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Minahil Farooqi April 12, 2022

“We may have lost everything, but not the truth”: Oppression, Agency and Resilience in Dalit Women’s Life Narratives

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Abstract

"We may have lost everything, but not the truth": Oppression, Agency and Resilience in Dalit Women's Life Narratives

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The case of Dalit women, who have often been left out of both Dalit studies and feminist inquiries, is uniquely articulated within Dalit women's life writings. The plight of Dalit women is distinct from those of both their Dalit male counterparts and privileged caste female counterparts, as is uniquely characterized by what scholars Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar deem a 'triple burden': of not only caste discrimination and economic deprivation, but also external caste and internal Dalit patriarchy. This work uses the 'triple burden' as a framing lens, and is a comparative analysis of four pieces of Dalit discourse written or narrated by Dalit women which detail their lives between the 1940's and 1990's. The life narratives examined include Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of my Life,* Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* and *Viramma,* written and published by Jean-Luc and Josiane Racine and narrated by Viramma. This work, through its analysis of direct quotations and deep focus on the realm of the emotive, identifies specific, shared ways in which the 'triple burden' impacts the communities described across these four life narratives, depicting in great detail how caste oppression, patriarchy and economic deprivation interact and permeate distinct factors of everyday life for Dalit women. At the same time, this study illustrates how Dalit women have found ways to attain creative agency, inherit a sense of political conviction and find unfettered joy in their lives while enduring their distinct position.

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Foreword

In the Fall of 2021, I took a seminar at Emory College titled India: "The Home and the World," taught by subaltern studies expert, Gyanendra Pandey. In this class, we were trained to approach the history of India at the time of independence from the experiences of the *family within the home*, discussing how the ordinary person wrangled with questions about economics, politics, changing gender roles, caste and caste hierarchies, education, aspirations and opportunities. Through the experience, I learned the great power of considering the histories of those whom privileged histories neglect. Dalits, I learned, assume a distinct positionality and often a particularly difficult state. Since we aimed to include and understand the experiences of marginalized groups, we focused heavily on Dalit women's experiences with multiple forms of oppression, accessing information about their lives through their own life writings. Newly intrigued by caste and caste-informed power hierarchies, I wanted to learn more about Dalits, and in particular, hear more of their stories, beyond Bama's *Karukku* or Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, which we read in class. Dalit narratives piqued my interest. I found them so compelling and tragic and inspiring, all at once.

Sometime during the class, I realized that Dalithood was a concept that also existed in Pakistan, my own motherland. I had not known it at the time I had lived in Pakistan a few years ago because of my own ignorance. I realized I had, during that time, actually interacted with a Dalit man every single day. Irfan. Irfan was a Christian Dalit. Like many members of the Christian Dalit community in Pakistan, he worked in sanitation, sweeping the roads and the floors of people's houses. Irfan would come to our family's apartment as an employee of the university campus where my mother worked. Having lived in the USA up till that point and being accustomed to doing my own housework, I hated watching him sweep my floors. It pained

me to see him, a man at least a decade older than me, bending down to reach any dirt filled crevices with his broom. It was uncomfortable. I would be sat eating my lunch and watching television after school and he would be sweeping the floors under my very feet. I wanted to tell him not to and tell him to rest instead. Just because he was poor did not mean we could expect him to do such work for us. Why couldn't we simply clean ourselves, anyways? My mother believed the same, but the system was as it was and we did nothing to challenge it. We allowed it to benefit us.

Irfan spent a lot of time talking to me and my mother and my grandmother. My grandmother and mother were particularly fond of him. Since we were in an apartment of only women, he would go out of his way to help us buy groceries and make sure we had clean water from the nearby mini mart. I really appreciated all he did. I think we all liked each other a lot, though I do not think Irfan would have told us otherwise even if he did not particularly like us, because, even though it was not our choosing, we existed within a power dynamic, of employer and employee. He considered me as a boss to him even at my young age of twelve years old. I am struggling to find the words to describe how that made me feel. Terrible does not do it, neither does ashamed. Think a cross of the two.

One day Irfan decided to wash our rugs, even though he was never asked to. He just figured it would be a nice gesture. He said again and again he wanted to, even though my mom insisted he go so he would not miss his bus home. But no, he stayed, insisting the bus came later so he could carry on the conversation we were all having, as our conversation, though I cannot explicitly remember its contents, was particularly engaging that day. Only later we learned that the bus had long gone, and that Irfan had known about it the entire time. He stayed so we could all talk, despite knowing he would have to make tedious arrangements for a ride home.

Irfan used to meticulously arrange my mother's vanity of makeup every day, too, carefully wiping every product and placing it in a specific order. He brought us *methai* (sweets) when he announced his marriage, despite the fact that it must have cost him, and was delighted when my mom gave him a set of perfumes and cosmetics for his wife to enjoy and for him to arrange on her own vanity, too. His response was sweet. But again, I always felt badly that so little was so gratifying for him. That he could never simply expect more.

Irfan was thankful to my grandmother for giving him a big plate of lunch every day. He would take it outside and sit cross legged on the balcony, even though I implored him to sit with us inside. He would never sit down on a chair or couch, only the floor, and he would hardly ever sit in front of us either. He always exuded grace in the face of deep poverty.

I wanted to write this thesis because I want to know more about Dalit lives from their own perspectives. I regret that I never asked Irfan more about himself, because his story matters. To this day, I have no idea where he is or could be, and I doubt we will ever cross paths again. So I wanted to educate myself on Dalit lives in the hopes of later working towards better Dalit livelihoods in my own country, Pakistan. I also write this thesis because I want my readers to know Dalits from their own points of view, hearing them recast their experiences in candid terms. I wanted readers to see their humor, their grit, their suffering and their joy, and know the ways in which we as a society have to do better. And I wanted to make sure I myself never forgot about Irfan, many years later.

I hope all of you reading this thesis feel the same pang of urgency I now feel. I hope reading what Dalit women experience in their own raw and direct language stirs your humanity and makes you inquisitive about systems of oppression and how to change them. I hope that

when you see people who society has rendered invisible and, on the margins, people like Irfan, you make it a prerogative to learn their stories.

You played with our lives and enjoyed yourselves at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything, but not the truth

- Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke

Introduction Part I: *On Dalits*

India's acceptance of a Dalit President, Chief Justice, Chief Minister, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which is dominated by traditionally subordinated castes and led by a single, Dalit woman, Mayawati, may suggest that the oppression of the caste system is a structure of the past. It is true that casteism has, in many ways, become more subtle, and that there are quite a few more avenues for Dalits to attain social and economic leverage now than in the last few decades. However, to say caste oppression has *ceased to exist* is erroneous across several dimensions. Caste oppression still dictates the lives of a vast number of Indians in several critical aspects of life. Democracy never did away with caste. It just modernized it.

The practice of discrimination based on caste—for example, the practice of untouchability-- in India, has been formally outlawed since the emergence of Article 17 of the Constitution of 1950, (Prohibition of Discrimination on Grounds of Religion, Race, Caste, Sex or Place of Birth) (Teltumbde 6). However, the dehumanizing practice remains significant, due to a lack of change in mental attitudes and the continued existence of structural inequalities. It is reinforced by state allocation of resources and facilities (including residential segregation and discriminatory treatment in public services), economic inequities and growing caste-based violence enabled by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Political Party (BJP) – the Hindu nationalist party currently dominating Indian politics. The BJP has produced an atmosphere of heightened caste polarization politically and socially, where it has otherwise long existed institutionally.

Since many casteist behaviors and norms continue to exist, people from communities who were formerly called 'untouchables', to whom I will be referring to as 'Dalits', still overwhelmingly live in destitute circumstances despite constitutional safeguards, anti-discriminatory measures and targeted economic schemes. Subalternity still characterizes the Dalit experience, and Dalits in many ways continue to struggle to attain the benefits of modern, liberal society and shed their status as 'outsiders within' (Sharma and Kumar 3) despite their efforts to mobilize towards more equitable social and political arrangements. In this contemporary historical moment, caste oppresion "still remains an inherent feature of Indian life" (Deliège 21). Despite nineteenth and twentieth century attempts to challenge the structures of power enabling caste-based otherization and prejudice, caste-based denial, disenfranchisement and segregation continue to impede mobility, dignity, opportunity and equal access for Dalits in Modern India.

I write this honors thesis in an attempt to better understand the ways in which Dalit women in India, who occupy a particularly unique positionality at the crossroads of caste discrimination, economic deprivation and patriarchy, have used their voices to give expression to their experiences during the late twentieth century. I seek to explore how, through their literary voices, they detail the ways in which they have dealt with structural violence and difficult circumstances, but have also often sought out ways to live with a spirit of resourcefulness, valor and joy.

On the Word 'Dalit'

The term 'Dalit' has, since around the 1970's, come to refer to the ex-Untouchable population in India, formerly described in administrative settings as Depressed Castes, Exterior Castes, Outcastes, Backward Castes, and Scheduled Castes (though Backward Caste and

Scheduled Caste continue to be used as terms in administrative government today). Since the 1930's, Dalits were widely known by the euphemism *Harijan* or 'Children of God', a term coined by Gandhi, but disliked by many Dalits, who expressed displeasure towards its fundamentally paternalistic quality (Deliège 13). The 19th century Indian social activist Mahatma Jotirao Phule introduced the term Dalit—literally, "broken" -- in the 19th century to describe people exploited by and called 'untouchables' by the 'twice born' Dwija castes, the self-described highest and most ritually pure castes of Hindu society, including the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas (Teltumbde 2). Since that time, however, the term was reclaimed by a burgeoning political movement, the Dalit Panthers, in the latter half of the twentieth century, and has since become a self-defined, umbrella term for ex-untouchable castes.

Etymologically, 'Dalit' can be traced back to the Sanskrit root, '*dal*', meaning split, break, crack or crushed (Teltumbde 1). The term Dalit has evolved to mean 'oppressed' 'downtrodden' or 'ground down', describing people on the margins of Indian society, including menial workers, laborers and servants who have been characterized by privileged castes as 'decidedly unclean' and upon whose labor Indian civilization has largely been built (Pandey 14).

The Nature of Dalithood

The social position of Dalits has been and is still impacted by social and material deprivation, a lack of political authority, and the effects of privileged caste associations made between Dalits and ritual pollution. Dalits are excluded and marginalized, kept down by taboos and discriminatory practices. At the same time, they are an integral part of Indian society, playing critical economic and ritual roles, speaking local languages and dialects, and sharing

many cultural practices with other segments of Indian society (despite distinctions in some marriage rules, eating habits, and religious practices).

There is no inviolable line separating Dalits from the larger society. Additionally, Dalits are not a homogenous or monolithic population amongst themselves. Instead, they are divided into hundreds of sub-castes, and mirror social structures and hierarchies common in caste society. Historian Robert Deliège advances this notion by positing that "the cultural system of Indian Untouchables does not distinctively question or revalue the dominant social order. Rather, it continuously recreates among Untouchables a microcosm of the larger system" (Deliège 52). Deliège further explains that Dalits "live both inside and outside the main society; they participate in village life, but they are also rejected in some circumstances". In observing the ways in which Dalits are often relegated to live in separate colonies outside of the main village, he notes that "their spatial isolation reflects this relative ostracism" (Deliège 67). There are many historical examples in which Dalits are denied the ability to use public roads used by the privileged classes, drink from common wells, enter Hindu temples or wear certain clothes, even after the Anti-Untouchability Act of 1955 (Thorat 574). Their presence has, throughout history, been considered so polluting by some dominant castes that some Dalits were forced to tie brooms to their waistbands to 'sweep away their pollution' as they walked. Despite their relative integration now, Dalits are still sometimes denied access to some sites of worship, use of public facilities, and means of material well-being and economic production. For example, many Dalits work in agriculture and are subject to the "everyday tyranny of agrarian caste relations" (Subramaniam 14); despite painstakingly performing grueling and critical agricultural work, they inherently assume a role of economic dependence on the landowners employing them. Other

Dalits commonly do similarly treacherous and hardly rewarded work, labor stigmatized by the caste people that is physical, menial, and often incredibly degrading.

Many occupations to which Dalits have been traditional consigned have some type of tie to waste, filth, death, evil spirits, ritual pollution or various menial tasks; the more extreme examples of this involve manual scavenging and street sweeping, professions that no privileged caste people take on and which are injurious to one's health and well-being. Thus, we see that cruelty is endemic to caste politics. Additionally, it should be noted that caste discrimination is not locational. It travels between the villages and the cities. According to Indian author Arundhati Roy, "each region of India has lovingly perfected its own unique version of caste-based cruelty, based on an unwritten code that is much worse than the Jim Crow laws" (Ambedkar and Roy 27). Its discriminations allow for strategic benefits to dominant groups, and the threat of advancement of the subordinated castes provokes structural violence against them (Mosse 427). Within their lives even today, Dalits are often put in positions wherein their dignity is challenged via humiliation, discrimination and violence due to pervading ideas that the social stratification privileged by the caste system determines their worth. Suraj Yengde, a leading Dalit scholar and activist, notes in his seminal work, *Caste Matters*, that "Untouchability remains a lifeline of India's present" (Yengde 10), citing statistics to bolster his claim. He writes that as recently as 2015, greater than fifty percent of households in India admitted to "practicing or witnessing untouchability in urban capitals such as Delhi" (Yengde 10). He further cites that a study conducted over four years, between 2014 and 2018 in Tamil Nadu "revealed that over 640 villages in twenty districts surveyed practice untouchability" (Yengde 10). He thus argues that the practices of untouchability and casteism are alive and well in modern day India.

Dalit Demography

There are no reliable estimates of the Dalit population in India, as the Indian Census has only captured the number of 'Scheduled Caste' individuals (including ex-Untouchable Hindu, Sikhs and Buddhists, but excluding Muslims and Christians) since 1951 (Teltumbde 2). I mention other religions because of the phenomenon of Dalit conversion, which refers to the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and other religions. Conversion, firstly to Islam and Christianity, became a widespread effort to actively reject Hinduism and its supposed fixed relationship with caste identity. Mass conversions to Buddhism came later and were largely inspired by the conversion of B.R. Ambedkar (often referred to as 'Leader of the Dalits') to Buddhism in 1956.

According to the most recent 2011 Census, the population of Scheduled Castes in India was 201.3 million, or 16.6 percent of the population. This alone is significant; however, according to Anand Teltumbde, Indian scholar and Dalit rights activist, if one were to include the estimated population of Christian and Muslim Dalits, the total Dalit population may actually cross 320 million, making them more than a *quarter* of the total population (Teltumbde 3). However, because they are so widely dispersed, Dalits are still a minority in nearly every denominational unit. For example, at the village level, they constitute the majority of only 7.4% of all villages (Teltumbde 3).

Origins of Caste Discrimination

The historicity of the modern perception of caste is widely debated and that there are several theories about its origins. Some scholars characterize the lived dimensions of caste as an innate product of brahmanical Hinduism. Others believe that they are irreducible to a set of traits

or a religious worldview and are instead a product of a dynamic set of social processes informed by interest, competition and shifting scales of consolidation (Subramanian 9). In truth, it would be too reductionist to put a definitive date on the development of the phenomenon, especially since it is an ever-changing one. What we do know, however, is that caste has become characterized by a fluid scale that includes observance of ritual purity-pollution rules and that historical and economic power relations have much to do with the modern, lived dimensions of caste.

The religious origins of caste hierarchy and untouchability stemmed from dominant brahmanical Hindu traditions derived from the Rig Veda (believed to be developed 1500 - 1800 BC) and Manusmriti, or *Code of Manu* (believed to be written between 200 BC and 200 AD). brahmanical Hinduism attained social and political hegemony in the sixth to tenth centuries, and its Vedic traditions created and legitimized a four-fold *varnashrama dharma* system stratifying and hierarchizing society into castes and stages of life. The system favored a philosophy identifying "*Advaita,* the identification of a 'self' or *atman* within each individual, with the universal '*Brahman*'" (Omvedt 2). Its co-optive power established a caste hierarchy which relegated a class of people who did not inherently belong to any caste to a status in which they were classified as *avarnas* (non-varna) or *pancham* (fifth varna). Over time, privileged castes characterized *avarana* castes as 'low-born' and 'untouchable'. In this viewpoint, Dalits were supposedly bearing the karma of bad deeds performed in past lives and had to, as a result, avoid further acts of insubordination to prevent this fate from continuing or worsening in future lives.

It is unknown how many people within this era truly deferred to brahmanical hegemony. Gail Omvedt, an American-born Indian sociologist and human rights activist notes that, at the time,

> There were numerous local gods and goddesses who remain the center of popular religious life even today; and the period gave birth to bhakti or devotional cults sometimes centered on non-Vedic gods (such as Vithala in Maharashtra) which rebelled against caste hierarchy and brahmin domination. Many of these in turn developed into religious traditions that consider themselves explicitly *non-Hindu* (Sikhism, Veerashaivism, etc.) (Omvedt 3).

Additionally, it is likely that the Code of Manu establishing Brahmins as the "ultimate arbiters of all things earthly and holy" (Riser-Kositsky 32) was probably never actually employed verbatim in a religious context before the advent of the British (Riser-Kositsky 32). Evidence thus points to the notion that caste hierarchy was more established through social processes than religious orthodoxy. Omvedt asserts that it was during the colonial period when many non-Brahmin Indians began to align with the particular religion of (brahmanical) Hinduism and its core tenets. She ascribes this transition as being a result of both the Europeans, with their "racism, romanticism, fascination with the Vedas and orientalism" and the Indian elites, who had begun to adopt the ideological formulation of Hinduism as nationalism in the wake of heightened disputes with Muslims (Omvedt 3).

As the British attained governing power, Brahmins allied themselves to the perceived new ruling class and attempted to gain influence through it. The British would use the information Brahmins provided to them, which inherently bolstered their own positionality, and interpret it according to their own experiences and cultural conceptions. The two in tandem filtered information before producing and publishing provincial reports and governance

documents and in the process produced several new conceptions of social structure that fit neatly into brahmanical ideologies and inaccurately represented those about whom the information was written. It was during this period that casteism changed form. The British needed a way to break down the vast Indian population into discrete sections; they used the census to make caste an empirical category in accordance with a belief that Indian society was fundamentally structured by caste. They thus championed a uniform and pan-Indian caste system (Samarendra 51-58) and caste became the locus when collecting information about Indian society.

Social Anthropologist Simon Charsley notes that Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner of India for 1901, was the first to propose, in his scheme to classify castes, a category called 'Asprishya Shudra' or 'Untouchable Shudra (Charsley 1). In his subsequent publication based on the survey information gathered in the Census, Risley argued that caste was a system of social classification deriving from a race-based hierarchy of life (Carlan 1), interweaving British notions of racial impurity into the caste system. This conception, as well as a misinformed approach using the Code of Manu to formalize caste law, would go on to inform common law and dominate colonial policies of governance. As a result, fluidity of caste hierarchies and identities between castes in Colonial India became very limited, and there were strong negative associations placed on the Dalit population. American scholar Nicholas Dirks further reinforces that caste as we know it, which is both racialized and politicized, is not a residual feature of Ancient Indian society but a "specifically colonial form of civil society" (Dirks 76). He asserts that under colonialism,

> Caste became … the most critical site for the textualization of social identity but also for the specification of public and private domains, the rights and responsibilities of the colonial state, the legitimating conceits of social freedom and societal control, and the

development of the documentation and certification regimes of the bureaucratic state (Dirks 76).

It should be noted that while caste dynamics changed dramatically under the British, adapting to new state apparatuses and ideologies, caste has always been a social fact in India. Much caste discrimination and division predated the British Raj. However, colonial efforts to systemize and politicize caste into a codified hierarchy exacerbated the scope of discrimination under their rule many folds. In fact, it is widely accepted that "colonial policies, through their structuring and politicization of caste, are one of the direct causes for the incessant and often deadly caste conflict in India today" (Riser-Kositsky 1). The postcolonial rendering of caste is "not [India's] precolonial fault" (Dirks 76); however, to this day, the influence of the British Raj in sowing the seeds of difference and resentment continues to divide the nation of India along caste lines, despite legal safeguards and policies aimed at eradicating such a practice (Carlan 1).

B.R. Ambedkar & Dalit Social Movements

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is revered as being India's first politically prominent Dalit leader. As a Mahar Dalit who experienced the stigma of being identified by dominant castes as 'untouchable' himself, he repudiated the caste system for its degrading nature and led India's most well-known autonomous struggle for Dalit rights through his writings and advocacy. Ambedkar was the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution in 1947 and embedded principles of democracy, equal citizenship, and the prohibition of caste-based discrimination and practice of untouchability within it. He also reintroduced the Hindu Code Bill, which codified laws around seven matters all related to elevating women's autonomy and

abolished caste as a determining principle to basic rights for debate in parliament, endeavoring to annihilate the caste system and challenge patriarchy (Ambedkar and Roy 26).

Ambedkar believed that Hinduism and casteism were inherently fused together, and that Brahmanism was "the very negation of the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity" (Ambedkar and Roy 29). As a result, before his death in 1956, he converted from Hinduism to Buddhism, symbolically rejecting the inequality codified into Hindu beliefs. His conversion inspired a wave of conversions amongst Dalits to Buddhism. Dalits have greatly revered Ambedkar and his cause, and many have since cited that he inspires them to "assert their rights – to claim land that is owed them, water that is theirs, commons they are denied access to" (Ambedkar and Roy 25) a deeply empowering sentiment.

There were several notable movements in the twentieth century, including the Dalit Panthers, Republican Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, and the insurgencies pursued by low-caste based Naxalite organizations, which all sought to unite Dalits against the oppressive caste system. However, none has truly succeeded in uniting more than a few sub-castes in the same state. Even legendary Ambedkar, who consistently fought for non-brahmin/ Dalit forces to unite and form a political alternative to the Indian ruling classes and imperialism (Omvedt 51) is sometimes reduced to the role of a Mahar leader (Mahars are the largest caste of Dalits in Maharashtra) since while members of his own caste followed him, few from other Dalit castes did (Deliege 172). The weakness in Dalit movements, according to Deliège, lies in the fact that Dalit movements became caste movements and would often work for the betterment of one (sub)caste at another's expense. This is not to say, however, that these movements did not have any effect on society. They shook the core of the hierarchy on which the caste system stood, embedding ideals of equality and democracy in his teachings and leading to some major

initiatives in favor of Dalits, including the (contentious) reservation system, which I will explain below.

The Dalit Panthers *& Dalit Sahitya*

In the days following the establishment of an independent Indian state, Dalit expectations for educational advance and social mobility were heightened. However, in the wake of independence, Nehruvian democratic ideals collapsed, and Ambedkar's political movement fragmented, disappointing these aspirations. Inspired by growing discontent, and an unwillingness to settle without agitation, "a newly militant cultural/political movement", known as the Dalit Panthers Movement arose (Pandey 163). The Dalit Panthers were a loosely organized group of college-educated intellectuals and professionals inspired by the fervor of the U.S. Black Panthers and Dr. Ambedkar's ideas, which "imbued Dalits with self-respect and thus awareness of their own condition" (Festino 28). The Dalit Panthers produced a literary output that came to be known as Dalit Sahitya ('literature of the downtrodden') (Deliège 16). The literary movement was enabled by the Little Magazine Movement, which was initiated in the U.S. and England in 1880, and took root in India in the 1950's and 60's. In India, the movement encouraged socially marginal writers, including regional and vernacular Dalit writers, to voice their opinions in periodicals for serious literary writing that were small, avant-garde and non-mainstream (Krishnamurthy 62). The products of this literary movement transgressed the bounds of mainstream Marathi writing, which had thus far been dominated by Brahmins. As a result, the Dalit Panther movement gave currency to the term 'Dalit' and many Dalit youth readily adopted it and its aggressive, rebellious overtones. 'Dalit' acquired a meaning of resistance and self-identification contrary to its literal etymology of "brokenness," symbolizing the emergence of a

strong oppositional consciousness to the state of deprivation, humiliation, and oppression to which Dalits had been relegated.

Dalit autobiographies and memoirs thus emerged in the 1960's as a form of protest literature and a means to depict the Dalit struggle. Dalit autobiographical writings had a wide impact in both the literary world and Dalit consciousness, articulating new reflections on history and creating a Dalit literary consciousness. Through writing, Dalits communicated the sufferings of their communities, while also starting a quiet revolution. Arjun Dangle, the editor of a collection of Dalit writings titled *Poisoned Bread,* describes: "Dalit Literature is not simply literature, it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people" (Prasad and Gaijan 3). Not all pieces of isolated literature stirred change or even hoped to; however, the greater body of writing produced through the movement was powerful in its assertion of a Dalit self with an elevated voice and disposition.

Subaltern studies scholar Gyanendra Pandey observes, "the outpouring of Dalit autobiographical accounts was particularly remarkable in Maharashtra, western India, the home province of B.R. Ambedkar and the area of his greatest initial influence" (Pandey 164). A series of autobiographical works arose from Ambedkar's caste of Mahars and from other Dalit castes and included a slate of writings in languages other than Marathi, like Hindi, Kannada and Tamil. Throughout the 1980's and 90's, an audience for Dalit literature emerged. Many Dalit writers invoked the posthumous symbolic posturing of Ambedkar as a visionary, intellectual, and leader; as a direct result, "many life-writings appear in the form of fairly direct political commentary and inducement to Dalit mobilization" (Pandey 164). Dalit life writings are thus inherently political in nature.

Introduction Part II: *Dalit Life Writings*

While, in the past, suffering has rendered the Dalits without voice in the literary sphere, writing their own literature gave them a voice that contributed to changing their status. However, this is not to say that the writings alone had such powerful social agency that they single handedly brought about change in society. Rather, the literary metaphors encapsulated in the non-fiction writings produced as part of Dalit Sahitya powerfully conveyed the social life of Dalit communities and provoked raw reflection on their quality of life, serving as not only as 'objects' of knowledge, but 'sources' of knowledge as well.

Dalit life narratives, being the "act of people representing what they know best, their own lives…" (Kumari and Vohra 69), recreate societal realities and create a higher degree of awareness for readers. They have the composite effect of potentially changing readers' ways of seeing and motivating a desire for social change where marginalization or oppression are observed. They thus "shorten the distance with the otherness of suffering" (Festino 27) for readers. Readers experience an unfolding of the lives of different characters and not only witness their plights but understand, at an intimate level, the causes, values and beliefs that provoked unequal treatment (Festino 27). In forging a deeper connection with these characters and their stories, readers (hopefully) become empathetic to situations that may have otherwise been inaccessible to them. In this way, Dalit literary narratives are a powerful means of expression, evoking empathy, awareness and potentially catalyzing change.

By authoring their own narratives, Dalits sought to counteract common patronizing discourses about them and counter discourses that portrayed them as victims of their own circumstances. As Festino explains,

> The men and women who populate the pages of Dalit narratives might not have happy or easy lives, but at no point are they constructed as martyrs due to their circumstances. Instead, they are presented as people who are not afraid to put up a fight in order to preserve what belongs to them (Festino 29).

Additionally, while articulating a sense of resilience and resistance from the perspective of the collective, Dalit autobiographies serve as *testimonios*. *Testimonio* is a Spanish term meaning "witness account" that was first used in context of writings depicting the social inequalities in Latin America since the 1950's; it describes writings in which indigenous communities establish first person accounts of their experiences with oppressive structures to inspire social change and redress inequities (Ganguly 432). The term has been imported and widely used in Dalit studies, pointing to the cross-cultural reach and resonance of Dalit scholarship (Ganguly 432).

Testimonio is usually described in reference to first person accounts (but the Dalit 'we' effectively can be adapted to fit this criteria) wherein the narrator has faced instances of prejudice and marginalization. The teller becomes a "conduit to voice the stories", a facilitator of research with an interest in relaying a narrative that "represents a larger, collective story that took place in the community that the narrator inhabits" (Mora 1). Dalit writings emerged at a time in which a celebratory mood, the result of late modern Indian democracy, pervaded India. Dalit writings contrasted with this mood, demanding recognition of the suffering of the Dalit people by the public sphere (Ganguly 431). In establishing truth through *testimonio*, Dalit life narratives confront what is referred to as the "suffering of unrealizability", the "not-yet-ness of citizenship

rights and human rights universalism" (Ganguly 441). *Testimonios* of this sort make way for the formation of a discursive space in which readers can interact with the subaltern and curate a relationship of solidarity.

However, it is not merely the specific genre of life narratives and memoir that have this effect. There are many types of discourses that bear the same impact for Dalits. In my study, I take note of this, examining written Dalit life narratives, oral testimonies of a nonliterate Dalit woman, recorded by literate ethnographers, as well as a curated commentary about past events derived from an oral family history.

Within Dalit life writings, the community is omnipresent (Pandey 168). Many Dalit narratives are memoirs, but they are inherently social, dealing with the lives of a community, making them more similar to socio-biographies in nature. This is well articulated by Pandey, who asserts, "the loudly declaimed subaltern 'I' is located in a no less forcefully proclaimed 'we'" (Pandey 170). In Dalit life writings, selfhood is often claimed through the community.

Dalit life narratives also strongly invoke the symbolism of what Pandey, calls, the 'subaltern body' (Pandey 177). Pandey describes how popular Dalit writers depict the Dalit subaltern body and the way it is perceived and notes the power behind such a description. He writes, "The body of the Mahars -- unclean, grimy, superstitious, irrational, lacking in human dignity, self-confidence and self-respect -- is the mark of their degradation" (Pandey 177). He goes on to describe that the marked subaltern Mahar body is an archive of the history of prejudice and degradation imposed onto them. Raw descriptions of Dalit bodies are pervasive in Dalit writings and are a powerful source of imagery. We see this version of the subaltern body

often juxtaposed in literature with the body of Ambedkar, who represents self-respect, liberty and transformation - the making of a new Dalit body, and one to which Dalits thus aspire.

The bodies of two subalterns are evident in Dalit writings: those of the poor, which includes women and men of all ages, and those, specifically, of girls/women. Within Dalit writings, girls/women are "constantly exploited, overworked, disciplined, and punished by a jealous patriarchal order that doesn't hesitate to show its manliness… for real or imagined transgressions" (Pandey 178). Dalit women are shown to particularly feel the disadvantage of their identities, which are doubly marginalized by caste and patriarchy.

Dalit Women and Life Writings

The case of Dalit women, who have often been left out of both Dalit studies and feminist inquiries, is uniquely articulated within Dalit writings. The plight of Dalit women is distinct from not only Dalit men, but also the experiences of privileged caste women, as it is characterized by not only caste discrimination and economic deprivation, but also external caste and internal Dalit patriarchy. The Dalit woman is a "Dalit amongst Dalits" (Prasad and Gaijan 48) and is particularly vulnerable in comparison with Dalit men and other non-Dalit women. Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar, researchers on equity, economics and women's experiences, note that, "The additional discrimination faced by Dalit women on account of their gender and caste is clearly reflected in the differential achievements in human development indicators for this group. In all the indicators of human development, for example, literacy and longevity, Dalit women score worse than Dalit men and non-Dalit women" (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 1). Thus, their placement at a crossroads of marginalized identities has tangible implications in their ability to enjoy the actualization of their rights.

Sabharwal and Sonalkar introduce the notion of a 'triple burden' when referring to Dalit women, describing their plight as being characterized by gender bias, economic deprivation and caste discrimination (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 52). They assert that Dalit women face the following challenges regularly:

• Economic deprivation

• Educational deprivation

• Poor health

• Caste- and untouchability-based discrimination in accessing sources of livelihood, public services, and political participation

• Caste-based atrocities and violence

• Temple prostitution

• Gender discrimination

The concept of the 'triple burden' is what I will use to frame my work. I will be analyzing how Dalit women have, in partaking in Dalit Sahitya through their own life writings, sought to inform Dalit consciousness and represent their own, unique experiences. My thesis is a comparative analysis of four pieces of Dalit discourse written or narrated by women detailing their lives between the 1940's and 1990's: *The Prisons We Broke*, by Baby Kamble, *The Weave of my Life,* by Urmila Pawar *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla and *Viramma,* recorded and published by Jean-Luc and Josiane Racine and orally narrated by Viramma herself. I will analyze the ways in which the 'triple burden' manifests within each of them. I will also explore how, despite great difficulties, these Dalit women balanced their difficult plights with resilience,

resistance and joy. It is important to observe that the degradation and strife present in Dalit writings often coexist with stories of mobilization, activism, faith, celebration, family and community.

Through writing and storytelling, Dalit women are able to "not only voice their pain and humiliation, but also able to make visible their quest for improvement in their family lives, jobs and salaries" (Festino 30). Despite all they endure, the Dalit women whose stories this thesis focuses on are hardly victims of their circumstances. Dalit women writers portray themselves and the women of their communities "as subjects who resist and fight back [...] like any other victim of social oppression to guard their dignity" (Tomar 3). They are strong, resourceful, and full of life. Through their desire to tell their stories and document their own experiences, as well as those of their communities, they show the ways in which Dalit women pave the way for elevation and justice.

This Research Project

In examining four life narratives in tandem and focusing on several themes and subthemes relating to the triple burden that cross the different works, I will critically explore an image of a distinct Dalit female personhood in the twentieth century and highlight the commonly shared everyday experiences explored within the narratives. While this will be a limited glimpse drawn from the narrative self-representations of four women, archival works and oral testimonies, it will still allow me to identify some common experiences shared by Dalit women across spatial boundaries, religions and levels of literacy, and will particularly focus on the visceral register and how it *feels* to be a Dalit woman. My project will enable my readers to better acquaint themselves with the thoughts, beliefs and aspirations of Dalit women, and better

understand their plight as it is affected by structural violence and deprivation in a more personal way. It should be noted that the time period captured in my work is limited; all of the narratives end the majority of their analyses around the 1990's (though *The Weave of My Life* touches on events up till 2002) just at the point in which the BJP began having electoral successes and gaining political leverage in India. Tit should be noted that the rise of the BJP alters caste experiences considerably.

The four books I chose to examine are not typical Dalit life narratives or memoirs. Two, *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, are written as socio-biographical memoirs. Contrarily, *Ants Among Elephants* is not a story told by the protagonist. The author, Sujatha Gidla weaves together the stories of her own mother and uncles, recreating their lived experiences and assuming their voices based on their oral retellings of events. Similarly, *Viramma* was written not by a Dalit woman, but by two anthropologists, Jean-Luc Racine and Josiane Racine, who documented ten years of oral testimony provided by a Dalit woman commenting on her life.

In analyzing these four books together, I explore Dalit women's *discourse*. The merit of this is that I will include both the voices of literate women and activists and those of women who are non-literate, such as Viramma, who represent a large portion of Dalit women, and whose voices are otherwise not so intimately present in literate Dalit women's life narratives.

The Narratives I chose

The first narrative I chose is *The Prisons We Broke*, by Baby Kamble. Baby Kamble was an anti-caste activist in Phaltan, a small town in the Satara district of Maharashtra. Her first edition of *Jina Amucha* (1986) was originally written in Marathi; it was later translated by Maya

Pandit into English under the title, *The Prisons We Broke* (2009). Her writings detail what life was like for her community of Mahars in rural Maharashtra before and after B. R. Ambedkar, roughly from the eve of independence to the 1980's. It is noteworthy that she minimally dwells on any thoughts about Buddhism despite her community's conversion. Her writings are critical in that they, for the first time, explore, in an intimate context, the ways in which Dalit women confront brahmanical hegemony on one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. Her writing speaks widely about the everyday suffering of the Mahars at the hands of caste society, but also delves into rituals and customs. Baby Kamble can be distinguished by her blunt, graphic descriptions and activist tone. She is forthright in calling out injustice and is highly observant of the plight of those around her, seeking to get out to the world the ways in which Dalits and particularly Dalit women have been repressed.

The next narrative I chose is Urmila Pawar's *Weave of my Life*. It was originally written in Marathi with the title *Aaydan* (2002) before being translated into English by Maya Pandit in 2008. Pawar's narrative spans from 1947 to the end of the century, taking the reader from Pawar's childhood memories of life in the *maharwada* (Mahar settlement) of rural Mahad and her widowed mother's struggle to make ends meet, through her schooling and college days in Ratnagari, to her life after marriage in the urban setting of Mumbai, wherein she becomes a writer and organizer of Dalit women. Urmila Pawar challenges the established dichotomy between men rightfully occupying public space and influence and women being limited to the household. She harnesses a university education, is highly involved in various cultural and literary events organized by Dalit organizations and feminist organizations alike and seeks to merge the two in her independent activism, despite the pushback she receives from those who disapprove of her activism, including her own husband, Harishchandra Pawar. Through her

narration, Pawar, like Kamble, also weaves together the everyday and ordinary experiences of her family and community, echoing many of the same themes. What is unique about her writings is that she approaches the subject not only as a woman with a vast record of literary achievement, but also as an activist who has developed a specific stance on Dalit feminism. Pawar details how the triple burden reconstructs itself into a new, more subtle form in an urban context, and documents the social changes brought about by her community's conversion to Buddhism. Pawar, like Kamble, writes to document the lives of those around her and share their experiences.

The next narrative I chose is *Ants among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla (2017), which sets the history of the political project of post-independence India against the background of everyday caste violence. Gidla, unlike Kamble and Pawar, is an Indian American author who writes in English. She was formally educated in physics at the Regional Engineering College of Warangal (in the south Indian state of Telangana), immigrated to the United States in 1992, and currently works as a conductor for the New York subway system.

Instead of writing about her own experiences, Gidla captures the lived history of her family through narration of oral testimonies of her mother Manjula and uncles Satyam and Carey in the years preceding and immediately following independence from the British Raj. The three are raised outside of the *malalpalli* colony of Mala Dalits and are instead raised in the village in slightly elevated circumstances on account of their father's being a school teacher. However, Gidla's mother Manjula, despite being bright and well educated, is subject to immense difficulties as she grows into adulthood and strives to pursue her education and work in the city while balancing motherhood, the expectations of being a wife and enduring harsh economic conditions. Manjula is thus the principal character of interest in the book, and we engage with

her deeply in context of her intellectual and personal life, especially with respect to her tumultuous marriage with Prabhakara Rao.

Ants Among Elephants is not widely cited in Dalit studies, as it is fairly recent, and it is unique because it is an account of Dalit Christians in Andhra Pradesh. Her work is critical in that it adds to the Hindu/Buddhist perspectives obtained from the other memoirs in this study and adds a dimension of regional diversity.

Viramma (1997) is the fourth and last narrative I chose to analyze. Viramma is the name of a Paraiyar caste, Dalit woman who worked in agriculture and as a midwife in Karani, a village near Pondicherry in South East India. Viramma orally narrated her life story (in the socio-biographic style similar to that of Pawar and Kamble) to a French ethnographer, Josiane Racine, as well as her husband, Jean-Luc Racine, during ten years of daily conversations starting in the 1980's, during which Josiane Racine, who Viramma fondly refers to as Sinamma, and Viramma became very close. Viramma never sought to put out her story; rather, it emerged over years of everyday conversations with the anthropologists who were studying her community; her personal narratives are an amalgam of different ideas and moments that further elucidate our understanding of caste and patriarchy. Viramma tells her life story with humor and the characteristics of a vivacious storyteller. She narrates her seemingly carefree childhood, her marriage before puberty (both the trauma associated with it and the love she developed over time), the births (and deaths) of her twelve children, her life as an agricultural worker and midwife, and various tales of superstition, healing and faith through stories of various gods, goddesses and evil forces.

Unlike her literary counterparts Kamble, Pawar, and Gidla, Viramma, does not, for the most part, outwardly attack oppression or denounce Hindu or societal tradition with her words, even when such traditions are rooted in misogyny or casteism. Rather, she describes how a non-literate Dalit woman lives and thinks in her circumstances and offers insight into how many Dalits perform possibilities of resilience in their everyday lives. Despite all the hardship, and the strife caused by the interlocking modes of oppression, meaning for Viramma is still found through "a place, a community, a framework for life and thought and an order of things, even if that framework and order also claim to justify oppression or limit emancipation" (Viramma et. al. 310). Viramma recognizes difficulty but also narrates the ways in which Dalit women perceive and react to it. This is a critical perspective for my writings, as Viramma represents the perspective of a Dalit woman located in a rural setting, and may be a better insight into how many Dalit women of a similar, labor based background, handle the triple burden, especially since many nonliterate women are unable to seek out creative or activist spaces to actively talk about or contest their plight.

Of these four life narratives, two pieces are set in a rural context (*The Prisons we Broke* and *Viramma)* and two are partially focused in an urban one (*Ants Among Elephants* and *Weave of my Life*). Additionally, I have chosen two works based in Maharashtra (West India), one in Tamil Nadu and one in Andhra Pradesh (which are both in South East India). There is variation in the types of discourse reflected across the writings, and their protagonists represent Dalit women of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian backgrounds and varying levels of literacy and occupations across the latter half of the twentieth century, from activist/ writer to teacher to agricultural laborer and local grocery store owner. Thus, together, these narratives deliver a

range of Dalit female experiences to draw from when analyzing the triple burden and suggest ways in which it affected Dalit women at this moment in time.

Methodology

In my analysis, I will reveal how isolated instances of oppression can potentially inform us of larger, structural patterns. I will analyze instances of oppression as they pertain to examples of gender bias, caste discrimination, economic deprivation and counterbalance these anecdotes with stories of verbal and performed resilience within the four readings.

My main aim is to tap into the visceral register and help readers understand the ways in which the ordinary and everyday experiences of Dalit women during this time and across these spaces were impacted by the triple burden. Stories are complex, but narrative self-representation is a wonderful way to reconstruct lives outside of a merely academic or sociological framework; stories are what remind us of each other's' humanity. While these stories may only present a range of experiences, they are a powerful way to begin to understand what it is like to be Dalit. These stories each suggest distinct things about Dalit livelihoods, and I am putting them in conversation with one another to create a distinct visualization of the range of Dalit women's experiences, so the readers can merge the critical ideas of the authors and understand greater themes.

I chose to, for the most part, relay these stories in the present tense, despite them having been performed in the past in order to retain the storytelling quality present in each book. I struggled initially in deciding how to best balance using my own voice and the voices of the women whose lives and thoughts I seek to highlight and decided that I want to focus as much as possible on bringing the women and their words and feelings to the forefront of my work,

allowing them to retain an original quality instead of paraphrasing too much. I hope to let the women largely speak for themselves and powerfully render their own lives and aspirations to my readers, so that whilst my readers become better equipped to reflect on the modern day implications of such realities and the ways in which oppression has merely changed form, they also come to appreciate Dalit women as interesting, creative, and charismatic beacons of strength, nurturers of communities, and agents of change.

Index of Notable Figures

Urmila Pawar (1945- present): Author of *The Weave of My Life*, converted Buddhist, located in the *maharwada* of of Ratnagiri and then the city of Mumbai, educated, Dalit Women's activist

Harishchandra Pawar: Husband of Urmila Pawar

Baby Kamble (1929 - 2012): Author of *The Prisons We Broke*, converted Buddhist, located in the *maharwada* of Veergaon, mildly educated and employed in her husband's grocery store

Kondiba Kamble: Husband of Baby Kamble whom she married at age 13

Sujatha Gidla (1963 - present): Author of *Ants Among Elephants*, Christian, grew up in the slums of Elwin Pete in Andhra Pradesh, highly educated, later became a physicist living and working in the USA, daughter of Manjula

Manjula (born in the 1940's): Gidla's mother and one of the principal characters of *Ants Among Elephants*, a bright student and worker, located in Khazipet, Telangana, did not grow up in a Dalit colony but is a Dalit Christian of the Mala caste

Prabhakara Rao: Husband of Manjula

Satyam (KG Satyamurphy): Brother of Manjula, leader of an influential Maoist guerilla group

Prasanna Rao: Father of Manjula and Satyam

Viramma (~1930's - 2002): Narrates what became the book *Viramma* to Josiane Racine for ten years between the 1980's and 90's, lives in a *ceri* in Karani, Tamil Nadu, nonliterate, Hindu and Dalit of the Paraiyar caste, agricultural worker and midwife

Manikkam: Viramma's husband, to whom she is married as a prepubescent girl

Sinamma: Viramma's name for Josiane Racine, etymologically meaning 'little mother' or 'young lady'

Time Periods Covered Through the Life Stories

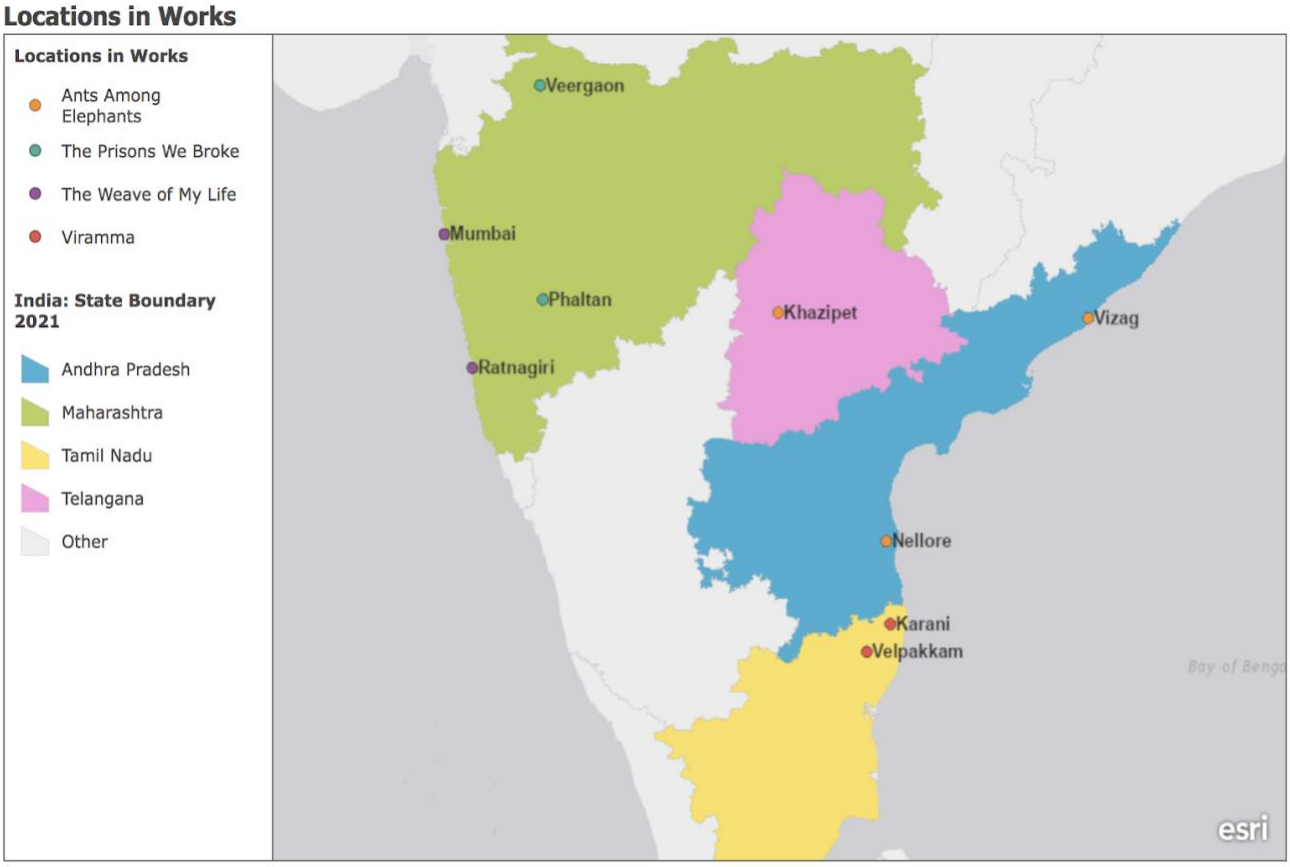
Ants Among Elephants: 1942 - 1990's

The Prisons We Broke: 1950 - 1986

The Weave of My Life: 1947 - 2002 (though events mentioned post 1990's are sparse)

Viramma: documented over ten years from 1980-90 but is a recollection of Viramma's life up to that point (est. 30's to 1990)

Figure 1. Self-Produced Map of the Locations in the Works



> "Such was the condition of our people…. there was no difference between us and the animals. But how had we been reduced to this bestial state? Who was responsible? Who else, but people of the high castes!"
>
> - Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*

Chapter 1: Caste Discrimination

Dalits are often deemed by members of caste society to be 'untouchable', considered so ritually unclean that an individual risks defilement at even the slightest contact with them. The degrading notion of untouchability is imposed from birth, dictating a fate of repression, social exclusion and marginalization, which resultantly carries a burdensome social and psychological effect. Throughout the lives of Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Manjula (the mother of Sujatha Gidla), and Viramma, we see the deep-set influence of caste discrimination and hierarchy in varying forms, irrespective of religion or location. The women, who represent a range of different religious beliefs ranging from Neo-Buddhist, Hindu, to Christian, share the burden of casteism from their villages in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to the villages and cities of Maharashtra.

Throughout the four narratives, we readers are led through Karani, in Tamil Nadu where Viramma is located, Veergaon in the state of Maharashtra, where Baby Kamble is situated, the cities of Ratnagiri and Mumbai in Maharashtra from which Urmila Pawar is located, and the village of Khazipet in modern day Telangana, where Sujatha Gidla's narratives take place. At each location, we observe similar parallels regarding the ways in which casteism has a hold over Dalit livelihoods. In this chapter, I aim to explore three distinct ways in which this is so, specifically focusing on the discriminatory organization of public spaces, negative stereotypes of

Dalits commonly perpetuated by caste society, and the ways in which notions of caste hierarchy are reproduced.

Discriminatory Spatial Organization

Dalits' hereditary occupations entail doing work that caste-society considers filthy, such as sanitation tasks and dealing with animal carcasses and leather. This notion of pollution and tainting is reflected in the spatial organization of many Hindu villages. Dalits are segregated from caste society, made to live in colonies or separate hamlets such that they are rendered "outside of the boundaries of the village proper" (Gidla 4), whilst every other caste, from the Brahmins and landowning castes, to service castes (ex. barbers), are allowed to settle in the village. This segregation seeps beyond the realm of residence, but also influences education, worship, and access to public services as basic as clean water.

Viramma accepts the spatial marginalization of Dalits, as a given. She urges her son, who openly resists tradition and caste-based discrimination, that, as Paraiyars or Pariahs, a Dalit sub caste, they have a duty to "live humbly and at a distance from other castes" (Viramma et al. 169). She explains that their caste of agricultural laborers, who have been delegated to the lowest rungs of society, must live apart, discreetly, as such is both the god Isvaran's command (and defying his command is a way to incur his wrath) and because Pariahs are reliant on the people from the *ur* (central village space). As a result, in her worldview, Pariahs should not dare insult the upper-castes by trying to inject themselves into their society with their lowly status (Viramma et al. 169). As a result, Viramma has lived her entire life in the *ceri* of the Dalits, which Racine describes euphemistically as the "colony away from the *ur*" away from all of those considered to be of higher social standing (Viramma et al. 20). However, Viramma has a positive outlook on

the *ceri,* explaining that she enjoys how the *ceri* is community oriented, and "always full of noise and singing and shouting". She even shows pity towards the privileged caste children, who, by custom, remain secluded in their homes, since life in the *ceri* is remarkably more vibrant and communal (Viramma et al. 8).

Baby Kamble also offers observations on the living spaces reserved for Dalits; she bluntly describes that her community in Veergaon is allotted living space (known as the *maharwada*, literally, neighborhood of Mahars)*)* "in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste" in poorly constructed huts clustered amidst the filth (Kamble 49). She goes on to describe that her people are utterly marginalized and are "masters only of the dead animals thrown into those pits by the high castes", a powerful allusion to the inequalities of their arrangements. She writes, "We had to fight with cats and dogs and kites and vultures to establish our rights over the carcasses, to tear off the flesh from the dead bodies" (Kamble 49), signaling the sheer level of deprivation characterizing the *maharwada.* Kamble compares the plight of her people to a demise worse than that of the animals of the higher castes, exposing the ways in which the living conditions allotted to the Dalits challenge their collective sense of dignity. In comparing the way in which society is split into two, she describes, "On the one side, there was the entire society, arrogant and insolent, enjoying wealth and comfort; and on the other side, there were people dying without food, like fish out of water" (Kamble 104). Kamble detests the caste-based difference segregating the higher caste people from the Dalits, and the shame and lack of infrastructure tied to the homes of the Dalits. Like Viramma, however, she holds that she and her community are not made lesser by such circumstances, rather, they are in their position because of the labor and sacrifice they have provided to society (Kamble 49).

In cities, physical segregation of residences manifests itself as discriminatory policies aimed at preventing Dalits from securing urban housing. When shifting from Chiplun to Ratnagiri, Urmila Pawar and her husband, Harishchandra, are summoned by the landlady of their new rental, who immediately disapproves of them as tenants when she sees them. Interestingly, it is implied that she identifies Pawar's caste immediately, though there is no clear indication of what the landlady sees that makes her able to make this distinction apart from class status. She barks at them to evacuate for their own good, coldly explaining her reasoning as follows: "You may not know it, but the spirit of our ancient ancestor guards this place. It moves everywhere and cannot stand any dirt. Otherwise it gets extremely wrathful… I am telling you for your own good. Go find a room elsewhere!" (Pawar 173). Pawar does not leave the apartment, but is made aware that her landlady, by indirectly referring to Pawar and her husband as 'dirt', holds their caste against them, looking down upon them and distrusting them for it. In many such instances, being found out as Dalit is a means to lose one's right to take up certain spaces.

In contrast to Viramma, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, Sujatha Gidla's mother Manjula has a different plight. Gidla herself grows up in a state of abject poverty in the slums of Elwin Peta in Kakinada; her mother, Manjula, however, lived in a somewhat elevated status in relation to the other Dalits in her community. When enrolled in Gudivada College, Manjula is amongst a minority of low-caste Mala Christians amidst a crowd of Kammas. The Mala girls are for the most part ignored by their Kamma counterparts, aside from being the recipients of slights like "Fat Calf" and "Wan Sheep" (Gidla 123). However, the Kamma girls are shown to find Manjula as an exception and are fond of her, despite her also being a Mala. They want to befriend her, and see her as advanced, well-spoken, and hardworking, distinguished by her upbringing: Manjula, unlike her Mala counterparts, has not grown up in a segregated *malapalli*

(colony for Dalits of Mala caste), nor does she come from a nonliterate background. Manjula grew up in the village proper because her father Prasanna Rao, like many Dalit Christians who were educated by English missionaries, is an esteemed teacher. In 1951, when the Reddys of Telaprolu (Reddys have a contested varna designation but hold a high status analogous to the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) established schools for their children in the village, they sought only the best teachers, and the Dalit Christians were second only to the Brahmins in this regard. When the teachers arrived in Telaprolu, the question arose of where they should stay. The *malapalli* was too far from the village for the teachers to be able to arrive at work on time every morning; additionally, they could afford housing of slightly better status and did not want to stay in the *malapalli*. Prasanna Rao himself "was determined to shield his children from the wretchedness and disease and shame of the malapalli" (Gidla 82) and so he, alongside the few other Christian teachers, appealed to rent a vacant lot next to the school building. They were granted it, and subsequently erected their mud and thatch huts there, becoming a part of the village. Prasanna Rao's children are thus given respect by the Reddys for being the children of the head teacher, and this translates to Manjula's fitting in amongst higher caste girls and having a higher perceived status. This shows that there are exceptions to the segregation of Dalits and non-Dalits; However, Prasanna Rao and his family are not afforded many extraordinary privileges apart from the one. Regardless of his status, Prasanna Rao is still not allowed to draw water from the caste well (Gidla 82) and instead has to traverse long distances for water. Additionally, aside from the presence of the few other Christian teacher families, there is no community for the Christians amid the village. These families are still segregated, but from the inside, left unincluded from village activity. They have to endure any calamities alone and without support (Gidla 123). This

is a different reality than Viramma's *ceri,* which, though segregated from the village, is tightly bonded and communal amongst the Paraiyars.

Instances of Humiliation

Humiliation, segregation, and debasement are practiced in virtually every space wherein Dalits and their higher-caste counterparts come into contact. This dynamic upholds discriminatory tradition and preserves hierarchy, which is shown below to be inherently profitable for the privileged castes. The four books analyzed in this thesis thus depict extraordinarily difficult and discomfiting moments.

Pawar tells us that during the time of British rule, Brahmin priests would often perform rituals of marriage and worship for the Mahars and Chambhars. However, in the event of a ceremony requiring a Brahmin priest, Brahmns would never directly venture into the *maharwada*. She describes an example where a Brahmin priest is invited to conduct a wedding ritual; in doing so Pawar exposes the way in which caste society associate shame and pollution with the homes of the Dalits. She describes,

> Brahmin priests performed the rituals of marriage and ceremonial worship for the lower castes, like the Mahars and Chambhars, But the priest would never enter the Maharwada to perform these tasks. He would climb a tree on the outskirts of the neighborhood, muttering some chants… So, the *bhatji* (Brahmin priest) would climb the tree because he did not want to be polluted with the shadows cast by the people of our Mahar neighborhood (Pawar 11).

The *bhatji* would embarrass the Mahars by refusing to even stand on the same terrain as the people for whom he was performing the sacred ritual. In climbing the tree and making a show of doing so, he reminds them of their perceived low status and the pollution associated with them.

Kamble narrates a similar experience with Brahmin priests performing rituals in the *maharwada* of Veergaon, but she observes that, while the fear of pollution stops the Brahmin from any physical encounters with the Dalits, it does not stop him from collecting his share of pay from them. She observes a Brahmin priest invited to solemnize a marriage and notes that while he stands at a distance for fear of pollution, "he would never make any compromise on his dakshina! That he took away without any fear of pollution" (Kamble 89). The *dakshina* is a sum of money awarded back to the priest as a symbol of gratitude and respect. The priest also gladly takes away his share of 'dry grocery', consisting of two kilos of chana dal, one-and-a-half kilos of rice, three kilos of wheat, and a huge plateful of jaggery (Kamble 89). Priests are thus shown in this context to only uphold casteism and the notion of pollution when it benefits them. The notion of pollution dissipates when there is money (or the thought of sexual access) involved, the latter of which shall be discussed in later chapters.

This show of avoiding the 'pollution' at all costs is not limited to priests, however. Dalits are 'allowed' to enter the village to provide various services, but upon being received, they are reminded of the ways in which they are detested. As a child, Pawar is sent to the houses of privileged caste people to deliver the baskets her mother had woven. Even as a child, some of the people who receive her to obtain her mother's goods never allow her to enter their houses. She describes,

> They made me stand at the threshold; I put the baskets down and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burned had they touched me. If the house belonged to one of my classmates, the shame of it was killing (Pawar 55).

This ritual is a means to reinforce hierarchy and self-hatred, humiliating the Dalits. The privileged caste people do not hesitate to show even a small Dalit child her place. Additionally, there is nothing one can do about these rituals without becoming the subject of reprisal. Thus, such practices evidently become normalized and perpetuated even towards the youngest members of caste society.

While Dalit children are forced to understand that they will continually face discrimination by their peers and elders, older Dalits are also humiliated by younger people with privileged caste status. Kamble recalls watching a polite Mahar woman go to the village shop, where the shopkeeper would give his children spiteful lessons in social behavior. At the arrival of a Mahar woman, the shopkeeper says to his child, “Chabu, hey you, can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch her. Keep your distance” (Kamble 14). This is said loudly, as to remind the Dalit woman of her low stature. Kamble notes that, in response, the Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, replies, “Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted’” (Kamble 14). Her reaction is evidence of her knowledge that she is the one who

will suffer if she does not show deference to him and the boy is touched. The Mahar woman herself reveres the young boy and refers to herself as a polluting agent, shying away from him as if to shield him from her own wretchedness. Immediately after this moment, the shopkeeper throws the Mahar woman's purchase at her to avoid touching her (and to reinforce her lack of respectability), and she, for fear of polluting him, leaves after placing her payment for him at a distance for him to collect. Through this moment, we observe the nature of casteism and the ways in which it is propagated to and by younger generations. Many Dalits are shown to be rendered powerless to the humiliation and mistreatment of the caste population, even to the point of a young boy degrading a grown woman.

This discrimination is not limited to privately owned spaces, but it is also operative in public and natural spaces wherein Dalits and non-Dalits come into contact, including roads and pathways. Kamble describes a moment in which the women of her village are traveling to the village to sell firewood, gathered in bundles atop their heads. She notes that the Mahar women had to follow several protocols on their journey. The first of which is that they are not allowed to use the regular road that is used by the higher castes. Kamble notes, "When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside" (Kamble 52). Dalit women thus render themselves invisible to the privileged castes. If they come into direct contact with privileged castes on their journey, Dalits are obliged to cover themselves fully, and say, "The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master" (Kamble 52). The consequences of failing to adhere to this degrading norm and is described in detail by Kamble. She describes the unfortunate circumstance of newlywed girls who often join the crew of women in their daily duties and fail to adhere to this social norm. She narrates,

> Sometimes, there would be a young, newlywed girl in the group and she would fail to join the chat out of sheer ignorance or awkwardness. All hell would break loose then. The master would simply explode in rage. He would simply march to the Mahar chawdi [area], summon all the Mahars there and kick up a big fuss. 'Who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn't she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?' (Kamble 53)

Even unintentional avoidance of such demoralizing rituals is punished with negative assumptions, rage, and the eagerness of members of privileged castes to reinforce power structures. Older people themselves thus teach younger people norms of respect and submission.

Many Dalit children are reprimanded by caste elders and young people alike, who taunt them for their polluting touch and tell them to stay away from them. Even in schools, caste hierarchy is replicated. Wherever there is caste mixing in education, higher caste children bully their Dalit counterparts. Kamble notes how, as a child, her school was predominantly high caste, and how if the high caste girls would pass her small group of Dalit friends by, they would "cover their nose, mutter 'chee, chee' and run as if their lives were in mortal danger" (Kamble 108). Teachers would take no notice of such acts and would continually admonish the Dalits, who were made to sit in an allotted corner (where they could not see the board) and would be victim vicious verbal attacks. Pawar notes that in her school, she was singled out for being Dalit and harassed by her teacher. She notes, "I was a frequent target for Herlekar Guruji. He always made me do the dirty work, like cleaning the board, the class, collecting the dirt and disposing of it"

(Pawar 57). She is the most evidently unfavored girl in her class, which greatly impedes her learning experience.

Both Gidla's mother Manjula and uncle Satyam feel ostracized for their identities in school as well. They find that Dalits like themselves, or else those hailing from poor, rustic backgrounds adored them, but the rich, fashionable Christians and Hindus alike often hold them in contempt (this is true for Manjula in her schooling outside of Gudivada college). Manjula often feels utterly isolated and out of place, and only eventually finds her place amongst the popular cliques by behaving like the Brahmin girls. Gidla's popular uncle Satyam feels a deep disconnect from his peers while studying away from home in college too. Even without being directly made to feel different, it is an unshakeable feeling. He notes,

> In Slater Peta the difference between his family and the rest of the Malas was small. They were all ants. It mattered little if one was a bit bigger than the others. But here at A.C. College, Satyam was an ant among elephants. No other student was in his situation. He suffered from hunger, but even more from loneliness and shame (Gidla 35).

Ant among elephants. This is a powerful means of describing Dalit experiences in relation to privileged caste society. Even where Dalits co-exist amongst caste individuals, they still are belittled and fight to be deemed legitimate and contributing members of society, regardless of their wit or intelligence.

The outward and reproachable behavior described above is shown to have a deleterious effect on the Dalit communities experiencing it. Being called idiotic, polluting and filthy, being alluded to as a crow due to 'blackness' and to a pig due to 'foulness' (Gidla 152) and being admonished constantly undoubtedly can have negative consequences on one's perception of self. Many Dalits are shown to walk on eggshells around higher caste people, becoming reserved and docile in their presence. While Dalits retain an aura of pride and honor, they are tested immensely.

Kamble describes the 'Yeskar' Mahar of the sixteenth share, who holds village prestige for being the Mahar chosen to wait on the Patil's (landlord's) *chawdi* (area/ dwelling) and furthermore, maintain law and order in the village. Amongst Dalits, the Yeskar is considered honorable, but when he rotates through caste homes collecting his pay in *bhakris* (a thick flatbread), Kamble describes him losing: "The moment he entered the village, his chest would deflate like a balloon and he would shuffle around as inconspicuously as possible so as not to offend anyone from the higher castes" (Kamble 75). The Yeskar carries with him a stick fitted with a bell. The reasoning behind this is as follows: if the men in the village sitting down for dinner hear the voice of the Mahar, they have to discard their meal and get up for fear of pollution; if he has a bell, however, they can finish their meal, since the sound of his bell has no polluting power. This is an incredibly degrading and absurd notion, which also demonstrates the great power differential between the castes – even for a male who has a relatively high position amongst fellow Dalits.

Upon being met at the door to collect leftover food, the Yeskar is not handed the food, but instead it is thrown into the blanket that the Yeskar spreads as a makeshift bag. It should be noted, that while the Yeskar Mahar visibly 'deflates' at the door of the Patil, he sets off towards

the village with great pride, and struts home joyfully and with a sense of achievement, as if he were carrying home a great catch instead of a bag of leftover foods. This is testament to his resilience and to how his physical stature and emotional composure shift as he leaves a privileged caste space and returns to his home among other Dalits. This is evidence of how, even if Dalits are made to act subservient in front of privileged castes, this does not necessarily mean that they have internalized subordination. They may have, also, but this varies from person to person.

In the face of transgressions of privileged caste prohibitions for Dalits, Dalits are often met with threats and insults including phrases calling them a “bunch of bastards" and “dirty fools” (Viramma et al. 122). While some Dalits actively and loudly reject these notions, many accept them as the social realities in which they live. Viramma in particular, who is older and non-literate, is often shown to accept these slights as truths. She describes how it is the fate of the Paraiyar to be born as Dalit; she goes on to explain that according to her understanding, she and her people are fundamentally unclean and thus must stay stationed in one social positionality. In some contexts, she accepts her given social position and gives religious justifications for it.

She explains her submission to the system, reasoning, “Just as there are the rich high castes, so there are the poor low castes. God gave the land to the rich high castes and he gave the poor low castes the duty of cultivating the land” (Viramma et al. 160). She further explains that, “Meat is unclean, it’s waste. Milk is pure. And as we eat waste, we’re unclean. That’s the difference between low castes and high castes,” demonstrating the deeply entrenched feelings she has adopted verifying the low status of her own people (Viramma et al. 160). To Viramma, it is her *dharma* (aspect of truth and reality) to be humble, obedient, discreet, and affectionate to people of caste society (Viramma et al. 148). In her eyes, regardless of the way in which they

treat the Paraiyars, the higher castes occupy a higher, revered social standing and thus are owed respect. Viramma's husband Manikkam explains that the reason for this acceptance of a lower position is merely their economic dependence:

> All my family are serfs for the Reddiar and we eat the *kuj* [gruel] he gives us. I depend on him completely. I have to run to his house to borrow when we've got nothing to eat, or when we have to celebrate an important event. I don't want to provoke his anger and we must vote for him (Viramma et al. 263).

However, Manikkam, unlike Viramma, is shown to be deeply angered by the inequities the Paraiyars face. He loathingly describes how, at lunch, the Reddiar eats rice and an array of vegetables on a magnificent banana leaf, while laboring Dalits are merely poured gruel directly into their hands (Viramma et al. 267). Manikkam describes how, despite working for the Reddiar for life, paying in sweat, blood, and tears, when he and his wife need a loan of money for an important matter like a marriage, the Reddiar acts stingy and merely gives him 200 rupees and a sack of rice (Viramma et al. 267). He mentions how Pariahs are hit, but if they dare hit back they are jailed and beaten up further (Viramma et al. 271) and asserts how unfair it is to toil all day just to be deprived of time to relax and enjoy the company of one's family, when the Reddiar, who is equally human, is able to do as he wishes (Viramma et al. 267).

Like Manikkam, many Dalits wholeheartedly reject the overarching ideology behind casteism, but follow custom to avoid trouble. Gidla explains how she would often watch in amazement as her family would pay respects to even the least respectable caste Hindus of the community, writing, "I saw the grown-ups in my family scrambling to their feet, straightening their clothes, and wringing their hands when a certain bowlegged, cross-eyed, drooly-mouthed

Hindu man passed in front of us" (Gidla 5). She herself would also passively accept taunts and insults targeting her caste and religion, despite being conscious of the fact that they were incorrect. To this end, she explains, "In my town, Christian girls were called crows, pigs, scavengers. One boy in my neighborhood used to call me and my sister 'shit lilies'" (Gidla 8). At the same time, she notes that whether she likes it or not, she cannot openly talk about her Dalit life, and that it is something that just must be accepted, mentioning that she has had similarly degrading experiences across vastly different cities in India. To Gidla, caste is life and life is caste, and such is an inescapable reality (Gidla 5).

Urmila Pawar talks often about how she and her family members confront caste oppression. While she herself becomes an activist for the cause of Dalit women, she also depicts common realities for Dalits. Specifically, Pawar describes how her sister wants to leave her medical job, since a patient in the hospital's psychiatric ward came to know she is Dalit and began abusing her. However, her father does not let her leave the job, telling her to concede and play the role of a bigger person. He says, "In any case, they are mad people. But you are sane, aren't you? So behave like a sane person" (Pawar 18). There is evidently sometimes little Dalits in the narratives feel empowered enough and able to do in the face of outright abuse.

Similarly, Manjula Gidla receives a once in a lifetime, wonderful, and stable position teaching at Tirupati College after seven years of working towards it through temporary positions and night jobs. After quitting her job and reporting to Tirupati, she is confronted by the Brahmin female principal there, named Rajeswari, who declares that Manjula has no job there anymore on account of her Dalit identity (Gidla 244). There is no remedy to the situation, and Manjula is forced to return to her former position and beg for her job back. Manjula is helpless and can only do as the system permits her to.

Even systems set in place to preserve the rights of Dalits are sometimes ineffective. Dalit reservation, the policy of providing scholarships, concessions in fees, and a percentage of seats in educational institutions and jobs in order to elevate Dalits, is shown to be helpful, but limited in its impact, often met with hostility and prejudice by caste individuals who feel deprived of opportunities. Additionally, the benefits are not extended to Dalit Christians like Manjula and Satyam who are believed to be outside of the folds of Hinduism and the caste system and thus not in need of such assistance. Reservation more generally has been met with severe opposition by the greater population, resulting in increased harassment towards Dalits. This harassment, which aims to make Dalits feel as if they are undeserving of their merit, is so pervasive and psychologically damaging that it drives Urmila Pawar's son, Mandar, to suicide.

Opposition to safeguards and resources for Dalits exists both implicitly and explicitly. To this end, Viramma's husband Manikkam talks about how, at the 'Harijans' office' in Pondicherry, an office established for Dalits' affairs, if one is literate, they will be well received and get what they want, but if a non-literate Dalit goes, they are told, "Come back in twenty days!" or, "Wait three months!" (Viramma et al. 262); in effect, they are denied help.

Systemic discrimination is not easily battled when it benefits a large portion of society – something which Baby, Urmila, Sujatha, Manjula and Viramma all recognize. Viramma, who normally takes on a more conciliatory tone, exhibits this attitude when she conjectures, "The truth is that the people from the *ur* don't want us to rise up and be educated like them. Why? Because if we manage to own a bit of land tomorrow as well, then they won't be respected any more, they won't find manual labor at a cheap price, they'll have no more serfs" (Viramma et al. 192). She notes that the Reddiar does not want Paraiyars to become tenants of privately-owned

land, as it threatens their hegemony and builds a fear that the Paraiyar will take the land they cultivate and profit off of it themselves.

Throughout the four accounts I am analyzing in this thesis, there is mention of progress, but progress comes slowly, and old habits remain. Even as the Dalits accrue more wealth or literacy, this does not inherently change the attitudes of the higher castes towards them. To this end, Viramma notes, "Just because we're a little bit 'decent' now doesn't mean that we're going to be allowed into people's houses: and if we touch any utensils in a courtyard or at the well, women still rinse them with loads of water before they pick them up!" (Viramma et al. 167). Throughout the narratives, Dalits are often viewed with an entrenched lens of spite and mistrust.

The Reproduction of Hierarchy

Within Dalit communities, hierarchy further reproduces itself both along gender and caste lines. The notion of backwardness is pervasive even within Dalit communities. For example, Kamble notes that the Bele Mahars are supposed to be more advanced compared to the Pan Mahars "who were backward" (Pawar 50). There are many Dalit castes, each of which is distinguished by the traditional tasks they are called on to perform in addition to toiling on the fields of caste Hindus. For example, Malas, including Manjula and Satyam, are village servants made to do whatever menial work is needed. Malas are different from the Madigas and consider themselves superior to the Madigas, despite the fact that for caste Hindus, they are all despicable (Gidla 23). The reason for this distinction is that Madigas are traditionally tasked with the job of hauling away dead animals from the village and using their hide to make leather (though not all partake in this trade). To illustrate this, Gidla notices that her uncle, Satyam, cannot simply walk

into the Madiga colony or *goodem* without raising alarm or suspicion. Gidla describes the Madiga *goodem* as follows:

> The Madigas are forced to eke out a living by trading in dead animals. When an animal falls dead in the village of disease or old age, a Madiga comes to haul it away. The carrion flesh is sold to untouchables as meat, and the hide is tanned and made into leather goods. Not all Madiga families engage in this occupation, but even if only four or five of them do, the whole Madiga goodem is polluted by the festering piles of guts on the ground and dripping pieces of flesh hanging in the sun. The smell of blood is everywhere (Gidla 98).

As a result of the occupation, which is viewed as inherently filthy, the entire community is shunned or viewed as dirty.

Viramma gives an interesting perspective on the hierarchy existing within the Dalit community, commenting that it is made fluid by changes to economic status. She notes that "money's the master and when you know how to earn it, you make yourself higher than you were the day before" (Viramma et al. 160), remarking that the traditionally lowly Tomban Dalits were able to elevate themselves in wealth and status despite the fact that amongst Dalits they are considered low for raising pigs and living amongst the animals. They remain low in status but are eventually considered much higher than the Paraiyar due to their wealth. The Paraiyar accept cooked food from the Tomban and acknowledge their socioeconomic movement.

Aside from this exception, lower or poorer Dalit castes are generally made fun of and looked down upon by other Dalits. For example, Viramma talks about the hunters, mentioning that they are lower than the Paraiyars in caste and jokes about them. She mimics them laughingly, remarking to Sinamma, "They're lower than us by caste and anyway, like I've told you… they make everybody laugh by imitating their drawling accents like the Koravan's: 'Wooman! Where diiiid youuuuu puut thee croowbaar?'" (Viramma et al. 127). Viramma thus pokes fun at their ways. This discourse of hierarchy, though displayed in this case with humor, is also evident within Pawar's community in Ratnagiri. When considering potential suitors for her sister's marriage, Pawar's parents dismiss an evidently lower-class Dalit for being a street sweeper and having skin "as dark as a burned griddle" (Pawar 16). Thus, we see the reproduction of sometimes discriminatory caste hierarchy, likely due to internalized feelings of rejection or shame.

Concluding Remarks

Through this analysis, we observe how Dalits are involved in both reconciliation and protest as it involves caste. They are deeply aware about the way caste influences power and conditions their experiences in every realm, and all four authors depict this well through their narratives. Despite degrees of literacy, locations in rural or urban environments, and varying degrees of wealth and different genders, casteism and the labels derived from it relentlessly follow the lives and communities of Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sujatha Gidla (as well as her mother, Manjula and uncle Satyam), and Viramma. Being Dalit is thus associated with a deep level of vulnerability and self-consciousness. It is no coincidence that many Dalits who feel disillusioned by this system say of a man who has lived in poverty all his life, never having had a moment of happiness but for small intervals "*Veedu pandi lanti vadandi. Chacchipoyye mundu*

akasanni choosedu (This fellow's like a pig. He saw the sky for the first time at the end of his life)" (Gidla 154).

Caste-based oppression plays a large role in negatively affecting the lives of Dalits. However, the prejudices derived from it affect Dalits in even more spheres, contributing to economic dependence and exploitation and amplifying the effects of negative gender bias for Dalit women, in particular. Caste is interwoven with Dalit experiences of poverty and patriarchy; neither experience can be separated from its impacts. In the following chapters, we will be exploring this notion in depth, building upon our understanding of the Dalit experience.

"There is a saying that a black cow can survive even on thorns. Our women were like that proverbial black cow. Even on occasions when they had a right to be indulged a bit, they had to fill their stomachs with thorns to stay alive"

— Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke

Chapter II: Gender Bias

Dalit women have a unique social position that is deeply affected by both caste and gender. Pawar highlights this phenomenon by articulating that, in her experience and at the time of her writing, "women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement, and the women's movement was indifferent to the issues in the Dalit movement" (Pawar 217) alluding to the lack of a comprehensive understanding and platform for Dalit women, who not only face hardships due to economic deprivation and caste, but who are also are deeply affected by the patriarchal norms mired in Indian society. Across the narratives I am analyzing in this thesis, Dalit women face several challenges, mostly pertaining to the expectations attached to womanhood and marriage, as well as a lack of autonomy in the face of in-laws (phenomena also widely experienced by caste women due to the imposition of patriarchy), a particularly arduous routine precipitated by low economic status and sexual harassment by privileged caste men.

Women in their Marital Homes

Despite having a strong awareness of the hardships associated with being considered a 'lesser class of people' on account of socio-economic class and caste, Dalit men within narratives examined here do not spare Dalit women, enforcing patriarchal norms and expectations of female subservience. Thus, Dalit women are made *Dalit twice over* (Pandey 7), burdened not only by the limitations placed on them by caste society outside of the home, but

also by those imposed upon them by their own men within the domestic sphere. More specifically, many of the women who bear the brunt of such hardships within the four narratives are Dalit daughter-in-laws, who are often subject to emotional and physical abuse.

The natural reaction for Dalits, both male and female, when facing severe marginalization at the hands of greater society, is to return to the domestic sphere and assume a role of power within the private sphere. To this end, Kamble writes, "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves – our very own daughters- in- law!" (Kamble 87) Both men and women alike come together to collectively torment women newlywed into their families as a way to counteract feelings of disempowerment generated by experiences outside of the home. Although the legal marriage age for girls in India has been eighteen since 1955, Kamble writes that within her community, young girls of hardly eight or nine are forced to marry much older men and become accustomed to a harsh and arduous new life of serving their in-laws. For the immature child bride, for whom the notion of marriage is still a mystery, marriage means nothing but calamity (Kamble 93). Daughters-in-law, even at this age, are customarily subject to several kinds of abusive and controlling behaviors by their in-laws (including their siblings-in-law) and husbands alike. Kamble describes that among the Mahars of Maharashtra, it is customary for a girl to, upon arriving to her in-laws, immediately be put to work and chided heavily for her mistakes. For example, she is expected to make two baskets of *bhakris* (a type of flatbread) upon arrival, only to hear criticisms demeaning her and her work. She endures taunts like the following: "Look at the *bhakris* this slut has prepared. She can't even make a few *bhakris* properly. Oh well, what can one expect of the daughter of a dunce?" (Kamble 95). These insults hint at her promiscuous

and undisciplined character and insult her parents. At the end of the day, however, the *bhakris* are gone, enjoyed by her in-laws. All that is left for her is would be the "half-burnt, half-baked *bhakris* that she herself had made" (Kamble 95). Thus, the daughter-in-law is expected to endure baseless insults that invalidate her and her work, just for her in-laws to, in the end, rely on and benefit from her labor.

Mothers-in-law, in particular, often assert a strong hand of control over their daughters-in-law, conniving against the daughter-in-law's relationship with her husband. Kamble writes, "When the daughter-in-law got her menstrual period for the first time (ever), the *sasu* [mother-in-law] would become terribly agitated and keep a close watch on her daughter-in-law and her son… she would not let them even glance at each other" (Kamble 95). The mother-in-law fears her son will be snatched away and will divert his attention and pampering to his wife (many Dalit wives are betrothed before their first menses; the daughter-in-law's first menses is thus sign of her readiness to have intercourse). Jealous of her daughter-in-law's youth and authority, the mother-in-law criticizes the wife to her son. Despite having been treated in a similarly harsh manner in her own younger years, many mothers-in-law go often ridicule and torment their daughters-in-law as a means for avenging their own struggles. It must be noted that these dynamics of entrenched patriarchy influencing marital relationships as well as one's relationship with their in-laws are common within caste society too and are pervasive within the entire Indian subcontinent. These dynamics are not unique to Dalits but are especially intense parts of the Dalit female experience due to their interactions with caste discrimination and economic deprivation.

Urmila Pawar notes similar attitudes shared among mothers-in-law in her community. She describes how she once overheard a mother-in-law speaking crudely about her daughter-in-

law to her own mother when they were fetching water from the well. The woman accused her daughter-in-law of hoarding money, never doing chores and being a 'slut'. She exclaimed in a frenzy, "How that slut has made my life hell! My poor son works himself to death in Mumbai and look at this slut…enjoying herself to the hilt!" (Pawar 62) This is one example, but across the narratives I analyze several more illustrate how common it is for a mother-in-law degrade and harass her daughter-in-law.

Manjula, Sujatha Gidla's mother, faces this phenomenon directly. During her pregnancy, Manjula experiences considerable morning sickness. As a result, she clings to her husband, Prabhakara Rao. Her mother-in-law Rathnamma does not approve. She fears that her new daughter-in-law, educated with her double M.A., will push her into a corner, "usurping her authority as mistress of the household and relegating her to an insignificant position" (Gidla 230), causing her, in turn, to mistrust and mistreat Manjula and for things to sour between them. Thus we observe how mothers-in-law often feel threatened by their daughters-in-law and their proximity to their husbands. Again, this experience is not uncommon in caste society, too, but it is heavily pervasive in the narratives.

Daughters-in law also often endure physical abuse. Kamble writes of her time growing up (before the 1940's when such practices were still rampant): "In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off" (Kamble 98); mothers-in-law turn their husbands against their wives, planting the idea that their wives are unfaithful and pursuing affairs. After using tactics of emotional blackmail, including shedding false tears and provoking their son's sense of honor, a mother-in-law would convince her son to chop off his wife's nose to then present to her brother and father as a means of tarnishing their self-respect and permanently maiming her. Kamble notes that after, "they would drive the poor girl out of the house, with

blood pouring from the mutilation" (Kamble 101). In the aftermath, no relatives would give her shelter. Quite interestingly, the *sasu* would take this opportunity to get her son married again, this time to a divorced woman with children. The *sasu* would feel elated that the harassment that she had suffered was being finally compensated for. Kamble writes, "An innocent girl would thus be sacrificed to atone for the sasu's suffering" (Kamble 101). The *sasu*, who had once endured similar abuses, is thus shown to torture her own daughter-in-law as a form of recompense, encouraging a cycle of mistreatment.

Even though this practice of chopping off noses has become rare over time—and likely was always an unusual occurrence--within the narratives it is still commonplace for husbands to flog their wives with sticks. In such cases, there is no one to care for the ailing daughter-in-law. Despite her injuries, the daughter-in-law is made to serve the entire household like a slave, enduring the abuses of her *sasu* (mother-in-law) and *sasra* (father-in-law).

Kamble remarks that her father would even thrash her mother on account of her wanting to work to provide food for the children when he himself was mired in politics and not working (Kamble 107). Kamble herself notes that, in contrast, her own mother-in law and sisters-in-law treated her well, but her husband would suspect her on the slightest pretexts and lash out on her as a result. She would bear her suffering alone (Kamble 156). Manjula similarly fears the hand of her husband, Prabhakara Rao. Sujatha describes how he abuses her regularly, most often in the presence of his mother (whereas he is a loving man in private) (Gidla 245). At the smallest of misunderstandings, she describes how her father would transform into "a monster". In this state, with his "face red, nostrils aflare, hair bristling" (Gidla 231), he would look like a different person. Manjula, despite marrying her husband for love, only stays with him after he begins abusing her for the preservation of her own social respect.

Marital Issues

Viramma expands on Kamble's discussion of child marriage through a heartfelt retelling of her own experiences. Viramma is still a little girl, "happy and flat-chested", when it is decided that she will marry Mannikkam, a man many years her senior (Viramma et al. 15). Immediately she is fearful; she is going to leave her home, family, friends, and village where she grew up to go and "cook and work for strangers"; she is terrified that "from then on she would only belong to them" (Viramma et al. 16). Viramma implores her mother to not send her away, but her request is denied. She remarks, "It was too much for a young thing like me. I sobbed day and night. I begged my mother not to give me away in marriage. I would be good. I'd stop all the games. I'd work hard, I'd bring home lots of money" (Viramma et al. 16). Viramma is desperate to stay with her family and retain her childhood. In the end, though, she accepts the marriage, unable to do anything to stop it. The day everything is decided, she feels sullen, grim, and entirely alone, despite the joyous atmosphere around her. She is told to obey her in-laws to preserve her mother's honor and is made to understand that her husband will be her protector: after marriage she will belong to him and have to satisfy him. For example, her mother tells her, "Obey your parents-in-law, from now on they are your gods. Obey your husband, he's your master. Be faithful to him. Don't be arrogant, don't provoke anybody, don't speak wildly but earn yourself a good reputation" (Viramma et al. 35). Her mother emphasizes virtues of acceptance without question, docility, and honor, but at Viramma's age, listening is not enough to make her understand (Viramma et al. 42).

Viramma's account includes a chilling, detailed description of her wedding night. We readers learn that, as an innocent young girl, Viramma is nonconsensually approached for

intercourse by her husband (as was tradition) and is unable to do anything about it. She narrates her first time as follows:

> The man came in at last. I shut my eyes straight away. I was curled up like a shrimp, my head in my hands. He brought the lamp nearer. I was still as a corpse. He muttered something and lay down next to me. He took off his *soman* [undergarment] very quickly and with the same speed he undressed me. I was humiliated to be naked. He stuck to me like a leech and took a firm grip of my breast. I was suffocating under his weight. I was trembling. I was terribly wet as if I'd pissed. At last he let go of one of my breasts, took his tail which was hard as a sugar cane and pushed it in at the top of my thighs, which he kept apart with his own. It felt like he was tearing me. He roared like a lion, giving great thrusts and for once, I suffered in silence (Viramma et al. 44).

Viramma has no concept of sex at this point and has barely just had her first period when she is made to have rough intercourse with her husband, who does nothing to comfort her or seek her consent. Viramma describes how, after the terror of her first wedded night, she feels intense anger towards her husband and her in-laws for allowing her to knowingly endure such suffering. But despite her feelings of unease, as a newlywed, Viramma still is forced to care for her husband, including heating the water for his bath, taking his meals to him in the fields, and giving him betel (a plant leaf that is chewed). She feels a deep dissatisfaction and injustice in this arrangement, noting that, "it wasn't the work that made me recoil, it was doing it for this stranger

who hurt me at night and disappeared in the day. But the only answer was to obey" (Viramma et al. 45).

As a result, in her early marriage days, Viramma rebels in her own subtle ways to take revenge. She does so by not showing Manikkam proper respect and annoying him often. Mentally, she refers to him as the 'executioner' and does simple things to get on his nerves. For example, there are seven girls with whom Viramma travels to deliver lunch to their husbands who work collectively in the fields. All of the other girls roll up the folds of their saris on their heads and place a pot of *kuj* (described as gruel) on top. However, Viramma arrives with the pot flat on her head, instead, circumventing the proper mode of showing respect. This small act is her form of rebellion. However, in the evenings, after enduring such subtle humiliation, Manikkam always finds a reason of some sort to start insulting her, saying abrasive things like "You poxed, badly fucked whore! Will you take a look at that cunthead" (Viramma et al. 45). Viramma cries in response, but also feels satisfied with her game. However, she never dares answer back his insults for fear of being hit (Viramma et al. 46).

Such is the beginning of Viramma's marriage. However, in her reflections as an adult woman, Viramma presents very different thoughts on her husband. She says in hindsight, "My husband was kind. He tried to get to know me, to make friends with me" (Viramma et al. 47). She goes on to say, "I was the one who didn't understand anything. I was too young, and the slightest thing he said or move he made seemed to me aggressive" (Viramma et al. 47). Viramma blames herself for her naivete and refuses to place blame on her husband or on those who arranged her marriage so young. Viramma thus tends to downplay her struggles in retrospect, but also elucidates the complexity of her marriage and her feelings towards it. Despite being married against her will at an exceptionally young age, Viramma begins to value her marriage and have

love for Manikkam as she grows up with him. Viramma further reflects that “In the end, we were happy, we satisfied each other. I felt good with him. It was from that time on that love was born between us. In any case, it was then that I began to love my husband as the dearest being in my life” (Viramma et al. 49). Viramma comes to build a positive relationship with her husband, despite her feelings of intense dislike towards him in the start. The exact time frame for this is unknown, as she is vague about it, but I presume it was soon after the initial weeks of marriage. She forgives the happenings of their first weeks together, including the rape and many insults and she comes to revere him. However, she does note that while she ended up having a positive relationship with her husband, she pays for his desire for her later. She says, “For him it was nothing: he climbed on top of me and that was the end of it. But I found myself with a child in my womb afterwards every time, having trouble standing up, sitting down, sleeping! So much trouble!” (Viramma et al. 56). The two are shown to (eventually) have mutual intimate feelings, but without contraceptive methods, Viramma is left to bear children constantly, which takes a toll on her wellbeing.

Viramma ends up having a positive relationship with Manikkam and also highlights how overall, besides traditional banter towards her, the women of her new house are very kind to her. However, over time, the women use her to do more and more of their work, knowing that she cannot (as principle) refuse. As a result, she spends her day doing their chores, including grinding spices, fetching jars of water, and looking after her nephews, leading her to fall behind in her own work. When Manikkam comes home, she is still busy with some household jobs while her sister-in-law hangs around by the well. If the work is not done, she gets the blame and is called lazy (Viramma et al. 50). Thus, Viramma’s in-laws exploit her labor, even if they are not particularly cruel.

Urmila Pawar similarly notes that she likes her own *sasu* very much, and eventually refers to her in-laws as "her people" (Pawar 170), but her misgivings primarily involve her husband, who begins to disapprove of her work and education, and who makes constant sexual advances. She narrates how, in the early days of her marriage, he follows her around, trying to touch her often. Pawar draws him into an alcove and asks him, "How long does a man have this desire?", to which he answers, "Till his death!" She remarks that this feels to her like a slap in the face (Pawar 158).

Both Urmila Pawar and Sujatha Gidla echo the sentiment that Dalit marriages are often riddled in abuse. Pawar writes that, normatively, "Every house had its own share of drunkards. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way" (Pawar 5). Alcohol abuse further aggravates domestic violence and also leads to a heightened sense of economic scarcity, as money is being squandered. Throughout the narratives, women often pay the price for their husbands' lack of financial intelligence and indulgences but are abused for any attempts to correct their husbands' behavior. Additionally, they are the first victims of their husbands unrestrained behaviors. Beyond their husbands, daughters-in-law are often despised and beaten by others in their marital family, made to endure it without retaliation.

Pawar writes of her cousin:

> I always remember my cousin Susheela at such times. She was married to a man in Partavane. He was a drunkard and Susheela's mother-in-law was a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would even drive her out of the house with

> her young children even on stormy dark nights. The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house at Phansawale (Pawar 28).

Susheela has no allies within her marital home and is made to endure severe abuse with no remorse and no support. In the end, no matter how badly battered she is, Susheela is always sent back to her in-laws by her father.

Not only husbands or family members beat up women; women who are suspected to have erred are also brought to the *panchayat*, or village council, to be publicly judged and punished (Pawar 131). The beatings are not limited to young women, either. One night, Pawar's *sasu* and *sasra* have an argument which ends in her *sasra* thrashing his wife. Pawar recalls how in the morning, her *sasra* sat quietly in front of the stove, applying a hot compress to her aching shoulder. Her sister-in-law then remarked, "Now, if anybody asks, do you know what she will tell them? She'll say she slipped on the stairs or had been to the toilet where she slipped and fell and hurt her shoulder!" (Pawar 158). Abuses would last throughout entire marriages, and rarely would women be able to counter them. Nor would anyone intervene. Many would simply remain silent, and age would not help stop the abuse.

As Manjula's marriage to Prabhakara Rao progresses, she faces increasing hostility from him. They live, at one point, in very poor, difficult circumstances, but even at the birth of his own baby, he does not care to attend to her or simply be present (Gidla 238). At 28, all of Manjula's hair has grayed. Whenever angered, her husband threatens to leave or else disappear for long periods of time. Whenever Manjula cries out against his abuses for the sake of their

babies, he replies with incredibly harsh and gruesome language, once even remarking that he would lay her and her babies out in the street and hack them all to pieces (Gidla 243). After years of her tumultuous marriage of abuse and deprivation, Manjula is reduced to "nothing but bones, pale and weak". Sujatha describes of her mother how, even if she wanted to sit, she needed to be helped down, and if she was sitting, someone had to put their hands in her armpits and lift her up (Gidla 246). Even when sick and frail, she is afforded no empathy. Upon delaying to fulfill her husband's request for her to make tea while she is sick and lying in bed, Manjula is beaten up badly in front of her children. Sujatha, who was a child observer at the time, describes the scene as follows:

> A hand grabbed Manjula by her hair, lifting her right out of bed and onto her feet. Prabhakara Rao was standing there like a dragon spewing fire. Then he slapped her face. Manjula screamed. The children woke up. The scene that day is burned into Sujatha's – into my – memory. The terrified woman – her mother – disheveled, her hand wounded, utterly naked, running to save himself (Gidla 283).

Prabhakara Rao is ruthless and is unafraid to thrash Manjula in front of her own children, even in spite of her condition. Like Viramma, however, despite a difficult past with her husband, Manjula enjoys a harmonious and loving end to her marriage in the years preceding his death. This is only after they have aged, Manjula has born their desired children and after the death of Manjula's mother-in-law, Rathnamma, who not only deeply despised her, but who Prabhakara Rao would become incredibly cruel to his wife in front of. We do not definitively know what the

reason behind Prabhakara Rao's shift is, but we can cautiously ascribe it to some combination of those factors. Thus, we see the complex array of emotions reflected in these tumultuous relationships, wherein there is often little empathy and many characters seeking to turn things sour, but there are also moments of harmony and joy as well.

Many women, however, never feel this sense of ease during their marriages, even as their husbands approach their demise. Only after the deaths of their husbands are they said to have been released from oppression. They look a little better, fresher, and as a result, people thus say that they have *randki suj* or "widow swelling" (Pawar 128). Urmila Pawar, on whose marriage I will further elaborate, is an example of a woman who does not see a harmonious end to her conjugal relationship due to her outspokenness.

Patriarchy & Resentment

Dalit women are often denied autonomy; even as they enjoy freedom of movement, working outside of the home in order to survive, patriarchal values denigrating women are still rampant. Kamble rightfully notes the deep-set effect of patriarchy on the experiences of women in her community noting that "The honor enjoyed by a family is in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house" (Kamble 5). Many women are like *birds in cages*, and the governing belief system centers men and male authority over equitable treatment towards women. It should be noted that this is Kamble's generalization; Viramma enjoys more freedom of movement than even the caste Hindu women. Thus the situation varies amongst Dalits and even South Asian women in general, as notions of patriarchy effect virtually all women. Nevertheless, this situation of male hegemony and centrism is well depicted in Kamble's quote below:

> We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her. It's another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow nothing on us but grief and suffering. Still, the kumkum that we apply in their name is the only ornament for us. It is more precious than even the kohinoor diamond (Kamble 41).

Even if her marriage is riddled in humiliation and abuse, a woman's worth is derived from her husband. The trope of an ideal woman is thus that of a woman who is gentle, generous, discreet, obliging, and kind; a woman who never grumbles nor puts up a fuss, even in the face of insults. While notions that the ultimate purpose served by women is to bear children are rooted in patriarchy, such ideas are a byproduct of the social order and are propagated by many women themselves.

Schooling and pursuing jobs are also sometimes looked down upon after basic literacy is achieved. Pawar narrates how no one in the family is in favor of her sister's going to school and that the women themselves complain, "Bah! What do women have to do with education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she?" or they slyly remark "Is she going to be a teacher, a Brahmin teacher that she goes to school?" (Pawar 16). Women in the narratives themselves are often shown to not understand the magnitude of the benefits of education and of defying normative patriarchal ideologies. However, there are women (such as Urmila and Manjula who do, as well as men who also support the education of women). For example, ultimately, Pawar's father is shown to be in favor of his daughter's being financially

independent, but this attitude is not widely shared. Prasanna Rao similarly imbues a love for education in his daughter, Manjula.

Urmila Pawar herself faces major backlash for her high levels of education and involvement outside of the home. While her husband Harishchandra is initially supportive of her, he becomes bitter as she attains a higher level of education than him. As a result, he purposely undermines her intelligence (Pawar 209). Ultimately, he uses her achievements against her, charging that because of her business in meetings, film screenings, and social work, she has rejected the needs of her family and dismissed her role as a mother. Harishchandra believes that looking after the house is the responsibility of women and is despondent and furiously angry at his wife for countering his expectations. He declares that she has ruined his family and caused him to lose face in the community. He insults her, screaming, "She considers herself so intelligent! But she is plain stupid! She is selfish, useless, shameless" (Pawar 259). Even in his last days, despite supporting him and revering him as her lively husband and life's companion, she is blamed squarely for his illness, resented for her activities outside of the home and her activist mission. Pawar, despite dedicating her life to a noble cause and making an effort to maintain a balance between her domestic commitments and her commitments as a writer and activist, notes that gradually, she loses everything. She writes, "gradually, my education, my job, my writing, my social work, my meetings, my programs, and, last, I, because of what I was, were held responsible for his illness" (Pawar 265). Pawar is thus left underappreciated and is expected to bear the burden of her husband's insatiable discontent.

Literate women who work outside of the home in nontraditional careers, despite considerable obstacles to provide a greater sense of purpose in their lives and have financial autonomy, are often unable to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Even women who do not work

outside the home often have to make up for their husband's habits and handle accounting and finances within the home. Gidla writes of her father and mother (her mother being a hardworking teacher):

> On his summer vacation, Prabhakara Rao came to Nellore. In the two months her husband was there, Manjula's carefully balanced finances were ruined by his cigarettes, his three teas a day. He took his mother's and Manjula's own gold chains and pawned them to marwaris [business men]. The women consoled themselves for the loss of their meager jewelry with the hope that as soon as they had the money to spare they could get it back from the pawnshop. Of course this never happened (Gidla 282).

Many women in the narratives have to bear the burden of their husband's bad habits, unable to retaliate, even when it comes at the expense of their own hard work and meticulous planning.

The 'Ideal Dalit Woman'

In describing memories of her childhood, Baby Kamble narrates the daily routine of the women of the *maharwada*, describing how they would wake up at the crack of dawn to begin working on an endless list of laborious chores. Like the other children of the *maharwada*, Kamble would awaken to her mother at the grinding stone, laying her head on her lap as her mother worked and sang rich melodies. Kamble describes fondly how "the sound of the grinding stones and the sweet notes of the women singing would float all over the *maharwada*" each morning, creating a distinct, comforting ambiance. The women would finish grinding by

daybreak, and then shift to their next task: going to the dam to fetch firewood. Around midday, the women would return with bundles of firewood atop their heads, drenched with sweat and parched from the heat (Kamble 51). Having not had breakfast and having little food at home, the returning group would share a generous women's store of dried *bhakris* (a type of flatbread) alongside a heap of raw onions, consuming two to three onions and a jug full of water each. The women would then spend the latter half of the day laboriously breaking the firewood they collected into small pieces before tying them up and setting off for the village, where they would sell them. They would not be allowed to share the road with the higher castes and would have to climb into the shrubbery and walk through the bushes whenever a caste Hindu would pass by in order to avoid offending them. Before entering the village, the women would also have to hide the borders of their saris under the pleats, as "only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen" (Kamble 54). The Mahar women would mainly sell their wares to Brahmin households, but every house would have a high platform acting as a wall or barrier from the Mahars, barring them from directly reaching the doors; the Mahar women would have to stand at a distance as they bargained. Kamble notes that the Brahmin *kaki* (define) would sit in the shade and micromanage the exchange, shouting:

> Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar women, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. But what's that to you? Your carelessness will cost us heavily. Our house will get polluted. Then we will have to polish the floor with cow dung and wash all our clothes, even the rags in the house! (Kamble 55)

She denigrates them in the presence of their children and underpays them, too. The Mahar women oblige, ignoring the attempts at humiliation and reprimanding their children if they try to touch the sticks for fear of polluting the *kaki's* firewood. They carefully check and stack the sticks. Once they are done, the *kaki* takes a couple of coins and throws them on each of their outstretched palms from above. The days toil on like this, characterized by manual labor, house chores and a daily dose of humiliation by the privileged castes.

Like Kamble and the Mahar women, Viramma does similarly laborious work as a midwife and agricultural laborer of the Paraiyar caste. However, within her community, women have any number of children (she herself had 12) and are often depleted by the burden constant childbearing has on their bodies (which is often additionally compounded with hunger and disease). Thus, working in the fields is particularly exhausting. Viramma juxtaposes the life of the women in the *ceri* with the high caste women in the *ur* who would merely "eat, sleep and do a few little jobs in the kitchen" and who would resultantly keep very clean and civilized. In describing the collective plight of the women of the *ceri*, she describes,

> We lose blood with each child and, on top of that, there's all the work we get through: planting out, weeding, harvesting, looking after the cattle, collecting cow dung, carrying eight jars of water, and then pounding, winnowing the millet, hulling the paddy, taking it to the rice mill in Tirulagam, and all the work at home and in the *ur* (Viramma et al. 52).

Not all Dalit women perform manual labor; such is contingent on economic standing, but the Paraiyar in particular are known for land cultivation. Additionally, Viramma is nonliterate, which limits the number of opportunities available to her considerably.

In contrast, Urmila Pawar, who moves to the city, desperately wants to complete her education and pursue work; however, as mentioned above, her husband, Harishchandra is reluctant to give his consent to do so and, instead, challenges her. He says, "Look, you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house. Cooking, looking after children, and all that stuff. If you think you can do this and get more education, fine!" (Pawar 198) This response is Harishchandra's way of saying no, but instead of resigning her efforts, Urmila gains admission to college and attempts to defy the odds. She describes her daily schedule, a precarious balance of domestic and scholarly responsibilities, as such:

> I used to get up at four o'clock in the morning, make chapatis and cook the vegetables. And then at six I would be out of the house. After college was over, I rushed to work, and after office, I rushed home. When examinations drew near, I left the children in the ayah's care and rushed to the university library and sometimes to the Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya at Dadar. I left only when I was literally pushed out of the library by Sarita, Khanolkar, and Mungekar, the girls who worked there. At home I studied till late at night (Pawar 199)

While Urmila's work day differs from those of Baby and Viramma, it is still incredibly busy and loaded with domestic obligations. Harishchandra, the husband of a prominent Dalit

women's activist, believes that the sole responsibility of the woman is to maintain the home. Thus, in order to keep him happy, Urmila has to endure the challenge of balancing her two sets of responsibilities with no help or sympathy whatsoever.

This notion of women working endlessly within their homes and walking on eggshells around the brute expectations of their husbands, is echoed in the experience of Bhikiakka, Urmila Pawar's cousin. Bhikiakka's husband has two working wives who serve him as he drinks heavily and has affairs with other women. When he comes home from work, he stays in the comfort of his second wife, leaving Bhikiakka to work in the house. Pawar notes of Bhikiakka that,

> She would be constantly cooking, cleaning the children, feeding them, washing utensils and clothes, and doing a thousand household chores. Yet there was no peace for her in the house. At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her. The other wife abused her with dirty words. She (Bhikiakka) did not survive, though, for long (Pawar 95)

Bhikiakka performs an array of chores as her husband lounges around but is unable to take any breaks or refuse to complete anything without enduring domestic violence. She is fearful that he might perceive a slight from her and punish her accordingly, and thus obeys him regardless of circumstance.

Satyam, Manjula's revolutionary brother, who supports her education and is dismayed by her ill treatment by her husband, Prabhakara Rao, also paradoxically imposes strict ideals onto his own wife, Maniamma, whom he has chosen as a spouse by his own liking. His demands are

as follows. Firstly, Maniamma has to "take care of him in every way and see that he sat home and studied and passed his exams" (Gidla 149). Secondly, Maniamma has to also attend to his *sister's* needs, which means cooking her meals and washing her clothes so that she can study. Thirdly, she has the responsibility of looking after Satyam's ailing grandmother, Marhamma, and attending to his father, Prasanna Rao as he ages. Lastly, Maniamma has to put up with her brother-in-law Carey's fiery temperament (Gilda 149). Once again, we observe how stern husbands are presented to be, and how Dalit women must abide by their uncompromising demands or else face sometimes severe consequences. Women must take care of everyone else, including their in-laws, at their own expense to prove their worthiness, and are guaranteed little respect in return.

Sexual Harassment

In addition to facing hardship in the home at the hand of their husbands and in-laws, Dalit women are also often subject to rampant sexual harassment in public spaces by u privileged caste men. There are numerous instances within the four books analyzed in this thesis citing moments of unwelcome sexual advances towards Dalit women on account of their caste and the presumption that they are 'free' women. As a young woman Viramma goes to the *ur* to do some small jobs for the school master's father's wife. The registry office is next to her house, and that particular day she has her hair done well with flowers and is wearing a neat dress. A civil servant calls her over, signaling her to come into the office. Viramma gives him respect and accedes to his request because he is "a top man, a sir, a civil servant" (Viramma et al. 51). She stops out of respect, thinking he might want her to sweep the pavement or courtyard, but what she finds next is completely unexpected. She narrates,

> I went into the room, covering my back with my sari and putting my palms together respectfully. And what did I see when I raised my eyes? His dick! A fat dick! He was holding it in one hand and he had money in the other. I screamed. I was trembling all over and I didn't know how to get out of the situation" (Viramma et al. 52).

The man assumes that, because of her social standing, Viramma will gladly indulge him in a sexual favor for money. All the while the schoolmaster's mother and her husband are watching the situation from the courtyard, wondering if Viramma will take his offer or raise the alarm.

Viramma notes that the Paraiyar women have a reputation of being "easy women who'll jump into bed with anyone if they whistle" (Viramma et al. 52) and acknowledges that the young are eager to have sex before marriage and sometimes even afterwards, but goes on to say, "but that's between us. We work in remote fields, young guys come past… but we're not whores" (Viramma et al. 52). She notes that caste society criticizes the uncleanliness of Dalits, but that caste men are eager to sleep with Dalit women, most likely due to their perception that such is convenient (they are easily exploitable due to poverty and because it is difficult to refuse or complain with such stringent power structures). She remarks "doctors pretend to listen to our hearts so they can feel our breasts. Others just go ahead and get their packet out and tell us to touch it. That's happened to more than one of us" (Viramma et al. 52). Thus, Dalit women are particularly sexualized and denied a semblance of respect and privacy, which results in heightened experiences of sexual harassment and assault.

Pawar notes how, when talking to fellow schoolgirls, she would hear many such stories. She narrates how a girl mentioned, “My stepbrother sits on my sister’s stomach and has threatened to do the same thing to me if I told anyone”; another one said, “My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drags me into an alcove, and presses me hard” (Pawar 105). These are depictions of sexual abuses by family members, a signal of women’s relative disempowerment even in families, but the same stories are attributed to powerful men in society. Pawar alludes to how she once witnessed sexual abuse by a priest towards a Dalit schoolgirl. She says,

> Once we were playing outside as usual. The priest was busy with his puja. But he did not come out as usual to give his prasad…After a long time the door opened and a Komti girl named Ulgawwa came out, her face wet with tears, in a terrified state. Then the priest came out, but he left without giving us any prasad. Suddenly I was frightened of the priest (Pawar 56).

Ulgawaa, a Dalit child, is sexually abused by the Brahmin priest, but is likely unable to do anything about it due to her status as a female child and Dalit. As a child, Pawar is also approached by an old man, who, winking at her, pushes his dhoti aside and shows her his “cobra” (Pawar 10). Dalit girls are considered ‘cheap’ and ‘easy’ to caste boys, who never dare to harass Brahmin girls in the same ways.

Concluding Remarks

The four narratives analyzed in this thesis substantiate the idea that Dalit women are subjected to relations of power that not only privilege caste society, denigrating them on account of their Dalit caste, but also propagate a patriarchal social order that systematically disempowers them and objectifies them in relation to men. Both the men of their communities and privileged caste men largely mistreat and oppress them, while village councils and patriarchal gender ideologies held by both men and women further enforce unjust rules over them, solidifying a community identity that stands on a foundation of gender-based oppression. Dalit women, who must endure drunkenness, ignorance, humiliation, and a variety of emotional and physical abuses, even in their homes, are thus ensnared by the interlocking nature of oppression on account of socioeconomic status, caste and gender, despite their foundational role in preserving families, communities and important social movements. Regardless of their levels of literacy, the women are all adversely affected by structures of oppression that seek to keep them mired in a position of subservience. There is no respite for these women even in private spaces; while their caste restricts them publicly, their status as women restricts them at home. When economic deprivation is compounded with the structures of patriarchy, the experiences of Dalit women become much harsher, as we will explore in the next chapter.

"We crushed a tiny piece of coal between our teeth and brushed them with the dust. We stared at the yellow flames in the stove. While drinking tea without milk, we occasionally ate stale bread with tea"

– Urmila Pawar, The Weave of My Life

Chapter III: Economic Deprivation

India's independence and Ambedkar's role in writing the new constitution offered Dalits hope of a better life in terms of economics. However, the reality that transpired was something different. Ambedkar did not foresee a dismal reality when he admonished Dalits to leave the villages, attain an education and migrate to the cities. He believed that eradicating poverty for the masses of India would be achieved by addressing their dependence on agriculture and pursuing industrialization, which would "reduce population pressure on agriculture and provide alternative occupations to tenants and landless workers" (Kumar 54). Dalits often became landless laborers, cultivating land that caste people owned and controlled, a relationship Ambedkar characterized as "economic dependence" (Kumar 45). Additionally, land, when held by Dalits, was often "actually an expression of feudal bondage in which Dalits were tied to servitude" (Kumar 54). In order to address the unequal and exploitative labor relationship existing between caste villages and Dalit colonies, Ambedkar thus advocated for a plan which involved the state redistributing cultivable land to Dalits and breaking the land monopoly of caste society.

Land reform is important to understand, since so many Dalits, including the communities analyzed in this thesis, have traditionally been engaged in agriculture, a major determinant of India's economy and a critical pathway to "financial security, social status, power and even a sense of identity" (Kumar 1). Land ownership in agrarian societies such as India is also about

respect and dignity, not only economic freedom. As a result, not possessing collaterals like land documents makes securing loans difficult for many Dalits who are then susceptible to financial exploitation by loan sharks and bonded labor.

Policies on land reform that began emerging during the 1950's emphasized social aspects including "reduction of disparities in wealth and income, elimination of exploitation, provision of security of tenure to tenants and workers, and providing equal status and opportunity to the different sections of the rural people over a period of time" (Kumar 4). The plans sought to abolish intermediaries (who would often humiliate and exploit Dalits in the process of revenue collection), impose tenancy reforms, impose ceilings on landholdings and protect Dalit land by consolidating disparate landholdings. Despite conscious efforts, however, poor implementation meant land ownership stayed unevenly distributed and skewed towards the most powerful in society, a factor influenced by caste. Fraud, collusion, suppression of landholdings and a lack of due diligence subverted change and the land reforms did not have much effect. Additionally, promises of peasant proprietorship were often violated; even where the Dalits were officially documented as the owners of a swath of land, there was a high possibility that the actual benefits were reaped by others (Kumar 4) and that their rights to freely access and enjoy their land were infringed upon by caste Hindus. In fact, Dalits who sought to secure land were often faced with "state violence or retaliation by the upper and dominant caste private actors in the form of violence or economic sanctions" (Mandal 11).

As a result of inadequate access to capital assets, many Dalits depended on wage labor in both rural and urban areas, where their earnings were dependent on level of employment and wage rate (Mandal 11). These factors together, including lack of income-earning assets, lower employment and lower wages, all contributed to a continuing trend of high incidence of poverty

amongst Dalits, despite special state-run programs aimed towards poverty alleviation. Restrictions in occupational mobility from traditional, caste-based occupations, often stemming from beliefs about uncleanliness and impurity, are evidence of this economic discrimination.

Dalit laborers were thus often subject to intense exploitation, deprivation and discrimination, and while movements geared towards political equality and socio-economic justice existed, there were still many grievances to be addressed. Various states have launched economic programs or schemes aimed at generating income, providing credit support and financial assistance and ameliorating poor conditions for Dalits since the eve of independence. Additionally, the constitution of India has prescribed several safeguards meant to uplift Dalits in terms of general status, jobs, education and representation in government, but progress still has a long way to go. The narratives analyzed in this thesis, all historically located in the twentieth century, through their expressive descriptions of what Gyanendra Pandey calls "subaltern bodies" (Pandey 177), inequitable systems of labor, poor infrastructure, and constant bouts of illness and malnourishment, well illustrate the ways in which economic deprivation often affects all aspects of Dalit lives. Beyond caste identity and gender, economic exploitation and market fundamentalism are key to the disenfranchisement of Dalit women.

Poor Infrastructure

Throughout the narratives, we are exposed to many elaborate descriptions of economic hardship, the most pointed of which are articulated by Baby Kamble, despite her own higher status within the *maharwada.* Kamble, unlike her counterparts, grows up in the *maharwada* of Veergaon with a sense of pride. Her maternal grandparents, with whom she lives, are relatively comfortable and working-class. Having served as butlers for different British officers, they

"prospered modestly under British rule" (Pandey 172). Her father is a labor contractor who earns a decent living, but he is rarely saves money and instead indulges a lot, putting the family into a precarious position financially. Nonetheless, Kamble, in growing up for eight or nine years in her maternal grandparents' home, is subject to a high degree of pampering. She writes:

> In the *maharwada* of Veergaon, I behaved as if the locality was my personal property. I called all the men, *mama,* and their wives, *mami,* and their parents, *aaja* and *aaji* [uncle and aunt, grandfather and grandmother, respectively]. All those fifteen of sixteen houses in our *maharwada* were like family to me… I used to walk in style with silver tassels down my back, silver anklets on my feet, silver chains clinking above them, my half tola nose ring, earrings and silk clothes. (Kamble 6-7)

Kamble writes of her childhood with great splendor and an awareness of her relative privilege. She depicts herself as happy, carefree, and deeply entrenched within the community, which is infused with love and comradery. Kamble, in both her childhood home as well as her marital home in Phaltan, escapes the extreme conditions of poverty under which many other Mahars live. However, in writing a socio-biography, she emphasizes the "poverty and filth that abounded in the community" (Pandey 175). In Veergaon, she lives among fifteen other households, but describes how, except for three or four of them, all of whom are related to the *Yeskar Mahar*, the head of the Mahar caste group (who receives 16 percent of any payments received for traditional services performed for higher-caste villagers), the remainder live in exceptionally poor conditions. In her words, "The rest of the houses were the poorest of the poor,

eternally stricken by poverty. The walls were nothing but stones arranged vertically with some mud coating" (Kamble 7). The *maharwada* in totality is thus a symbol of utter poverty and destitution (Kamble 80).

The use of soap and medicines is not, for a long time, shown to be widespread in the *maharwada*; instead, traditional methods of preserving cleanliness were used, as are remedies concocted through superstition. As a result, epidemics, especially cholera, plague, and tetanus, are shown to be extremely common amongst the Mahars. The lifespan of many Mahars thus amounted to a mere 30 to 40 years due to a lack of access to proper healthcare infrastructure. Viramma's accounts also describe insufficient medical care. She mentioned that the Paraiyars had several superstitious ceremonies that are performed as remedies so that a "(sick) child doesn't die" (Viramma et al. 97). However, within these ceremonies, Viramma notes that traditional methods, like "swapping the child for bran or rolling it in dirt" (Viramma et al. 97) were not always sufficient, or even helpful. In such cases, like when children had jaundice, Dalits in Viramma's community deferred to the nearest hospital in addition to giving them a homemade remedy. But since many of the Paraiyar children did not have access to consistent meals or an abundance of nutritiously rich food, they often had difficulty regaining their strength after illness, and many times died or were else permanently weakened (Viramma et al. 97).

Verifying Baby Kamble's suggestion that the *maharwada* and other Dalit colonies are particularly susceptible to epidemics, Urmila Pawar notes how periods of outbreaks of illness were common in her *maharwada* as well. She describes how when she was a girl, she lost her 22-year-old brother to typhoid. She explains, "Around this time there was a terrible epidemic of plague and cholera. Poor people were dying like flies. Medicines were scarce. People who contracted typhoid and pneumonia died too, as medicines were not available" (Pawar 22). Death

and disease are thus shown to be a particularly negative but common byproduct of poverty for the Dalits in the narratives.

In the narratives, Dalits face such severe lack that oftentimes catastrophes, including animal epidemics, are said to be useful to them. While eating dead animals is a practice that gradually stops with imposition of Ambedkarite ideals of modernization, Kamble describes how, in difficult periods, "the Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon", as this would guarantee plenty of food to last them for the next couple of months (Kamble 85). She mentions how the inside of many of the animals would be "putrid, filled with pus and infested with maggots", reeking with a foul smell. But still, the Mahars never threw away such animals, instead cutting away infected parts (Kamble 85).

This description resembles a period of distress similar to the year of drought and poverty which Viramma describes to Josiane Racine, who she lovingly refers to as *Sinamma.* She says:

> I remember a year of drought, Sinamma! Nothing sprouted. We couldn't find anything to eat. A measure of rice went up from one and a half rupees to five and a half rupees. In a house of five people, what could you do to feed everybody? We ate like cattle, groundnut cattle cakes and greenleaves" (Viramma et al. 241).

The Paraiyars at this time had little by way of food or money and would eat whatever vegetation available to stay alive, a totally destitute state. Within the narratives generally, Dalits are often shown to have to make do with very few provisions, causing many to be incredibly malnourished

and susceptible to disease. Delicacies are enjoyed very sparingly, and there are few occasions in which there is any description of abundance.

Manjula describes how her father intentionally seeks to keep her family out of the disease prone environment *malapalli* for fear of their wellbeing. However, when she is a mother and finds herself in difficult financial circumstances and dealing with the protracted absence of her husband, she moves back to housing that is affordable for her children and herself, living in a slum in Nellore known as James Garden. Manjula quickly feels an urgency to move away from the slum, however, since all three of her children contract an aggravated skin disease with terrible boils. Gidla remarks, "That James Garden was a filthy, filthy slum. The sooner they moved out, the better" (Gidla 281). Manjula and her children do eventually move out of James Garden and closer to the college where she works. She finds a room in Moolapeta, a developing neighborhood. The surroundings are so unpleasant that no caste person wants to live there, so the caste-Hindu owners agree to rent it to Manjula and her kids, despite their being Dalits. Manjula obliges out of want for better. The following is a description of the location:

> Their new living quarters were a portion of a house built to be independently accessible. Construction wasn't finished. The floor was still waiting to be plastered, and the walls were just bare bricks. There were no windows, just holes, and the doors were raw wood. They had just one small, damp room and a dark kitchen, which was also the bathroom. There were no steps in front: the floor of their rooms was level with the street. And the street was not paved, but just loose dirt. Centipedes and scorpions crawled in through the cracks between the bricks (Gidla 284).

The living conditions in Moolapeta are absolutely decrepit and unsuitable for comfortable living, infested with bugs and unfinished in virtually every aspect. The quarters are grimy and foul. However, due to financial and caste-based restrictions, Manjula is only able to secure an apartment of such conditions for her children as an alternative to the slums.

Pawar echoes this sentiment in describing living conditions for Dalits in urban settings. She describes of her elder sister's household post marriage:

> Tai's house was a one-room "apartment" in a block that consisted of such apartments in a chawl. In that small space lived her parents-in-law, three school-going brothers-in-law and two sisters-in-law. There was only one common toilet for all the families living in the chawl. Tai tried hard to cope with the problems: space, crowding, people, heaps of dirt, spit-covered walls, hoards of flies hovering all over, and the rats and mice (Pawar 124).

Tai's apartment is unfit for so many people and is highly unsanitary and uncomfortable, infested with rodents, soiled by heaps of dirt and lacking basic amenities. Tai's in-laws are also incredibly harsh towards her, directing their fury toward her often. She is thus put into both a destitute environment, one from which she has no escape (Pawar 125).

Subaltern Bodies

In addition to poor living conditions, descriptions within the narratives focus heavily on what Pandey refers to as the "marked subaltern body", presenting it as the archive of Dalit

history (Pandey 177). In describing bodies, the narratives articulate the burden born by Dalits in a visceral way. Bodies in a very literal sense shoulder the impact of the interlocked nature of oppression. Kamble writes of the Mahars:

> People would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin. You could see the deep marks where moisture had trickled down. Hair, untouched by oil, fell over their shoulders in thick tangles. They looked like rag dolls, nibbled and torn by sharp-toothed mice. The thick tangles of hair would be infested with lice and coated with lice eggs. Children looked as if they had rolled in mud, snot dripping from their noses in green gooey lines (Kamble 8)

The poor condition of the Mahars, as described by Kamble, is evident in their physical disposition – the Mahars do not have access to modes of routine cleaning, and are coated in dirt, with ashy skin, ragged clothing, and tangled hair. Furthermore, on the topic of clothing, Kamble describes: "Children up to nine years of age would look thin as sticks. When girls reached puberty, their mothers would pull out some dirty rags from a bundle and put them on their bodies to somehow cover them. That was all, by way of clothing" (Kamble 8). The Mahars have little clothing to hide their bodies and are emaciated by malnourishment, a byproduct of their economic deprivation.

Across the narratives, women in particular bear the most ardent marks of abuse and hunger. Many Dalit women in the narratives must work to keep their families fed (and are shown to be more financially responsible than their husbands) and sacrifice for their children. At the

same time, they are subject to abuses both by husbands and in-laws within the home, as well as caste men and women outside of the home, as described in the earlier chapter on gender. Pawar describes the women of the *maharwada* as they endeavor to sell their wares at the market: "With their emaciated bodies covered in rags, sticklike legs, pale, lifeless faces dripping either with sweat or rain, sunken stomachs, palms thickened with work, and feet with huge crevices …they looked like cadavers" (Pawar 3). The women are gaunt and malnourished, with tattered clothing and calloused hands and feet, a symbol of their manual labor. They are parched and sweaty, and their expressions are telling of the difficulties they endure.

However, the worst fate is arguably that of new *mothers*, many of whom are ill attended to after labor and left to endure great hunger due to the lack of proximity to affordable healthcare for delivery (besides a village midwife) and a lack of basic resources. Kamble writes,

> Many new mothers had to go hungry. They would lie down, pining for a few morsels while hunger gnawed their insides. Most women suffered this fate. Labor pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by onlooker's nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating – everything would cause the new mother's condition to worsen (Kamble 60).

Women would endure arduous pregnancies and deliveries, put into a hellish state by those attending them, who would have no formal training in midwifery, and having little nourishment for recovery. Many Dalit women who are nonliterate or located in a rural setting continually give birth until menopause, too, which in turn takes a harsh toll on their bodies. Though, as a result of

poor conditions and healthcare, hardly a few babies would survive. Kamble notes, “One in every ten lost their lives during childbirth. Infants died as well” (Kamble 61). Thus, women and children are particularly vulnerable to disease and death in the face of poor resource dispersal.

India’s health inequalities continue to impact Dalits from economically less privileged backgrounds. Even in 2022, the International Dalit Solidarity Network reports that Dalits are lagging behind more privileged groups in terms of access to healthcare and are particularly vulnerable to disease. In fact, they report that on average, “a woman from a dominant caste lives 15 years longer than a Dalit woman” and that Dalit rates of infant mortality are significantly higher than more privileged groups, at approximately 45 (deaths in 1,000) compared to 32 in general society, a result of disparities between women’s education, access to quality healthcare and household wealth between the Dalit and general population. (“India’s Health Inequality Severely Affects Dalits”) Thus, the narratives expose some truths about Dalit lives that endure to this day.

Labor Inequalities

Caste-based divisions of labor are endemic within the narratives, and unsurprisingly, Dalits are paid incredibly low wages for their work, wages that are entirely unable to sustain a comfortable standard of living. Kamble writes “a laborer could make ten paise every day. People somehow managed to survive on that meager amount so long as there was work” (Kamble 3). Kamble’s grandfather is the only real exception within the narratives regarding the trend of poorly paid Dalits**.**

As a butler for a British official, he is granted a much higher pay, of 16 rupees at a time where “a man getting a salary of sixteen rupees every month was a unique phenomenon in the

village" (Kamble 45). He is thus able to afford a more comfortable style of living relative to the other Dalits of the *maharwada.*

Overall, many Dalits in the narratives, despite varying levels of literacy and education, are given meager wages and assigned inhospitable places to live. It should be noted that there is not only a wage differential between Dalits and caste workers, but also between Dalit men and women (Agrawal 338). Viramma is a Paraiyar and is therefore involved in agricultural work, since sub castes of Dalits often have particular, caste-based occupations, but even her work is quite laborious. As a young girl, Viramma spends all her time in the paddy fields and is never paid for her work (Viramma et al. 11). If she does not oblige the demands of their employers or raise concern at their treatment, she is physically thrashed or verbally abused.

Many Dalits are subject to jobs that no one from caste society would ever even consider, laborious jobs often having to do with grime and filth, including carrying away dead animal carcasses. However, there is one occupation which is the most degrading, heinous, and inhumane of all: *manual scavenging,* the burden of which is entirely thrust onto one Dalit caste – called Pakis in *Ants among Elephants.* The Pakis are made to "carry away human shit", an unimaginably disgusting and dehumanizing task (Gidla 114). Gidla describes their work in technical terms:

> They empty the 'dry' latrines still widely used throughout India, and they do it by hand. Their tools are nothing but a small broom and a tin plate. With these, they fill their palm leaf baskets with excrement and carry it off on their heads, five, six miles to some place on the outskirts of town where they're allowed to dispose of it (Gidla 114).

Gidla mentions that in some cases, pushcarts are used, but that the traditional method of head-loading prevails. Worse still, there is no protective equipment involved in the job, not even gloves. Gidla graphically describes the terrible nature of the job: “when their baskets start to leak, the shit drips down their faces. In the rainy season, the filth runs all over the people, onto their hair, into their eyes, their noses, their mouths” (Gidla 114). The job is horrendous and filthy, never becoming easier or less insulting, and being a great risk factor to the health of all involved in it. As a result of the conditions affiliated with the job, tuberculosis and other diseases are endemic to the Pakis as well.

Pawar, in her work as a writer, meets a man named Ramesh Haralkar. He is “a man with a very handsome face, piercing eyes, thick beard, and mustache and a slender build” and has an “impressive personality” (Pawar 189). Haralkar is the leader of the manual scavengers in Mumbai and enlightens her about their plight. He expounds many details about them, a large number of them being from the Konkan region, mentioning topics such as “their comparative ratio with the workers from other regions, their addiction to alcohol, the reasons for their untimely deaths, the percentage of women scavengers, women workers and their sexual exploitation…” (Pawar 189). Haralkar opens Pawar's eyes to the real condition of the scavengers, a key moment that inspires her writing and career as an activist. More specifically, he narrates a wrenching experience of his own:

> When I was a scavenger myself, I was cleaning in a narrow corridor between two buildings, collecting the slush crawling with maggots from the drain in a basket.

> Suddenly, some woman upstairs threw a used sanitary napkin down. It dashed against my face and then fell down into the drain… my sweat trickles into my mouth… there was a funny taste on my tongue… as something else trickled into my mouth along with the sweat (Pawar 189).

This jarring and disgusting description is hard to stomach as a reader but is an experience common for the Dalits involved in manual scavenging, work revolves around unprotected exposure to bodily fluids and human fecal matter. It should be noted that nearly all workers involved in manual scavenging happen to be women (Gidla 114). Furthermore, since this line of work is a caste occupation, "wages are not true compensation but charity that may be given or withheld" (Gidla 114). As a result, many Pakis must borrow money to survive and become entrenched in large amounts of debt, stuck in a bitter cycle of extreme poverty.

While manual scavenging still persists in some rural locations, India has developed into a modern society with sewage systems. Gidla describes how, as a result of this progress, Paki men and women are now often hired as janitors and sanitation workers, instead – a move which is considered 'progress'. However, Dalit sanitation workers would often be denied, and are *still* denied (as will be explained later) protective gear and equitable wages.

The Telangana Vetti System

Notions of humiliation, debt, bonded labor and exploitation are rampant throughout the narratives, but there is one episode that is especially jarring, that is the story of Telangana in 1947, the heartland of the Nizam's kingdom of the Deccan, where the feudal *vetti* system of servitude exists at large. Under the *vetti* system, every caste has to provide some goods and

services to the *dora*, a powerful landlord, without any expectation for compensation, but Dalits suffer the worst, especially Dalit women (Gidla 42). Gidla describes that under the *vetti* system, "every (Dalit) family in every village had to give up their first male child as soon as he learned to talk and walk. They would bring him to the *dora* to work in his household as a slave until death" (Gidla 42). For Dalits this was more than mere exploitation but a form of slavery. The *dora's* fortress is shown to be a symbol of tyranny, slavery and cruelty to the Telangana peasants, a place of "torture, rape and murder" (Gidla 42) The whole village is considered possession of the *dora,* including all the Dalit women in it, as exemplified here:

> If he (the dora) called them when they were eating, they had to leave the food on their plates and come to his bed. Dalit girls were chosen at a young age to live in the house of the *dora*, where they served as concubines for him and his relatives and guests. When the *dora's* daughter got married and went to live in her husband's village, these slave girls went with her as part of her dowry like pots, pans, and other chattel (Gidla 43).

Dalit girls of young ages are thus shown to be his sexual slaves and are used at the whim of both the *dora* himself and his guests, treated quite literally like possessions, stripping them of their dignity and bodily autonomy.

Gidla writes that the *dora* system originated because of British demands to maximize revenues and cultivate cash crops, which would require large scale irrigation, servile labor, and the subsequent eviction of small peasants from their plots in order to organize large swaths of land. Thus, under a subsequent series of "so-called land reforms" (Gidla 45) encouraged by the

British, a class of landlords known as *doras* came into being, a product of the capitalist world market. The *doras* managed huge tracts of lands spread out over several villages and the small land owners evicted from the lands became their dependent laborers.

At the head of the class of landlords or *doras* was the Nizam, a "faithful ally to the British government" (Gidla 47). Gidla writes of the relationship between the Nizam and the *doras:* "His regime was their regime. Wealth from the *dora's* estates flowed into the treasury of the Nizam's government in the form of taxes. Some *doras* received their lands from the Nizam in exchange for maintaining his troops" (Gidla 43). Under the Nizam, Gidla describes that the people lost their access to basic democratic rights, including practicing their own languages and religion freely. The Nizam lived in splendor at the expenses of his subjects.

A revolutionary struggle known as the Telangana People's Armed Struggle, organized in the 1940's in part by the communist movement, eventually countered this system, but what is important here is the terrible treatment allotted to Dalits and Dalit women, in particular under this exploitative system, wherein they were the most likely to be used for bonded labor and thought of as sexual property, exploited physically and emotionally.

Living through Poverty

Throughout the narratives, there are many moments in which poverty causes the Dalits to face their difficult circumstances head on, making sacrifices to make ends meet. However, Dalits, like any other humans, have a strong sense of honor and dignity, despite the hardships they encounter. Viramma describes how, in times of desperation, she has to do unexpected things to make ends meet. Viramma and the Paraiyars of the *ceri* work for the Reddiar caste, who live in the village. The Reddiar are a non-Brahmin privileged caste, technically considered Shudras

but elevated socially by their status as rent-receiving landlords in an agrarian economy. Regarding working inside the Reddis house, Viramma says:

> When I'm asked to winnow something at his household, I drop a few grains with the bran and the black grains and I get them afterwards when I'm sweeping up. Or when we're harvesting peppers, bitter oranges or palmyra fruit, I take out what's been nibbled by insects or rats and put it to one side and when my son comes by, I give it to him to take back to the house (Viramma et al. 121).

Viramma takes leftovers soiled by insects and rodents in order to secure adequate food for the night. However, despite her socioeconomic position bringing her to this point, she has a strong sense of honor. She says of another instance, "And when it's a question of honor, people are happy to lend: just because we're poor doesn't mean we have to humiliate ourselves in front of our family-in-law!" (Viramma et al. 61), alluding to her sense of human pride and self-image, especially in the face of others. Viramma in particular, however, is not one to question the system that marginalizes her people, though she acknowledges the injustices present within it. She tends to downplay her concerns and focuses more on the small signs of progress rather than ideas of radical change like her activist counterparts. This is not to say she does not intrinsically desire more or is blind to injustice she faces. However, she is not one to actively counter the systems of oppression at play. She instead proposes what she believes are more realistic measures of concessions from the privileged castes to the Dalits. For instance, she says, "But do you think, Sinnamma, we're the age to struggle, to fight? Life is behind us now…If you really

want to fight for us, the poor, give us some money to buy some land, or share out land for us to cultivate" (Viramma et al. 182). Viramma thus has a more practical and less radical take on social change.

Throughout the narratives analyzed in this thesis, we see instances of confronting systems of oppression, but at the same time, we see how many Dalits, excluding the voices of activists, seem to have accepted a marginalized position and have internalized a notion of inferiority. Dalits are often harassed on the basis of caste and class, hearing taunts like the following, (which are shouted at Pawar and her family by the family of a rich architect who had taken her lease) "These are low-caste people! So what else can you expect from them? Look at their things! A tin cot and cheap pots and pans! The moment we saw their things, we knew what they were! Dirty, mean, uncivilized…!" (Pawar 188). These insults are heinous and pointed, meant to humiliate and denigrate one's status. Over time, such jabs, compounded by poverty and difficult circumstances, cause many Dalits to internalize a sense of shame and desperation. For example, when insulted and harassed by her caste schoolteacher, Pawar, a child at the time, tells her mother about the incident, but is unwilling to let her confront him. She says, "I very much wanted her to confront the Guruji, but I did not want her to go to the school because, frankly, I was ashamed of her sari, which now was reduced to rags, her bare legs and uncombed hair" (Pawar 57). This narrative indicates that she feels shame when comparing her mother to Guruji and has succumbed to a sense of inferiority.

Debt is also a great source of stress and shame, despite how honest a living Dalits make. Gidla writes of her grandfather, Prasanna Rao, who is a single father raising three children, "Prasanna Rao's debts, like water-soaked logs, got heavier and heavier, sinking his family deeper and deeper into poverty. Soon they could not afford two meals a day" (Gidla 34). So

overwhelming is his misery that he physically feels the weight of his debt sink him lower and lower. Nothing is enough to make ends meet despite his hard work and myriad of sacrifices. Dalit parents want desperately to experience joy and provide material things for their families. Poverty is a byproduct of caste oppression, an unfortunate and difficult reality, but Dalits know and strive for better in whatever ways they can. Debt is, however, an economic weapon used against Dalits to keep them in a certain social station, and is hard to free oneself of, especially with such limited access to avenues of upward mobility and decent pay.

It should be noted that within the narratives, there is a lot of change experienced, and attitudes are particularly fluid between generations. Viramma notes at the end of her retelling how the *ceri* has transfomed a lot. She remarks,

> In the past we worked for a quarter of a rupee a day. We were happy with little. We filled our stomach with what we found on the verges of fields or just with water, and that was enough for us. It's not like that now. Everything comes from the city: bread, tea petrol, sweets. Everything is bought with money. That's what civilization is as well: money! You can do anything with money – eat, dress, live, be a higher caste, have all the rights. Our young have understood that and that's why they want to be educated and earn lots of money" (Viramma et al. 186)

Viramma highlights the key notion that with money, one can permeate the boundaries of caste and elevate their status, as have the Reddiar by becoming powerful land owners, or the Tomban caste as well. Additionally, she alludes to the ways in which some political reforms and effects of modernization have improved the standard of living for Dalits in the village, so that the younger

generations aspire to education and are more vocal about their plight. It is important to realize, however, that economic deprivation still endures, just with lesser force or in different ways. The *ceri* still has a way to go in order for Dalits to live a life comparable to caste society, but there is great change. Viramma notes how she now uses soap, and how the markets have "combs of colors, powder, pencils for the eyes and the lips, *pottu* [forehead marking] which doesn't rub off" (Viramma et al. 187). The people of the *ceri* are learning to use these new things and adjust to the strides being made and the new ways of life being taught. The existing infrastructure changes as well, much to the dismay of the caste people who fear signs of Dalit upward mobility, since they rely on their segregation and subjugation for their own benefit. To this end, Viramma's son Anban remarks,

> The truth is that the people from the *ur* don't want us to rise up and be educated like them. Why? Because if we manage to own a bit of land tomorrow as well, then they won't be respected any more, they won't find manual labor at a cheap price, they'll have no more serfs. That's what they're afraid of!" (Viramma et al. 192).

Thus, generationally we see a shift in attitude to one that is more combative of negative social structures, as well as evidence of visible change and progress. Anban is aware of the dynamics of oppression and counters them actively in his speech. However, despite changes, Viramma and elders like her often display resistance to such attitudes for fear of losing the respect of their employers or society.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout the narratives analyzed in this thesis, while we see change and voices of critical awareness about systems of oppression, we also see the ways in which economic dependence, fueled by caste hierarchy, impacts the plight and feelings of many Dalits, influencing their health and living conditions, their physical disposition and their emotional states and aspirations. Poverty is difficult to escape and further entrenches the negative experiences caste discrimination creates, despite desire for better. All of this is further compounded by debt, notions of purity and traditional occupations, which enforce caste hierarchies. Thus, poverty and caste interact heavily, and challenge Dalit upward mobility in both rural and urban settings.

"So far we have been calling our huts, royal palaces; our poor husbands, kings; and the leftovers we got, rich dishes"

— Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke

Chapter IV: Resistance, Resilience and Joy

While the 'triple burden' has undoubtedly had a deleterious effect on the Dalit community, it would be unjust to portray Dalits simply as passive *victims* and say that their lives are cast only in shades of grey. Many studies focused on Dalit narratives often forget the critical point that whilst Dalit lives are often hard, they are not absent of joy. Throughout the four narratives analyzed in this thesis, Dalits and Dalit women, especially, are shown to be adaptable, gracious and strong. While oppressive structures stand against them, they find creative modes of resistance, by writing, organizing, protesting, having a strong sense of pride in their identity, and exhibiting patience in the face of hardship. Even where Dalit women do not actively challenge patriarchal norms and class and caste-based oppression, they show strength by finding contentment in small moments and displaying endurance in moments of difficulty. To endure and locate a sense of true joy is itself strength. The story of Dalithood emerging from the evidence supplied by the four narratives is about much more than mere suffering: it is also about resistance--directly counteracting forces of subjugation being imposed by an 'other'--and resilience, a more passive approach to withstanding adversity. These are in addition to celebration, the preservation of fond traditions and the simultaneous welcoming of change. In this final chapter, I will be shifting my focus from more dismal themes to highlighting moments in the narratives wherein Dalits assert a distinct sense of self, through writing, organizing, celebrating and simply living fully despite the obstacles.

Protest: The Act of Writing

Within their writings, both Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar take on a tone of urgency, pressing for social change through their meticulous documentation of Dalit life experiences within their respective communities. Both writers produce socio biographical memoirs, exploring their own lives as well as the lives of a multitude of others living within their own communities. These memoirs go far beyond mere self-expression or historical record making; they are critical works that seek to assert a distinct sense of Dalit selfhood and challenge the social order. These works became important parts of the Dalit Sahitya movement, which emerged as a means of asserting Dalit aesthetics and a distinct sense of selfhood and exposing the workings of caste power. It would be too much to say that these works on their own are vehicles for Dalit liberation, but they are still profound forms of intellectual resistance highlighting the stark history of stigmatization, oppression and poverty affecting Dalits and alluding to the visceral experience of what it really is like to *be* a Dalit. In particular, Urmila Pawar is the first, through her writings, to distinctly describe what it means to be a Dalit *woman.* Thus, the act of writing and documenting raw experiences with a profound social commentary is an exemplary form of resistance and activism in itself.

In explaining why she writes, Pawar notes that in observing the condition of her community, she felt a "terrible restlessness" growing inside of her, which refused to let her sit quietly. She exclaims, "My own experiences, those of my friends and other women, that of living in the village, caste discrimination, being a woman built up pressure inside me!" (Pawar 190) In bringing these universal experiences forward, despite not clearly knowing what impact her writings might have, she produces a powerful social document – one that is relatable to some, informative to others, and powerful. It is even more remarkable to know that Urmila Pawar

writes against strong odds Despite working all day in the office as a writer of Dalit literature, making a long journey home and seeking out ways to make her husband happy in order to fulfill her wifely duties, her husband Harishchandra still accuses her of being far from both an ideal wife and mother as a result of her preoccupation with writing and organizing. Precisely everything that gives her a unique identity – her writing, her education and her participation in public programs – deeply irritate her husband and fuel him with resentment (Pawar 206). Her work, and gradually her own self as a result of it, lose meaning in his eyes. He belittles her ambitions and intelligence and resents her lack of subservience, yet Urmila Pawar writes against all odds.

Baby Kamble hides her writing from her husband, writing in his absence while working in their grocery store. She says, "writing was a difficult task. I had to take great care that nobody saw me writing" (Kamble 147). She notes that while her husband was a good man, "like all the men of his time and generation, he considered a woman to be an inferior being" (Pawar 147). Harishchandra did not tolerate the idea that she had taken to writing, and in fact, Kamble writes that she used to be scared of him, and that it was for that reason precisely that she hid her writing (Kamble 147). Despite the difficulty, she still makes it her prerogative to write. Her reason has to do with her community. She says, "I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine" (Kamble 136). Thus, both Pawar and Kamble defy many odds in order to retell the experiences of their communities. The act of writing itself is a powerful mode of resistance to both patriarchal norms and the casteist societies in which they are located.

This is different from the case of Sujatha Gidla. Gidla is a Dalit Christian who grows up being shunned by caste Hindus. She is astounded when she comes across a group of Kerala

Christians with an elevated status and claiming to be Brahmins converted by St. Thomas in 52 A.D. Gidla, noting the discrepancies in the lives lived by her own family versus these other Christians, begins questioning how her own family became Christian, studying the relationships between religion and caste, caste and social status, social status and wealth and caste and wealth. She finds that her mother and uncle are an excellent resource and are highly insightful of people and social conditions. She uses a tape recorder to capture their oral narrations about their family's history as it relates to the social order in India in the backdrop of the last days of British colonial rule. Gidla's writing is a means of expounding a family history, but more specifically, is a way of articulating the life experiences of the Dalit Christian experience within a particular political moment. She, too, by narrating these experiences which would otherwise have been lost, seeks to add to a heightened sense of consciousness about Dalit livelihoods, and contribute to an emerging literature articulating and elevating the Dalit self.

Gidla writes not only because she has questions and wants to know more about her family's stories, but also because she realizes once she arrives in America at the age of twenty-six, that her stories and her family's stories, "are not stories of shame" (Gidla 5). Before that, she had always hidden her identity and experiences as a Dalit, using her high level of education to pass as a different caste in India. She mentions how across her time in many different cities in India, she could never tell her or her family's stories. She notes, "You cannot tell them about your life. It would reveal your caste. Because your life is your caste, your caste is your life" (Gidla 5). She writes once she feels empowered and encouraged to share, creating a powerful document detailing her family's social life as Dalit Christians in the middle of the twentieth century.

Kamble, Pawar and Gidla are thus examples of incredibly resilient women who articulately put forward the stories of their families and communities in order to export details of their plight to caste society. By writing, they resist.

Protest: The Content of Writing

The content of life writing itself is also a powerful means of resisting caste society. For example, throughout her writings, Kamble offers a strong narrative elevating the Dalits and questioning the foundations upon which the hierarchies oppressing them stand. While she exposes the vast difficulties endemic to the Mahars, she highlights the good qualities within them as well as their legacy of strength. She writes, "Our people in these villages lived in abject poverty. They had absolutely no power, and yet their hearts were full of kindness and love for each other" (Kamble 49); in the face of sheer difficulty, Dalits are characterized as showing great patience and are characterized by great humility and compassion. Love is never absent in their disposition towards either each other or even society at large. But they are not unaware of the injustices thrust towards them. She writes,

> We may be coarse and ignorant, yet you admit that we have been the most devoted children of Maharashtra, this land of our birth, and it is we who are the true heirs of this great land. You played with our lives and enjoyed yourselves at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything, but not the truth (Kamble 37).

She even speaks directly (though rhetorically) to the privileged caste Hindus, criticizing their unjust ways and challenging their authority. Kamble seems to adopt the rhetoric of Gandhi and Indian nationalists, who refer to Dalits as *Harijan* or children of God, referring to the idea of serving the land and clinging to truth as a mode of resisting oppression, *satyagraha.* She pointedly calls out caste Hindus ill treatment of her people, highlighting the great cruelty in their actions. She writes,

> We never rebelled against you, did we?... We dedicated ourselves to the service of the civilization and culture that was so precious to you, in spite of the fact that it was always unkind and unjust to us…Then why did you treat us with so much contempt? (Kamble 38)

Kamble questions why caste Hindus are so firm in their resolve to terrorize and abuse the Dalits, despite the latter's obliging and respectful nature. Kamble shames the privileged castes for their exploitation and utter disregard for Dalit livelihoods and dignity. By teasing out the juxtapositions in their doctrines and actions, she shakes the foundations upon which caste discrimination stand. Furthermore, she conveys the great courage of the Mahars. She writes,

> But it is because of us that the world stands. We are the foundation. Shallow water makes a lot of noise but still water runs deep! Like the ocean that covers mountains of sin under

> its huge expanse, we covered the sins of the high castes. That is why we, like the ocean, deserve the admiration of the whole world (Kamble 49)

Kamble does not let the humiliation of the privileged castes taint her image of the Mahars, instead giving them reverence and praising their great patience in the face of caste oppression. She further asserts that it is upon the labor of the Dalits that the foundation of caste society stands.

At the same time, the narratives not only articulate with a great deal of emotion the aspirations and struggles of Dalits, taking a hard stance against injustice, but they also articulate the ways in which Dalits live, create and maintain community, and access joy. Within the narratives, Dalits celebrate many moments. Pawar writes of the arrangements made in the *maharwada* and village for various religious holidays, including Dasara, a ten-day celebration of the goddess Durga's victory over a demon, as well as Diwali and the Muslim holiday, Muharram. She describes the joy of the festive atmosphere, even if such celebrations often required loans. She writes vividly:

> The huge ladus we were given, the *gudhi*, or decorated pole that Akka erected at the door, the decoration of flowers and sugar rings around the gudhi, the wonderful puranpoli Akka made, the procession of colorful *talbots* of Moharram which we watched along with the crowd, the molasses rings tied like a watch on our wrists that we licked happily, the colorful "sky lamps" we made for Diwali, sitting out late at night – all of these things

> provided a bright dimension to the drab and dull routine followed in our house (Pawar 70).

Thus, Pawar illustrates the wonderful ways in which Dalits celebrate life with color, graciousness, pomp and comradery; a bright juxtaposition to many of the negative realities of life. Dalit lives are difficult, but that is not to say Dalits are not a resilient and joyous people.

Kamble echoes this notion when talking about the month of *Ashadh,* a Hindu month corresponding to June/July in the Gregorian calendar, that marks the start of the monsoon season. She describes the joy Ashadh brings to the Mahars, "Of all the months of the year, Ashadh was their favorite month… it was a month of comfort, of sweet food! If eleven months of the year were together a horrible curse on the Mahars, Ashadh was an antidote" (Kamble 12). Despite her often serious tone, Kamble also highlights the positive moments her people share with one another. She speaks about how the entire *maharwada* looks forward to Ashadh as a month symbolizing festivity and celebration. She writes, of their rituals, "The entire village flocked to the temple with varied dishes as offerings to the goddess – fried delicacies, curd rice, bhajis cooked with choice spices and kurwadya. They also offered beautiful pieces of khun [fabric jewelry] and bangles to the goddess" (Kamble 29). The Mahars are shown to indulge joyously in celebration alongside one another.

Additionally, community is of utmost importance. Although the Dalits shown in the narratives I have analyzed have incredibly long, laborious days, they seek out the company of one another when they finish their daily responsibilities. Kamble describes of the Mahar men,

> After eating, the men, now satiated, would go to the chawdi [village meeting place] to chat and gossip. There they would tell each other stories of kings and queens, and princes and princesses. Lounging about in the chawdi, they would describe the wealth and prosperity of the kings and lose themselves in the fictitious world of their stories" (Kamble 85).

Stories detailing rich histories and luxurious fables would be told after dinner, a form of escape and enjoyment. Dalit colonies like the *ceri* in which Viramma lives are energized, full of laughter, shouting and fun. Viramma actually pities the caste Hindu children who cannot enjoy this reality and are instead secluded inside in the quiet *ur.* She narrates of two caste girls, Janaki and Minatchi: "Janaki and Minatchi never put their noses outdoors… Always shut away in their big house, the poor things! Friendship, discovering nature, Grandfather Munissami's stories – they were forbidden all of that. That's the lot of the high-born children! (Viramma et al. 13). Viramma much prefers the lives of Dalit children, who play games like hopscotch, horses, slaps and hidden hand, and who would sing and dance for hours. Even though she did not go to school, she remarks how her life was made up of "games and stories" (Viramma et al. 8). Caste children are shut inside, forbidden from doing so many activities and made to be amused by toys and expensive things.

Protest: Partaking in Movements

In addition to the writing itself being a mode of resistance, the narratives present evidence about multiple ways in which Dalits organize themselves against oppressive social

norms–from the Ambedkarite movement, to the Dalit Worker's Movements and Dalit Women's Movement.

Both Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar's communities take part in Neo-Buddhism, a religious and socio-political movement among Dalits started by B.R. Ambedkar, wherein they convert to Navayana Buddhism, a new branch of Buddhism which reinterprets Buddhist teachings to be about class struggle and social equality. They thus reject Hinduism and challenge the caste system entirely. Kamble's community is deeply moved by the movement and finds great strength in it.

Ambedkar implores the Dalits to reject degrading treatment and throw out the entire doctrine of Hinduism. He says to the Mahars, "The stone steps in front of the god's temple have been worn away by hapless people beating their heads against those steps in utter supplication. But has he ever taken mercy on you? What good has this god ever done to you?" (Kamble 64). He asks why the Dalits have been serving privileged caste communities for ages, just for them to never give them respect, instead making the Dalits clean their filth. He tells the Mahars, "Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return?" (Kamble 64). Ambedkar thus urges the Dalits to follow a new path, divorcing themselves from their connections to Hindu theology, educating their children and asserting their humanity and dignity. In doing so, he asks them to change their ways, including practicing customs that have caused caste society to scorn upon them, including eating carcasses and cleaning the filth of the village.

Ideas such as this are not met without resistance, however. Many Mahars take offense at the notion of changing their ways, saying,

> Stop teaching us this *padri* knowledge of yours. How dare you ask us to give up our custom of eating dead animals! You are asking for us to revolt against the village…Suppose we give up all this as you and your Ambedkar say, then how can we call ourselves true Mahars? (Kamble 67)

Giving up practices and ways of living is met with resistance, especially by older generations, and an even greater level of controversy is raised with suggestions of conversion. There are innumerable arguments and counterarguments about it; youth more readily latch onto new ideals, while old habits stay steadfast within the older generations. However, over time, sweeping change does occur as Dalits seek to participate in Baba's (Ambedkar) revolution aimed at liberation from caste oppression. Baba's ideas enliven a spark among the Dalits, reminding them to claim their humanity and dignity and relentlessly advocate for themselves. Kamble writes, "People began to change slowly but steadily. They began to be aware…Gradually the wind of Ambedkar's thought turned into a whirlwind" (Kamble 69). At the time, Kamble notes that everyone worked "with one voice and in one mind" (Kamble 113) allowing the community to mobilize and unite with great strength. It should be noted, however, that while this community advocated for great change in the 1940's under B.R. Ambedkar, Kamble notes how at the conclusion of her writing, the community, while large, becomes "ineffective and feeble" (Kamble 113). She notes how people have broken the union of the community to pursue selfish

needs; it is rare that anyone agrees. The organizing strength of the Mahars dissipates without strong leadership.

Pawar echoes this. While she mentions how in the end, while no one in the village is as poor or behind as they once were, and that younger women have many more privileges, even with Buddhism, superstition returns with a vengeance (Pawar 241). Kamble notes, however, that despite this, it is Ambedkar who inspires her to be an advocate, beginning her struggle through writing (Kamble 135).

Before Ambedkar, great humiliations and injustices towards Dalits are shown to commonplace in Pawar and Kamble's narratives. Pawar describes a ritual in her village wherein an upper-caste man inflicts a large wound on the back of Mahar, and the wife of the Mahar has to cover the wound with a cloth and go walking around howling. However, as the movement towards Dalit liberation takes effect, one hears more and more retaliation against such customs. For example, her sister's husband, aware of how denigrating this practice is, implores, "You have to resist this custom! … This ritual is symbolic of some old sacrificial rites! The Mahar symbolizes the animal sacrificed! I tell you, get converted then this will automatically stop." (Pawar 70) Thus, conversion and the burgeoning social movement are shown to offer great hope and confidence to the Dalits to confront injustice head on.

Furthermore, promise of social elevation in light of conversion permeates the two narratives and heightens this sense of hope. For example, Pawar's mother throws her beloved idols away to welcome in Buddhist theology with the hope of a better future as promised by Ambedkar (Pawar 92). Additionally, traditional invocations post-conversion are sung with

entirely new words, like the following chant challenging Hindu theology and amplifying conviction for an equitable Buddha.

O ye Gods,

Yes that's right, Maharaja [title of the Hindu god being addressed],

Go back to your own place.

Yes, that's right, Maharaja,

You never did any good to us.

Yes, that's right, Maharaja,

Now our Lord Buddha has come.

Yes, that's right, Maharaja.

Now we aren't scared of anyone.

(Pawar 93)

Since the 'Lord Buddha has come' the Mahars are no longer scared of anyone, a powerful sentiment.

Beyond mass conversion to Buddhism, other movements, including Dalit worker's movements, further help Dalits organize and lead their lives with dignity. Gidla mentions how

the Mandapadu Malas are poor, landless agricultural laborers, but how they refuse to suffer passively. In fact, many become involved in politics and are attracted to the independence movement, some supporting the Congress Party and others the Communist party (Gidla 24). Some, like Ambedkar, worry that driving the British out will give caste Hindus even more power. Some, in contrast, think the solution to everything is the nationalist cause. Others advocate for the entire social system to be overturned. But most everyone seems to have an opinion. Manjula's own brother Satyam becomes the leader of the armed Naxalite revolt in Warangal, part of the People's War Group, a radical Maoist movement and splinter group of the Communist Party of India (Gidla 258).

Women like Urmila Pawar also organize, particularly in order to safeguard rights for Dalit women that neither the Dalit Movement nor Women's Rights Movements address. The women in the Dalit Women's Movement, a burgeoning movement founded in the 1980's that fractures over time, still have a strong impact. Pawar writes, "The women in the movement left an indelible print on history through their indefatigable work. They had been harassed by their families and by people at home and outside; they had been subjected to harsh words, were berated and at times badly beaten up by their husbands" (Pawar 247). While the movement does not last, the women shake the status quo by organizing and advocating relentlessly for themselves and their community, bringing them out of the home and into the public sphere as activists. Pawar herself mainly writes stories and publishes them, portraying experiences of caste discrimination and the burdens of patriarchy alongside other magazine writers who similarly write about the Dalit cause and partake in literary conferences. Pawar also meets other women's groups, participating in discussions on women's liberation, running women's support centers and spreading awareness about women's issues. Pawar and her comrades, seeing a need for an

intersectional organization which addresses both caste and gender, float a *Dalit Mahila Sahita Sanghatana* (Dalit women's literary organization), combining the strength of the Phule-Ambedkarite philosophy with feminist theory (Pawar 222). This gradually becomes just a Dalit women's organization, the first of its kind (though the organization disintegrates quickly due to lack of organizing experience). Thus, we see how Pawar and other Dalit women are incredibly inclined towards forming a powerful and inclusive movement.

Throughout three of the four narratives, through various movements, we see staunch action taken towards political change. It is important to note that while many Dalits actively do seek reform, not all do and not all are equipped to do so. Such is the case of Viramma.

The Case of *Viramma:* Accessing Dalit Joy

As a non-literate woman and unapologetic Hindu, Viramma does not attack oppression, nor does she, through writing, seek to impact any change in thought since hers is an oral history. She does not seek out a retelling of her life but is approached by Josiane Viramma et al. for an ethnographic project. While occasionally her ideas protest norms and hegemonic ideals, her actions are largely reconciliatory survival strategies and silent protests. *Viramma* is a text which, instead of attacking the social system, attempts to describe, in a very raw and honest way, the way a Dalit woman lives and thinks, tapping deeply into mythology, tradition and value systems. In doing so, Viramma the narrator presents means of preserving tradition, holding onto hope and finding joy in a cruel system.

Viramma's accounts are the most lighthearted of the narratives analyzed in this thesis, despite the great hardship present within them. She recognizes the suffering of her community but opts to find acceptance and joy in the way things are. She says, "It's good people want us to

be raised up, but it's better if we stay in our place" (Viramma et al. 191). Unlike her activist counterparts, she does not see utility in fighting the system. Instead she opts to simply not dwell on hardship. She says, "Disappointment or misfortune don't last long among us, the poor; we can't live if we brood on them the whole time" (Viramma et al. 4).

Viramma is quite different from her counterparts. She stays a devout Hindu, for example, whereas many Mahars across Maharashtra for example, accept Ambedkarite ideals of conversion and shun Hindu theology. She indulges in Hindu tradition, as well as various beliefs derived from folktales and notions passed down many generations. Kamble explains this phenomenon well. She writes how, while Hindu philosophy had in effect, discarded Dalits "as dirt" and "thrown (Dalits) into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village" … Hindu rites and rituals remained dearest to many Dalits' hearts" (Kamble 18). Many Hindus like Viramma see these rituals as an outlet for their souls, a means of finding solace from terrible times. They pray to Hindu Gods and Goddesses for deliverance from suffering (Kamble 18) and subscribe to traditional beliefs as a means for explaining misfortune or oppression.

Overall, Viramma portrays her life in terms very differently from Kamble, Pawar, or Gidla. Instead of capturing her childhood as difficult in any sense, she says, despite the deprivation she faced, "My childhood passed as if I was living in the kingdom of the gods on earth. Of course, if I compare it to my daughter Sundari's I'm sure it was a little short; we didn't go to school when I was a kid. But I'll always have happy memories of my years in Velpakkam" (Viramma et al. 4). She is content with her experiences and does not dwell on any memory of lack. She romanticizes her years of playfulness and being carefree, reflecting on them fondly.

Additionally, she operates within an entrenched, patriarchal worldview, a byproduct of her upbringing. She herself articulates, “What’s more important for us women than children? If we don’t draw anything out of our womb, what’s the use of being a woman? (Viramma et al. 104). However, it should be noted that her beliefs come from notions of respectability passed down to her, as exemplified here, when she says, “That’s what life is like for a woman without children: you’re nothing any more. You’re not respected any more” (Viramma et al. 84). Viramma believes a woman should be discreet, obliging, affectionate and complacent; such is femininity.

Viramma also believes that a Paraiyar is a Paraiyar by divine order, and that one born into a ‘lowly’ caste should not seek to be elevated in status or treatment, accepting dominant-caste, traditional renderings of the caste system. Viramma, as we see across the previous chapters, in the face of child marriage, sexual harassment, staunch patriarchy and deeply riddled exploitation and caste oppression maintains the attitude that such is the way life is, the order of the world, and thus never seeks to change it. She internalizes her own oppression; Racine notes, she is “afraid of the spread of new ideas and the politicization of the youth, and nervous about losing the protection of her master” (Viramma et al. 311). The protection of the Reddiar is more important than any political promises of Dalit activist groups, even to the point in which she justifies her own abuse. Her son, Anban, is progressive in his values for the abolishment of caste and for an equal society and is the benefactor of many of the economic strides made by the *ceri,* evidence of the differing opinions towards caste hierarchies between generations. However, Viramma still lectures him to keep his opinions within limits:

> If the master who employs you wants to hit you, bend down and let it happen. Seeing your attitude his heart will melt and he'll let his arm drop. But if you rebel saying, "So, how can you raise your arm against me just because we're a different caste? How can you hit me?" If you answer back, his anger will only grow and he'll tell you, "It's the party dogs who've made you so arrogant!" (Viramma et al. 192).

Viramma avoids conflict with the Reddiar and has a fundamental belief that "in spite of everything, the Reddiar has a good heart" (Viramma et al. 189). She cares for maintaining the original order of things, even if that disadvantages her, and practices great patience. She assumes that the best form of protest is modeling truly empathetic and obliging behavior and relying on the Reddiar's morality to prevent further abuse. Viramma finds meaning in the framework of life surrounding her, even if it limits her own liberation. She cannot conceive of a reality in which the order of things is overthrown. Other Dalits, including her son, are shown to be more direct in challenging existing orders of caste oppression.

Viramma takes life as a set of experiences, countering negativity with a sense of acceptance and good humor. For example, Dalits are often compared to crows in a derogatory manner; Viramma reclaims the term, making it positive. She says, "It's not for nothing that people say that Pariahs are like crows, children and grown-ups alike. It's not just the color. Like crows, we're always in a group. Like crows, we never eat alone. When a crow finds something, he calls his friends to come and share it with him; it's the same with us" (Viramma et al. 5). She highlights the comradery of the Dalits, their proclivity to share and be generous and benign, despite the term being used to jab at them. She thus sees things in a particularly positive light.

However, despite following this type of logic, Viramma is also candid in her reading of the privileged castes. While she addresses them with great respect and does not question nor try to transgress social hierarchy, she holds everyone to a moral standard. She says, “Just because they're of a higher caste doesn’t mean that they know how to live a better life. They can behave like animals as well” (Viramma et al. 40). She is judicious, however, in her response to this awareness, and chooses to not retaliate in the face of perceived inequalities.

Even when it comes to difficult and ill paid labor, Viramma finds positives. She describes her work in the paddy field as arduous, mentioning how it pains her knees and is dirty and tiring. However, she also highlights the enjoyment she experiences while working, noting, “It’s so much work, the paddy field! We used to sing away the hours and forget the tiredness and the pain in our backs… we used to tell each other funny stories as well and the gossips’ tongues would wag away in the paddy fields” (Viramma et al. 11). She focuses gleefully on the gossip spilled, humorous tales shared, and songs sung while laboring. She says, “When we break into this song at work we don’t feel tired or the pains in our knees or our hands in the mud or anything! And what's more, the work goes quickly! (Viramma et al. 201). The Paraiyar do not sing when the Reddiar is around, working in silence in respect of him. But when he goes off to eat or attend to other things, they resume, enjoying each other's presence, despite the nature of the job, being out in the sun, hollowed out by hunger. They endure by singing, and find joy in their comradery, a great mark of resilience. Pawar similarly highlights how working women would group together and make the most of their tasks, how they would “talk freely, without any restraint, in a language vivid and robust, full of various cadences, tones and rhythms that evoked many colors and smells of things from different places” (Pawar 3). Thus, Dalit women like Viramma may obligingly complete their tasks, but make them enjoyable to themselves.

Viramma also talks often about celebration, most remarkably commenting on the eighteen-day festival of the goddess Draupadi, the biggest festival in the village. The people of the *ceri* and the *ur* both observe this holiday; in fact, during Draupadi, the Paraiyah's orchestra is at the forefront of the celebrations, leading the processions alongside the temple's orchestra. Thus, during the festival, Dalits from the *ceri* are directly in contact with the people of the *ur,* establishing their joyous and overt presence through music in honor of the goddess. Viramma describes, "Our musicians are always at the front: they're the ones who clear the way. Their drums ring out very loud, para para para" (Viramma et al. 229). The festival includes vivacious theater performances, dancers, firecrackers and fireworks, as well. Women from the *ceri* put on clean saris, weave their braids with fresh flowers and have a *pottu* on their foreheads to attend. They even go to the fair in the village, which attracts people from all over, including the state of Andhra, cities of Madras and Pondicherry as well as nearby villages, enjoying merry-go-rounds, tea, sweet delicacies and other offerings made by stallholders. In worshipping Draupadi, the castes in many ways come together (although different castes have different roles), and the Dalits of the *ceri* enjoy eighteen days of festivities amongst the people of the *ur*.

Throughout her narrative, Viramma takes a starkly different tone than her counterparts, and in doing so she gives us a new perspective of how a woman whose life is dictated by certain social realities copes and finds joy. In her community, even deaths are celebrated. Funerals too are commemorated with music or laments. In fact, "Burials are even more cheerful than marriages" (Viramma et al. 137). Life is in no way dull. Viramma mentions how, on an auspicious day in the month of Maci, where the Paraiyar in Viramma's community would worship their god Periyandavan, there would be a celebration and the sacrifice of a pig. During that time, "The *ceri* stopped looking anything like the picture of filth that the people from the *ur*

make it out to be and people walking past on the road said, 'Hum! There's a celebration in the *ceri.* That smells good!" (Viramma et al. 174) Viramma takes great pride in the preparations made in the *ceri,* including a great feast of delicacies, and mentions how she and her friends would put their hair up in a bun and beautify themselves, looking "as beautiful as for (their) wedding day" (Viramma et al. 177). She thus shows her pride towards her traditions and her community. Pongal is everybody's celebration. Instead of working, everyone cooks together. Even the men and children are there, chatting, playing and watching the women cook, while the women themselves, "giggled and chattered away without stopping" (Viramma et al. 174).

Viramma's perceptions of the social situation and developments made for the elevation of Dalits are quite positive, too. She says of the government and communist party, "The government is all for us poor and especially the Pariahs! We've got lots of facilities now!" (Viramma et al. 124). Viramma is limited in her grasp of politics in comparison to her husband, Manikkam, who is keener to criticize the privileged castes and government for not doing enough. Such may be the product of her illiteracy or old age, or simply her own perception of things, but she is not evidently discontent or motivated to fight the status quo. One thing we do know is that Viramma is seemingly content with her life and the ways her people have progressed. This is made evident in the end of her recount, as she comments:

> Today, we Pariahs are becoming civilized. There's more people as well than there used to be, more poor, and they are making demands now. For my part, I work for a house which carries a lot of weight and everyone is well off. Thanks to their *dharma*, I live well too.

> My children are married. I've got grandchildren. I don't go without anything. I live without starving, Sinnamma (Viramma et al. 281).

Viramma, in her own reflections, has fulfilled her duties in life, as a wife, mother and community member, and she is happy. She is no victim, and nor does she ask, by retelling her accounts of her life for pity of any kind. She is a Paraiyar, and she is very proud. Thus, Viramma offers resilience in a new light. Viramma's resilience, like that of many non-literate Dalits, is characterized by courage, optimism and by the ceaseless pursuit of joy and humor. Racine notes, "Viramma lives out her oppression like the majority: the harshness of existence does not preclude release through family, hope, the intact faculties of laughter, song and the imagination" (Viramma et al. 310). Viramma offers a perspective on what it is like to be subjugated but still live a life of richness and strength despite the hardships.

Concluding Remarks

When we look at our four narratives together, we learn that resilience takes many forms, and that the experience of Dalithood, particularly for women, is one that includes enduring hope and great courage. Dalit women like Pawar and Kamble work against all odds to elevate the plight of the Dalit community; writing itself is a form of resilience. Sujatha Gidla similarly seeks to assert a distinct sense of Dalit pride and selfhood, whilst also narrating the many injustices faced by her own community. The communities they describe are alive with resistance movements as well as themes of unity. Through the narratives, most markedly Viramma, we also learn about Dalit joy – a theme often lost in discourses focused deeply on the ways in which Dalits experience brutality. Joy is a choice that can be made despite a lack of positive caste and

economic circumstances, and Dalits naturally gravitate towards it often, indulging in storytelling, music, festivities, jokes and community engagement. Through community, Dalits in the narratives find solidarity, strength, and the ability to keep on, a perspective that is sometimes lost in Dalit memoirs detailing Dalit communities' experiences with oppression.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, I have analyzed narratives that meticulously detail the lives of several Dalit women and their communities in the latter half of the twentieth century, identifying similarities in their plights. I focused on expounding the ways in which caste discrimination, patriarchy and economic deprivation interact to triply oppress Dalit women.

However, I wanted to end by shedding light on moments of resilience exemplified by the Dalit community in the narratives. While Dalits, especially Dalit women, are shown to be deeply impacted by structures of oppression and a history of prejudice, they also are shown to find dynamic ways to resist, assert a sense of selfhood and celebrate their lives and traditions. Whether or not they are active or passive in advocating for socio-political change, Viramma, Urmila Pawar, Sujatha Gidla and Baby Kamble all exemplify courage and candor. While my work only focuses on four accounts and thus is limited in its generalizability, the accounts are raw and moving. By better understanding Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Viramma and both Sujatha Gidla and her mother Manjula, we are able to start to find a window into what it *feels* like to be a Dalit woman during this time in an incredibly visceral way, wrangling with strife, anguish, resilience, happiness and pride all at once.

This study is limited as it only utilizes four perspectives over a limited timeframe, and the insight I have attained cannot be expected to represent the greater Dalit female community in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, in analyzing perspectives from literate and non-literate, activist and non-activist women who identify with Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity and who are located across both rural villages and urban cities in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh,

Telangana and Tamil Nadu, I have been able to identify many cross-cutting themes across differences.

Comparing the narratives alongside one another has exposed the ways in which caste discrimination manifests through the dissemination of negative perceptions of Dalits by caste society, and through prejudiced speech and discriminatory spatial organization. The narratives also expose the toils involved in upholding duties as a Dalit woman, specifically, detailing the ways in which Dalit women often wrangle with patriarchy, domestic violence, and mistreatment by in-laws within the home, as well as sexual harassment outside of the home. The narratives together also echo similar sentiments about the lack of equal opportunity, poor healthcare infrastructure and episodes of disease and death that often plague Dalit communities, and the ways in which many Dalit bodies physically bear marks of oppression. The narratives show the collective effect of such discrimination on the Dalit perception of self. These are all very difficult realities, and they often occur in tandem. They may have been overgeneralized within the narratives, or may be in ways, unrepresentative of the communities mentioned. However, for the purpose of this study, I have accepted them as testimonies that shed insight into Dalit women's lives.

In researching existing literature for this study, I noted how conceptions of the 'triple burden' and of Dalit suffering are widespread. My work is modeled off of a study that similarly does a comparative analysis of Dalit feminist literature, a fifteen page study addressing the sociological significance of Dalit Women's Life Narratives by Bhushan Sharma and Anurag Kumar titled, "Learning from 'the Outsider Within': The Sociological Significance of Dalit Women's Life Narratives", which compared Bama's *Sangati*, Urmila Pawar's *Weave of my Life* and Baby Kamble's *Prisons We Broke* in light of the 'triple burden'. However, I felt that there

was so much more that needed to be said about the specificity of the triple burden and the way it manifests across all aspects of life, as well as about Dalit modes of resilience. Thus, I chose to to use the well-known *Weave of my Life* and *Prisons We Broke* alongside the lesser discussed *Ants Among Elephants* and *Viramma* in my analysis. I used *Ants Among Elephants* to introduce the Dalit Christian perspective and the critical perspective of Dalit peasants influenced by the Communist uprisings happening in Telangana at the time of Indian independence. *Ants Among Elephants,* like *Weave of my Life,* also specifically details Dalit women's experiences, and both cut across the binary of the rural and urban. I chose *Viramma* to bring in the perspective of a woman who is a non-literate, proudly Hindu Dalit woman, and who is not an activist and does not attack systems of oppression; rather, her oral narratives provide a glimpse into how hardship is balanced with joy in many Dalit communities where access to education and upward mobility is limited. These perspectives mesh well with the activist perspectives of Kamble and Pawar, who both convert to Buddhism and are located in Maharashtra.

This thesis is the first analysis of these four particular accounts considered together, shedding light on their many similarities in light of the 'triple burden'. My work is unique for the ways in which it seeks to cut across so many divisions – of the rural and urban, of various subcastes, of moments in time, and of non-literate and literate experiences – and for the way in which it endeavors to create a narrative highlighting unity of experience and a limited but powerful insight about what many Dalit women might have experienced during this time. It is one thing to say that a class of people is oppressed, but it is quite another to let them speak for themselves about their own experiences in a qualitative way, wherein their struggles are captured with sensitivity and emotion, rather than mere statistics or an underlying political motive. I wanted my work to read like the narratives themselves. I thus sought to preserve the words and

ideas of the women narrators as much as possible while organizing them in relation to one another.

Finally, my highlighting possibilities of Dalit *joy* is unusual in Dalit literature and academic writing of Dalit lives (Sharma and Kumar come the closest, including a section on endurance and resilience in their work, but their discussion is limited to just one page). Instead, we mostly hear of very valid Dalit 'struggles' juxtaposed with Dalit 'resistance' – but what about the very human, very visceral ways in which the Dalit finds contentment? I dedicate an entire chapter to document not only how Dalit women write and resist but also chat and gossip about great fables, lose themselves in the world of fictitious stories, dance together, sing, and celebrate life despite the odds. These are the stories I have most loved learning about and would love to continue pursuing in the future. I enjoyed experiencing a full spectrum of emotions within the four narratives, but going forward, if I have the opportunity, I would love to conduct ethnographic research to better understand the ways in which Dalit women, especially non-literate Dalit women, access joy within their distinct social contexts.

Contemporary Caste Discrimination

While the narratives analyzed in this thesis were written in the last half of the twentieth century, many of the themes I analyze can be observed today. I write in 2022, as a new wave of Hindu nationalism has taken root in India under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP is a right-wing offshoot of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS., a militant organization built upon notions of Hindu supremacy. It began rising to power and making strides in elections in the 1990's and has been gaining influence steadily since. Under the BJP, a Hindu nationalism reliant on the idea of *samajik samrasta* (social

harmony) now exists in a nation riven by unrelenting and drastic inequalities and which seeks to hide the inevitable hierarchies present within it in the name of religious utopianism (Mannathukkaren 1). There is no imperative of reform and no conception of equal citizenship or democracy in such a regime, and as a result, many of the very issues explored within the narratives between the 1940's and turn of the century persist, including sexual exploitation and violence towards Dalit women, manual scavenging, and caste-based discrimination in schools and offices.

While strides have been made for Dalit women, there are still many atrocious cases of violence against them reported and circulated in the news and social media, sparking protest amongst government opposition groups, Dalit activist groups and gender-rights activists. Just in August 2021, a variety of news outlets including the *New York Times* covered a story involving the rape and murder of an unnamed nine-year-old Dalit girl in Delhi. The child was raped and killed by four men, and men at the site cremated her body before her father could even reach, destroying any evidence of her rape (though her mother cites signs of serious abuse). She described the state of her daughter's body when she saw her:

> Her hands were bruised, the skin on one hand was peeling off. Her lips were blue and black. I opened her mouth a bit, her teeth were getting blue and black. Her eyes were shut, her hair spread, her clothes were wet. She was lying on the bench inside the crematory (Mashal and Raj 1).

Among the four male perpetrators was the crematory's head priest. The parents accuse the police "of not stopping the men from destroying potential evidence, and then… pressuring them to file only a complaint that echoed the priest's version of what happened — that the child had been electrocuted after stepping on a wire" (Mashal and Raj 1). Family allegations of negligence and mistreatment were entirely dismissed. The parents also reported that when they were taken into police headquarters "they were kept in separate rooms, beaten and intimidated by an informer for the police, who… told them to accept the account that the child had died of electrocution and not to mention rape" (Mashal and Raj 1). Violence against women and subsequent lack of proper investigation are common in India, but this is especially so for Dalit women and girls, who are more vulnerable to such heinous acts and more disenfranchised within the justice system.

Similarly, issues of human rights related to Dalit labor and sanitation work as described by Urmila Pawar and Sujatha Gidla persist today. For example, manual scavenging endures, and the degrading and discriminatory practice is still a job taken up mostly by Dalits. According to Census data from 2011, there were still twenty six lakh dry latrines, hinting at the notion that there are many manual scavengers currently employed; but as of 2017, "only 13,384 manual scavengers had been identified by the government," (Kumar and Srivastava) evidence of numerical discrepancies in reporting manual scavengers. Interestingly, the government, particularly the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment denies the existence of *any* insanitary latrines, and concludes that manual scavenging no longer exists as a profession (Khan and Tasneem). The Ministry reports that any identified manual scavengers have received "One-Time Cash Assistance (OTCA) of Rest. 40,000 per head amounting to Rest. 232.39 crore as of March 2021"; but only "only 2.7% and 31.3% of total identified manual scavengers have

received the capital subsidy and skill development training respectively" (Khan and Tasneem), exemplifying a lack of mobilization where there was promise to rehabilitate all people engaged in the practice. The 2013 enactment of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act, which prohibits insanitary latrines, manual scavenging and hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks has been extended periodically but little real progress is being made. Despite the fact that manual scavenging is recognized by India as a violation of international human rights law, many Dalits are involved in the practice and are denied regular wages and threatened with violence or eviction if they refuse their work. Others who work in sewer work, which is not a violation of human rights, are not given adequate protective gear and enter the sewers without any protection, leading to deaths by suffocation and toxic fumes as well as infectious disease. In fact, just eighteen hours prior to my writing this, three contractual laborers died of suffocation while cleaning a ten-foot-deep underground sewage tank in Maharashtra ("The Wire") News reports like this come out frequently, evidence of the need for reform.

In addition to discriminatory work policies, caste discrimination is also rampant in higher education, despite attempts to elevate and better represent Dalits in schools and public offices via reservation and similar policies. According to Jenny Rowena, an English professor at Delhi University and a contributor to a YouTube channel which documents Dalit struggles, "Caste discrimination is very prevalent on campuses ... classrooms have become terrible spaces" (Nagaraj 1). Many Dalit students are failed in assessments, questioned about their abilities, or refused supervision by advisors in post-graduate studies. As a result, many Dalits facing humiliation and caste-based discrimination by students and administrators alike skip classes or drop out together. This discrimination is explored by Gidla, who tells of educational

discrimination that Manjula faces, and Urmila Pawar, whose son takes his life as a result of the harassment rampant in the education system. Intake quotas derived from reservation also fuel resentment. C. Lakshmanan, a convener of the Dalit Intellectual Collective and professor of political science remarks, “Students coming in through reservation are seen as undeserving by their urban upper-class peers and teachers, who largely come from the same elite space” (Nagaraj 1). There is a lot of anger against Dalits for being beneficiaries of this system, since university placements are already cutthroat and full of intense competition; as a result, Dalit students and their abilities are often mocked. This harassment and the constant threat of defamation and expulsion has led many Dalit students to commit suicide, as there is also very little support available on campus to Dalit students who complain about such intensely discomforting situations.

The tragic death of Dalit PhD student Rohith Chakravarti Vermula in 2016, who faced systemic discrimination at the University of Hyderabad, is evidence of this. In 2015, the University stopped paying him his fellowship after he was found “raising issues under the banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA)” which impeded his ability to afford his academic and living expenditures (Sahoo 42). The University vehemently denied such charges despite hunger protests by Vermula and other students, who faced similar issues with the University. Vermula also experienced unequal treatment throughout his entire lifetime. In his own words, he gave up his battle because he realized that,

> The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing

> made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living (Mondal).

Rohit's death is testament to the ways in which caste endures and takes a painful toll on countless Dalit individuals, especially within Indian higher education.

Nowadays, these negative, prejudiced caste attitudes are often exported into the culture of the Indian diaspora, too. This was exemplified when casteist attitudes and prejudices were shown to be exported and used as a way for individuals from the subcontinent to discriminate against fellow Dalit employees in American tech companies, including Cisco in 2018, when a Dalit engineer cited severe discrimination by two caste supervisors. The U.S. based Dalit advocacy group, Equality Labs, announced that since this case was made public, "more than 250 tech workers had come forward in the wake of the Cisco suit to report incidents of caste-based harassment" (Rai 1). Thus, some graduates from elite institutions in India where such attitudes are rampant perpetuate prejudice even outside of the subcontinent, making caste an even more entrenched and inescapable reality.

Currently, political parties tend to listen to Dalit needs and complaints of discrimination in the face of upcoming elections. The B.J.P. has sought to absorb Dalit majorities under a Hindutva umbrella, needing their votes for political gains (Pankaj 1). However, in this electoral strategy, the promised share of power does not materialize. Rather, Dalit poverty, caste violence, discrimination and denial of dignity has only increased within the BJP's Hindutva project. Today, Dalits face growing crime and violence as a result of their caste identities, especially

women, and also face a denial of power-sharing due to a deep-set apathy by the B.J.P. to Dalit issues (Pankaj 1).

Dalit Women Today

The plight of Dalit women at this moment, specifically, is still more complex than what Dalits rights movements and women's movements often imagine, as the latter often fail to explicitly address how caste and gender interact. As Pawar observed in the time period she addressed, and this continues today, Dalit organizations often fail to narrow their focus on the realities specific to Dalit women. The Indian feminist movement also often treats caste like class, prescribing it similar solutions, and failing to take into consideration the ways in which caste directly affects Dalit women's health status, education levels, and economic performance. It thus fails to address many of the central questions that are crucial for Dalit women. In fact, quoting scholars researchers on equity, economics and women's experiences Sabharwal and Sonalkar,

> Upper-caste feminists have often refused to recognize caste as a form of social privilege and capital that enables social mobility and choice. Rather than seeing caste as having its own independent identity, many feminists have seen caste… as a socioeconomic category instead of an aspect of religious conceptions of self and society that reproduce structural inequality (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 49).

The Dalit Women's Movement today has burgeoned, however, and is organized around specific social needs, addressing patriarchy and caste oppression, improving access to avenues for

political participation and countering impunity for violence towards Dalit women. It acknowledges that lack of access to consistent sources of employment, caste disparity in wage earnings, low literacy rate and high drop-out rate from school, high incidence of poverty, malnutrition and subpar access to maternal care all continue to make life difficult for Dalit women, even as of 2015 (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 53-60) despite relative progress being made since the time the narratives analyzed in this thesis were written. Professors Sabharwal and Sonalkar powerfully assert, "Dalit women are at the bottom of the economic and social structures characterized by inequality on the basis of caste and gender" (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 61); as a result, they face high instance of social exclusion and discrimination, making them more vulnerable to deprivation. Their multiple marginalized identities make their social gains uneven in comparison to Dalit men and caste women, and there is, as a result, "a slow rate of improvement in the human development indicators for Dalit women as compared to for the rest of the population" (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 72).

The four women whose discourse I analyze in this thesis are writing within a specific framework of time (from the late 1940's to roughly the 1990's). However, Sabharwal and Sonalkar identify, through their analyses of official data sets and several primary studies in the labor market and on reproductive health, similar issues facing Dalit women in the twenty first century. Dalit women still are deeply affected by the 'triple burden' despite greater access to education, more organization on the grassroots and policy levels, greater relative financial autonomy, and greater awareness of their plight as promoted by the internet and social media. While there are more women parliamentarians from Dalit backgrounds now, they are underrepresented in comparison to Dalit men and caste women (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 61).

This gives Dalit women a far more limited sense of agency in determining better outcomes for themselves, as political participation is an important representative instrument.

Final Thoughts

Progress has surely been made since the turn of the century thanks to the activity of Dalit activist and civil society groups, but there is much work to be done by wider society in order to produce structural change and help Dalits to attain true equality within all caste-affected countries in South Asia and its diasporas. Dalit women, as I have shown, endure a great number of injustices, since South Asian cultures are also plagued by the burden of patriarchal values, regardless of religion or economic status. It is thus critical to focus on Dalit testimonies, learn their histories, and understand their plight. Just because caste discrimination has been formally outlawed does not mean caste oppression ceases to exist. Caste matters, especially when some 260 million Dalit individuals are impacted by it. Both caste discrimination and patriarchy are alive and well, even when they do not always directly meet the eye in the face of relative social progress. Only when we realize this, will we be able to address prejudice and injustice, look inwards to our own contributions in perpetuating it, and do something about it. Fixing this problem is not on Dalits. It is on everyone, every person and institution, who is responsible for, complacent to, and a beneficiary of such aggressive systems of marginalization and prejudice. And we must not forget that in reconsidering caste and the way it shapes society, we must also think hard about patriarchy, poverty and the ways in which all three are interconnected. We must not forget about Dalit women.

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