



Urmila Pawar's 'Aaydan': A Prototype of Dalit Women

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Abstract: *Dalit autobiographies have become very popular in Marathi literature. Dalit literature is gaining a pan Indian status. Though Urmila Pawar writes of her memories in this memoir, it reflects Dalit's family. The lifestyle, circumstances she faces and experiences are not uncommon. Every episode she narrates in the memoir unfolds the common Dalit community experiences in every village of India. This article tries to look the Dalit women and their experiences in their daily routines. It also deals with the harmonious relations the Dalit women maintain with other women, the nature of love they show towards each other and the role of women in Dalit families.*

Key words : *Dalit woman, Defiance, Harmony, Equality, Satyasodhak movement*

The original title of Urmila Pawar's memoir is *Aaydan*, a word from the local dialect spoken in the villages of Konkan region. In English it is translated as *The Wave of My Life: a Dalit woman's memoir* by Maya Pandit.. *Aaydan* is a generic term that refers to all things made from bamboo, *awata* is another word. In the Konkan region, it was the Mahar caste that undertook this task. Nobody knows why. Even today, the practice is still prevalent. The other meanings of *Aaydan* are utensil and weapon.

Pawar tries to correlate the weaving of baskets and her writing in this memoir. She says, "My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us."¹

The memoir covers the time span from 1947 to the end of the century. Pawar's memoir takes us back to her childhood memories, through her school

and college days in the town of Ratnagiri, to her life after marriage, in Mumbai where she encounters a feminist group and later how she becomes a writer and organizer of Dalit woman. The lives of different members of her family, her husband's family, her neighbours and classmates, are woven together in a narrative that gradually reveals different aspects of everyday life of Dalits and the manifold ways in which caste asserts itself and grinds them down. As Wandana Sonalkar puts it "Pawar's point of view is also woven from two strands: that of the young girl uncomprehendingly witnessing instances of caste injustice, patriarchal domination, and the daily compulsions of poverty, and of the mature woman looking back on these with the insights she has gained later on in her life. And yet the narrator's position is neither central nor distanced: it is constantly engaged."²

Equal share of work

Dalit family system seems to be matriarchal often, though both wife and



husband share work and responsibilities. Particularly , women of Dalit families take lead role in the household work. They wake up early in the morning along with their husbands and do the household things as fast as they can and go for their routine works. In this novel Pawar describes the working style of Dalit women and their schedule of a day's life. "I know, I got up bang at the first cock crow . kicked my blanket away with my feet ... went to the stove ... picked up the clay pitcher in the corner and came out ... when I came out, it was still moonlight... yeti went to the river ... filled up the pot with water ...by that time the cock crowed again ...she gave me a small live coal which I placed on the dung cake... I came back blowing on it." (Pawar 3)³

Dalit women are skilled and industrious

The word 'aaydan' itself is self significant. It means making a basket with bamboo strips. Before plastic began to be utilized for making different objects of everyday use , bamboo was the common material used to make baskets, containers and other things of general utility in households. It is not very easy to make a bamboo basket. They have to collect the bamboos from the forest and strip it into pieces of different size and shape . One must admire the skill of a woman who cuts it. Striping of a bamboo trees into thin layers shows the skill they posses. Not all can do that. After striping it , they have to weave the baskets in different forms and sizes according to the needs of the people. After making the baskets , the biggest challenge is to find a customer. They cannot sell their goods in the village , because they find very less number of customers . And so , they need to go to nearby towns and find customers

. For that they need to walk miles together , crossing rugged hills and rivers . The whole process of the work needs much dedication, commitment and hard work. Moreover , it s their livelihood. Unless they work hard , they cannot feed the family.

Manner of selling goods

In Indian society there are a section of people who won't go out of their residence for selling goods. They sit at their homes and do business. It is very surprising that the Dalit women don't have that kind of business style. They have to leave their native places and go far off places to sell their goods. There is no possibility for them to sit at sell goods at home. The problem is they need customers who need the goods from them. Even if some people sell their goods at home, the other villagers won't come to their colonies to purchase goods. So they have to move away from their residences to sell goods.

Women would go to Ratnagiri from their village Phansawale to sell the fire coal and other commodities. It is a daily routine for the Dalit women in Phanshwale. It was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain as it lay in an obscure ditch in a far –off corner of the hills . Two high hills stood between the village and the outside world. Then there are two big rivers to cross. After crossing the hills and the rivers , the women had to walk quite a distance on a long, dusty ,and dirty path till they reached the city. Occasionally , the women heard the bloodcurdling roars of a tiger even in broad daylight and , indeed , incidents of tigers attacking people on their way were not uncommon. Danger lurks everywhere. It crawls across one's path in the form of poisonous snakes .



The barren open spaces were covered with shrubs as sharp as the teeth of those creatures and resembled some ancient armour. The howling wind, ferocious enough to topple one to one's death, blew continuously. Then there was a huge deep well on the way, without any protective walls around, shrouded in the midst of chilling stories of evil spirits lurking there. All of these would strike one's heart cold with terror.

Women were compelled to make the journey to the market because they had to sell their wares in order to survive: bundles of firewood or rice bags or whatever merchandise, covered with leaves or woollen blankets. With their emaciated bodies covered with rags, bony sticklike legs, bare feet, pale, lifeless faces dripping either with sweat or rain, sunken stomachs, palms thickened with work, and feet with huge crevices like a patch freshly tilled, they looked like cadavers floating in powerful streams, propelled by a force hurtling them along the strong currents, being dashed against rocks and thrust forward by powerful waves.

Their voice would be fresh as strong early in the morning when they started from their village with bundles on their heads. Someone would complain to her friend, "haven't you stuffed your firewood yet? You silly woman, why didn't you pack it up yesterday and keep it ready? Come on, hurry up, we are getting late!"

Harmony and care among the women

The conversation of the women would be at a very personal level. It was a common phenomenon among Dalit communities that there would be no secrets, everything is known all. The

intimate relationships people have in the community, and the concern for the other people are very apparent in Dalit communities. The following statement reveals the harmonious relationship among the Dalit women. The attitude and sacrificing nature, caring nature, sharing nature, can be seen in the following statements. They are not envious or jealous of the other ones. "One for all and all for one" principle works out in the community.

"How's my baby, I'm so worried! Did they give him his medicine? A young mother would find her breasts aching, heavy with milk. Often while crossing boulders it would drip out, wetting her blouse. The young mother would interpret this as a sign of her baby crying at home for milk and break down into uncontrollable sobs. The other women would console her. Why do you cry? Last time you had fed the her baby with your milk. Now won't she return your favour and feed your baby? And suppose she doesn't! Somebody is bound to do so in the village, willing to feed him with a little something. No, no don't cry like that. Come on." (Pawar 4)⁴

The women and their clothes would carry mixed smells of cashew nuts, mangoes, the medicinal nuts grass, wood, ash, cow, dung and earth. They evoked the fragrance of mango blossoms and flowering kuda trees, the soil soaked in the first rains, of mud, moss, gum, and other juices oozing from the tress.



Sometimes they carried sounds such as the murmur of the flowing river , the splashing of streams , and the chirruping of birds that provide some sort of background music.

It is not easy for them to go and sell their goods and other things they bring from their village in the city. They have to find customers who can purchase from them. sometimes customers bargain for cheaper prices. The women have to go through different streets and sell. Pawar writes “ After climbing atop of the hills, the women had to trudge through various small lanes and nook and corners of the town to sell the heavy loads on their heads. Once they had struck bargain , they walked all over the bazaar , looking for places where they could get cooking ingredients like molasses , oil, and red chilli powder at cheap rates. Then they threw the tiny packets in their baskets , bought some cheap, low- quality fish, tidbits for their kids waiting at home , and start their way back.”(Pawar 5)⁵ Pawar says “ on the same road, we heard hundred of stories about the history of our family across generations.”

Defiance to suppressing traditions

People of India witnessed the hegemony of Brahmins in performing rituals and ceremonies. Other were not allowed to perform such duties. They believe that they have dominion over those activities. Only Brahmins have to perform to the mahars also but in different manner which humiliate the mahar people. Since time immemorial, It is said that only Brahmins should perform ceremonial rituals to all castes people. They think it is their sole prerogative . Even all Hindu religious texts support this idea. But when the

Brahmin priests go to mahar colonies to solemnize a marriage or other ceremonial rituals , they don't go near and sit with them. They distance themselves from the community. He is not even interested to perform the rituals on the ground. The priest, known as bhat, would climb a tree because he does not want to be polluted with the shadows cast by the people of mahar community. From the tree top the bhat mutters some mantras and then he would shout the word ‘sawadhan’ literally means ‘attention’, at that instant the drummers start beating their drums and the marriage takes place. Pawar says ,

“The priests never enter the maharwada to perform these tasks ... he would climb up the tree so that he would not be polluted by the shadows of mahar neighbourhood... The Brahmin priest would climb down , sprinkle holy water from his panchapatra with pali, on the coins kept as his dakshina to wash away the pollution and make clean, and push it into his waistband. He would also make it appoint to take away all the offerings : rice, coconut and so on as part of is dakshina . he never carried these himself, he has his servants for this task. “ (Pawar 7)⁶

Pawar gives a vivid description of Hari's victory over a Brahmin priest. The Mahars felt it was an insult that performing rituals from a distanced. Hari, the great grand father of Pawar, challenges this inhuman and humiliating act. Hari was influenced by Satyashodhak movement led by Mahatama Jyotibha Pule in 1873. Hari discusses with the



elders in the community and decides to perform the rituals for themselves. When the Brahmins come to know this, they feel it as a threat to dominance and livelihood. The Brahmin priest says that they must know Sanskrit to conduct marriage. When Hari recites slokas and demonstrates his knowledge in Sanskrit, priest raises another issue saying that “if you want counsel the people about the past and future you also must know ‘pranayam’”. Hari says “I know it and I can do it.” but the priest does not believe Hari and challenges him. For eight days they would sit in pits dug deep in their respective cremation grounds. After four days the Brahmin priest dies and Hari comes out alive. That was turning point to mahar people. Hari wins the challenge and from that day onwards the responsibility of carrying out various rituals in nine surrounding villages including Pensawale. He earns a second name “The Buwa of the Burning Ground”.

Conclusion: Dalits are not parasites. They are very industrious, though denied, they are dignified in their living. The experiences of Urmila Pawar are not only of hers and of her family or of her village, but it reflects the whole Dalit community in India. Every person have to do hard labour in order to eke out their lives. They are the productive section of the Indian society. But still they are cast outs, humiliated, scoffed at as untouchables, downtrodden, suppressed and marginalised.

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