



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

Grau de d'estudis anglesos

Treball

de Fi de Grau

Curs 2021-2022

TÍTOL: Dalit women autobiographies for the understanding of caste

NOM DE L'ESTUDIANT: Carolina García Rodríguez

NOM DEL TUTOR: Dr Isabel Alonso-Breto

Barcelona, 31 de gener 2022

UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONACoordinació d'Estudis
Facultat de FilologiaGran Via
de les Corts Catalanes, 585
08007 BarcelonaTel. +34 934 035 594
fil-coord@ub.edu
www.ub.edu

Amb aquest escrit declaro que sóc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18, del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 31 de gener 2022

Signatura:



Carolina García Rodríguez

Membre de:

LE
RU

Reconeixement internacional de l'excel·lència



B:KC

Barcelona
Knowledge
Campus

HUB

Health Universitat
de Barcelona
Campus

Acknowledgements

To the ones that have been supporting me during the time that took me to put this research together.

To Isabel, who has encouraged me every step of the way.

Abstract

Starting from the hypothesis that caste is a severe hindrance in the life of the socially disadvantaged in India, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate what the caste system is in order to be able to comprehend the true social implications it has for those who are affected by it. The study begins with a discussion of Dr B. R. Ambedkar's thesis on caste so as to understand its mechanics, and then the paper delves into Indian history to see how certain events have shaped the caste system and have affected the Indian population. Because the voices of India's lower castes have traditionally been silenced and pushed to the margins, we examine two autobiographies written by Dalit women, who are the system's most subaltern voices. With this, the paper gives emphasis to the importance of the literary rising of Dalit autobiographies, as made manifest in the work of Indian scholar Sharmila Rege, particularly in her study *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women Testimonios*. Thus, overall, the paper provides a chronological perspective on the caste system, whose events and consequences are depicted in two Dalit autobiographies: Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008). The paper concludes that while there has been progress in recent years due to the implementation of education and the efforts of many people, caste continues to hold strong in a substantial part of Indian society, which is why it is critical to understand its dynamics so that we can contribute to its elimination.

Keywords: caste, Dalits, Ambedkar, Dalit autobiographies, Indian women, Testimonios

Resumen

Partiendo de la base que las castas son un impedimento importante en la vida de los más desaventajados en la India, este trabajo pretende ilustrar lo que realmente es el sistema de castas para poder entender las implicaciones sociales de los afectados. El estudio empieza con una discusión sobre la tesis de Dr. B. R. Ambedkar sobre las castas para entender su mecanismo, y después pasamos a la historia de la India para observar como ciertos eventos han moldeado el sistema de castas y han afectado a su población. Debido a que las voces de las castas bajas han sido tradicionalmente silenciadas y llevadas a la marginalidad, examinamos dos autobiografías escritas por mujeres Dalit, cuyas voces son las más desfavorecidas del sistema. Con esto, el trabajo da énfasis a la importancia de la resurgencia literaria Dalit, como ha sido manifiesto en el trabajo de la académica Sharmila Rege, particularmente en su estudio *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women Testimonios*. De esta manera, el trabajo ofrece una perspectiva cronológica del

sistema de castas, cuyos eventos y consecuencias están representados en las dos autobiografías Dalit: *The Prisons We Broke* de Baby Kamble (2009) y *The Weave of My Life* de Urmila Pawar (2008). El trabajo concluye que, a pesar de que ha habido progreso en los últimos años debido a las implementaciones educativas y los esfuerzos de mucha gente, la casta continúa manteniendo su poder sobre una gran parte de la sociedad india; por ese motivo es importante entender el funcionamiento de las castas y poder contribuir a su eliminación.

Palabras clave: castas, Dalit, Ambedkar, autobiografía Dalit, mujeres indias, Testimonios

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	8
2. CASTES IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA	11
2.1. Origin and mechanism of Caste	11
2.2. Caste Terminology	16
3. CASTES IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL INDIA	20
3.1. British Empire	20
3.2. Inside India movements for Untouchables: Phule and Ambedkar	22
3.2.1. Ambedkar and his fight for Untouchables	23
4. DALIT WOMEN WRITINGS	29
4.1. The importance of Dalit testimonios and literature	29
5. TWO DALIT TESTIMONIOS	35
5.1. The Prisons We Broke	35
5.1.1. Month of Ashadh	37
5.1.2. Practices of caste, untouchability and humiliation	39
5.1.3. Difficult life for women	44
5.1.4. Winds of change	48
5.2. The Weave of My Life	53
5.2.1. Festivals	55
5.2.2. Wedding rituals	57
5.2.3. Conversion to Buddhism	58
5.2.4. Caste accidents	59
5.2.5. Violence towards women	60
5.2.6. Women's movement	63
6. CONCLUSION: TO BE A DALIT TODAY	66

1. INTRODUCTION

The common knowledge about caste is its religious origins in the Hindu Texts, where Brahma, the Hindu God of Creation, divided himself into four parts, and each caste was created from a different part of his body. The four groups that originated from Brahma's body are categorized in hierarchical order, being the more privileged at the top, and the less privileged at the bottom. The four main categories are formed by the Brahmins at the top (who were the priests and academics), then the Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), followed by the Vaishyas (merchants and traders) and at the bottom, the Shudras (who were servants and subordinates). Under these four categories, at the lowest level and outside the system, there is another group which is the absolute opposite of the Brahmins: people without privileges, whose jobs put them in contact with dirt and death and make them polluted, so impure as not to be touched. Thus, they are called the Untouchables, also known as Outcastes, or Dalits.

This is a simplistic way of understanding and viewing what caste is, and it comes from the colonizer's construct of the East. The Occident has defined the Orient and has shaped it under its dominant point of view, and what is left is a single story told by the Occident about the Other. What we get is an external representation of what caste is, and this creates a detached view of what is being represented. This is defined in *Orientalism* by Edward Said, who describes the term Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." This happens by "the corporate institutions that deal with the Orient and makes statements about it: authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (2003, p. 3), all in different formats, and all by an Orientalist voice, never a native. The British, with colonization, simplified India's culture and took advantage of the caste system, fossilizing it and leaving no room for change: everything was reduced to caste.

Since the most spread understanding of castes equates them to social classes, the real implications of caste are lost. This paper aims to provide a deeper insight into this complex system and its profound consequences for the Indian population. To this end, two perspectives are considered in this research project: on the one hand, some colonial views, addressed from a postcolonial approach; on the other hand, the voices left to the margins of intellectual discourse, those of the subaltern. Moreover, quoting the Indian scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "in the context of colonial production ... the subaltern female is even more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak, 2010, p. 83). That is why,

this paper will have special focus on the situation of women and on feminist approaches to caste. For this purpose, the work of Sharmila Rege *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006) is addressed in the paper. Sharmila Rege is a sociologist and feminist scholar, who has made numerous contributions to Indian feminism¹, and has included Dalit feminism in her discourses. However, considering this paper builds on understanding caste, it will introduce Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and his thesis on caste to understand its mechanism and origin. He is, after all, considered the father of the Dalit movement who, at the same time, has fought for gender equality and has always had present the importance of women in society. He is, even today, an important figure for the Dalit movement in Indian society. To illustrate the real condition of Dalits, and more specifically Dalit women, and therefore be able to understand their lives, after having talked about the theoretical basis that concerns the subject in question, there is going to be an analysis of two books written by Dalit women that display the importance the Ambedkarite movement had on the low-caste and Dalit's lives, among many other issues that depict how the caste system treats Dalits, and how within caste, patriarchy treats Indian women. The books are *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, and *The Weave of My Live*, by Urmila Pawar.

With all this background, one issue stands out, and that is the unfairness and discrimination caste maintain towards Dalits. Consternation on these issues is shared with writer and activist Arundhati Roy, about caste not being discussed globally and wondering how it is possible that such a system is not fought against as it is racism, for example. As Roy states in her introduction "The Doctor and the Saint":

Other contemporary abominations like apartheid, racism, sexism, economic imperialism and religious fundamentalism have been politically and intellectually challenged at international forums. How is it that the practice of caste in India—one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that human society has known—has managed to escape similar scrutiny and censure? (Roy A. , 2014, p. 22)

This thought is what sparked the idea for this end of degree paper. A need to understand caste. However, once caste was better understood, a new motivation started, and that is the purpose of denouncing this practice, as it can easily be considered a violation of basic human rights. Having said that, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the need for greater

¹ For more information on Rege and her work: <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/10/17/remembering-sharmila-rege/>

attention to caste on a national and international level; there is also a pedagogical aim since one of the goals is to understand caste and spread the mostly unknown plight and achievements of Indian Dalits in different spheres. Caste affects in a particular way to Dalit women, so if India wants to improve women's situation, they must address caste as a major issue.

2. CASTES IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA

This paper aims to explore what caste is, a challenging matter because caste is not something that we, as Europeans, have ever experienced nor can even experience first-hand. The colonial voices from the British Empire and Europe offer their own version of what caste is, however, since this is a post-colonial research, it focuses on the voices of the *subaltern* (using the term coined by Antonio Gramsci). Only by listening to them can we understand them, and paying heed to them might contribute to changing their reality so that maybe they would cease being subaltern, as approached by Gayatri Spivak in *Can the "Subaltern Speak?"* In order to understand what the caste system is and its real consequences in Indian society, several sources have been considered in this research, from the more traditional perspective of Western authors to postcolonial theories about the effects of the British Empire on the caste system, with special focus on Dalit authors and Dalit literature. Dalit literature is especially relevant as it provides us with real insight on Dalit's lives. The Dalit writer and critic Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" and specifies its obvious purpose: "to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (Limbale, 2004, p. 19).

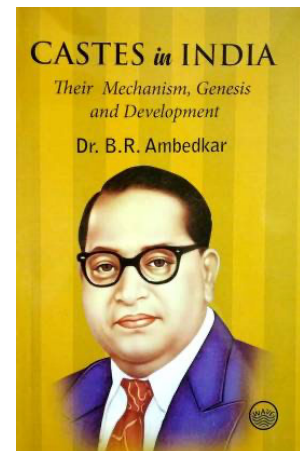
To understand caste, the research focuses on Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), because, as Surinder S. Jodhka puts it: "No discussion of caste today is possible without invoking Ambedkar and his critique of caste and Hindu society" (Jodhka, 2018, p. 13). In the prologue to Dr Ambedkar's text *Annihilation of Caste* we also see a letter addressed to Dr Ambedkar where Mr Sant Ram, the secretary of the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, tells him "You are a great thinker, and it is my well-considered opinion that none else has studied the problem of caste so deeply as you have" (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 2014). Ambedkar was crucial in the struggle against caste and for improving Untouchables' lives.

2.1. *Origin and mechanism of Caste*

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born in 1891 in what is known today as Maharashtra, to the Mahar Caste (a Dalit caste). People from low caste did not have much of an education, however, Ambedkar went to high-school, being the only Untouchable enrolled at Elphinstone High School in Mumbai, and then matriculated at Elphinstone College. He was the first person from the Mahar caste to achieve such a high education. He was also awarded a scholarship that allowed him to continue with his studies at Columbia

University. It is there that he presented his paper on the mechanism of caste: “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”.

In this paper, Ambedkar proceeds to explain, albeit difficult, how castes came to exist, what are the mechanisms and possible origin for them to be the way they are nowadays. Ambedkar takes upon four different definitions, “from a few of the best students of caste” (Ambedkar, 1916, p. 4), of which he finds none is complete nor correct, and that “all have missed the central point in the mechanism of Caste” (1916, p.5). From the analysis he provides of the different definitions, Ambedkar takes one thing that is key to understanding caste: “the absence of intermarriage-endogamy” (1916, p. 7).



It is important to point out that this endogamy found in caste is not by choice, meaning that it is not that the groups choose not to mix together due to racial issues or because they are from different tribes that live far from each other, thus maintaining endogamy, as for example, in the case of black people or native Americans with white colonizers. In India the situation is different, the numerous races of India form a cultural unity, and that is precisely what makes caste difficult to be explained (1916, p. 7).

By showing how endogamy is maintained is how Ambedkar proves the genesis and also the mechanism of caste. Quite relevant to mention is the fact that India’s society is also an exogamic one, and it is forbidden to marry the same blood-kin. Knowing this, it would seem logical to conclude that, because exogamy is the rule, there can be no caste. However, there is a “superposition of endogamy on exogamy” (1916, p. 9), and here, together with the means used for the preservation of endogamy against exogamy is where we can find the creation of caste.

Before proceeding to explain what the mechanisms of caste are, it is important to make reference to the role women have in all this. As mentioned previously in the introduction, Ambedkar acknowledges the horrible situation women are in, and draws attention to the low status they have compared to men.

There are three customs that are core to what caste is. Three customs that in all of their strictness are found in only one caste: the Brahmans, “who occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy of the Hindu society” (1916, p. 19). By maintaining them, it is how

caste is created. We have to put ourselves in a situation in which there is an enclosed group and one cannot marry outside that group (endogamy); however, one cannot marry any member of their family either (exogamy). Assuming that the numbers in such a group are even, there is one woman for every one man, and vice versa. Therefore, what happens when, in a marriage, either the wife or the husband dies? Ambedkar calls them the “surplus man and surplus woman” (1916, p. 11).

There is a tremendous and unjust difference between the two suppositions. If the husband dies, the woman is a danger to the enclosed group, because there is the possibility she could marry another man, but with this possibility, the numbers would not be even, meaning that she would be taking a man who should be another woman’s husband. So as for her not to be a danger to the group, she has two (extreme) options: she can either throw herself into the funerary pyre where her husband is being cremated (a tradition called *sati*), or she can be forced into widowhood. However, to be a widow has some implications because a widow could start a new relationship and thus threaten the harmony of the group. Taking that into consideration, for widows not to be “attractive” and tempting to other men, they will be degraded, their status will be lower, and they will have to undergo other changes in their lives, i.e., their clothes and diet, among others.

In the case of men, if he were the one losing his wife, the situation changes drastically. There is a new facet to take into consideration: not only are men considered valuable members of the social group, but as Ambedkar writes “[men’s] wishes have always been consulted ... and you cannot accord the same kind of treatment to a surplus man as you can to a surplus woman in caste” (1916, p. 12). Therefore, the best option is to keep them actively involved in the duties of the group. The thought of men following the *sati* tradition is out of the question, and to enforce widowhood upon them and keep them in celibacy would be both imprudent and a waste, from the perspective of the social group. Because, as far as men are concerned, they are considered an asset and it would be ‘better’ for them to stay in the group as active participants. For this to happen, for men to be active members of the group, they will be provided with a new wife. However, not to take those who are marriageable to other suitors, he will be provided with “a wife only by recruiting a bride from the ranks of those yet not marriageable” (1916, p. 14), or, in other words, a child wife.

Summing up, we have:

- *Sati* (women dying on the pyre with their deceased husband)
- Enforced widowhood
- Girl marriage

Thus, by means of these three customs, caste is maintained. These are the mechanisms of caste, and the reason why these customs exist is to maintain the mechanism for endogamy, as Ambedkar explains:

These three customs were primarily intended to solve the problem of the surplus man and surplus woman in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. Strict endogamy could not be preserved without these customs, while caste without endogamy is a fake. ... I have established before that endogamy is the only characteristic of caste and when I say ORIGIN OF CASTE, I mean THE ORIGIN OF THE MECHANISM FOR ENDOGAMY. (Ambedkar, 1916, p. 18)

As mentioned before, strictly speaking, the three customs are found only in one caste: the Brahmins. That is why Ambedkar explains that he thinks Brahmins were the first caste, and the rest of groups just copied these customs. Yet, did all the groups choose to follow endogamy? In his essay, Ambedkar explains that in Hindu society, there were different classes. Four different classes that have been already mentioned: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriya (soldiers), Vaisya (merchants) and Sudras (artisans and servants). Because they were classes, they could change from one class to another. However, at some point, the priestly class detached itself from the rest and became an enclosed group. What we find in an enclosed group is “exclusivity”, although there is exclusivity by choice and exclusivity by obligation. That translates to what Ambedkar illustrates as one group closing the door to others, and other groups finding the doors closed to them (1916, p. 24). When the Brahmins detached from the rest through a close-door policy, the other classes underwent other subdivisions. A caste is an enclosed class.

The psychological interpretation, which is complementary to the mechanics of it all – is that the reason for the other groups’ becoming endogamous is just because the Brahmins were so. If we take into account who the Brahmins represented: priests, therefore sacred and the higher ranks in society, it is understandable that the rest would want to be like them, hence, copying their mechanisms and customs. This imitation is not voluntary nor even conscious, the Brahmins were simply the example to follow.

Ambedkar takes French sociologist Gabriel Tarde's ideas regarding imitation and how it works (1916, p. 27). According to Tarde, the main trait of imitation is that it goes upwards, meaning that the group being imitated has a higher status than the one doing the imitation. Also, the intensity of this imitation varies inversely in proportion to distance. The further down the group is, the more it derives from the higher caste. That is why, the further down a caste is, the less strict the customs mentioned above are, and why only the nearest castes to the Brahmans comply with the three customs:

Those castes that are nearest to the Brahmans have imitated all the three customs and insist on the strict observance thereof. Those that are less near have imitated enforced widowhood and girl marriage; others, a little further off, have only girl marriage and those furthest off have imitated only the belief in the caste principle. ... This is partly to what Tarde calls 'distance' and partly to the – barbarous character of these customs. (Ambedkar, 1916, pp. 27-28)

Consequently, there are different castes, not only a caste. If there were only one caste, it would be the Brahmans and non-Brahmans. However, when they enclosed themselves, they closed others out, thus, creating new castes. One separation that can be found among castes is by occupation, although there is no explanation for why occupational groups (called *jati*) are castes.

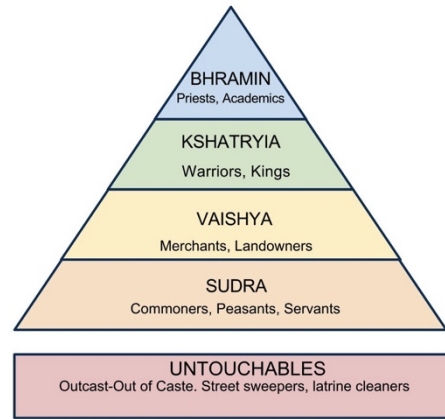
These are the mechanisms of castes, how they were created. We also find another feature to them, and that is how they follow a social hierarchy or graded inequality. That is to say, the higher the caste, the more privileges it has. This translates into a situation in which somebody from a lower caste will never be able to escape its status, and have better aspirations in life. But because the unfairness is graded, not everyone from the lower castes will suffer the same consequences. That is why there cannot be a unanimous revolt, because there is not the same amount of inequality for everyone. The ones that suffer the most are the outcastes, who, as the name indicates, are the ones that are outside the caste system. They have such a low status that they are considered to be polluted, thus: untouchable.

Ambedkar fought against the discrimination Dalits suffered. He fought for them to have representation in the government, so they would not continue to be left out, marginalized and humiliated as they are. That is why he is considered the father of the Dalit movement. He was determined to change the situation and was conscious of the unfairness of the system.

2.2. Caste Terminology

There is a different terminology associated with castes that should be learned in order to understand certain readings. Many writers have introduced explanations in their essays and publications, and this section will compile a few of them to help the reader understand the terminology when reading about caste.

The term 'caste' comes from the Portuguese, while in Sanskrit the designated word for this system was 'varna'. As we saw previously, the system is divided into four groups that have different privileges. The four groups that come from Brahma's body (the Hindu God of creation), are the 'savarna', meaning they belong to one of the varnas, and



the ones that fall out of the system and do not belong to any varna, but are still Hindus, are called 'avarna'. Thus, we have the *savarna* groups: Brahmins / Brahmins (higher castes), Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras (lower castes); and the *avarna*: the Dalits, who are outside the system and are considered outcastes. Another term used is 'Ati-Shudra', which would be the same as *avarna*.

Sometimes the Shudra and Ati-Shudra are put in the same category, and there is a religious explanation for that: Hindus believe in reincarnation, or second birth, but only the three first categories have that right; the Shudras do not, hence the Shudras and Ati-Shudras have no right to a second birth.

The term 'untouchable' comes from the Hindu belief in the dichotomy between purity and pollution. Brahmins are pure and the Untouchables are polluted. The reasons for being polluted are many; Mendelsohn & Vicziany mention a few:

Women are polluted during menstruation, and on this account may not cook food for their family (Dumont 1970: 53). Daily pollution arises from the secretions of the body, and the left hand is permanently polluted by its use in cleaning the body. Birth and death engender great pollution, and the new mother must be sequestered for a period of some days before she will be fit to be seen and touched.

[However], the Untouchables are a permanently polluted people. Their status is said to arise from the work they perform, such as skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes; playing in musical bands; butchery of animals;

fishing; removal of human waste; attendance at cremation grounds; washing clothes; coconut harvesting and the brewing of toddy, to name some of the principal grounds of permanent pollution. Ostensibly, then, today's Untouchables - all 150 million of them - are descended from persons polluted by their unclean work. (1998, pp. 6-7)

Being an *untouchable* embodies a subordinated condition, since they are polluted, they cannot interact with non-untouchables. Their presence must be kept to a bare minimum in front of other castes so as to not disturb the *savarna*, creating a highly miserable and marginalized existence which reflects on their everyday life, as Arundhati Roy illustrates:

Outside of these varnas are the avarna castes, the Ati-Shudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own—the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables—whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus. (...) 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. In addition to being forced to live in segregated settlements, Untouchables were not allowed to use the public roads that privileged castes used, they were not allowed to drink from common wells, they were not allowed into Hindu temples, they were not allowed into privileged-caste schools, they were not permitted to cover their upper bodies, they were only allowed to wear certain kinds of clothes and certain kinds of jewellery. Some castes, like the Mahars, the caste to which Ambedkar belonged, had to tie brooms to their waists to sweep away their polluted footprints, others had to hang spittoons around their necks to collect their polluted saliva. Men of the privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of Untouchable women. Love is polluting. Rape is pure. In many parts of India, much of this continues to this day. (2014, p. n.p.n.)

The term 'Depressed Classes' or 'Backward Classes' makes reference not only to Untouchables, but also to other people who are economically, educationally, and socially backward.² It includes the 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST), which

² Ambedkar established the Depressed Classes Federation (DCF) in 1930, which is the term that later the British used to give them representation in the census.

imply roughly the same thing, just making the distinction between castes and tribes. ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OCB) are classes that are approximately at the same stage of social and educational progress as the *Depressed Classes*; it also includes religions other than Hinduism. The difference among all these is reflected in the reservation³ percentage they are entitled to.

The most widespread term to refer to Untouchables is ‘Dalit’.⁴ Dalit in the Marathi language means ‘oppressed, broken’⁵, which emphasizes the oppression they experience. In her introduction to Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, Arundhati Roy expresses how she feels about these terms:

For a writer to have to use terms like ‘Untouchable’, ‘Scheduled Caste’, ‘Backward Class’ and ‘Other Backward Classes’ to describe fellow human beings is like living in a chamber of horrors. Since Ambedkar used the word ‘Untouchable’ with a cold rage, and without flinching, so must I. Today ‘Untouchable’ has been substituted with the Marathi word ‘Dalit’ (Broken People), which is, in turn, used interchangeably with ‘Scheduled Caste’. This, as the scholar Rupa Viswanath points out, is incorrect practice, because the term ‘Dalit’ includes Untouchables who have converted to other religions to escape the stigma of caste (like the Paraiyans in my village who had converted to Christianity), whereas ‘Scheduled Caste’ does not. The official nomenclature of prejudice is a maze that can make everything read like a bigoted bureaucrat’s file notings. To try and avoid this, I have, mostly, though not always, used the word ‘Untouchable’ when I write about the past, and ‘Dalit’ when I write about the present. When I write about Dalits who have converted to other religions, I specifically say Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Muslims or Dalit Christians. (Roy A. , 2014)

Another way Dalits are called is by the term coined by Gandhi: ‘Harijan’. ‘Hari’ is the name for a male deity in Hinduism, ‘jan’ is people. So Harijans are People of God, though in order to infantilise them even further, in translation they are referred to as ‘Children of God’” (Roy A. , 2014).

³ Reservation is a system in India that grants scholarships, fee concessions, 49.5 percent seats in educational institutions, employment, and qualification test and age relaxation to specific castes.

⁴ Dalit is generally written with capital d, but some writers use the term without capitalization, thus the paper will maintain it that way in the quotes, respecting other authors' usage.

⁵ It was used to refer not just to Untouchable communities, but to “the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion” (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2013 in Roy A., 2014)

The terms ‘Bahujan’ or ‘Bahujan Samaj’ are explained by Omvedt as follows: “literally ‘majority community’ or ‘majority of society’; often translated as ‘masses’; refers to non-Brahmans excluding merchant castes and highly educated small castes” (1976, p. 369).

The term ‘Adivasi’ means: “literally, original inhabitant; popular term for tribes outside the caste system” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 368).

3. CASTES IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

Given that the purpose of this paper is the understanding of caste, we must first learn about Indian society, as well as various political movements and colonial voices that have influenced the country and defined caste. Some highlights that are considered important in this paper are the influences the British Empire had in India in relation to the caste system and its society, how it affected the upper castes and lower castes, and how that led to different movements and the emergence of figures for the lower castes.

3.1. *British Empire*

Contrary to popular belief, the British Empire did not establish the caste system in India. Caste was influenced by the British presence in India, but before the beginning of European colonialism there was already a human subordination system in place, as addressed by Mendelsohn and Vicziany in their book *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*. As the title of the book exposes, the subordinated part of the Indian society are the people known as Untouchables. There have been many discussions about Untouchables and their degraded condition as a part of the Hindu religion. Whether or not Untouchables are part of Hinduism was significant for the British administrators of the Raj, as in 1871-2 they created the first census in India and “became obsessed with the question of whether Untouchables were properly classifiable as Hindus, or whether they were a people *sui generis*” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 27). Mendelsohn and Vicziany suggest that “this may well have been the very first time such a question was asked. Until Indian civilisation was defined relative to the world outside, there was no need for a concept of 'Hindu' at all” (1998, p. 27). There was, however, some controversy in the recognition of who was Hindu and who was not: “high-caste Hindus did not want to recognise Untouchable castes as belonging to the Hindu religious community” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 28). Nonetheless, that changed when the inclusion of Untouchables in Hinduism gave them more parliamentary representation.

It was in the 1931 census that the “Depressed Classes” appeared in the demographic classification, to account for the Untouchables. It is within the context of this classification that it is important to trace some shifts that occurred in the class structure due to new forms of commercialisation happening in the country with the British Empire. The caste organization changed with colonization because of the introduction of new jobs and commerce, creating new sources of wealth (Rege, 2006, p. 19). The new professions that appeared in connection to the British Empire were related to the

administration: clerks, journalists, writers... All of them opened new opportunities in urban centres, driving the lower castes communities (and Untouchables) to an even deeper marginalization. The reason for this was that this emerging “professional class” (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, 2006, p. 20) required educated people, and India's educated population at the time was disproportionately inferior in the lower castes. The sociologist and scholar Sharmila Rege offers an insight to the disadvantaged numbers in education for the lower castes: “several schools of the Elphinstone institution had 152 students matriculated. Of these 152 students ... 25 belonged to the lower castes. In the New English school in Pune, out of 982 students registered, 911 were brahmans” (2006, p. 21). What worsens the situation is what Rege writes about an Indian social reformer and linguist: “In his autobiography, Dadoba Pandurang recalls how upper castes exerted their caste authority to remove students of the kunbi, koli, bhandari caste from these schools”⁶ (2006, p. 21). With these numbers, it is easy to see how the lower castes did not make it to the new “professional class”. Taking into account Rege's analysis, we can see how the brahmans' dominance grew even more as a result of this economic shift, as well as the incorporation of new political strategies and nationalism that made any “articulation of caste in the public sphere to be seen as illegitimate and even as a betrayal to the nation” (2006, p. 25).

In a similar manner, the connection between the brahmans and the lower caste is comparable to the relationship between Europe and the Orient. To paraphrase Said “the westerner never loses the relative upper hand in respect to the Orient, which is Orientalism's tactic” (2003, p. 17). It is via the Orientalist notion that “the British rulers 'invented' or 'constructed' ... their version of caste”, and they did that by misrepresenting “out of all proportion the importance and unchangeability of caste within Indian society” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 17). As Mendelsohn and Vicziany point out, the British turned caste into the 'essence' of India, robbing Indians of their 'agency',⁷ an essence that was substantially different from what was known to the Europeans. Thus, making “European discourses appear to separate their Self from the Indian Other” (Inden, 2000, p. 3).

⁶ Kunbi: included among the Other Backward Classes (OBC) in Maharashtra

Koli community: Scheduled Caste

Bhandaris are included in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Goa, Western Coast of India.

⁷ Read Ronald Inden's *Imagining India* (1990) for further information on this topic. He gives his viewpoint in order to modify the unitary discourses that have been produced from a Eurocentric perspective, and to restore 'ancient' India's agency.

3.2. *Inside India movements for Untouchables: Phule and Ambedkar*

The impact of the West on India has affected the country at different levels. As Gail Omvedt, American-born Indian sociologist and human rights activist, writes in her dissertation: “colonialism involved not simply the imposition of new forms of social organization upon the traditional one, but the transformation of the very basis of Indian society, creating new forms out of ‘traditional’ materials.” (1976, p. 3). As previously stated, one of the consequences of colonialism was increased dominance for the privileged castes, with the rise of the commercial bourgeoisie and further marginalization of rural areas. The commercial bourgeois were “a class of merchants, moneylenders and middlemen ranging from powerful urban merchants down to the petty money lender or traders” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 22). They are also referred to as “the new middle class” or the *intelligentsia*, and they aspired to work in the colonial administration or public service, as well as professions such as law, journalism, and education (1976, p. 22). Other work and possibilities that opened up in urban areas were “jobs in the military, railway, building and textile mills” (Rege, 2006, p. 20). Some members from the rural communities that left the villages for the urban areas to take on these jobs were lower castes; we have information regarding the Mahar caste in particular, which is one of India's major Untouchable castes and is located in Maharashtra. They were historically servants who lived on the outside of the main village, and because they were servants, they did not have a specific occupation as other castes did, “nor the same commitment” (2006, p. 20). And as Omvedt points out, “it was this caste that was to produce the most vigorous Untouchable movement in India in the twentieth century.” (1976, p. 70) as it was the Mahars who, with access to education from the missionary schools, played a major role in initiating a self-reform in the 1890s (Rege, 2006, p. 20). The missionaries’ schools gave education to the lower castes, and with it a new opportunity to challenge the supremacy of the upper castes. The first example we are going to introduce to illustrate this reality is the Indian social activist, thinker, anti-caste social reformer, and writer from Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule, for his path breaking contribution: he was given education in one of these missionaries’ schools, and years later he “began to teach his aunt and young wife Savitrabai to read” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 106). In 1848 he established his



Jyotirao Phule, Founder
of Satya Shodhak
Samaj

first school for girls.⁸ Jotirao Phule is known as the founder of the non-Brahman movement, and his “thought represented the fulfilment of the renaissance desire for social transformation along revolutionary lines. ... [His thoughts are] linked to a movement of opposition to the Brahman elite, ... it represents the first expression of social revolution in India” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 100).

As Omvedt begins to describe in her dissertation, the non-Brahman movement arose in 1873 “against the background of the increasing poverty of the lower classes under the British rule and domination of the largely Brahman native elite” (1976, p. 1). It was a cultural revolt that rose in Maharashtra, and it is also known as “the Satyashodhak Samaj”, which means “the Truth Seekers’ Society”. This movement was primarily peasant-based⁹ and it was “a discursive arena where members of the shudra and ati-shudra castes invented and circulates counter discourses on the importance of education, the situation of the peasantry and women, the exploitations by moneylenders and brahmans” (Rege, 2006, p. 39). Sharmila Rege explains in her work about the Satyashodhak Samaj: it opposed both Untouchability and Brahmanism, and many leaders of the movement petitioned for access to water, schools, and representation on local wards. It also published a booklet against the Vedic religion. Altogether, the Satyashodhak Samaj¹⁰ “supported in different ways the emergence of the early dalit publics in westerns and northern Maharashtra”. In fact, its ideology, “which the Untouchables have helped to form, provided the themes and language to the later militant movement of the dalits” (2006, p. 39). Continuing with Rege’s explanations, in the 1930s “the non-Brahmans merged with the Congress and the Satyashodhak Samaj voice almost vanished” (2006, p. 44). Ambedkar, who in the 1920s led a strong Dalit movement, was critical of the non-Brahman leadership on several issues, but identified with the Satyashodhak (Rege, 2006, p. 44).

3.2.1. Ambedkar and his fight for Untouchables

The 1920s were defined by Ambedkar's campaigns against the practice of rituals and customs for the untouchables. As previously stated, Ambedkar is a Mahar caste member, and as a Dalit, he was aware of their difficulties and the traditions that they had to endure as part of ritual processes and ceremonies. Some of the campaigns he conducted were to

⁸ See Gail Omvedt (1976), especially Chapter VI, for more information about Phule’s life and work.

⁹ It had support from non-Brahman intelligentsia and members of the commercial bourgeoisie, however it was mostly peasant.

¹⁰ See Gail Omvedt (1976), especially Chapter VIII, for more information on the Satyashodhak Samaj.

give them access to certain roads,¹¹ as Dalits could not use roads that crossed a temple or that were used by upper castes, making them walk extra kilometres so upper castes would not have to encounter them (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 100); the abolition of the Mahar *watan*,¹² which was an economic structure of servitude, where the Mahars were completely at the service of the government and they were barely paid, among other straits (as mentioned before, the Mahars come from a caste of servants); and the campaigns to establish the right for access to public places, temples, and access to water for the depressed classes. It was the access to water the first campaign that was addressed in the form of the Mahad Satyagraha, in 1927. Around 10,000 people attended and listened to Dr Ambedkar's speeches on all kinds of topics (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 101). Ambedkar, also conscious of the pitfalls of gender, had a "practice of organising a women's conference along with every general meeting that was called" (Rege, 2006, p. 53), and the speech¹³ he gave in the Mahad Satyagraha had an immense effect on the audience, and especially on the women that were present. The speech addressed women and untouchability customs:

I am extremely happy that you have come to this meeting. Men and women together resolve the problems of everyday life. So must the problems of society be solved by men and women working together. If the men take up this work on their own, there is no doubt that they will take a long time to complete it. But if women take this work on themselves, I am sure they will soon succeed. ... I therefore tell you that from now on you (women) must always be present in our meetings. To tell the truth, the task of removing untouchability belongs not to men, but to you women. ...

The other thing I have to tell you is that you must all give up your old and disgusting customs. To tell the truth, no untouchable person carries the mark of being

¹¹ This was called Vaikom Satyagraha, which is the name where the protest took place (Vaikom) and Satyagraha, which means a peaceful agitation and protest.

¹² " ... as servant who can be called upon as the maid of all work ... for all practical purposes and are treated as maid of all work of all the Government departments. Further he may be called upon to render service at any hour of day or night. Every other Government servant, however humble his position between particular hours; every peon in the Collector's office or any other office knows that he has to go to his duties at definite hours and return at definite hours. But that is never the case with these Mahars ... whether it is raining or there is lightning or any other difficulty, he dare not refuse to do so"

"Under the system as it operates not only the officiator is obliged to render service but the whole family is obliged to render the service. I submit that this is a most oppressive system not obtainable in any other department of Government service."

"Again I will repeat that the Mahars are Government servants; but the Government does not take upon itself the responsibility of paying the remuneration to the person whom the Government employs"

"the Mahar is left entirely to the sweet will of the ryots. If the ryots are pleased to pay a Mahar he can get it. If the ryots are not pleased to pay the Mahars at the end of 12 months after exacting service from him, the Mahar will find that he has rendered service for nothing."

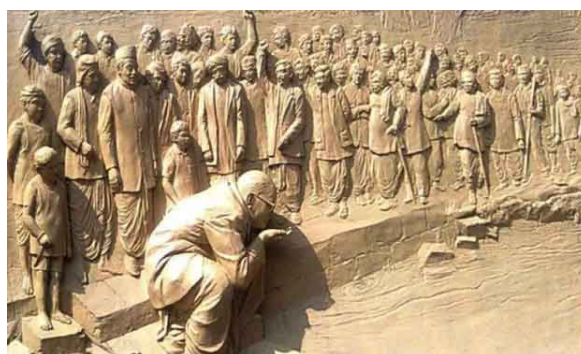
"[the evils of the system] affect not merely the officiating class of Mahar but they affect the whole population of the depressed classes." (Ambedkar, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, 2014, p. 75)

¹³ There is a significant and historical account of the articulations of the women's question and voices in the Ambedkarite movement, which documents oral narratives of women in the movement. This archive of critical memory is called Pawar and Moon.

untouchable stamped on his forehead. But untouchable persons can be easily recognised as such because of their customs and way of life. I am of the opinion that these ways were once imposed on us by force. But such compulsion cannot continue under the rule of the British. Therefore you must now give up all those things that enable people to recognise you as being untouchable. The way you wear your saris is a sign of your being untouchable, you must wipe out that sign. You must begin the practice of wearing your saris in the same fashion that upper-caste women do, it will not cost you anything. ... Also, you must make sure that your daughters are educated. Knowledge and learning are not for men alone, they are essential for women too. ... so you must remember that if you want to improve the next generation, you must not neglect to educate your daughters. I am hopeful that you will not go away and forget this speech I have given you. You cannot afford to delay in putting it into practice.¹⁴

(Pawar & Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, 2006)

Following the Mahad Satyagraha, in which Dr Ambedkar was the first to draw water, the Orthodox Hindus were enraged and purified the tank;¹⁵ the town government also abandoned the non-discrimination pledge. On the following meeting, on December 1927, Ambedkar,



taking the agitation further, burnt a copy of the *Manusmriti*¹⁶ (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998, p. 101). With all this, Dr Ambedkar aimed to deconstruct the *varna* system, which perpetuated inequality in society and called for self-dignity and the end of cruelty towards Dalits. What these campaigns also did was to bring the question of caste on its own terms to the public,¹⁷ and in the 1930s, a distinct Ambedkarite counterpublic emerged (Rege, 2006, p. 51). An essential element was Ambedkar's political implication in the government, as he was part of the Bombay Legislative Council¹⁸ as one of the

¹⁴ Every sentence of this later became the basis for the work of untouchable women activists (Pawar and Moon, 2006).

¹⁵ The Brahmins 'purified' the tank with prayers, and with 108 pots of cow dung, cow urine, milk, curd and ghee (Roy, 2014).

¹⁶ Also called the Laws of Manu. It is the "Hindu law" and its influence on all aspects of Hindu thought, particularly the justification of the caste system, has been profound. It is also the base cause for sati and child marriage and it deeply sexualizes women.

¹⁷ Also called the Laws of Manu. It is the "Hindu law" and its influence on all aspects of Hindu thought, particularly the justification of the caste system, has been profound. It is also the base cause for sati and child marriage and it deeply sexualizes women.

¹⁸ He was also elected a member of the State Committee which made enquiries into the educational, economic and social conditions of the depressed classes and aboriginal tribes of the Bombay Presidency. Thereafter Dr. Ambedkar was nominated as a British India

representatives of the Depressed Classes and an important “drive within the Legislative Council was to push for the opening up of administrative and educational positions for lower castes” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 196). A policy of positive discrimination was introduced in favour of the Untouchables, because they would never receive education otherwise. However, even educated, they could not get jobs. Under pressure from Ambedkar, quotas for Untouchables in the administration were introduced (Jaffrelot, 2012, p. 91). Freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, equality before the law, universal adult franchise, free and compulsory primary education, a guaranteed living wage for every citizen, and limited hours of work were some of the other rights that Ambedkar fought for and that were included in the Resolution of Fundamental Rights in March 1931; also, the protection of women and peasants, were highlighted in this resolution, and most significantly, it established a barrier between religion and the state (Roy A., 2014).

Ambedkar also attempted, for the benefit of the depressed classes, to create a distinct electorate in the government, the same way other minorities had. At the Round Table Conferences, Ambedkar outlined why this was important,¹⁹ and after some time, “the British administration handed the Untouchables a distinct electorate for a period of twenty years” (Roy A. , 2014). Gandhi, on the other hand, did not approve of this; he would not support Ambedkar’s case for a separate electorate for Untouchables, even though he had agreed to separate electorates for Muslims and Sikhs (Roy A. , 2014). Gandhi declared “that unless the provision of separate electorates for Untouchables was revoked, he would fast to death,” writes Arundhati Roy in her preface to *Annihilation of the Caste, The Saint and the Doctor*: “He waited for a month. When he did not get his way, Gandhi began his fast” (2014).²⁰ This situation caused great tension, and it made Ambedkar look like the villain, “the traitor, the man who wanted to dismember India, the man who was trying to kill Gandhi” (Roy A. , 2014). Ambedkar did not have much of a choice and, even though “he tried to hold out with his usual arsenal of logic and reason, the situation was way beyond all that. He didn’t stand a chance” (Roy A. , 2014). As a consequence, on September 24th 1932, the Poona Act was signed, an agreement in which

Delegate to the Round Table Conference held in London in 1930 (Ambedkar, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, 2014, p. xii)

¹⁹ Ambedkar did not believe that universal adult franchise alone could secure equal rights for Untouchables. ... they would always be a minority and would never be in a position to elect a candidate of their own choice. He suggested that Untouchables, who had been despised and devalued for so many centuries, be given a separate electorate so that they could, without interference from the Hindu orthodoxy, develop into a political constituency with a leadership of its own. (Roy, 2014)

²⁰ See Arundhati Roy’s *The doctor and the Saint* (2014), for more information on the confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi.

“instead of separate electorates, the Untouchables would have reserved seats in general constituencies.” (Roy A. , 2014).²¹

Another noteworthy project Ambedkar worked on was the Hindu Code Bill, which “is seen as a manifesto of women’s liberation” (Rege, 2013, p. 26) he had drafted for months. The Bill would give women “access and control resources and property, the possibility of removal of restrictions of caste in marriage and adoption, and the dawn of the right to divorce” (Rege, 2013). After years of defending and advocating for it, the Bill did not get approved, and as a result, Ambedkar resigned as a Minister of Law in 1951.²² Ambedkar also contributed in the draft of the Indian Constitution; he was named Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. He managed to include several safeguards for the Untouchables, however it reflected the views of its privileged-caste members more than his own (Roy A. , 2014).

By the end of his life, he was greatly disappointed in Hinduism, and “after twenty years of contemplation, during which he studied Islam as well as Christianity, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism” (Roy A. , 2014). He made the conversion on October 14th 1956, at a conference held in Nagpur, along with 365,000 Dalit followers, who also converted during the public ceremony. Here is a speech he had given years before at a Depressed Classes Conference regarding the idea of conversion to escape the injustices of caste:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another faith none would treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power.” (Zelliot, 2013 in Roy, 2004)

Regarding the movements for Untouchables in India, both Phule and Ambedkar shared the same ideas, and they “both underlined the historical character of caste-based exploitation, rejected the varna order and suggested annihilation of caste as the only path to an egalitarian society” (Rege, 2006, p. 29). The contributions we have from Phule are

²¹ After Act was signed Ambedkar wrote: There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act...[I]t was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards of which they had become possessed under the Prime Minister’s Award and agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus. It was a vile and wicked act. How can the Untouchables regard such a man as honest and sincere?” (Ambedkar, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, 2014)

²² Sharmila Rege’s *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R Ambedkar’s Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, for more information on the Hindu Code Bill.

“his rigorous cultural revolutionary stand, his drive for equality and rationality, and in the creation of the Satyashodhak Samaj, which would carry on agitation for social and religious reform at a mass level” (Omvedt, 1976, p. 121) together with the opening of schools for girls. From Ambedkar we have already seen some of his work. Phule and Ambedkar were the agitators, and others joined their voices to speak the truth about the caste system, and as a post-Ambedkarite movement we have the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit literary movement, “which in the 1970s marked another defining moment in the politics of speaking caste on its own terms” (Rege, 2006, p. 30). However, the mainstream Hindu upper castes have made it so all of this is excluded from the educational system, and the voices of Phule and Ambedkar have been deliberately overlooked and discarded. Their voices have been silenced in the public, and as Rege writes “caste identity has hardly ever been an issue for public discussion” (2006, p. 2).

4. DALIT WOMEN WRITINGS

Caste and gender are deeply intertwined. This section will look at Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* to see how her work unveils this idea while exploring the relevance of Dalit literature in today's society. Rege explains how, as an upper caste student in social sciences, she was "part of a group that thought discussions about caste identities to be retrograde" (2006, p. 2). As she writes, it seems as if Indian sociology has led people to see caste only in villages, ceremonies, and rites, implying that caste plays no active role in ordinary urban life. In universities, the works of Phule and Ambedkar were not read and the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite movements were not part of courses on social movements (2006, p. 1). She explains how, a decade later, when she became a teacher of sociology, she realised that caste was still very much practiced in the classrooms. Thus, Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* is the second of "the two projects that were undertaken with the objective of fulfilling a pedagogical function in the area of Gender and Dalit Studies" (2006, p. 7) and it consists of two books: the first one is a research on the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite cultural movements, and the second one aims "to 'translate' into English the lived experience of caste as articulated in dalit women's 'autobiographies'" (2006, p. 7). The creation of these projects, Rege explains, arises from the need for teaching and learning resources that might enhance political and interpretive involvement with caste issues (2006, p. 7). For our purposes here, we will go through the second book of Rege's project, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, which first reviews the debates that arose with the emergence of the Dalit autobiographies and then reflects on caste, gender, and class issues. Following Rege's work, we will see the evolution of women's writings.

4.1. *The importance of Dalit testimonios and literature*

In recent decades there has been an increase in the publication of Dalit literature in translation, which are mainly life narratives, as the most recently published Dalit writings are autobiographical in nature (Rege, 2006, p. 10). As a result of this surge of interest in Dalit life narratives, there have been a number of debates around it, such as "the politics of translation and publications" or "the radical potential of the increased accessibility of dalits writings" (Rege, 2006, p. 10). These debates raise issues about "the origins of the genre of dalit life narratives and its political significance", because as the Indian scholar

wonders, “are dalit life narratives a moral source for political movements or reminders of a hateful past?” (2006, pp. 11-12).

There are two points of view to answer this question. On the one hand, there are those who feel dissatisfied with Dalit life narratives because they “focus more on the pre-Ambedkarite era and thus do not adequately represent the history of agitation and progress”; and also those who think they are “revivals of a hateful past” (Jadhav, 2010 in Rege, 2006, p. 12). On the other hand, we have the opinions from a Dalit intellectual (Baburao Bagul) and a Marxist scholar (D.K. Bedekar), who think that Dalit literature “is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone but is a historical necessity in promoting human freedom”, and see it also “as moving from the articulation of the experience of humiliation to humanism and from agitation to transformation” (Rege, 2006, p. 12). Nonetheless, Dalits’ narratives cannot be blamed for bringing such a terrible history into the present since such was (and still is) their reality, and their narratives are an excellent method to access the “silence and misrepresentation” (Rege, 2006, p. 13) these people have endured. In fact, the entire debate demonstrates the complicated link between “official forgetting, memory and identity” (Rege, 2006, p. 13). These stories have been forgotten, elided, or simply ignored by official history.

Dalit life narratives are *testimonios*, according to Sharmila Rege, because “they forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance” (2006, p. 13). As she argues, in a *testimonio*, the purpose is not the same as that of a literary novel; rather than entertaining, its purpose is to communicate the oppression, enslavement and struggle of a group, which is exactly what the two autobiographies that will be discussed in this paper convey. The Indian sociologist and scholar then, proceeds to state how “dalit life narratives cannot simply be reduced to mere ‘narratives of pain and sorrow’ or ‘memories of a ‘hateful past’”. These narratives violate the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography and create *testimonios* of caste-based oppression, anti-caste struggles and resistance” (2006, p. 14), and they provide new concepts and thoughts that have never been present in Brahmanical academic institutions before, contributing to the widening and diversification of knowledge and the serious consideration of new questions that have arisen. Some of these questions are attributed to the fact that the majority of *testimonios* are written by women, which raises gender concerns.

In order to better comprehend the questions that might have emerged as a result of the eclosion of Dalit women's *testimonios*, Rege provides an introduction to the processes of caste, gender, and the formation of classes. In terms of caste, we have previously seen how Ambedkar framed caste within gender distinctions to assess the worth of the surplus man and surplus woman, laying the groundwork for what Rege refers to as a feminist view on caste (2018). We can easily see how, within the three methods that are fundamental for caste to exist (violent control over women's sexuality, means of reproduction and life), exclusionary violence and subjugation of women are inherent in the process of caste formation. In her book, Rege mentions how the issue of gender within caste was influenced by the British Raj. As classes were forming and castes started to be defined, "matters of caste custom, norms related to marriage and purity of caste came to be regarded as matters of religion and were to be executed through the caste panchayat"²³ (2006, p. 20). Through this kind of local government, whenever there was a hearing, gender was crucial for the resolution because "when establishing the caste status, the purity of women was often more important than the right to the Vedic ceremonies and rituals" (2006, p. 20). With this we can see two clear pillars in Brahmanism: hierarchy based on the purity/pollution (Brahmanism/untouchables) dichotomy and the purity of women. By accepting the Brahmanical hierarchy, women faced stricter regulatory codes (2006, p. 20). Gender had become a major aspect in the division of the middle classes formed by the upper castes during the second half of the nineteenth century due to the stricter codes forced on women to maintain caste status. The division arose as a result of opposition to widow remarriage and other gender issues such as sati and girl marriage; this opposition would represent the adoption of lower caste models by the higher castes (2006, p. 24). Savarna Hindus, in order to prevent gender from becoming the major controversial subject among brahmin and middle classes, in the last decade of the century, worked on political strategies and nationalism to create a rigid "model of Hindu wifehood" (2006, p. 25). Under this argument, if you did not follow their rules, you were not supporting your country: "nationalism became more precisely defined ... as the rule of brahmanical patriarchy" (Sarkar, 2001 in Rege, 2006, p.25). However, as we have mentioned previously, "a class of thinkers emerged from the bahun and dalit castes in response to the opportunities for education opened up the colonial rule" (2006, p. 28), and there was a growing criticism that appeared "against this with Phule's Satyashodhak and

²³ Panchayat: In the Indian subcontinent, Panchayati Raj is the oldest form of local governance.

Ambedkar's call for the annihilation of the caste, which also opened the cultural imagination to more emancipatory gender codes" (Rege, 2006, p. 22). Forms of the movement are the cultural Satyashodhak and the Dalit Panthers, which sought to speak the truth about caste in public spheres, in efforts to recover the language of caste on its own terms, and the articulation of the women's question.

Sharmila Rege offers examples of some of the many voices that participated in the Satyashodhak counterpublic arenas. 'About the Grief of Mahars and Mangs' (1855) is a well-known essay written by Muktabai,²⁴ an eleven-year-old Mang student, where she highlights certain issues that affect the lives of the lower castes, such as land expropriation, lack of education, and the complicated hierarchies into which even the lower castes are placed depending on their degree of pollution. She also analyzes and contrasts the childbirth experiences of lower caste and brahman women (2006, p. 35). *Stree Purush Tulana* (1882), by Tarabai Shinde is an exemplary text of the Satyashodhak tradition. Tarabai's work covers a wide range of topics, including domestic and everyday concerns, forced widowhood, women's education, and predominantly masculine public spaces (2006, p. 36). The Satyashodhak also published a booklet on wedding ceremonies, which aimed to give the bride a more equal role and reframed the wedding as a platform for public lectures and discussions. Many copies of this booklet were sold and it provoked some controversy with the Brahmins who did not agree with the new practices. The printed booklets that were around, together with other oral forms of expression and communication, were the modes of publicity through which the Satyashodhak operated (2006, p. 37). One recurrent topic in the oral forms of expression critiqued Brahmanism for its practices of tonsure and enforced widowhood, so much so, that even brahman women and brahman widows wrote and spoke against it (2006, p. 38), as in the following example: *I am your loved one, father, your loved one,/ Why do you make me a tonsured widow?.../ Drop your adamant behaviour, Arrange for my Pat/Allowed among lower castes* (2006, p. 38).²⁵

With the rise of the strong Dalit movement led by Ambedkar at the turn of the twentieth century, writings by both middle-class and Dalit women appeared. Women from the middle classes proposed a womanhood model that sought an unsettling balance between the Brahmanic and Satyashodhak forms of womanhood and wrote in journals

²⁴ Rege points that her essay might qualify as the first 'modern *testimonio*'.

²⁵ Pat= second marriage

about the questions that concerned them, such as “enforced widowhood, dowry, the importance of education, age at marriage, physical exercise, health and sexuality” (2006, p. 47). On the other hand, Dalit women raised their voices in different oral forms to propagate Ambedkar’s message: ‘Educate, Organize and Agitate’ (2006, p. 53). From the 1930s, women’s writings began to appear in Ambedkar’s second newspaper *Janata*,²⁶ where the participants exposed themes related to the “lack of access to water, indebtedness, humiliation suffered by dalit students in schools, contraception as a responsibility of both men and women and intercaste marriages” (Nirmale 1987, Pawar and Moon 2000, in Rege 2006, p.56). In various essays of educated Dalit women, they recount in detail their introduction to Ambedkar’s life and ideas, the impact this had, and the possible futures that they anticipated, as it was him who directed their attention “to the specificities of women’s subordination by caste, [explaining that] underlined the simultaneity of the subordination, as ‘dalit’ and as ‘women’” (Pardeshi, 1997 in Rege, 2006, p.58).

Participation by Dalit women fell in the post-Ambedkar era, and while there is some factual evidence of women singers and cassette culture in Ambedkarite parties (2006, p.60), there is a lack of documentation that names this era “the silent years of dalit feminism” (2006, p. 63). There is, however, from the early twentieth century on, an extraordinary number of autobiographies written by middle-class women, in which they focus mostly on the lives of their husbands, thereby presenting their lives as the ‘other’ and seldom succeeding in degrading the Brahmanical patriarchy (2006, p. 49). Sharmila Rege overviews the autobiographies by middle class women in the 1950-1975 period as narratives of “companionate marriages of life sketches of famous husbands”, and from 1976-2000 the narratives are “of women artists and wives of famous men” (2006, p. 50). As Rege explains, “caste rarely appears in the autobiographies” (2006, p. 50) of these women, and if it does appear, it always belongs to another person or another time (Pandian, 2002 in Rege, 2006, p.50). Caste is seen as the ‘other’, not belonging to them, but solely to Dalit women; as a result, Dalit women’s battles are viewed as not feminist enough since they are considered to focus more on the community than on ‘women’s own issues’ (2006, pp. 50-51).

Since the 1980s, a new Dalit feminism has emerged in connection with caste identity and consciousness, dividing feminism into two distinct paths: *brahmani* and

²⁶ For further information on his journalistic role: <https://thewire.in/caste/the-journalistic-legacy-of-b-r-ambedkar-the-editor>.

abrahmani. The term *abrahmani* can be identified “as *dalit/dalitbahujan*/Phule Ambedkarite feminism” (Rege, 2006, p. 64). Dalit feminists have mobilized in the form of conferences, groups, and seminars, and an important debate arose with the essay “Dalit Women Talk Differently” (Guru, 1995 in Rege, 2006, p.65). There are both internal and external reasons that contribute to the need for Dalit women to speak “differently”: a dissenting discourse against the middle class women's movement, Dalit men, and the moral economy of peasant movements. It is a protest against their exclusion from the political and cultural arenas (Guru, 1995 in Rege, 2006, p.65). The new articulation of ‘difference’ requires Brahmanical feminism to rethink its theories, methodology and praxis. There has been a lot of rethinking and re-orientation of feminist analytical frames in the aftermath of the post-Mandal violence,²⁷ since it offered a direct challenge to the premise that caste identity in urban India was personal and private, and “feminist scholarship conceptualized Brahmanical patriarchy in order to define and clarify the links between caste and gender” (Chakravarti, 1993 in Rege, 2006, p. 67). In recent years, Dalit feminist scholars have discovered a new theoretical framework in which upper caste intellectuals' thinking is questioned and in which “dalit feminist conceptualisations would not contradict with the realities of their *co-others* of the land, making dalit feminist perception more incorporative than the mainstream feminist or dalit male theories” (Jalli, 2003 in Rege, 2006, p.69). In the case of Dalit male theories, Rege cites Lokhande (1996), who “has observed how in dalit men’s *testimonios* dalit women were only selectively remembered as sacrificing wives and mothers, or victims or caste-based practices” (2006, p.75). Overall, “*testimonios* engage us in a process of ‘rememory’ in a nation actively invested in forgetting them”²⁸ (Rege, 2006, p.75), and the life narratives of Dalit women constitute a valuable source that provide us with their interpretations of society as well as their accounts of the anti-caste movements and what those meant for them. With their *testimonios* we can recover the voices that have been silenced by oppression.

²⁷ The Mandal Commission was opened to bring into effect new government employment opportunities to reservations for Backward Classes. The protests, that happened in August 1996, were against giving jobs to certain castes. This initiated a fierce debate on the policy for the underrepresented and underprivileged groups in Indian politics. The violence occurred by Savarna elite students who attempted self-immolation as a form of protests.

²⁸ Rege borrows the term “rememory” from Morrison, 1987, where the Afro-American writer coins this term to refer to the recuperation of elements from memory which have been forgotten or elided.

5. TWO DALIT TESTIMONIOS

In view of everything that has been seen thus far, we shall now turn to two autobiographies or *testimonios* written by Dalit women, where we will be able to see first-hand from the author's perspective, the importance and the impact the fight for Dalit rights had on them, with Ambedkar's work and later with the literary movement and all the women's organizations. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is set in western Maharashtra in the early twentieth century, and it lives Ambedkar's historical movement from the beginning, thus reflecting the difference Ambedkar made in people's lives. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, on the other hand, is set in the twenty-first century, and it focuses on the post-Ambedkar period and the urban feminist and literary movement in Mumbai. The two autobiographies allow us to follow the progression of history and how Dalits have been affected by it.

Maya Pandit, an activist who has spent the last two decades working with Maharashtra's women's and teachers' organizations, has translated both memoirs from Marathi into English. She has made the Dalit narrative much more accessible via her translations, bringing these people's voices and experiences to a larger audience. Also, thanks to her work, we now have empirical data that can be utilized to better comprehend and recreate the Dalit experience, as well as demonstrate how caste and gender influence women's lives. Also, in the case of Baby Kamble, Pandit has included an interview with her at the end of the book, which helps to understand why Kamble decided to write her story.

What follows is mostly descriptive, to illustrate the lives of these two Dalit women, whose memoirs allow us to experience their world at two separate times. Both autobiographies complement each other incredibly well since we can see the changes and improvements in the lives of Dalit women and society following Ambedkar's influence. Therefore, sections of the novels will be added to better depict their lives.

5.1. *The Prisons We Broke*

In her life narrative, Baby Kamble describes the changes that occurred in her community following the arrival of Dr Ambedkar (who they lovingly call Babasaheb). The chapters are divided into different components of the community's life and customs, and she details the neighbourhood and its people as well as the traditions of Hindu festivities and other difficulties concerning women, such as childbirth. Despite the hardships Kamble

narrates, she keeps a touch of humour in her narration and does not adopt a tone of self-pity.

The Mahar people place a high value on their community because it is where and with whom they spend the majority of their time. Baby Kamble lived in her grandparents' home, as it was the custom when she was a child, in the *maharwada*, which is a designated area for the lower castes at the margins of the village (where the upper castes lived). The neighbourhood had roughly fifteen or sixteen houses. Only three or four of them were in reasonable shape, as Kamble illustrates:

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. They were tiny huts really. There would be a big clay pot with a small mouth kept at the entrance for drinking water. ... One corner of the hut would have a clay chulha near which lay a couple of clay pots, a wooden pali, and a tawa. ... Above the chulha would hang a long string called walni. These strings were our holy threads, the markers of our birth, our caste—like the janeu of the brahmins. These strings had to be there because on these strings we would hang the intestines of dead animals in order to dry them! There would be rags used as mattresses heaped in another corner. Near the chulha would be a small platform called bhanwas with a few clay pots on it. They matched the overall decor of the house.²⁹ (Kamble, 2017, p. 22)

Every house had also an altar for the gods; the bigger the altar, the higher the status of the family was. Kamble mentions that each household would be home to eight or ten children, some could even have twenty. It is also remarked the way children would be dressed: "A rag would be tied around the waist; its ends pulled between the legs and tucked up at the waist. For the boys, a rag of an arm's length and four-finger width would be considered adequate to cover their nakedness" (Kamble, 2017, p. 22). From the children, it was custom that the eldest son would be offered in service to the mother goddess as *potraja*:

To offer the son as *vaghya* or *potraja* was considered a great honour and prestige for the family. Besides, giving away the child in the service of the deity would sort out the problem of earning a livelihood ... The father very diligently saw to

²⁹ *Bhanwas*: small clay platform; *chulha*: stove; *janeu*: sacred thread worn by Brahmins as a mark of status as a high caste; *pali*: spoon; *tawa*: iron plates; *walni*: string for hanging things.

it that his son was properly trained. The training would begin when his son was seven years of age. (Kamble, 2017, pp. 30-33)

The training consisted in some dances and songs that would be performed in certain festivities. The child would also go begging for alms from door to door.

An important part of the *maharwada* for the community is the *chawdi*. A meeting place for the people in the village, it “was the place for the exchange of views” (Kamble, 2017, p. 23). In there they would talk about the life and visits from relatives, and about the gods and spirits that possessed them, describing dreadful events that had happened to them, such as: “Now he gets possessed by no less a god than the Yetal Sahib himself. Now that’s a real tough god, ... Whosoever he wants dead, will vomit blood and die at that very instant” (2017, p. 24). After such tales, they would start to pray. Looking back in retrospective, Baby Kamble writes: “Come to think of it, what kind of life did these people really lead? What was there worth living for? Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished” (2017, p. 24).

5.1.1. Month of *Ashadh*

A holy month in the Hindu calendar is *Ashadh*,³⁰ and the most significant of the year for the Mahar community:

The Mahars considered this their own month. This was the month for ritual baths, house cleaning and the polishing of floors with dung. This meant a lot of work. And yet it was a month of comfort, of sweet food! Even better than the months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik*, when *Diwali* comes—these were months of false happiness. They decidedly liked *Aashaadh* better. (Kamble, 2017, p. 25)

There would be a lot of cleaning, washing, and bathing throughout this month. It would be when the *potraja* danced and sang prayers to the mother goddess. They would have family gatherings and would eat sweet dishes, which was not usual. And the women would become possessed:

Resounding screams of these possessed women could be heard all over. We kids used to rush from place to place to see women getting possessed. ... The screams could be heard from a long distance. ... Meanwhile a *potraja* started beating rhythmically on

³⁰ Also called *Aakhaadh* for the non-brahman.

his dimdi! That would excite the women all the more. They would just sprint towards the chawdi, like excited she buffaloes, completely unaware of what they were wearing or the people around. They would dance around the potraja, screaming all the while at the top of their voices. These possessed women were called goddesses or mothers. When they started dancing, the potraja too slipped into his element. The goddesses got more and more frenzied. The potraja would alter the rhythm and the women matched their dancing to the changing beats. The potraja would get tired, but the women? No way! In case a potraja wanted to stop, the mothers would get terribly annoyed.³¹ (Kamble, 2017, p. 33)

The women would be possessed by gods' spirits, and the village elders would implore the goddess for forgiveness, begging her to leave the bodies of those women and asking for favourable omens in exchange for prayers and offerings. "After this, the spirit of the goddess left and the woman became conscious of her surroundings, as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep. Hurriedly, she tied her dishevelled hair into a knot and pulled the *pallav* on her head, becoming, once again, a docile and virtuous wife" (Kamble, 2017, p. 35). This would be repeated on various occasions during this month.

By the third week of *Aashaadh* the most important event took place: the *rede jatra* or Buffalo Fair. It was "considered to be a gift the Mahars had received directly from Indra, the king of gods" (2017, p. 41). There are numerous food offerings, which are later distributed among all the Mahars in the *chawdi*. Everyone, including the children, have something to prepare for this event. The entire process is full of traditions and rituals to be followed, such as the clothing the married woman wears (a green sari and a green blouse), the *kumkum*³² marks, the way the buffalo is paraded to the temple and the sacrifice. Once the buffalo is dead, they cook it for the entire community and what is left is distributed among all the houses, "the entire buffalo would be finished up in no time" (2017, p. 45). After, more dancing and singing would follow to appease the gods:

The women who dispensed medicines and who could cure illnesses caused by evil spirits would now play a very important role. Only these women knew which rituals should be performed to appease the goddess. Nothing should go wrong! Otherwise they might invite the wrath of the goddess upon themselves. (2017, p. 45)

³¹ *Dimdi*: A tiny drum carried by the *potraja*.

³² *Kumkum*: Red powder used to make a mark on the forehead

These rituals were performed to praise the Hindu Gods, and the entire event was surrounded by superstitions and fear of the Gods' spirits. Yet they kept repeating the same traditions year after year since it was what had been done for as long as they could remember, and it was the only thing they knew, to imitate their elders who had followed those same traditions all their lives: "We used to keenly observe ... the elders in our community and the customs followed by them, especially those practised during the month of Ashadh. ... We tried to emulate them, to think and behave like them" (2017, p. 52). After Ambedkar's appearance, Baby Kamble recognizes how this was imposed on them due to a lack of better understanding and writes:

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully. (2017, p. 47)

5.1.2. Practices of caste, untouchability and humiliation

Baby Kamble belongs to the *yeskar Mahar*,³³ whose work was assigned by the Patil, the administrative officer, to offer their services at the village. They had to wait, often for an entire day, to be assigned to do any type of work. After the service was offered, "the labour of the entire family was paid for in the form of *bhakris*,³⁴ which the *yeskar* had to go and collect from house to house every evening" (2017, p. 79). This consisted in going from house to house asking for any leftover food. For this, they had to carry a stick with bells at one end, to announce themselves, since their voice could pollute but not the sound of the bell. The Mahars had to lay a blanket where the leftover food would be tossed to receive it. The control the higher castes held on the lower caste was such that for the Mahars, "the *yeskar*'s stick was like a royal staff. Each *yeskar* considered this stick as a mark of honour for his family" (2017, p. 81). The most prestigious family among the Mahars was the sixteenth share; they would become the *yeskar Mahar* and have the stick for six months, and the rest of the year it would be shared in turns among the other families. Kamble tells us about the excitement and the routines that having the stick would entail:

³³ *Yeskar*: The Mahar whose duty was to work for the village.

³⁴ *Bhakris*: a kind of bread cooked with millet.

People would feel so excited when their turn came, that they wouldn't be able to sleep. The next man received the stick with great pride. His wife would worship it with *haldi* and *kumkum* and pray to it with folded hands.³⁵ (2017, p. 81)

They would worship and give offerings to the stick. The man with the stick would address himself very proudly to the Patil's office in the village, where he was given a place to wait— at a distance, of course. The man had to stand there all day waiting with his back bowed, greeting everyone who passed by, including the children. The salutation was like this: "He had to bend down, till his head touched his knees, join his palms together and say "*Johar ma i bap*"³⁶ three times, and then touch his head with his palms joined in salutation" (2017, p. 82). When the man was given a task, the whole family could participate (depending on the task). Sometimes they would be given food, other times they had to go the whole day without anything to eat and wait until night to go asking for the leftover food from house to house. When the leftovers were collected, "[the Mahar] would stride homeward joyfully as if he was carrying not leftovers of food, but some great catch. His entire family would dine on this food" (2017, p. 79).

The Mahars' tasks would include the removal of dead animals, from which they would take all the eatable pieces, as well as the duty towards dead people. During epidemics, dead animals would be found in the pens of various settlements and localities. Kamble tells us about this:

The carcasses of these animals would rot, giving out such a foul stench that people in the house found it difficult to even drink water. They would ask the Mahars to carry the carcasses away. When such summons came, the joy of the Mahars knew no bounds. Everybody shouted out to share the good news with others. ... Everyone would rush to the place, as did the vultures, kites and dogs that competed with the Mahars! The Mahars had to pull out the rotting carcasses and carry them to a deserted spot at a considerable distance from the village. Then they had to sweep the pens that were full of rotten flesh, maggots, droppings and the bloody secretions of dying animals. They had to wash the floor clean and drive out the flies. Once they had finished this task, they would go to the place where the others would be cutting open the carcasses. After one animal was cut, the meat was

³⁵ *Haldi*: turmeric.

³⁶ A traditional greeting that a Mahar man had to utter to greet the upper caste men.

divided into portions and the women would immediately begin to transport the food. They would put their share of meat into the baskets and cover it with twigs and leaves. (2017, pp. 88-89)

In the case of someone dying in the village, the Mahar would be responsible for telling the relatives. That meant they had to go wherever the relative resided, even if it meant running without food to distant places in the sweltering sun or heavy rains. The news would be delivered with apprehension, fearing the anger of the relatives, who would always yell insults at the Mahar. The family would go to the funeral on a cart, while the Mahar had to walk all the way back. The Mahar's family, meanwhile, would be in charge of collecting the firewood for the cremation and waiting at a distance, and

once the body was placed on the funeral pyre, the white sheet covering the corpse was taken off and thrown away. The Mahars waited for this moment. They had a right to the white sheet and the bamboo bier on which the corpse had been carried to the *ghat*. They could use the bamboo for their house and the sheet would come in handy for stitching clothes. They would happily carry these items back home.³⁷ (2017, p. 83)

The Mahar would wash this piece of cloth for two days. After that, Kamble retells memories of how the young daughter of the family would wear it in various styles, copying the Brahmins and other caste women, imitating their accent and repeating the same phrases: "Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don't touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion" (2017, p. 83). Kamble uses this opportunity to express how they, too, wished for a better life:

What other evidence does one need to know how the Mahar woman craved to live like a Brahmin or a high caste Maratha or Patil woman? They, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery. It was on the Mahar's labour that these idle parasites lived. The condition of the Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, those beasts of burden, who slogged all their life for a handful of dry grass. (2017, p. 84)

These practices that were included in the services Mahars offered to the village, the *watan*, would be fought against by Ambedkar in the 1928. He also addressed the Mahar

³⁷ *Ghat*: River bank.

people on this matter, urging them to start their businesses instead of serving the village as well as to stop eating the carcasses of dead animals.

When the women had to go to the village to buy anything from the shop, they had to be at a distance from the shopkeeper and pull their *pallav*³⁸ over their face. Then, “using the most reverential and polite terms of address, she would beg him with utmost humility to sell her the things she wanted” (2017, p. 26). If the shopkeeper children were around, they would be taught these same social practices:

“Hey you, can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch her. Keep your distance.” Immediately [the] Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, “Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.” (2017, p. 26)

The shopkeeper would throw the things at the Mahar woman too, instead of just handing them to her. The money would be left on the threshold, and with the double morality untouchability can be played, that the shopkeeper would take, as Kamble states: “That of course did not pollute him” (2017, p. 26).

Due to their poverty, they were all too familiar with hunger, and women often went to collect wood or grass to sell in the village. To go to the village, they could not use the regular road that was used by the higher caste, they were not allowed:

When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside. They had to cover themselves hilly if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master.” This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times, even to a small child if it belonged to a higher caste. (2017, p. 60)

If it happened that there was someone new in the group (a newlywed girl) who was unfamiliar with this custom, this would not pass as a foolish mistake,

the master would simply explode in rage. He would march straight to the Mahar chawdi, summon all the Mahars there and kick up a big fuss. ... “Who, just tell

³⁸ *Pallav*: The part of the sari which covers the torso.

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?" ... "No, no kind master! That girl is a new animal in the herd! Quite foolish and ignorant. If she has erred, I, her sasra, fall at your feet, but please forgive us for this crime." "No! You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn't it?"³⁹ (2017, p. 60)

Later, in the town, the poor girl would be abused and yelled at for her mistake. Once the women reached the village, the process of selling the wood or grass would be full of work for the women, as not to pollute. To begin with, they had rules on how to wear their pleats: "a Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes" (2017, p. 62), then, on reaching the Brahmin lane, every house had a "chest-high platform, like a wall, to prohibit the Mahars from directly reaching the door. The Mahar women would stand in the far-off corners of the platform" (2017, p. 62). When the bundles of wood were sold, the women had to untie the bundles and stack all the wood neatly, picking up each stick and inspecting it for any strand of long hair or thread from their saris that may have become strangled on the wood, while being yelled at to do so very carefully because otherwise the house would get polluted. "The same process was followed while selling grass as well. The kaki⁴⁰ would get the women to carefully check each blade of grass!" (2017, p. 63).

When there was a marriage in a high caste family, the *yeskar* Mahars would have to do all the menial jobs, from "arranging fuel for cooking to making arrangements for [the bride's] morning ablutions, ... and sweep the house, clean all the shit of a houseful of children, cut firewood and stack it neatly for cooking. All the dirty and laborious jobs were the privilege of the Mahar!" (2017, p. 80).

The double standards of untouchability may be found here as well. An untouchable cannot enter the brahmin's house because it will get polluted, but [Brahmins] can consume the wood they collect, the food they harvest. An untouchable cannot be touched, unless it is a man abusing or raping a girl, in which case he does not get polluted (this is not seen in Kamble's book, though). Untouchability is only a tool to make a person, a community, feel humiliated and worthless, to be hopeless. Baby Kamble has

³⁹ *Sasra*: Father in law.

⁴⁰ *Kaki*: Paternal aunt.

learnt this thanks to Dr Ambedkar, and as she demonstrates through her words and life work, she will be eternally thankful to him:

When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then? Just as the farmer pierces his bullock's nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. And the one who has taught us this, the one who has transformed us from beasts into human beings, is the architect of our Constitution—that shining jewel of sheel and satwa, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.⁴¹ (2017, pp. 63-64)

5.1.3. Difficult life for women

The life of a woman in Hindu India is in the hands of her father and later her husband. This is no different for the lower castes. For the Mahar community, in the time of Kamble's childhood, girls would be married when they were around eight or ten years old, "there were children who could not even remember their marriages" (2017, p. 90). The Mahar family of the sixteenth share had a very prestigious position in the community, and "to give one's daughter in marriage to a member of this Mahar's family ... was considered a great honour" (2017, p. 77).

The typical marriage involved a lot of preparation, lasted eight days, and was filled with traditional rituals that had to be performed. The bride's family was paid a dowry, and they had to take care of all the wedding expenses. They also had to travel to the groom's place for the event and the preparations. The ceremony would begin by applying *haldi* to the bride and groom. Many rules had to be followed for this: where the couple had to sit; the clothes they would wear; who applied the *haldi* and in what order was it applied. This ceremony lasted an entire day. Following this, the couple would be given a

⁴¹ *Shatwa*: truth; *sheel*: character.

bath, which would also be accompanied by a series of rites. Once the bath was over, “the bride and groom were not allowed to walk on their feet for five days” (2017, p. 91):

On the day of the marriage, the bride would be given her bridal sari to wear. The little girl would feel like she was drowning in that sari. The groom would be dressed in a thick coarse dhoti and khadi jacket, with a huge turban on his head. He would resemble a scarecrow perfectly. By the time the bride and the groom were both ready, preparations for the marriage ceremony would be complete. (...) a khadi towel was held between the couple and they would not be able to see each other. Their mamas would stand behind them. The bride and the groom wore huge mundawalis and over those they wore huge crowns called bashinga. Their foreheads were covered with kumkum. One could not even catch a glimpse of the bride and the groom as the poor creatures would be literally buried under all this weight. All guests would then be given rice grains that were coloured with haldi, as akshata, to shower on the couple at the time of the marriage.⁴² (2017, pp. 92-93)

During this period of time, before Dalits’ mobilizations, lower castes were not allowed to perform the wedding ceremony without a priest from the high castes, thus a Brahmin priest had to be invited. He “would stand at a distance for fear of pollution, but he would never make any compromise on his dakshina!⁴³ That he took away without any fear of pollution” (2017, p. 92), a part he was also given what is called “the dry grocery” (2017, p. 92), which consists of rice, wheat, yellow lentils and a sort of syrup (a few kilos of each).

The wedding would not be over just yet; the feast and other activities would still last a few more days. It would also include some games and singing, as well as more baths. There would also be a *rukhwat*⁴⁴ procession, where people dressed up as mythological characters would follow the procession with a basket filled with small ritual offerings. On the fourth day after the wedding had been performed, came a ritual where the bridal crown would be taken off.

After the wedding, it was customary for the new bride to live with her in-laws. As Kamble says: “the girl would embark upon a new life that was harsh and arduous” (2017,

⁴² *Mundawalis*: ceremonial strings of flowers worn by the bride and groom on their heads; *bashinga*: crown of flowers placed on the heads of the bride and the groom; *akshata*: coloured rice grains which are showered on the bridal couple in the marriage ceremony

⁴³ *Dakshina*: Money or things offered to the Brahmin priest as a mark of respect.

⁴⁴ *Rukhwat*: Ritual gifts to the bride from her maternal house, kept on display

p. 96). Kamble offers a sort of explanation for what will be the bride's new life, as well as a detailed description of her miseries. The explanation that is offered is this:

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! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them. (2017, p. 96)

The daughters-in-law, who were "young girl[s],... still immature" and had to leave their families, would be required to work from the time the sun rose until it set. The tasks would be too hard for her, and many at the time: cleaning the grinding stones, taking care of her *sasu*'s new baby, fetching water from the river, and cooking, among others. She would be verbally abused continually. The girl would be asked to cook and would be made fun of if the food did not turn out perfect:

Then the *sasu* would call all her friends and neighbours and hold an open exhibition of the tiny burnt bhakris, "Attyabai, come and see what's happening here. Didn't you think that I'd brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She can't even make a few bhakris properly. Oh well, what can one expect of this daughter of a dunce?"⁴⁵ (2017, p. 96)

The abuse would not come only from the mother-in-law, other members of the family would participate too. However, as Kamble tells us "This rigorous punishment at a young age was far preferable to what she had to endure once she reached maturity" (2017, p. 97). Once the girl had her first period, the 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 meet. She stayed awake at night for fear of their coming together" (2017, p. 97). The mother-in-law would talk ill of the girl to her son so much that he would end up hating and beating her. Other women in the neighbourhood would also join in with false accusations and warnings, "the neighbourhood women simply loved such conspiracies. This provided some excitement to their otherwise uneventful lives. The whole village would gather in front of the tortured girl's door" (2017, p. 98). The poor girl was just "an easy prey. Anybody could torture her as they wished" (2017, p. 99). The torture could go to awful lengths, and the girls had no place where to escape. If they were to return to her

⁴⁵ Mother-in-law

parents' home, they would send her back, and the repercussions would be considerably worse. In the narration, Kamble also includes a story about a daughter-in-law whose nose was chopped off. These practices were in use until 1940.

Baby Kamble tells these stories that she knows because she grew up surrounded by these situations, but does not explain much about her personal experience or her own wedding. At the end of the book, there is an interview with Maya Pandit in which she asks Kamble when did she get married. Kamble explains that she was thirteen when she got married, so she was already a little older than the usual age, and her wedding was one of the first marriages according to the Buddhist way. There was no Brahmin priest to perform the marriage, and during the ceremony they read a praise to Dr Ambedkar's work.

Another topic that Baby Kamble delves into in depth is the circumstances in which women were forced to give birth. For the first delivery women usually went to their mother's house, although for the first delivery, these women were children themselves, since they would be very young, "as all girls were married off at a very tender age" (2017, p. 65). The lack of hygienic habits and medical knowledge put the mother's life at risk:

The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably, the vagina would get swollen, obstructing the baby's path. The girl could overcome all obstacles and have a safe delivery only if her luck held strong! It was a battle with death. (2017, p. 66)

The advice the elder women would give to the girl's mother were mere superstitions that they blindly followed out of fear. However, the danger did not end there. Once the baby was born, the girl would have several wounds and cuts inside, which would pain her enormously. Sadly, as poor as they were, most of the times they would not have even a dirty piece of cloth to use to stop the bleeding. One thing they did have was water and wood, so the new mother and the baby would get many hot baths. The mother would also consume some gruel, as it was thought that if the mother ate it, the infant would not suffer stomach pains. As Kamble recounts, many new mothers had to go hungry and suffer from high fevers and diseases:

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.

Labour pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by onlookers nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating—everything caused the new mother’s condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever. On most occasions, it was tetanus. (2017, p. 67)

When this happened, because “the Mahars did not know about medicine, they used all kinds of superstitious remedies” (2017, p. 82) to remove the spirit that was believed to be inside the girl. Many young girls and children died. If such a thing happened, people would go to a goddess (the goddess Satwai) and perform the customary rites. If the girl survived, there were other rituals to perform: on the fifth day, the new mother was supposed to consume five specific organs of an animal in front of seven stones that represented the goddess, with the infant at her feet. During the night, the new mother and her mother kept vigil because it was believed that “the goddess Satwai and the god Barama visited the house at midnight to write the baby’s future on its forehead” (2017, p. 69). Here, Kamble adds a touch of sarcasm to point to the absence of possible fates for the Mahar babies:

But didn’t all the babies in the Mahar community share the same fate? So what was there to write on the forehead of each baby? Actually, both Barama and Satwai probably give the Mahar household a miss. Or they must have made one common stamp for all the Mahar children! In any case, what was so glorious in the life of a Mahar that they could choose to write about? So one common stamp was probably more than adequate for all Mahar babies. (2017, p. 69)

5.1.4. Winds of change

Throughout the text, Baby Kamble mentions Ambedkar’s contribution to their lives and what that meant for them:

From 1930 onwards, his name started reaching villages like a gentle breeze that brings succour in the scorching sun. Our Bhimraja decided to awaken his people who had sunk to the level of subhumans. He began to organise small meetings and speaking to the people. (2017, p. 69)

To reach the meeting they had to walk several miles sometimes, but Ambedkar's word reached every Mahar, and his speeches would be the new conversations in the *maharwada chawdi*. They were also very impressed by the fact that Ambedkar was also a Mahar:

"Such great education he has had, you know. Imagine, he returned to Mumbai in a ship! And he can actually speak in the white sahib's own tongue and hold his own." This would be enough of an invitation for yet another to chip in, "This man is nothing less than a miracle of god. That's why he's been able to cross the seven seas, you know! Anyway, let's sit down and listen to what he has to say." (2017, p. 70)

Baby Kamble's grandparents attended one of the speeches Ambedkar gave in Maharashtra and were mesmerized by his words, as Kamble narrates: "My grandparents started repeating Ambedkar's words to every person they met. They never got tired of repeating the things that he said. All the people who came to our house had to listen to them" (2017, p. 72). The grandparents encountered some adversaries among the elders of the neighbourhood. They did not want to rebel against the village, disregard the customs of eating dead animals, or even educate the children since they didn't comprehend what difference it would make. They would argue:

"Aren't we the children of this land? This duty of being the yeskar has been earned by our forefathers. ... And you suddenly want us to give it all up! You get these silly ideas stuffed in your head and then come and pour them down on us. Stop preaching us this Christian knowledge. Why do you want us to put our children in schools? Are they going to become teachers? Or are they going to become Brahmins? ... The village land is our mother. We have to carry forward whatever order she has given us. Why do we need foreign knowledge? The yeskar's stick is the mark of the happiness of the land. ... Do you know that if the goddess is displeased, she can ruin the entire house? She will burn our houses as punishment. The potraja is supposed to be the servant of the goddess. Do you think that this is an ordinary thing? It's a great honour given to us. Stupid man comes and tells us to forget our gods and gives us Christian gods instead! No, no. For us what our ancestors did is the right thing." (2017, pp. 73-74)

There would be numerous arguments on both sides, but the change was already arriving and there was no turning back. "People began to change slowly but steadily" (2017, p. 75). The first changes Kamble mentions are the clothes and hairstyles. Whereas they used

to dress in rags, they now wore *pajamas* and arranged their hair in a style known as ‘English bal’. The most significant change, though, was that parents began enrolling their children in school. The adjustment that took a little longer to come was abandoning the custom of eating dead animals, but the young people kept pushing on this matter, and they eventually stopped altogether.

Gradually, the wind of Ambedkar’s thoughts turned into a whirlwind. Everybody began to understand, argue and consider. The dead cells in their blood were charged with a new life. Blood began to flow through their veins with new vigour. People got charged with the spirit of revolution. There was one name on every tongue— Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. This included the young and the old with no exception. Each hut reverberated with his name. (2017, p. 75)

In the years 1938-39, Baby Kamble and her brother were enrolled in a school for the first time. Many more young activists started enrolling their children too. At the school where Kamble attended, there was a group of around ten girls from her community. Most schools were then predominantly high caste. It was the first time for the high castes to have girls that could pollute them in the same class. Baby and the other Mahars were still treated as before, but now they were encouraged to answer back:

The teacher had allotted us a place in a corner near the door from where we could not move till school was over for the day. The blackboard would be in another corner. We could neither see what the teacher was writing on the board, nor could we raise our doubts, in the classroom. If we went to drink at the school tap, the other girls would raise hell. But we never listened to them. We were greatly emboldened by Baba's brave spirit. We, seven or eight friends, would move together as one person. The higher caste girls would hurl taunts and abuses at us, “These Mahar girls put on such airs. They have even touched the taps! Now where should we drink water from? Stupid things!” (2017, p. 110)

There would be many quarrels between the girls of upper castes and the Mahars. The Mahars would chase the high caste girls to touch them and pollute them. The teacher would punish them by having them bend down and touch their toes until the class was over, but after the class, they would go back to the chase. This kept going until they left school. The kinds of insults they exchanged were like this:

“That Ambedkar has educated himself, that’s why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives

himself!” ... “You shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar’s name! You have your own baldy, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth! That toothless old bugger hasn’t any teeth! Ha ha ha”. (2017, p. 110)

Kamble’s brother, inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, had started composing songs. He and others from his same school, would go in “procession singing fiery songs of revolt through the town at night” (2017, p. 112). This would also be the start of the literary movement, where new and revolutionary political ideas were shared through the singing and telling of stories.

The entire maharwada would gather at the chawdi, drawn by their bells and songs. People listened to the songs with great pride. Eventually everyone would join in the singing. The boys sang these songs with such spirit, force and vigour, that our blood would be on fire. The singing continued throughout the night with people lavishing praise on the boys. Lemons and coconut were smashed to ward off evil spirits. ... Thus the new wind of Ambedkar's thoughts started to blow. The end of the long night was in sight. In the chawdi, Ambedkar’s ideas were constantly discussed and these discussions generated more ideas. One such idea was to celebrate Babas birth anniversary on 14th April. (2017, p. 112)

For the celebration of Ambedkar’s birthday, they made up new songs. Baby Kamble writes one that she and her friends made up on the spur of the moment: *What a shameless god! How I’m fed up with him! / The stink of abir and gulal, friend, has made me lose my appetite / The sounds of the taal and mridung, make any head ache so! / Why should I see this Vithoba? He is nothing but a black stone!*⁴⁶ (2017, p. 113).

People would gather in the *chawdi* to read Ambedkar's newspapers and speeches, which were read aloud. Kamble grew up in this environment, where cultural programs began to arise and she, too, would participate. She explains how once they organized the entry into a temple, and “soon the news of the Mahars having polluted the divine couple Viththal and Rukmayi spread all over Phaltan. In fact, it reached all the eighty-four villages in the state of Phaltan” (2017, p. 125). All of these changes affected Kamble’s view of the world: “I realised that the purpose of [Ambedkar’s] life was to empower the oppressed and to restore to them their human rights. Once I realised this, I understood

⁴⁶ Vithoba is a Hindu deity predominantly worshipped in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

that even my life was meant for the service of the society. I realised I had to be one with my people” (2017, p. 127). She also became very radical in other aspects, such as not wearing the *kumkum* mark on her head, which until then women were very protective of.

Together with her husband, Kamble started their own business and opened their own grocery shop. They started small, selling grapes. It went well and they added vegetables; “gradually, along with vegetables, we added provisions like oil, salt, and such other stuff to our list. This also fetched us a tidy profit. So we decided to expand our business. I told my brother and husband to stock our house with grocery items” (2017, p. 139). The business worked very well for them, and it was there that Kamble started her writing, during the times she was alone in the shop and her husband was out looking for provisions. Her work has gone beyond the writing, which she hid and held from publication until years later, when Maxine Berntson, a sociologist working on the scheduled castes, approached her for some data collection. In the course of their conversations, it came out what she had written and Berntson read it. She then took it to the editor of the women’s magazine *Stree* and it was finally serially printed.

The work that Baby Kamble has been involved in started with the writing, but then she also started a school for orphans:

Baba’s words showed me the way. I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba’s advice verbatim, to the best of my ability. When Shashikant Daithankar was secretary in the Maharashtra government, he granted me permission to start an ashram shala for orphans from the backward castes. Today, I am the president of Mahatma Phule Dnyan Vikas Prasarak Sanstha and I serve the community in this capacity. Two hundred children study in this school. I ask my children to donate money whenever the school is under financial strain.⁴⁷ (2017, p. 132)

Over what have been seen, Dalits had a very tough life. The saddest aspect is that they were forced to live in such conditions; they were kept in the dark so they would not know any different. For obvious reasons, women faced more adversity, not just as a result childbirth, but also as a result of the dual subjection they experienced: both the caste system and their male counterpart. In some conversations included in Kamble’s autobiography, males spoke to women in such a condescending and disrespectful tone

⁴⁷ *Ashram shala*: Boarding schools, especially in the tribal areas of Maharashtra and elsewhere in India, are called ashram shala or ashram schools.

that it was the same treatment a high caste would give a Mahar. Men had complete control over women in all aspects of their lives; Kamble describes her mother being kept in the house because “it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town” (2017, p. 19). Next, with Urmila Pawar’s autobiography, we will be able to see the changes that have occurred from Kamble’s time to hers. The two autobiographies are complementary, as they provide views of two different moments, which are also very closely related.

5.2. The Weave of My Life

Urmila Pawar’s life narrative is an excellent autobiography to continue viewing how the changes brought by Ambedkar impacted the Dalit community, particularly women. Her narrative takes us from her childhood memories in the village where she lived with her mother and siblings. She also talks about her experiences as a student, and later as a married woman. In her marriage she moves with her husband to the city, and we can see how her writing begins there, as well as her involvement in women’s organizations.

Pawar’s story begins in the Konkan region, also located in Maharashtra, where her family lived before going to school. They also belonged to the Mahar Caste. The village where she lived before being schooled is surrounded by mountains and rocky paths. The way to go to Ratnagiri from the village was quite arduous, yet women were compelled to make the journey to the market to sell their products in order to survive:

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. The steep climbs, with their narrow winding paths full of jutting sharp stones and pebbles, were extremely slippery. One wrong step and one would straightway roll down to one’s death somewhere in the bottom of the deep valleys. Then there were two big rivers to cross. These rushed down the hills, looping through thick forests and valleys, their bellies carrying who knows what under the deep water. But that wasn’t all! 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. (2009, p. 30)

Pawar tells us how all the children always wanted to go with their mothers, as they enjoyed being in the village. During the journey, they would gossip and curse the founder of the same village for placing it in such a place. Some of the stories told during the day were about an ancestor of them who felt humiliated for having to wait endlessly outside the priest's house and at a distance for any kind of ritual, so he called a meeting in the village and agreed that in the future they would perform all the rituals themselves. This "must have been the influence of Mahatma Jotiba Phule's Satyashodhak movement in 1873" (2009, p. 40). This humiliated ancestor was Pawar's great grandfather, and she tells us how "the responsibility of carrying out various rituals in nine surrounding villages" (2009, p. 40) was given to him. "It was a tradition that my family had inherited. All the men in our family, and even a woman, Phatiakka, [my grandfather's] daughter and my father's sister, would function as the "bhat" for the community. They read holy texts and performed religious rituals" (2009, p. 40).

The schools at this time were held inside the houses of Brahmin teachers, and even though "some Mahar children also went to school, ... they had to sit outside in the courtyard. The teachers taught them and examined their slates from a distance. They would hit the children with stones if they made any mistakes" (2009, p. 43). Pawar's father was a teacher and he was very persistent with everyone getting an education. Even when the eldest daughter was to be married, the father "selected a boy who was the first boy among the Dalits of Mire to have passed the vernacular examination, that is, the seventh standard" (2009, p. 44). The father also wanted "his daughters to work and be financially independent" (2009, p. 46), and so the eldest daughter got a job at a mental hospital. She had some trouble when "the mad women in the hospital had come to know that she was a Dalit" (2009, p. 46) and some patients would not take food from her hands and abused her because of her caste. She wanted to quit, however her father convinced her to stay.

We can immediately see how the timeline parallels Kamble's up to this point. Kamble was part of the first generation of Dalits to attend school in her *maharwada*, later opening her own school. In contrast, Pawar's father was a teacher, and she comes from a family of Dalits who had already acquired an education.

Urmila's father died from an ulcer when she "was in the third standard, in 1954. He was just fifty-eight" (2009, p. 52). When they went to the hospital to see him "he wept like a child and told Aaye, 'Educate the children.'" (2009, p.54). The fact that the father

was at a hospital is another significant difference from fifty years earlier, when Baby Kamble was a child and their only options were superstitious remedies. After her father's death, Urmila's mother would mourn her late husband every morning, and never visited the village again, not even for festivals. She would keep herself occupied with the weaving of the baskets without stopping. She had to be more rigid than ever since there was less income in the house:

She would sit under the vad tree in our courtyard, weaving her bamboo baskets till late at night. That was the last thing our eyes, heavy with sleep, would take in before we went to bed. And when we opened our eyes early in the morning, she would be sitting in the same place. In between she would go to the stove to do something. In the past it was my father's hands that worked, now it was hers. (2009, p.81)

5.2.1. Festivals

Pawar's festival celebrations are significantly different from those of Kamble. There were still certain customs, like as tattooing, cleaning, and singing, but there are no spirits possessing the women in Pawar's story, nor are there that many rituals to perform:

Women worked very hard to prepare for the festival and earned a little extra money by selling more grass and firewood bundles, which they saved for the festival. They bought new clothes, bangles, necklaces, and such things for their children. They would also get tattoos on their and their daughters' foreheads, arms, and hands from tattooing women. ... They swept their houses clean; polished the floor, walls, small alcoves, corners of rooms—all dirtied with constant spitting—with cow dung, went to the river to bathe, dressed in new saris and blouses, and got all decked up, wearing cheap ornaments bought from the bazaar shops. ... All this preparation was for the program at night when they danced and played various games like zimma and phugadya, in front of the Ganapati. ... They sang many songs, dancing in circles, bending forward and backward, snapping their fingers to keep rhythm. The songs reflected their hard lives. (2009, p.56)

Since Urmila's mother did not attend to more festivals after the death of her husband, other relatives had to take the children if they wanted to go. The one big festival celebrated in her village was the Holi, for this they would follow some traditions:

The young men of the village would cover the rock [a huge rock known as Chandaki Devi's rock] with dry leaves and grass a week before the festival. On the day of Holi all the old and young men and children in the villages would go to this rock on the hill, playing in a band. There they would put turmeric and kumkum on the covered rock, worship it, break a coconut, and then set it on fire. They would pray, "Lord, please keep our children happy." Then they would bellow, beating their palms against their mouths. This would be followed by obscene curses and shouts that could be heard for four to five villages around. ... After setting fire to Chandaki's Rock in the morning, young men would go to the forest to collect wood for the village Holi. (2009, p.68)

The village Holi for the upper castes was somewhat different, since the Mahars did not participate in it other than to collect the wood for the fire. During the upper castes prayers, they also included "calamities to the Mahars. ... But the Mahars dared not lodge a protest against this" (2009, p.69), as we read:

[The upper castes] would be the ones to carry the palanquin of the god, decorated with tassels, on their shoulders. They would push it like a he buffalo on each other's shoulders, jump four feet high in their dance. Each man from the upper castes would give his shoulder to the palanquin and dance till he was exhausted. All except the Mahars! None of the Mahars would be allowed to even touch it. (2009, p.69)

Another tradition in Pawar's telling of the Holi festival is connected to food: "the Marathas and Brahmins would make sweet stuffed chapatis called puran poli, and in our houses we would cook lentils called pavata or varana" (2009, p.69). Pawar provides many descriptions about the food, as well as comparisons between what the upper caste and what her family ate. They also had to deal with frequent hunger. After the festival meals, there would also be staged plays with humorous dialogues and attractive costumes.

After the festival was over, many of the women went to the houses of the upper castes to beg for the leftover food. They took that food as a way of payment because they had offered some services to them, such as labouring in the field or weaving baskets, "especially houses that performed the customary Mahar duties, such as beating the dhol, disposing of dead animals, delivering messages would go to beg as a matter of right" (2009, p.71). Urmila Pawar's family did not join in this practice because it was something that her father prohibited.

5.2.2. Wedding rituals

Pawar tells us about her elder brother's wedding. The wedding took place before the Buddhist conversion arrived to the Konkan area. Despite the fact that it is a Hindu wedding, it differs greatly from Kamble's experiences. For starters, they had a group of chosen five virgin girls called *muhurtawali*, who "were supposed to observe a strict fast till the marriage took place" (2009, p74). Pawar was chosen to be one of these girls when she was around nine years old. The role of these girls was to go in procession to the river with some rice in a basket and wash it as part of the ritual. Before the ceremony, there would be a lot of singing and a bath, as well as the gift exchange. But other traditional rituals were not performed, "nor did the couple play any games that were usually played in our community at such times, ... they were all traditional, outdated things and ought to be given up" (2009, p79). Another ritual performed is the naming of the bride, where "she would be made to take the pallav on her head and be given a new name" (2009, p. 80) by her husband. After, there would be games to be played by the couple and other guests, "there was a game that taught the groom how to deal with his wife", and another one that seems to be taken from the experiences Kamble told about the daughters-in-law:

There was a game for the mother-in-law as well. The women would throw some very tiny black beads into the bride's hair. Then the *sasu* would comb the bride's hair with a *phani*—a lice comb. She would show the black beads on the comb to all and say, "Oh, look at this! See how her head is infested with lice! What a dirty girl this one is!" Then she would laugh loudly along with the other women and admonish the bride, "I will not tolerate such filthiness in my house!" (2009, p. 80)

As Pawar remarks, "all these games were basically intended to control the bride and keep her in check. But when they were being played, everybody laughed and had a good time. These were happy occasions in their lives" (2009, p.80).

After the conversion to Buddhism, the ceremonies changed according to the Buddhist conventions, and "any of the older rituals such as applying turmeric on the bridegroom's body, tying flower mundawalis around his crown, tying a mangalsutra around the bride's neck, and playing instruments such as dhol and tashe ... had to be dropped!" (2009, p.122), although some of the preparations were just the same as before. The new wedding ceremonies would go as Pawar explains:

The villagers did not have to do much except enjoy the marriage feast. The white-robed Buddhist priest conducted the wedding single-handed, right from shopping to performing the marriage rites. He first covered the table with a milk-white piece of cloth, placed the photographs of Dr. Ambedkar and the Buddha on it, garlanded the photographs, and offered some flowers to the Buddha. ... Before commencing the rituals, the priest asked permission of the president and all other members of the community to go ahead with the marriage. Someone seconded the proposal. Then the ... the bride and groom exchanged rings. They had to take twenty-two oaths, which the priest made them repeat after him. Next they put garlands of marigold flowers around each other's necks and we showered petals of the same on them. (2009, p.125)

As Urmila Pawar writes, after some time, the women of her community began adding new words to the old wedding songs, ending with the criticisms that some of the changes in the ceremonies had brought.

5.2.3. Conversion to Buddhism

Due to their location, the Ambedkarite conversion movement did not reach the Konkan area until a few years after Dr. Ambedkar's death. Before that they too had some superstitions and believed in the wrong doing of spirits. Pawar's brother became priest after the death of their father. However: "All such things—ghosts and supernatural experiences—stopped abruptly after the conversion ceremony took place. That was later, of course! In truth, we hardly had an idea of what conversion meant, nor did we know who this Dr. Ambedkar was who had asked us to convert to Buddhism" (2009, p.119).

Activists from other villages arrived to Ratnagiri, where Pawar lived. They guided people in political matters and their rights, and it was they who introduced Ambedkar to the village, as well as his death: "I came to know who Babasaheb was, and then the conversion happened quite suddenly" (2009, p.120). People from many villages marched together to Ratnagiri and then there were loudspeakers that would give instructions, and the conversion ceremony took place. Afterwards, every household collected the idols and pictures of the gods and goddesses and threw them in a basket. Since Pawar's mother would pray every morning to those idols for his dead husband, the writer expected her mother to complain, "but ... was amazed to see her dump some of the idols as well" (2009, p.120). They all proceeded to the river to throw everything away, repeating traditional invocations but with different words: *O ye Gods, / Yes, that's right, Maharaja,*

/ 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. / Yes, that's right, Maharaja (2009, p.121).

Following the conversion, people began to hang portraits of Dr. Ambedkar and place Buddha statues where the gods used to be. Activists went door to door teaching people the Buddha's invocation as well as spreading Ambedkar's teachings and the new designated days of celebration. One major consequence was that boys who were often absent from school gradually began to return. In addition, according to Buddhist religion, previous birth, marriage, and death ceremonies were abandoned in favor of new ones that were progressively formalized.

5.2.4. Caste accidents

Other than the usual restrictions Dalits face as a result of their 'polluting' status, such as not being allowed to draw water from wells or being forced to sit separately at school so as not to touch anyone, Urmila Pawar tells us about one that occurred because "the savarnas in the Konkan were very resentful of Dalits leaving the Hindu religion to become Buddhists" (2009, p.99). One of the most significant aspects of Hinduism is that once you are born into a caste, you can never leave it, regardless of whether you have changed your faith or are a second-generation Christian or Buddhist convert, or even if you have lived abroad all your life and do not know what caste is. To Hindus if you are an Untouchable you will always be treated as such. In this sense, unlike social classes, where you may advance from a low class to a high class by marrying well or doing well in business, the caste system remains always the same. Hinduism will not allow Dalits to be free human beings. Pawar recounts an incident in connection with this as follows:

[Brahmans] deliberately tried provoking the Dalits in many ways. The Dalits were supposed to collect drinking water from a particular part of the river. One day, early in the morning, people from the Maratha community⁴⁸ deliberately took their buffaloes and bullocks to the designated part of the river to wash them. The Dalit women from the wadi had to wait for a long, long time before the muddied water settled down and they could collect some clean drinking water. (2009, p.99)

After this, the Mahars held a meeting to discuss this issue, however, they did not dare "to impose a fine on [the Brahmans]" (2009, p.100). While this event may not appear

⁴⁸ Maratha is an upper caste.

to be particularly harmful, it is often the case that when a conflict in which the Dalit's life is put in danger (which happens quite often) they do not dare to inform the authorities either. Harassment of Dalits is still a common occurrence, which is still happening because of old customs, as explained in this incident:

Once when I had gone to stay with Akka, a poor couple came to see them from a village called Anaav. They were sitting on their haunches in the verandah. The husband had wrapped a loincloth around his waist. There was a huge gaping wound on his bare back. His wife sat crying, wiping the tears with her torn sari. It seemed that in their village there was a ritual. An upper-caste man would inflict a big wound on a Mahar man's back and his wife had to cover the wound with some cloth and go on walking around, howling! Quite a ritual, that one! Dada, Akka's husband, was telling them, "You have to resist this custom! How can you tolerate it? 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." ... Afterward Akka would say, "How are these people any different from our patients in the mental hospital?" (2009, p.100)

Other incidents described by Urmila Pawar include work colleagues or mothers from her children's class who were initially polite and friendly, but insulted her and distanced themselves from her after finding out she is a Dalit. In the city, caste discrimination just takes a different form.

5.2.5. Violence towards women

There are some differences regarding the treatment towards women from what we have seen in Baby Kamble's narrative, but there are also a lot of similarities. Women's violence in a society where the caste system still exists is something that cannot be entirely eradicated; one cannot disappear without the other.

In the case of the daughters-in-law for example, Urmila Pawar's experience was rather positive. She had a very good relationship with her *sasu*, or mother-in-law, and the other members of her husband's family. In addition, despite her family's disapproval, she was able to choose her husband. Also, Pawar's life contrasts with prior traditions in moving to the city with her husband and children, emancipating herself from her in-laws. Nonetheless, she shares some experiences from relatives who did not have it as easy. A cousin of Pawar, Susheela, married a man who would hit her constantly:

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 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. When she came like that, and if Baba saw her, he would bark, "Who's that? Susha? All right, give her something to eat and send her back the way she's come. She must stay with her in-laws!" (2009, p.56)

As we can see, this kind of treatment continued to happen, and, as Kamble explained, if the beaten daughter in law returns to her family, she will simply be sent back to their in-laws, just as with Pawar's cousin. However, at a young age, Pawar would become aware of these affairs if there was violence involved, as in her cousin's case. For a time, Pawar shared her home with a sister-in-law whom she did not even identify as a family member, despite knowing how much she loved Urmila and her siblings. This sister-in-law that lived with them had to do plenty of housework and would be the last one to eat, and reading Pawar's memory of it:

Young as I was, I never realized the worth of her work, her endurance, and the deliberate indifference of the others toward her. Instead I treated her with an insolent indifference because of her big knee caps, thin bony legs, torn sari, unkempt hair, and cracked feet—all of which were obviously a result of walking with a huge load on her head on a regular basis. I always maintained a distance with her, so much so that when a classmate of mine, Shyamala Chavan, asked me, "Who's that woman in your house who looks like this?" I replied, "Oh, that woman? She's our maidservant!" when I ought to have told her that she was my sister-in-law. (2009, p.64)

Another thing Urmila Pawar recalls is how the town's *Panchayat* openly judged women's conduct, as has been pointed out by Rege in her work:

If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publicly judged, and her other relatives would beat her up as well. ... One day some women from the village came reporting that a widow was found to be pregnant. The whole village knew who the man was. The village ordered her to abort the baby. She did not listen to them. So she was judged before nine villages and punished in keeping with their verdict. She was

made to stand leaning forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the villages' honor! In another incident, when an eight-month-pregnant woman openly accused her husband of having illicit relations with another woman, the villagers gave her the same punishment. Women, mad with excitement, kicked her till the baby died inside her, and the woman died in pain in a week's time. Why should this so-called honor, this murderer of humanity, this tool of self-destruction, be so deeply rooted in women's blood? Why? (2009, p.119)

Honour punishment were and still are widely practiced, and rape is a big part of this too. The behaviour of women is heavily centred on caste honour; in this way, she is continually supervised, particularly her sexual conduct. As a result, the violence directed towards her is justified. One of the primary places of intersection between caste and patriarchy is the complex and controversial idea of 'honour.' Male honour is based on their capacity to dominate women's bodies, whereas female honour comprises complying to acceptable and authorized roles and norms of conduct (Gorringe, 2018).

Other instances of violence toward women are in the form of sexual abuse by male relatives. Pawar recalls some of the conversations she had with the girls in her class, which included several of these stories. In addition, a kind of gender violence that was overlooked in Baby Kamble's memoir would be a more current reality, comparable to that of many women nowadays, which includes a stressful amount of housework, caring for the children, and having a job at the same time, among other activities. As it happened with Pawar, and she narrates in her memories, women started realizing they also had other interests, other than her daily routine. Her husband would criticize her and tell her she was not a good mother nor a good wife, despite the fact that she would do everything in the house. The fact was that he was jealous of her and her achievements, since she was also getting published and attending school to get her M.A. She narrates these events as follows:

Our life together, which went on smoothly until then, received a serious jolt. Harishchandra said, "Why do you want to do M.A.? Now pay more attention to the children and the house." I retorted, "Look, I am paying enough attention to the house and the children. I take good care of their food, studies, and all the household work. Besides, I work in the office as well. My children are quite

healthy. And if they ever fall ill with some minor ailment, I take leave and nurse them without sleeping a wink at night. I am looking after them very well, thank you! It is you who needs to pay more attention to the house now. Instead of going to the bar, why don't you come home early and pay some attention to their studies? That would be far better. Besides, whatever I study, I do it in my spare time! Why should you object to it?" Harishchandra did not agree with this at all. He firmly believed that looking after the house was the sole responsibility of the woman. He kept stating his philosophy that a man has the right to behave any way he likes. This angered me and led to fights that went on and on. (2009, p.241)

5.2.6. Women's movement

Because of the time she lives in and all the feminist movements she gets to be a part of, Pawar's memoirs take place at a new point in the Ambedkarite movement. She meets other female writers and speaks about women's issues and the value of Ambedkar's work on a number of different programs that are part of women's organizations. All these gatherings that she attends, her encounters with feminism and the Dalit authors' movement, lead her to co-found a Dalit women's writers' group with another Dalit poet, Hira Bansode.

However, there was a downside to these feminist organizations: they drew women from educated, upper-caste backgrounds who were oblivious of caste and what it entailed, and the Ambedkarite movement which she was involved with had a strong impact by males:

One thing was, however, very clear to me. 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. Even today things have not changed! (2009, pp.252-253)

In these different movements that Pawar attended, she would be either participating with writing of by giving speeches. In one event with her organization, *Stree Uwacha*, the idea that "December 25 was the true liberation day for Indian women" and it should be celebrated as such came up, their arguments were as follow:

The Manusmriti has imposed many restrictions on women and built the caste system. That is why Babasaheb said that the woman is the gateway of the caste

system. It was on December 25 that Babasaheb had burned Manusmriti to liberate Indian women from the clutches of Manuwadi culture. Our organization has been observing December 25 as the Indian women's day of liberation for the last three years. So let us celebrate this day at Mahad every year. ... We argued that human enslavement begins with women's enslavement and that is why Babasaheb had liberated women on this day. (2009, p.259)

For December 25 they ended up creating two separate programs "to celebrate ... as both Human Liberation Day and Women's Liberation Day". Pawar, together with her friend Hira, realized that most of the events they attended were always organized by men, and in the same way, they could also organize an independent platform for literature. They decided to form a "Dalit Mahila Sahitya Sanghatana (Dalit women's literary organization)" (2009, p.259). They worked very hard to get members, explaining the reasons to join: "there are so many issues concerning the women in our community, such as ignorance, superstitions, caste discrimination, employment, and others. That is why it is necessary for all of us to come forward and unite" (2009, p.265). They came with the name *Samwadini*, which means "a woman who aims at communication with everyone" (2009, p.271), and the final name for the organization was *Samwadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch*. The organization finally opened, inaugurated by Eleanor Zelliott, and many other writers were present too, such as "Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, and Padmashri Daya Pawar, along with Maxine Berntson, the scholar from Phaltan. ... The first Dalit Women's Sahitya Sammelana, which we had organized in Vartak Hall in Mumbai in May 1987, must have been the unique not only in Maharashtra but in the whole country" (2009, p.273).

As part of her M.A. course at the university, Pawar was required to produce a thesis. She got an idea from reading Dr Ambedkar's biography. Pawar thought about his work and the women's participation in the movement, but there was nothing about the women. When she discussed this for her Ph.D, she was told that such an important matter should be written in a book, and that she should take someone with her to help interview the women from the movement. Pawar agreed immediately, and after talking to Meenakshi Moon, who was part of her organization and also very interested in the project, they began to collect information: "in a short while, an amazing history of women's participation in the Dalit movement unfolded before our eyes. There was so much concrete evidence in our hands" (2009, p.287). They ended up creating a book with a

recollection of the voices that participated in Ambedkar's women conferences which is mentioned by Rege as "the only, and very significant, historical account of these articulations of the women's questions" (2006, p. 53). The book *Aamhi hi Itihas Ghadawala* (We Also Made History) was released by Dr Eleanor Zelliot in a ceremony in Mumbai" (2009, p.289).

Urmila Pawar is now an award-winning author who has released a number of short fiction novels. One anecdote is her refusal to accept a literary award because the official ceremony followed the Hindu tradition of praying to the goddess Saraswati. This demonstrates how important leaving Hinduism and the caste system behind is for a Dalit woman.

6. CONCLUSION: TO BE A DALIT TODAY

The consequences of the anti-caste movements and the fight for lower caste rights are reflected in how they have acquired caste consciousness and identity, as well as the yearning for their own empowerment. The integration of the lower castes in the educational system has been crucial for their progress; nonetheless, they continue to experience discrimination, humiliation and disrespect on a daily basis. The kind of discrimination Dalits suffer has led to numerous students drop outs and even suicides. This is such a serious issue that there are countless articles in the news on the matter of suicides.⁴⁹ In 2011, a Dalit-Adivasi student organization produced *The Death of Merit*,⁵⁰ a documentary series about caste-based prejudice in Indian higher education. This documentary is divided into four parts, each of which focuses on a particular case.

From newspapers one can also see how discrimination in faculties affects not just students, but also other faculty members. The reality of this is that professors are also subjected to caste-based discrimination, leading to their resignation, if not worse. Professors from lower castes also have it difficult to advance on their careers, as they are recruited just as associates and in the case of IITs (Indian Institute of Technology) they “do not have promotions. Each position is filled as a fresh recruitment” (Sahoo, 2021), making it then, almost impossible for them to obtain a higher position. And this is just for the few that make it to that stage, as “none of the 22 IITs follow reservation in their faculty positions”⁵¹ (Sahoo, 2021). Even though they “currently have a fairly large number of vacancies which they are trying to fill” (Sahoo, 2021), it seems they rather not have enough professors than hire low caste, although qualified, applicants. This kind of schemes can be found daily, with upper castes making it hard for Dalits to prosper. Another example published a month ago, in December 2021: “Dalit cook sacked in Uttarakhand after upper caste students refuse to eat food prepared by her” (PTI, 2021). In this case, the boycott to the Dalit cook was supported by upper caste parents, alleging that the cook was chosen over a more suitable candidate, who happened to be a Brahmin.

Not only in academic institutions do Dalits find difficulties in many aspects of their lives. Now they have more opportunities; however, when they start to succeed and

⁴⁹ Just to give an example from the Indian Express: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/the-death-of-anil-meena/923471/0>

⁵⁰ For more information visit: <https://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/> The videos can be found on YouTube.

⁵¹ For more information the article that is being quoted has data on the faculty’s positions: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/rti-data-iits-not-following-reservation-rules-for-faculty-101624994117807.html>

improve their situation, upper caste members intervene. Arundhati Roy exposes the case of a woman called Surekha in her introduction to *The Doctor and the Saint*. She and her family bought a plot of land, and because they were Dalits, as Roy explains:

[They] had no right to aspire to a good life, the village panchayat did not permit her to get an electricity connection, or turn her thatched mud hut into a brick house. The villagers would not allow her family to irrigate their fields with water from the canal, or draw water from the public well. They tried to build a public road through her land, and when she protested, they drove their bullock carts through her fields. They let their cattle loose to feed on her standing crop. (...) eventually [her children] were lynched. Surekha and Priyanka [her daughter] were gang-raped and beaten to death. The four bodies were dumped in a nearby canal, where they were found the next day. (Roy A. , 2014)

This is not an isolated case; it occurs more frequently than we might think. Dalits are still targeted by upper castes for trying to have a normal life. What worsens the situation is that even if Dalits report to the police, they get disregarded very easily, as it is also explained by Arundhati Roy following the Surekha case in her introduction. Sometimes they just have to exist⁵² and break one of the ‘sacred’ rules imposed on them in order for upper caste community members to take the situation into their own hands. Titles like the following from the BBC News (2018) are not infrequent: “Indian Dalit man killed for eating in front of upper-caste men”, “Threatened for riding a horse”, “Killed for sitting cross-legged”, “Beaten for wearing 'royal' shoes”, “Violence over a Facebook name”.

The situation, however, does not appear to be improving much under the rule of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, whose administrations is labelled by Arundhati Roy as “fascist regime” (Roy, 2021). Roy has frequently criticized Modi’s government and has publicly stated her dislike for him. She explained her reasons as in a recent interview for *The Laura Flanders Show*:

[Modi] has belonged for most of his adult life, since he was a teenager, to a proto-fascist organization called RSS, which believes that India should be a Hindu

⁵² Sudharak Olwe is a photojournalist who has documented Dalit families and their realities. His last exhibition is presented in this article from the BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43972841>

nation and that everyone else, all minorities and other religions should live as minorities with fewer rights. (...) his ideologies have praised Hitler, have praised Mussolini, [and he] has referred to the Muslims of India as equivalents to the Jews of Germany. (Roy A. , 2022)

India is going from a secular state to a country that terrorizes other religions, Modi's regime is "openly calling for violence against Dalits, against Muslims, against Christians, against Adivasis" (Roy A. , 2022). In addition, in the actual situation with the pandemic, Roy has extensively written and talked about it and about the hardships the country is facing, and how, under Modi's leadership, they are "witnessing a crime against humanity" (Roy A. , 2021). She has even urged to Modi to "step aside" in an open letter (Roy A. , Scroll.in, 2021). And with good reason: India has been on our televisions more frequently in recent times as a result of the country's challenges with the coronavirus. However, it is worth noting that, while hearing about India's problems, we will never hear anything related to caste, as it is a relatively unknown subject outside of the nation and some academic circles.

In fact, it was only after the pioneering novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand (1992, originally published in 1935), and the success of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997, that caste prejudice and an intercaste relationship became internationally known. High-caste circles know of their own atrocities and work tirelessly to hide the caste issues, so much so that it is never seen in movies or TV series. Even if you are aware of caste, you do not see that reflected on a screen (unless it is a documentary specifically about it). The fact that castes, and everything they entail, are so little known together with the eagerness to learn and understand what it meant for a human being to live under such a horrible system matter is what prompted the formulation of this research.

With this research, we have a diachronic revision of events that have been part of Indian history from recent centuries up to the present, in which the work of a few has been able to shape the lives of many. Thanks to the life experiences of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, we have been able to follow some of the historical events explained, particularly the Ambedkarite movement, which has brought many changes to the lives of the Dalit community. Women, in particular, have advanced enormously as they have been able to unite their voices and fight for themselves in ways that were previously

unimaginable. However, despite the Dalit community being able to leave their submissive lives behind, a big part of high caste Hindus still hold them back with the chains of untouchability. And, given that the caste system has merely been modernized, we must take action to put an end to it, or at the very least advance in the struggle, which should be anti-casteist as well as anti-patriarchy. If more people work on Dalit feminist movements in upper-caste groups, as Sharmila Rege has done, the fight may gain traction among savarna women as well. Urmila Pawar's autobiography has been turned into a play; perhaps the next step would be to produce a film on the life of Dalits in order to raise awareness of caste on a global scale.

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B. R. (1916). *Caste in India: their mechanism, genesis and development*. New York: Open University Library.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of Caste*. India: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (Vol. 2). (V. Moon, & H. Narke, Eds.) New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.
- BBC News. (2018, June 19). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44517922>
- BBC News. (2019, May 20). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48265387>
- Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 579–585. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399556>
- Gorringer, H. (2018). *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*. Retrieved from Caste-Gender Intersections in Contemporary India: <https://journals-openedition-org.sire.ub.edu/samaj/4685>
- Guru, G. (1995). Dalit Women Talk Differently. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2548–2550. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403327>
- Inden, R. B. (2000). *Imagining India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jaffrelot, C. (2012). The politics of caste identities. In D. & Saldana (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (pp. 80-98). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <http://doi.org.sire.ub.edu/10.1017/CCOL9780521516259.007>
- Jodhka, S. S. (2018). *Caste in Contemporary India*. New York: Routledge.
- Kamble, B. (2017). *The Prison We Broke* (e-edition ed.). (M. Pandit, Trans.) Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
- Limbale, S. (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited.
- Lokhande, P. (1996). Garaj Navya Saundaryashastrachi. *Maharashtra Times*.
- Mendelsohn, O., & Vicziany, M. (1998). *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and The State in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York : Knopf.
- Omvedt, G. (1976). *CULTURAL REVOLT IN A COLONIAL SOCIETY: The Non Brahman Movement in Western India 1873 to 1930*. Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust.
- Pandian, M. S. (2002). One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1735–1741. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412071>
- Pardeshi, P. (1997). *Dr. Ambedkar Aani Stree Mukti Vaad*. Pune : Krantisinha Nana Patil Academy.
- Pawar, U. (2009). *The Weave of My Life* (A Columbia University Press E-book. ed.). (M. Pandit, Trans.) New York: Columbia University Press.

- Pawar, U., & Moon, M. (2006). *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- PTI. (2021, December 23). Dalit cook sacked in Uttarakhand after upper caste students refuse to eat food prepared by her. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dalit-cook-sacked-in-uttarakhand-after-upper-caste-students-refuse-to-eat-food-prepared-by-her/article38021151.ece>
- Rege, S. (2006). *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Rege, S. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. Navayana Publications.
- Rege, S. (2018, Nov. 21). *Brahmanical patriarchy: How Ambedkar explained the links between caste and violence against women*. Retrieved from scroll.in: <https://scroll.in/article/902839/brahmanical-patriarchy-how-ambedkar-explained-the-links-between-caste-and-violence-against-women>
- Roy, A. (2014). *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste, the Debate between B.r. Ambedkar and M.k. Gandhi*. London: Verso.
- Roy, A. (2021, April 28). 'We are witnessing a crime against humanity': Arundhati Roy on India's Covid catastrophe. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/28/crime-against-humanity-arundhati-roy-india-covid-catastrophe>
- Roy, A. (2021, December 24). *Scroll.in*. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/video/1013494/a-fascist-regime-is-not-just-against-intellectuals-it-is-against-intelligence-arundhati-roy>
- Roy, A. (2021, May 24). *Scroll.in*. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/994022/arundhati-roy-we-need-a-government>
- Roy, A. (2022, January 16). Arundhati Roy: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction and the Pandemic Portal. (L. Flanders, Interviewer) Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zct7cv0bt0I&ab_channel=TheLauraFlandersShow
- Roy, A. (2022, January 16). Arundhati Roy: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction and the Pandemic Portal. (L. Flanders, Interviewer) Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zct7cv0bt0I&ab_channel=TheLauraFlandersShow
- Sahoo, P. (2021, June 30). RTI data: IITs not following reservation rules for faculty. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/rti-data-iits-not-following-reservation-rules-for-faculty-101624994117807.html>
- Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. England: Penguin Books.
- Sarkar, T. (2001). *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Spivak, G. C. (2010). *Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea*. Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384>

Zelliot, E. (2013). *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit*. New Delhi: Navayana.