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Dalit Women in History: Struggles, Voices, and Counterpublics

By Tarushikha Sarvesh¹, Rama Shanker Singh², Tehzeeb Alam³

Abstract

History is a projection of realities from the historian's lens and parameters. The popularity and acceptance of historical accounts depend much on hegemonic structures and knowledge. The Dalit community was marginalized within the Indian economic, social, and political historiography. Gradually, with the rise of Dalit consciousness, men—the better-positioned gender of the community—tried to express their vulnerabilities from a masculinist perspective. The literature written also projected women only as extensions of male protagonists. Though the traumas Dalit women have faced due to intersectional realities are separate from that of men, they could not find a place in early literature as complete entities, entitled to be acknowledged as such. The trade union movements also sidelined the issues of Dalit women laborers. To date, issues of Dalit women's property rights, longevity, education, and empowerment are largely androcentric, as the state's schemes and policies are majorly heteronormative and male centric. The reason why we need to keep invoking the past and history is to assert that the present condition of Dalit women has its roots in the past and their issues and voices continue to remain on the margins despite the rich social experiences they carry and represent.

Keywords: Dalit women, Counterpublic, History, Voices, Democracy, India

Introduction

History is a projection of realities from the historians' lens and parameters. The popularity and acceptance of historical accounts depend much on hegemonic structures and knowledge. The Dalit community was marginalized within the mainstream Indian economic, social, and political history. Gradually, with the rise of Dalit consciousness, the better-positioned gender (men) of the community tried to express its vulnerabilities from a masculinist perspective. The literature that was being written, could merely project women as extensions of male protagonists. Even though the trauma that Dalit women went through for bearing intersectional realities were different from that of men, they could not find a place as complete entities in themselves in early literature on caste. The trade union movements also missed acknowledging the issues of Dalit women laborers as unique. To this day, the issues of Dalit women's property rights, longevity, education, and empowerment are largely androcentric, as the state's schemes and policies are majorly heteronormative and male centric. The objective of the paper is to invoke this history, to reiterate the assertion that the present condition of Dalit women has its roots in the past while their issues and voices continue to remain on the margins to this day despite the social experiences they carry and represent. The reality of most Dalit women has not changed much even in the urban areas.

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Due to the dependence on the *Jajmani*⁴ relations that existed in the past, in rural India, the condition of the poorest women who belong to the Dalit community didn't change very much. Their dependence on the patrons pushes them into traps of exploitation for job security or some form of financial security (Sarvesh, 2017). This vicious circle of dependence keeps them powerless and robs their agency as decision-makers even for their individual lives.

This paper aims to highlight the continuous marginalization of Dalit women's narratives as well as the sanctioned ignorance (Martin, 2013) of their lived realities in historical trends and patterns, which continue to largely define their everyday lives in contemporary times. Scholarship concerning the past might seem self-evident but must be considered in all their complexities when the question of history arises: "What we know about the past is dependent upon the questions historians have asked and how they have answered them. What has been the focus of their interest" (Rose, 2010, 1). What needs to be understood is that women, in general, have been ignored in mainstream history and that is why the issue of difference among women and the intersections they bear have been marginalized and unrepresented in the knowledge production of the past, which we understand as history. Many believe that women have been neglected as historical subjects because history has been framed "almost singularly about the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics, arenas in which the actors were men" (Rose, 2010, 4). Since history is always seen as the exercise and transmission of power, the hitherto powerless communities could not even find mention in the historical processes. In the European and North American context, women—and especially Black women—were ignored, similarly in the Indian context, among the 'Dalits' – the most marginalized community and the lowest in the hierarchical order of the Indian caste system—Dalit women experienced the extreme forms of exclusion in the historical processes. Even within the Dalit community, Dalit women's voices in the transitional processes of the society went unheard and undocumented, and this has been seen as 'sanctioned ignorance' (Nair, 2008, 60) of the mainstream academia and history. It would not be wrong to say that Dalit women's histories were subsumed under one broad historical narrative of either power transitions over the period or under the nationalist history as the mainstay of the colonial period. It is believed that even in early post-independence Indian feminism, there was blindness to caste, but the emergence of Dalit counterpublics are also evidenced in history which have challenged the historical orthodoxies that have kept caste out of the public sphere and rendered it as merely a social and not a political issue (Rege, 2006; Nair, 2008). These Dalit counterpublics had emerged in the form of Satyashodhak Samaj, non-Brahmin and the Ambedkarite Movement. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in the context of "rearranging desires," explains the emptiness in the idea of reforms that happen to be unevenly distributed across the caste divide in India, one such reform being widow remarriage. For a Dalit intellectual and particularly a Dalit woman, such a reform story would have no appeal as widow remarriage has been customary among Dalits (Spivak, 2006, 1). Movements like widow remarriage that are considered as reform movements impacting the society and women at large were in a real sense reform movements specifically for caste Hindu women in 19th Century Bengal. The ways in which these movements are projected and taught insinuate how history is embedded in caste-class categories and formations.

⁴ In accordance with the ritual status and the distance between the service castes and the *Jajman* castes (patron castes) in the social structure, the latter exercised political and economic control over the former and it varied from region to region as all the service castes were not considered *Kamins* universally in the *Jajman-Kamin* dyad. Usually, Dalit castes, the lowest in the order of caste structure, were referred to as *Kamins* in the *Jajman-Kamin* dyad (Rao, 1961).

The aforementioned concerns and gaps call for new methods to arrive at a fuller and richer account of the past. Janaki Nair points out that Indian histories have started uncovering new archives and that there has been a lateral spread of the historical methods ranging from field studies to developmental economics (2008). It can be said that the silence of the archives regarding Dalit women's voices has led to their historical misrepresentation and the construction of a site of 'difference in Derridian sense, understood as the "gap between object of perception and the meanings these have as symbols or representations"' (Stanley and Wise, 1983).

Since historical accounts have been narratives and factual details of the voices of particular sections—especially the dominant sections—it is believed that feminist historical accounts of the past must give way to an awareness that these are *accounts*, historiographies, present-day constructions, and not slices of the past itself (Stanley and Wise, 1983, 218). This understanding tells us that plausible counterfactual claims are always possible; therefore, on the one hand, the preoccupation and the intellectual concerns of the historians and the litterateurs have to be put through incisive scrutiny. On the other hand, historiographies exploring the marginal voices and the historical accounts silencing their voices need to be deconstructed and retold to understand the position and conditions of those voices in the present society.

To address the subject of Dalit women's voices from a historical perspective, one needs to understand various meanings of the word 'voice'; this would give us a better sense of the word 'Dalit'. Only then would the question of 'Dalit women's voice' become clear. Webster's dictionary describes voice as the sound or sounds articulated by the mouth of living creatures. It further adds the meaning of voice as the right to express an opinion or choice (Webster's 1971, 1111). Voice is understood as a set of assertions and rights of an individual. Having a voice makes people feel not only alive but free and capable of responding to others. This also implies that counter-voices exist. This reciprocity matters in a society dominated by a few castes and cultural and gender categories. In this regard, various aspects of voice and visibility have been described by thinkers like Nick Couldry, Judith Butler, and others. The two paragraphs below summarise some of their thoughts regarding 'voice'.

Voice is one word for the capacity to be able to give an account of oneself and one's place in the world. But simply having a voice is never enough: the important thing is that one needs to know that his or her voice matters (Couldry 2010). The manner in which things are organized ignores the importance of voice and keeps our consciousness of voice at bay. The status of voice as achieved in politics depends, then, on becoming '*visible*', not in the sense of being physically seen but in the sense of being regarded as relevant to the distribution of speaking opportunities (Couldry, 2010, 107). The idea of 'materialization' as posited by Judith Butler helps understand how the processes and structures allow some types of voice to emerge and others not (Butler, 1990; 2005).

In the context of Indian society, there are structures and processes which have proved to be disabbling towards certain groups and their voice—like the Dalits. Within the Dalits, the further invisibility of the Dalit women's voices prohibits the process of justice from taking its full course. It is very important to understand that the issue of caste and the issue of gender are not competing with one another for importance, rather they are very much intermingled within the larger reality of justice, as one is not above the other. (Turner, 2014)

A community gets pushed to the margins through a long, continuous process. Within the community, women further get marginalized due to the ubiquitous nature of patriarchy. A marginalized group's voice mostly goes unheard, and it often also goes unexpressed. The marginalization of a community creates double marginalization for women. The oppression is doubled when it comes to Dalit women. This kind of multiple marginalities is comprehended with the help of approaches like intersectionality. Intersectionality was coined by Kimberley Crenshaw when it came to highlighting the marginality and oppression of Black women. The levels of social justice in any society can be figured only by taking into consideration the most marginal of the society. Tracing the Dalit women's voice in the history of Indian society does not only do the task of giving them some visibility, but it also helps in tracking the pattern and processes of social change within the society from below.

To understand the plight of Dalit women and the need for recognizing their voice, it is important to first understand the overarching term Dalit. The term Dalit is explained by many thinkers and writers based on the idea of oppression. Professor of Marathi from Aurangabad Dr. Gangadhar Pantawane, the founder-editor of *Asmitadarshan* (mirror of identity), defines Dalit in the following manner: "Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of the country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, and holy books teaching separation, fate, and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution" (Zelliot, 1978).

It is believed that Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, during his years as a student at Columbia University from 1913 to 1916, became aware of the consciousness and assertion of Black people in America. It gave him the base of developing a strategy for fighting against caste discrimination in India (Kapoor, 2004). Suyamariathai Iyyakkam (Self-Respect Movement), which was launched by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker⁵ had documented the voices of Dalit women, but there is criticism by scholars that these voices have been left out in the study of historical movements. The feminist movement has been considered mostly the prerogative of upper-caste women (Turner, 2014). Periyar recognized the issue of Indian women's rights in connection to what he had been learning about feminist movements in Europe in the late 1920s, which became a significant part of his Self-Respect Movement (Khilnani, 2016, 389).

The studies and writings on the Self-Respect Movement were mostly silent on the consistent struggle of the movement against women's oppression and "its attempt to dismantle the ubiquitous structure of the patriarchy in Tamil society" (Anandhi, 1991, 24). N. Ram and Arulalan have briefly thrown light on this aspect of the movement, other researcher's silence is "significant because the question of women's emancipation was one of the central themes in the political agenda of the Self Respect Movement, especially during its early phase" (Anandhi, 1991, 24). Self-Respect marriages (i.e., marriages free from rituals) were one of the highlights of the Self-Respect Movement. In 1930, a women's conference was also held within the ambiance of the Second Provincial Self Respect Conference at Erode. Appeals for action were made to the

⁵ Periyar, like Phule and Ambedkar, was a man of remarkable insight, keen sympathy, endowed with a great and original imagination. He was deeply sensitive to the nature of ignorance, suffering, and injustice in his society and brought to people's understanding a robust critical vision that helped them evolve universal categories of understanding, analysis, and action. Through a creative deployment of these categories, such persons were able to identify the extent of hurt, oppression, and injustice in caste society as well as challenge its existence. People like Periyar, Phule, and Ambedkar shook the Hindu social order to its very roots and, to use Periyar's favorite figure of speech, stood it on its head (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998, 17).

magistrates to identify the temples that encouraged the *Devadasi* system⁶. And the fight against this reprehensible practice is still on. Geetha (2021) unravels the inherent caste hierarchy and the differential social positioning of the *Devadasis* drawn from the non-Brahmin and Scheduled castes. Dalit *Devadasis* have been excluded from the liberation process initiated by both the anti-*Devadasi* movement and the Dalit liberation movement.

Major Dalit Women Voices and Issues in the History of India

Where there have been cracks in systems of oppression, Dalit women, as with other oppressed groups, have spoken of their struggles and cries for justice in their narrations for centuries (Irudayam S.J. et al 2011). A student of social sciences must be perceptible to such voices. So, here we are going to discuss the voices of Dalit women within the history of South Asia. The word ‘Dalit’ carries some interchangeable meanings. The earliest surviving text in which there is a mention of the division of society into four *varnas*—*Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaisyas*, and *Sudra*—is *Rigveda*. In the historical process of categorization, the *Sudras* are also known as Dalits, untouchables, and Scheduled castes (Singh 2015). There was no separate category for women within the four *varna*, but women were considered less privileged. In the rituals of everyday life of educated people, *Sudra* women were always discarded. The idea of purity and the punishment for touching a Dalit woman was prevalent in society. A *dvija* (twice-born)⁷ was never supposed to see or be in the presence of a *Sudra* woman. If one sees a *Sudra* woman, one must suspend his Vedic recitations⁸ (Olivelle 1999, 18; 173-74; 250). Thus, history becomes more discriminatory for a Dalit woman and it excludes her.

In *Rigveda*, many women recited hymns and took care of the agricultural fields of their fathers. They went to wars and lost their limbs. They were also busy making baskets, dyeing, and grinding but there was not much space for women’s voices. So, the question of the voice of Dalit women was unimaginable in this scenario. The later Vedic texts present contradictions. *Shatapatha Brahman* (5.2.1.10) states that the wife is half her husband and completes him. On the other side of these texts, there are stigmas of pollutions by menstrual blood (Singh 2009, 205). A woman in the menstruation period was prohibited from participating in *yajnas*, and students were warned against the recitation of Vedic hymns for a menstruating woman (Olivelle 1999, 18). Thus the body of a woman became a tool of exclusion. We argue that this notion of impure women’s bodies promulgated the sense of untouchability in India. Such stigmas were doubly discriminatory for Dalit women. The *Atharvaveda* depicts *Sudra* women as lascivious creatures. It says, "Go fever, to the Mujavans, or, farther, to the Bahlikas. Seek a lascivious Sūdra girl and seem to shake her through and through" (Book v, Hymn xxii, 7).

The Upanisadic age was the age of knowledge. Women were speaking up. We can hear Maitreyi in *Brihadaranyak Upanisad* who argues with her husband sage Yajnavalkya (Olivelle 1996, 28-33). Deep down in the Ganga plains, some men were giving messages of kindness and

⁶The word *Devadasi* is a very complex term in the cultural history of pre-modern and modern India. Generally, they were women primarily from the lowest Dalit castes considered to be married to the lord of the temples or the ones who served God. The practice was prevalent in the premises of the great temples of India. In modern times there is an act of parliament abolishing the *Devadasi* system, but there are reports on its existence in some places even today.

⁷The upper castes which have the initiation ceremony (*upanayana*)—regarded as second birth or spiritual birth—are known as *Dvijas*. This is done through an initiation ceremony in which males wear a sacred thread (Manilal Bose, 1990).

⁸ The oral tradition of the Vedas consists of several recitations or ways of chanting the Vedic mantras; these are considered the oldest unbroken oral tradition in existence.

compassion to the downtrodden in the sixth century B.C. These were promulgators of heterodox sects. These sects gave space and a comparatively progressive environment to women, *Sudras*, and other less privileged communities. Mahavira and Buddha taught equality and compassion for every human being. Makkhali Gosāla admired *Sudra* women, a doubly excluded category in Indian society. It was Hālāhalā who gave her patronage to Gosāla (Basham, 2009, 51) while other teachers were being greeted and patronized by kings. The six predecessors of Gosāla are reported to have lived and taught at caityas outside various cities of the Ganges basin (Basham, 2009, 33). The name of Hālāhalā as patron of Gosāla is not merely a fact of early India but it denotes the right of the salvation of Dalit women by their own choice. This choice became more visible in the poems of *Therigatha*.

Therigatha is a collection of poems by Buddhist Bhikkhunis (Buddhist Nuns) bound together by shared experiences and relationships of care and intimacy with each other, as is expressed in verse from one of Rohini's poems. She says:

Those who have gone forth
Are from various families and from various regions
And still they are friendly with each other

The world of the ordained women in the *Therigatha* is one of sexual equality, in stark contrast to the social inequalities between men and women in lay life. It is a keen insistence on the possibility of freedom for women as well as for men (Hallisey, 2015, xxix). A close reading of this first feminist text of India can give a glimpse of the inner aspirations of women from lower strata. A *vessa* (prostitute) was never considered a normal human being, but a polluted one. Buddha and his sect gave not only some social and cultural meaning by accepting them in the fold of Buddhism, but it also offered them a chance to express themselves.

By then I had enough
Of what my body brought
And wearied I turned away
May I not be reborn again and again
In endless and inevitable births.
(Hallisey, 2015, 23)

When we say that a woman has her voice, what does it mean? A voice that wants to cultivate a state of mind filled with freedom:

I cultivated a state of mind
that depends on nothing else and cannot be measured,
I became focused, collected.
I am free, and I will always be completely free.
(Hallisey, 2015, 63)

Bhakti Movement⁹ (Lorenzen, 1995) has been explored from various perspectives (O' Hanlon and Washbrook, 2011) but here we look into it from women's perspectives. Although the

⁹ The Bhakti Movement was a pervasive cultural movement that appeared in various forms of cultural expression including religion, philosophy, language, art, and literature (Pandey and Tyagi, 200, 129). It was a pan-Indian uprising

Bhakti Movement was dominated by men, it included women as its prominent members. Dalit women also had a role to play in it. In an insightful study on the Bhakti movement from 6th century to 17th century A.D., Vijaya Ramaswami has underlined the social background of women saints in South India (Ramaswami, 1997, 448-53). There were women from *Sudra* varna—from Mahars (untouchable), carpenters, spinners, Chandalas, Vellala, hawkers, Paraiya, and Mali communities. Ramaswami highlights that out of 75 women saints, 41 percent of women saints belong to the untouchable and artisan class. She explains that *Sudra* women were more emancipated and equal to their male partners than upper-caste women. They were dependent on their husbands, fathers, or sons, while one could see women saints from lower social orders engaged in selling flowers, cleaning houses, and other household works. The *Vachanas* (poems) of Rammavve describe the profession of weaving and questions of salvation (Ramaswami 1997: 466). Their labor and crafts provided them a say in everyday life and in a spiritual matter of a community. In a Brahmanical social framework, both women and low castes were denied the path of salvation. Dalit women suffered dual deprivation, but some Dalit women raised their voices. Gangamma, a sex worker, was one of them. She managed to create a sacred space for herself (Ramaswami, 1996, 27). In pre-modern India, these women saints not only criticized Brahmanical social order but also put forward their vision for a just society. Poetess Kallavve attacked the façade of purity maintained by upper castes:

They (the Brahmins) still regard
Madigas as untouchable.
 They (the Brahmins) will go
 The Nayaka Naraka (hell of hells).
 (Ramaswami, 1996, 56-57)

Reread the above lines. The poetess is not asserting herself merely from the standpoint of a woman but, rather she is strongly holding her ground as an active participant in the struggle against caste discrimination and social injustice.

Dalit Women's Voices in Modern India

The project of modernity was also seen as a project of liberation for women. The advent of modern education during the colonial period created a class that was very sympathetic towards the discrimination of women within the caste society. The first half of the 19th century of colonial India abolished some heinous practices against women i.e. *sati*¹⁰, child marriage, polygamy, and also some laws for widows. Some scholars say that reforms created by the British were meant for imposing Victorian worldview on Indian subjects. The beneficiaries of these rules were the women from the upper strata of society. At the other end of the battle of emancipation, some Dalit women were fighting in unequal battles with British rule in India. Dalits were absent in the pages of the conventional mainstream historiography.

of a people's culture against feudalism, which had its roots in some significant processes of change in the 11th and 12th centuries when various castes came into being and regional languages and their literature evolved (Pandey and Tyagi, 2001, 129).

¹⁰ *Sati* was the practice of burning widows in India or of widows burning themselves “(the expression, originally denoting a faithful wife, says in its modern use nothing about the agent, and thus nothing about the voluntary or involuntary character of the act) on the funeral pyres of their husbands' bodies” (Fisch, 2005, 293).

The first great uprising against British rule was the revolt of 1857. It played a great role in the making of modern consciousness in India. From the very end of the revolt till the opening of the 21st century various groups have claimed the legacy of the revolt. The last entrants were Dalits. Now Dalits are recovering their history and voices. These groups are also highlighting the role of their 'women heroes'. In search of icons and symbols, Dalits are seeing Jhalkaribai and Udadevi as their heroes who are no less than any upper-caste hero in history (Narayan, 2006, 112-49). Jhalkaribai was a woman of Kori cast, and Udadevi was from Pasi. Both Kori and Pasi are untouchables in the Hindu social order and are categorized as Scheduled castes in modern India. Jhalkaribai is associated with 'Rani Laxmibai' of Jhansi¹¹. She fought along with Rani of Jhansi but could not get her due share in historical writings. Now Dalits are considering Jhalkaribai a prominent fighter of 1857. In this process, they are infusing emancipations of Dalit voices within the national history.

After the revolt of 1857, the new education system, press, and social movement accelerated the process of women's visibility in public domains. Despite some limitations, the social movements enabled some women to carve a niche for themselves and work towards women's emancipation and liberation. Women like Pandita Ramabia and Tarabai Shinde tried to bring to the fore the condition of women in the caste society. They did not focus on women's condition in terms of different caste realities prevalent within the Indian society. Pandita Ramabai refused to remain a Hindu and delineated how the "Sanskritic core of Hinduism was irrevocably and essentially anti-women. In her conversion testimony, Pandita Ramabai had put the women of high caste and low caste within a single class, in explaining discriminatory notions against them (Omvedt, 2006, 26- 27).

Clubbing all the women's voices indiscriminately left the Dalit women's voices buried beneath the mounds of hierarchical and patriarchal intersections of Indian society. The three-fold discrimination of caste, class, and patriarchy faced by Dalit women could not be addressed by bringing the Dalit women's voice within the fold of women's universal voice. Various Dalit women writers have tried to rethink and re-read historical movements like the Telangana Movement, the Ambedkarite Movement, and the Self-Respect Movement to bring out the Dalit women's voices and their peculiarity within the realm of social justice. These voices are brought out with the help of Dalit women's testimonial literature that give first-person accounts of discrimination and exploitation. Dalit women's voices are also brought out by looking into their participation in various rights movements.

During the nationalist struggle for freedom, every section of the society attempted to combine social and political liberation. Women were seeking a role in making the environment progressive: a conference of the Progressive Women's Association was held in Madras in 1938. It was in this conference, that the title *Periyar* was bestowed on E. V. Ramasamy for his efforts against caste patriarchy. The case histories of a few women activists who participated in the movement and national struggles bring out how such movements provided the space for Dalit women to transform their lives and have a voice of their own. One such voice was Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, who belonged to the caste from which *Devadasis* were drawn. She narrated her story in *Kudi Arasu* magazine in 1925 (Anandhi, 1991, 34). Though she belonged to

¹¹ Vrindavanlal Varma's novel in 1946 first evoked Jhalkari textually as a loyal companion of Rani Laxmibai, one who dutifully served her queen by putting her own life in danger (Deshpande, 2009, 875). He, also tapped into existing local memories of Lakshmibai's dramatic escape, some of which included Jhalkari's story. Jhalkari's exploits were popular among the Kori community and her caste status and dialect formed part of the Bundelkhandi social and linguistic landscape (Deshpande, 2009, 875).

the caste from which *Devadasis* were drawn her family, in particular, had been a traditional non-*Devadasi* family. She was forced into *devadasi* customs to fetch money for the family through this profession. Later, she realized the exploitation of the low-caste women through the *Devadasi* custom. She walked out of this system and married a musician called Suyambu Pillai. Ramamirthan Ammaiyar began her political career in the Indian National Congress but left it to join the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-1920s. She published a voluminous novel in Tamil in 1936 on *Devadasis* and also wrote the fictional series *Damayanthi* in *Dravida Nadu* in 1945.

Among the Dalit voices that have made themselves heard in history, Savitribai Phule is very prominent. Savitribai was the first low-caste woman to have stressed the importance of education and English through her poems. She, along with her husband Jotiba Phule, raised the issues of Dalit women in particular and women in general. She wrote poems that became recognized in the British Empire. Savitribai's collection of poems came out in 1854 and is entitled, "Kavyaphule". Savitribai Phule started schools exclusively for *Sudra* and Dalit women. Savitribai, along with Jyotirao Phule, did the historical work of building a holistic and integrated revolutionary cultural, social, and educational movement of women-Shudra and Ati Shudras of the country. This work is the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Hindu culture, wrote an anonymous journalist while reporting on their work in *The Poona Observer* and *Deccan Weekly* (Narake, 2009, 9):

Savitribai had taken teacher's training at Ms. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar and in the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. If these documents are to be given consideration, Savitribai Phule may well have been the first Indian woman teacher and headmistress. Her stepping across the threshold of the home to teach marks the beginning of public life of the modern Indian woman. In an interview given to *Dynanodaya* on 15 September 1853, Jyotirao said, "Those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started school for girls first. But my caste brethren did not like that I was educating girls and my father threw us out of the house. Nobody was ready to give space for the school nor did we have money to build it. People were not willing to send their children to school but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar convinced their caste brethren about the benefits of getting educated". (Narake, 2009, 10)

E.V.R. Nagammaiar, the wife of E.V. Ramaswami, was a member of the All-India Congress Committee. When Ramaswami got arrested under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code for violating prohibitory orders, Nagammaiar not only organized a group of women and protested against the order, but also raised public consciousness by carrying on propaganda through the streets of Travancore to fight for the rights of non-Brahmins to walk the streets where Brahmins lived (Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998). This had reflections of Black feminism in the USA.

Women's participation in Ambedkarite Movement was brought out by Marathi Dalit writers Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon. They wrote *Aamhihi Itihaas Ghadwala: Ambedkari Chalvalitil Streeyanacha Sahabhag*. Urmila Pawar not only contributed towards making the Dalit women visible in the Ambedkarite Movement but also through her research and testimonies brought out the grim reality of the missing voices in the archival material. This tells us how important it is to do the ethnographic study of the archives and look into archival silences. She

also highlighted the conspicuous absence of Dalit women's voices and the missing acknowledgment of Dalit women's participation in the available literature. The Dalit movement was given an overall male identity as only male voices and male Dalit leaders were celebrated in history and Dalit literature.

Dalit women's presence, voices, and narratives, as part of the Indian society and as part of various historical movements, largely went unnoticed or undocumented. Sharmila Rege states that such books as that of Urmila Pawar, which looked into the contributions made by women in the Ambedkarite Movement, challenged the assumed male identity of the collective subject of the Dalit movement (Rege, 2006).

Literature has always been a vehicle to usher a just and humane society. It questions the subjugation and dehumanization of a large section of humankind. Here we can take of the writings of some Dalit female writers like Bama and Sivakami who portray the oppression of Dalit women and subvert male dominance in their works (Nayar 2011, 365-80). Bama's *Karukku* (1992) goes beyond the genre of a typical autobiographical novel. M.S.S. Pandian (1998) argued that Bama verbalizes her own life story, depletes the autobiographical "I", which he calls an "outcome of bourgeois individualism", and "displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community". This way her story becomes a story of community where the traumatic experience of an individual converts itself into a collective biography. What happened to Bama could easily have happened to any other Dalit woman of her village. She had the opportunity to tell something that others in her community did not dare to voice. Bama, therefore, instead of promoting her voice, functions as a site for the crisscrossing of multiple voices from within her community.

Bama avoids naming individuals in her story. The act of naming is considered an exercise of power, and she deliberately chooses not to name her village, the priests, schools and colleges, the nunnery, the Dalit headman, etc. This conscious omission of distinctiveness showcases this message (Armstrong, 2010). This becomes a universal story of Dalit women, and the writer creates a sisterhood with the reader. Armstrong points out that Bama's text is marked by an absence of adherence to grammatical rules. She conveys a sense of remorse and guilt when she talks about the material benefits she had enjoyed, an elusive dream for others in her community. Bama unfolds her growing-up story in episodes, and throughout she displays indomitable courage, conquering the dominant forces (Armstrong, 2010). In a critical study of literary texts written by some Dalit activists and writers, Dalit male writers selectively excluded women's voices and brought forth their view on behalf of Dalit women (Rege, 2006). Dalit male writers have ignored Dalit women's own narratives of pain and instead portrayed their own understanding of it (Sunder Rajan, 1993), and have mentioned the traditional problem of the rape of Dalit women as part of atrocities in general on the Dalit community by upper-caste people. Most of the short stories by male Dalit writers portray the male Dalit protagonist as the sufferer throughout the narrative, one who finally seeks emotional and political reawakening as a Dalit (Brueck, 2014, 162).

The autobiography of Kaushalya Baisantri tells the inner world of a Dalit woman who is twice-excluded and jeopardized by male dominance and imposed the demerit of being a Dalit woman. Her autobiography *Dohra Abhishap* (doubly cursed) was the first autobiography of a woman in the Hindi language. She was a Marathi Dalit activist and has a legacy of the Marathi Dalit movement. Her biography offers a greater world view of a Dalit woman. It analyses not only caste oppression but also the domestic violence suffered by Dalit women. Here, caste becomes secondary and patriarchy dominates the everyday life of a Dalit woman (Merrill, 2014). Dalit women's autobiographies are comprehended as narratives of collective experience for which Sharmila Rege chooses the term "testimonios" (Rege, 2006), often used to assert the Dalit

women's subjectivity in subordination to the authority of her community (Nair, 2008, 63). Dalit women's autobiographies are also seen as autoethnographies¹² (Periasamy, 2012; Haider, 2015 Sharma, 2021). Carolyn Ellis, an established auto ethnographer, defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (Ellis, 2004). Sharma (2021) emphasizes that narratives of Dalit women are autoethnographies, cultural biographies, and social accounts of experiences of a muted group, realities that have not been revealed before, and the collective voice of Dalit women writers is a literary practice of Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

The 1990s were when, almost all of a sudden, many Dalit women's organizations sprung up: one of the most important ones was the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), founded in 1995 by a Dalit activist called Ruth Manorama. NFDW brought to the limelight the state's inability to protect the human rights of Dalit women (Subramaniam, 2006). At the UN World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, NFDW even demanded that caste discrimination be declared a form of racism. There were also a few other organizations: All India Dalit Women's Forum, which came up in 1996; an organization for Dalit Christian women came up in 1997. The focus of these organizations was Dalit women, and it led to a debate on plurality vs. unity in the context of women's movements (Subramaniam, 2006).

India adopted her Constitution on 26 January 1950 and provided a universal franchise to her citizens. This was the first step towards a political just society. The upper strata of the society dominated the initial decades of free India. The scene changed after some peripheral groups entered into electoral politics. The peripheral groups included the groups that were kept at the margins of the society like the lower and middle caste groups. By the late 1970s, there was increased participation of politicians from the lower social strata, with less or more vernacular education, whose political imaginations and practical preoccupations were very different from the upper-middle-class politicians due to their circumstances and experiences (Kaviraj, 2010, 72). They not only changed the course of politics at the regional level but also at the state and national level. The legacy of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and their pursuit of social justice created a 'Dalit Public' (Narayan 2011). Dalit women are playing a big role as voters and contestants in elections (Narayan 2011, 143-44). They can voice their concerns in the parliament and state assemblies. The life of Mayawati—the four-time chief minister of the largest state of India, Uttar Pradesh—is a testimony to Dalit women's empowerment. Mayawati's rise to power, her assertions, and social engineering to gain political representation have to be acknowledged and commended; at the same time, however, one needs to be aware of mere symbolism and iconography. A few exceptional cases like Mayawati and some other Dalit women leaders like Krishna Tirath, Shailaja, and Meera Kumar should not be seen as representative of Dalit women's realities in the Indian society as women's leadership in general and Dalit women's leadership, in particular, do not get politico-cultural acceptance and hence the contentious demand of quota within quota (according to the caste categories) for women's reservation (John, 2000) in the Indian Parliament.

In the *Panchayati Raj*¹³ institutions, a certain number of seats are reserved for women. These reserved seats for women are also allotted to Dalit women. Through this, they find a space

¹²Evading consensus, definitions of autoethnography have varied since the 1970s as they have evolved over the period (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008).

¹³ Article 40 of the Indian Constitution through Directive Principles of State Policy lays down that the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 of the Constitution of India envisages the Gram Sabha as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures.

to voice Dalit women's oppressive condition, even as they continue to bear the brunt for voicing their opinions as rape and sexual violence remains prevalent even for those Dalit women who have gained some political representation¹⁴.

Conclusion

The limitations and hurdles in the expression of Dalit women's voices in modern democratic India reveal the tradition of silencing and marginalization. This continuum of experiences in Dalit women's lives makes it imperative to trace the long-term historical structures and concerns that surround the issues of Dalit women and their assertions through participation in historical movements, political mobilization, and literary writings. Finally, it is rightly said that exploring the plausible counterfactual claims in the form of 'histories from below' lead to the recovery of past events, persons, and mentalities' (Stanly and Wise, 2008, 217). What Nancy Fraser said about democracy in the U.S. stands true for India as well: "In the U.S. we hear a great deal of ballyhoo about the triumph of liberal democracy and even the end of history. Yet there is a great deal to object to in our own actually existing democracy (Fraser 1990, 56)." Indian democracy too has to be reminded time and again of its exclusionary practices, policies, and institutions. Without the inclusion of historically and structurally marginalized lives, democracy can neither be practiced nor experienced in its true sense and form.

¹⁴A study titled 'The State of Panchayats: 2007-2008' done by the Anand based 'Institute for Rural Management (IRMA) brings out the point about the condition of Dalit women taking up leadership roles, especially in Gram Panchayats.

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