathi Literature. Aidan has been translated in English and has also been adapted as a play in Marathi theatre.

Karukku (Palmyra Leaves) (1992) is a semi-autobiographical novel by Bama Faustina Soosairaj (1958-) which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamilnadu. It focuses on the caste structure in the Catholic community as experienced by Bama who served as a nun for seven years and wrote about her childhood after leaving the Church. Through her brave-hearted narrative, Bama sheds light on the complex intersectionality of caste, religion, and gender, unraveling the layers of discrimination faced by Dalit women within religious communities. Karukku challenges the dominant narratives of mainstream society and the church and pens Bama's struggle against social oppression, and how she emerged stronger at the end. Bama's work portrays Dalit women caught between the discrimination of Hindu castes and the marginalization within their religious communities. Through her day-to-day life experiences, Bama questions the Church, its oppression, the pain it caused her, and her three-fold identity as a woman, a Christian and a Dalit. "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity." (Bama, 25) She examines issues of identity, self-discovery, the search for dignity in the face of societal prejudices, and hypocrisy that results in the marginalization of Dalit women. "It struck me that I would not get rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went." (Bama, 15) She creates a medium of resistance, challenging social norms and advocating for the empowerment of her female kin. "We are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities." (Bama, 19) Karukku is a seminal work in the sense it can throw away these indignities." (Bama, 19) Karukku is a seminal work in the sense it spoke of and to the Dalits like no other book and ushered a new genre in Tamil literature. It is translated into English, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam; prescribed in the university, and encouraged other Dalit women writers to speak up, protest, and fight

back.

Conclusion:

The novels by major Dalit women writers like Kumud Pawade, Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble and Bama powerfully depict the lived experiences of Dalit women, addressing themes such as caste discrimination, gender oppression, social injustice, and the resilience of marginalized communities. Through their narratives, these writers challenge dominant narratives, dismantle stereotypes, and provide a platform for the voices that have long been silenced. Their works contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities of caste and gender dynamics and advocate for social change and equality. These writings of the oppressed have instrumented in carving out a space for themselves, giving voice to the experiences of marginalized communities and shedding light on the intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and class. Thus setting Dalit women's writing on a different footing than that of the non-Dalit upper-cast feminist narrative.

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