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## Dalit Self-narratives: An Overview

**Dr. Mani Ram Banjare**

Asst. Professor English

Govt. T.C.L. P.G. College Janjgir (C.G.)

Email- [banjaremr@gmail.com](mailto:banjaremr@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Dalit literature represents the collective consciousness of social, political, economic and racial discrimination suffered by the Dalits for hundreds of years. This suffering is due to the age old 'Varna' system envisaged by Manu that created caste-based hierarchy in Hindu society forcing the lower caste people to undergo humiliation and exploitation at the hands of upper caste. So basically, Dalit literature contains seeds of rebellion against these age-old evil practices. The growth of Dalit discourse in the last five decades has shown the impact and spread of Ambedkar's thoughts among these unprivileged people. In almost every genre of literature- poetry, drama, prose and fiction; the Dalit writers have tried their hands and proved their mettle. Among all the forms, 'Dalit Self-narratives' have become a successful genre in depicting the originality of Dalit life. Dalit writers have started questioning the caste hierarchy and political supremacy through their writings. Dalit Self-narratives played an important role in establishing social and political consciousness among its people. It transforms the experience of pain into the narrative of resistance. They also aimed at breaking the 'culture of silence' imposed on them.

Self-narratives by P.E. Sonakamble's "Athavaninche Pakshi", Madhav Kondvilkar's "Mukkam Post Devache Gothane", Shankar Rao Kharat's "Taral Antaral", Uttam Bandu Tupe's "Katyavarchi Pote", Nana Saheb Zodge's "Khanjar", Keshav Meshram's "Hakkikat ani Jatayu", Rustam Achalkhamb's "Gavki", Partha Polke's "Abharan", Daya Pawar's "Baluta" (1978) and "Social Claim", Om Prakash Valmiki's "Joothan", Bama's "Karukku", "Sangati", and "Vanmam", Sharan Kumar Limbale's "Akkarmashi", Narendra Jadhav's "Out Caste: A Memoir", Dada Saheb More's "Gabal", G. Kalyan Rao's "Untouchable Spring", P. Sivakami's "The Grip of Change", Laxman Mane's "Upara: An Outsider", Prof. Shyamlal's "Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice Chancellor", Laxman Gaikwad's "Uchalya", Kishore Shantabai Kale's "Against All Odds", Vasant Moon's "Growing up Untouchable in India", B. Kesharshivam's "The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth", Baby Kamble's "The Prison We Broke", Urmila Pawar's "Aaydan", Mahan Das Namishray's "Apne Apne Pinjre" and many more focus on Dalit self and several experiences it has undergone and survived.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the self-narratives written by Dalit writers in various languages of India and their impact on political, social and literary fraternities.

*Keywords: Dalit, Discrimination, Humiliation, Exploitation, Resistance.*

### Introduction

Dalit literature represents the collective consciousness of social, political, economic and racial discrimination suffered by the Dalits for hundreds of years. This suffering is due to the age

old 'Varna' system envisaged by Manu that created caste-based hierarchy in Hindu society forcing the lower caste people to undergo humiliation and exploitation at the hands of upper caste. So basically, Dalit literature contains seeds of rebellion against these age-old evil practices. The growth of Dalit discourse in the last five decades has shown the impact and spread of Ambedkar's thoughts among these unprivileged people. In almost every genre of literature- poetry, drama, prose and fiction; the Dalit writers have tried their hands and proved their mettle. Among all the forms, 'Dalit Self-narratives' have become a successful genre in depicting the originality of Dalit life. Dalit writers have started questioning the caste hierarchy and political supremacy through their writings. Dalit Self-narratives played an important role in establishing social and political consciousness among its people. It transforms the experience of pain into the narrative of resistance. They also aimed at breaking the 'culture of silence' imposed on them.

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Here is a brief description of some of the prominent Dalit writers and their Self-narratives.

### **Dadasaheb More - 'Gabal' (The Stragglers')**

Dadasaheb More is one of the most prominent figures of Dalit Literary Movement in Maharashtra. He was born on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1961 at Bavchi of Solapur district. He belongs to the nomadic Pingale Joshi (astrologers low in the caste hierarchy) tribe in Maharashtra. This tribe used to travel from village to village rattling their bhamba (a kind of musical instrument), begging alms and foretelling the future of the people, to earn their livelihood. As his family had no permanent residence, Dadasaheb hardly had an opportunity to attend school, and until the age of almost seven, he took to the family tradition of begging and earning his livelihood. Against all odds such as abject poverty, superstition, discouragement from the elders in the community, Dadasaheb continued his education. During these times he did menial jobs, started acting in drama and got scholarship to support his education. Dadasaheb completed his M.A. in Marathi with first division. He also succeeded in passing SET exam and became an Assistant Professor. He also served as Dy. Director in Yashwant Rao Chauhan Open University, Nashik (MS). He was honoured with many awards for his writings and social works.

Dadasaheb's self-narrative *Gabal* is originally written in Marathi and published in 1983. This is one among the early Dalit autobiographies which plays an important role in Dalit Literary Movement of Maharashtra. The extracts have been translated into English as 'The Stragglers' by G. V. Bapat and published in 1992 in Arjun Dangle's edited book, *Poisoned Bread*. It is also translated into Hindi as 'Deradanger' (The Household) by Dr. Arjun Chauhan and published in 2001. *The Gabal* by Dadasaheb covers his childhood and early youth. Unlike many autobiographies where the protagonists are presented as a hero, 'The Stragglers' focuses on the sad and hellish life of the community which the hero lives in. In this self-narrative Dadasaheb sketches the real picture of pain and suffering, traditions and beliefs, rites and rituals, blind faith, illiteracy and ignorance, and the animal like life of women of Pingale Joshi (Kudmude Joshi or Duggi Joshi) caste.

### **Daya Pawar – 'Baluta'**

Daya Pawar was a remarkable Dalit writer, poet, short story writer, and literary critic. He was born on September 15 in 1935. He worked as Senior Auditor in the Indian Railways. Daya Pawar's autobiography 'Baluta' published in 1978 in Marathi. It granted him the status of a literary giant, among the Dalit literary fraternity in Maharashtra. 'Baluta' won the Maharashtra Government Award for literature. In 1982, it also won a Ford Foundation award. 'Baluta' was translated into Hindi, German, French and Italian languages between 1981 to 1992 and finally in 2015, into English by Jerry Pinto. Baluta created a sensation in the Marathi world for its frank and unique description of a life that the author lived in the ghettos of prostitutes, criminals, pimps and uprooted Dalit people, within and around the red-light areas of the city of Bombay.

### **Sharan Kumar Limbale- 'Akkarmashi' (The Outcaste)**

Sharan Kumar Limbale is a well-known Dalit activist writer, editor and critic. He speaks and writes in Marathi, Hindi and English. Mostly he writes in Marathi and is later translated into English and other languages. He has worked with several literary genres and is the author of more than 40 books. Dalit struggle and identity is the theme of most of his writing. He is well known for his poetry, short stories, including his most acknowledged masterpiece self-narrative 'The Outcaste' (2003). He is equally well known for his critical work, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations" (2004). Limbale got many awards and won the wider acclaim from the public for his literary talents. He is also a member of many academic, cultural and social organizations.

'Akkarmashi' is a self-narrative written by Sharan Kumar Limbale in Marathi in 1984. It was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar as 'The Outcaste' (2003) and caught the attention of the readers. It is also translated into Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi and Tamil. The word, 'akkarmashi' means 'impure, incomplete or an illegitimate child'. 'The Outcaste', by Sharan Kumar Limbale, primarily deals with the question of identity of a young man, who was born out of the illegitimate relationship between his mother Masamai and an upper caste Maratha Hanmanta. He wrote this book when he was 25 years old. Being young his search for an identity

is more intense and passionate. He criticises the hypocrisy of the Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women.

### **Kishore Shantabai Kale – ‘Kolhatyache Por’ (Against All Odds)**

Kishor Shantabai Kale was a Marathi writer and social worker from Maharashtra, India. He was born in 1970 as an illegitimate son of a Kolhati tamasha dancer Shantabai. Abandoned by his mother, neglected and mal-treated by his grandparents, uncle and aunts, ridiculed in school and college for his fatherless status, he was tested again and again by life. Fired with uncommon courage and determination to change his life and be free, he educated himself and went on to become a doctor- the first in his community. He devoted his life to educating the women in his community to give up dancing and live a life of dignity. Kale died at the age of 37 in a car accident on February 21, 2007.

Kishore Kale’s self-narrative ‘*Kolhatyache Por*’ (Son of a Kolhati) was first published in 1994, in Marathi. Later it was translated into English by Sandhya Pandey and titled ‘*Against All Odds*’. Through his self-narrative, Kale exposes the unequal, oppressive social and economic structures in Maharashtra, especially in the Kolhati community which victimized its women-folk. He pinpoints the harsh socio- psychological and monetary tensions and family relations of Kolhati women. It also throws light on the humiliation, exploitation, sexual abuse, negligence, deprivation, and torture of dancers and their children in this unjust set-up.

### **Om Prakash Valmiki – ‘Joothan’**

Om Prakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) was an Indian Dalit writer and poet, well known for his autobiography, *Joothan*, considered a milestone in Dalit literature. First published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki is a memoir of growing up ‘untouchable’ starting in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Told as a series of piercing vignettes, *Joothan* is also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socio-economic conditions to prominence as an author and social critic. What makes this work unique is its keen observation and detailed description of the oppression and atrocities faced by Dalits in this world conditioned by the caste system.

### **B. Kesharshivam- ‘Purnsatya’ (‘The Whole Truth and Nothing but The Truth’)**

B. Kesharshivam is one of the most prominent Dalit writers of Gujrat. He was born and raised in poverty in the Dalit moholla of Kalol in north Gujrat. He passed the Gujrat Public Service Examinations to become a mamlatdar, a revenue officer, and finally a Class 1 officer who held many significant postings including comptroller of the household to the governor of Gujrat. B. Kesharshivam is the pen name of B.S. Jadhav, which he coined by combining his parent’s names and placing Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's first initial in front. He has written many novels and short stories getting published while he was in school. He wrote his autobiography ‘*Purnasatya*’ in Gujrati which was published by Navbharat Sahitya Mandir in 2002. It is the first full length dalit

self-narrative to be published in Gujarati. Later it was translated into English by Gita Chaudhuri and first published in 2008 by Samya Publication.

Beginning with his life as a child who plays in the dust of the bone meal factory, where he later works, going on to labour with his parents in the ‘cotton mill’, the book presents a non-sentimental account of a childhood where friendships exist, sometimes across castes, and discrimination and abuse are constants. The description of his childhood memories is so heart touching. The second part of his story relates to his working life, his struggles on behalf of the Dalits and the Tribal populations against a backdrop of continuous discrimination.

### **Baby Kamble- ‘Jina Amucha’ (‘The Prison We Broke’)**

Baby Kamble was born on 1929. She worked as an activist in Phaltan, a small town in Satara district of Maharashtra. She is a veteran of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Inspired by the radical leadership of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, she has been involved with the struggle from a very young age. Later she went on to establish a government-approved residential school for socially backward students in Nimbure, a small village near Phaltan. She has published collections of poetry. She has been honoured with several awards for her literary and social work. She passed away on 21 April 2012.

Baby Kamble’s self-narrative ‘*The Prisons We Broke*’ (2008) was originally written in Marathi as ‘*Jina Amucha*’ and was later translated into English by Maya Pandit. It is considered as the manifesto of Dalit women. Maya Pandit observes the autobiography as ‘an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalit for thousands of years.’ Kamble’s autobiography deals with three major issues of the society—the oppression and exploitation of Dalits by the upper class; the discrimination towards Dalit women in a patriarchal society and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on the narrator and her fellow women.

### **Urmila Pawar- ‘Aaydan’ (The Weaves of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs)**

Urmila Pawar is a prominent figure in the Dalit and Feminist movements in India. She was born in 1945 in Adgaon village of Ratnagiri district in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. She received her M.A. in Marathi Literature from the University of Bombay. For many years, she worked in the department of labor welfare for the government of Maharashtra. Pawar eventually left Konkan for Mumbai, where she fought for Dalit rights. She is the author of two acclaimed short story collections in Marathi language, ‘*Sahava Bot*’ and ‘*Chauthi Bhint*’. She co-authored a book with Meenakshi Moon on ‘The role of Women in the Dalit Movement’. She is also a former actor of radical Marathi theater and a playwright.

Urmila Pawar was born in the Konkan region of Maharashtra where weaving ‘*aaydan*’ – bamboo baskets, storage bins and other household items – was the main caste-based occupation of the Mahar community. Looking back on her childhood, Urmila sees a close connection – one of unspoken pain – between the weaving of *aaydan* by her mother and her writing. It is because of this that she calls her autobiography ‘*Aaydan*’. It was first published in Marathi by Granthali Publication Mumbai in 2003. Five years down the line it was translated into English as ‘*The Weaves of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs*’ by Maya Pandit and published by Stree

Publication, Kolkata in 2008. *'The Weaves of My Life'* portrays the conditions of a subhuman existence of an entire community, shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, extremely marginalized and reduced to the status of beasts of burden.

### **Bama- 'Karukku'**

Bama is a pen name of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani. She was born in 1958 in a Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraiyar community from Puthupatti, Tamilnadu. Bama's ancestors were from the Dalit community and worked as agricultural labourers. Her grandfather had converted from Hinduism to Christianity. After joining the nunnery, Bama found out that there was a separate training centre for Dalit Catholics. Angered by the poor conditions of the Dalit Catholic Training Centre, she left the nunnery after seven years. She finished her studies and joined as a teacher at a Catholic Christian School. During her teaching experience, she found out that the Catholic nuns oppressed the Dalit children and teachers. This further added to her disdain towards the convent. She chose to take the holy orders to escape caste-based discrimination, and also to further her mission of helping in the advancement of poor Dalit girls. She set up a school for Dalit children in Uttiramerur.

Bama's autobiographical novel 'Karukku' is first published in 1992. It is one of the first autobiographies of a Dalit woman written in Tamil. Later it is translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. The book chronicles Bama's life, from her childhood to her early adult life as a nun, and beyond. *'Karukku'* means palmyra leaves, which, with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords. Bama compares her own life with Karukku. The word Karukku also contains the word "karu" which means embryo or seed. So, the very oppressive life that she had to face, carried within the seeds for her literary work.

### **P. Shivakami – 'Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum' (The Grip of Change)**

P. Sivakami, born in 1957, is a post graduate in History. Later she took up IAS exams as she thought that she would gain wealth and status in the society by coming to such high position. She got through her exams, but considered writing as her first priority. She derived a lot of pleasure from reading and writing. So even after becoming an IAS officer, she continued writing. She became a full-time writer in 2008 after taking voluntary retirement from Government Service. From then on, she has been working for the upliftment of the Dalits. She is the first Tamil Dalit Woman to write a novel *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* in 1989. The novel is translated by the author herself and published in English as *The Grip of Change* in 2006. Sivakami brings women of many generations in her novel *The Grip of Change*. The novel for the most part portrays the discrimination between men and women in the small village especially the sexual violation against Dalit women which has been seen as something natural and spontaneous.

Apart from these writers many other writers as mentioned above have also penned their grief, sorrows, anguish, hopelessness, discrimination, suppression towards Dalit communities in their respective self-narratives. They also speak out loudly to educate, agitate and organise their people to overcome collectively with all the issues related to their discrimination and suppression. Due to their relentless efforts somehow, they have succeeded to bring change in the mindset of society but the goal has yet to achieve. Because sky is the limit.

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