

Transforming Humiliation into Activism: Stories of Dalit Women Heroes**Deepthi**

Senior Research Fellow (UGC), Dept of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

Received: July 25, 2018

Accepted: October 08, 2018

ABSTRACT

According to Dr. Ambedkar, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women have achieved." Men oriented societies have always considered women lower. They were treated as second to men in developing countries like India. Although women achieved many milestones in India however their condition is not much improved. In the case of Dalit women, they face deprivation and humiliation as a woman and as a Dalit. They are victimised on the basis of caste and gender even by their own family. There are some courageous stories of Dalit women who have struggled against the flow of the wind. They have tried hard to achieve their current status which made the society to revise their thought process. Many Dalit women leaders or heroes are working in these manners. The most prominent names are Krantijyoti Savitri Bai Phule, Rama Bai Ambedkar, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Meria Kumar and Mayawati. They have worked in different fields and have become motivational spirit for others. This paper reveals the true stories of their courage to get rid of humiliation through positive activism and create assertion in marginalised people. Nowadays, their lives are a ray of hope not only for Dalit women but for all the women in the world.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Humiliation, Activism, Motivational Spirit, Marginalised people

Introduction:

Two words 'Humiliation' and 'Activism' are powerful words which although opposite to each other but can change someone's life. Humiliation leads Activism. When people faced deep humiliation in life they try to get rid of it by great activism. Humiliation means 'a feeling of being ashamed or stupid and having lost the respect of other people; the act of making somebody feel like this'.¹ Activism means 'The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.'² These two words are deeply attached with Dalits which lead them towards Dalit assertion by great heroes; not only male but also female. Badri Narayan (2006) argued, "In the recent past, however, there is a visible upsurge in the assertion of Dalit identity, which challenges the humiliation that they have faced for centuries."³ The activism has created assertion in marginalised people, Dalits, which force them to fight against humiliation to gain equal rights and self respect. Sometime assertion has led by Dalit women heroes who become an instrument of encouragement and sacrifice for others. In this regard, two events regarding Dalits's struggle and Dalit women empowerment are always remembered in the history. First is Mahad Satyagrah which was organised by Dr. Ambedkar in 1927. There were 3000 women were participated in that meeting in 18 July 1927.⁴ Another one is the rally in Ahmedabad, Gujarat which is the home town of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the seat of his ascension, where 30 Dalit groups organised agitation against *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors). Women participation in this event is also significant. They raised their voice against cow protectors who attacked Dalits for skinning a cow in Una. They were in anger and pledged never to remove cow carcasses from the streets again.⁵ Though women considerably participated in these events but there is no Dalit women leader who led them. On the other hand male dominated society does not accept the empowerment of women as they feel the danger for patriarchal society based on male dominance. This has been proved by the statement of Manjula Pradeep, the executive director of the Navsarjan Trust who recalls that during the Una protest, a male Dalit activist said that Dalit women's

¹Oxfordlearner'sdictionaries

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/humiliation> (accessed on 14-11-2018)

²<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/activism> (accessed on 14-11-2018)

³Badri Narayan (2006), 'Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India', Sage Publications, New Delhi.

⁴Jasbir Kaur, Women: Understanding Dr. Ambedkar's Vision and its Relevance in Contemporary Feminist Discourse, (Ed) in Emanuel Nahar, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Philosophy in Contemporary India, (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2017); See Also: "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and International Women's Day", Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Caravan, (07. 3. 2015) <https://drambekarbooks.com/tag/women-day/> (accessed on 14-11-2018)

⁵<https://thewire.in/gender/dalit-women-leaders> (accessed on 14-11-2018)

activism is “dividing the movement”.⁶ Male dominant Indian society gives lesser importance to females and has always considered them low. In the case of Dalit women, they borrow the dual burden as a woman and as a Dalit. It is the reality that women have to struggle for equal status. Nevertheless, in India there are some key figures among Dalit women who have/had the courage to struggle against the society and achieve the status that is an inspiration for others like Krantijyoti Savitri Bai Phule, Rama Bai Ambedkar, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Meria Kumar and Mayawati. This paper tries to reveal their true stories of these Dalit women heroes that lead others to continue struggle for equality.

Stories of Dalit Women Heroes as Social Reformers:

Two names will always be remembered in the history of Dalits especially for women are Krantijyoti Savitri Bai Phule and Ramabai Ambedkar. Both were wives of two great Dalit leaders. Krantijyoti Savitri Bai Phule was wife of Jyotiba Phule, an anti caste leader, social reformer, thinker. She was a social reformer, educationalist and political activist. She carried on struggle with her husband for Dalit emancipation especially for women. She was born on January 3, 1831 in a farmer’s family. In her early life, at the age of nine, she was married to Jyotiba Phule following the prevalent customs. However, it is interesting that she was very keen to get educated; Jyotiba Phule, who was a thinker and social activist, taught her. She was a bright student. At that time a new hurdle in her path struck as she was criticised by both family and community for getting education, even they had to get shelter at their friend’s place as well but they continued their efforts. Similar to her, Ramabai Ambedkar is another name in this list who was the first wife of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, philosopher, thinker, lawyer, and leader of marginalised people. She was an instrumental spirit behind the success of Dr. Ambedkar. She was born in a poor Dalit family where she took care of her siblings. She was early married at the age of nine with Ambedkar. She had four sons and a daughter but due to illness, four of them died early. She herself became ill.

Though they faced humiliation during their lives but both had activism and spirit to work for common people especially women. Savitri Bai Phule, along with Jyotiba Phule, opened first school for girls in Pune in 1848 and became first lady teacher. Both of them opened 18 schools for girls. As a social reformer, she played an important role to empower women through education. She was honoured as best teacher by British government.⁷ She raised the voice for women education, widow remarriage, and also started agitation against sati pratha and child marriage. She was anti caste reformist and actively participated in movements against untouchability and caste as well as gender discrimination. Her area of interest was not only girl’s education and empowerment but she tirelessly worked against caste system. She started efforts for abolition of caste and opened two schools for untouchable in her own house. Along with her husband, she organised a ‘Satyashodhak Samaj’ in 1873 to help the marginalised people like women and Dalit, give them respectable life and also promoted inter caste marriages. On account of her restless efforts, many organisations honoured her work as a memorial was formed by the Pune City Corporation in 1983; in 10 March 1998 a stamp was released in her honour by India Post, in 2015 Government of Maharashtra renamed the ‘University of Pune’ as ‘Savitribai Phule Pune University’.

It is said that every man has a woman behind his success. It is true in the case of Dr. Ambedkar. Ramabai Ambedkar was a simple lady and a supportive wife who always encouraged Baba Sahib to pursue his studies. Not only home front but she also actively participated in meetings as well as gave full support to organised agitation. In 1938, she became president of an organisation in Mumbai.⁸ Despite being ill, she was a valiant spokesperson and always tried to empower and educate women and Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar was much attached with her and felt upset due to her death. He was really inspired by her and gave her credits in his book which was published in 1941. In the preface of book, he mentioned that she was the spirit who transformed him from an ordinary *Bhima* to Dr Ambedkar. On account to her contribution and inspired life, two films were made on her life one is ‘Ramabai Bhimrao Ambedkar’ in Marathi in 2011 and another is ‘Ramabai’ in Kannada in 2016.

⁶Ibid

⁷<https://drambedkarbooks.com/2011/09/03/first-lady-teacher-of-india-savitribai-phule/> (accessed on 14-11-2018)

⁸<https://countercurrents.org/2017/03/08/jyotirao-phule-savitribai-phule-periyar-and-ambedkar-international-womens-day/> (accessed on 15-11-2018)

Stories of Dalit Women Writers:

Writing is a skill to express own feeling in a written form and two famous Dalit women writers Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar will always be remembered. Baby Kamble was well known Dalit activist and writer who was inspired by Dr. Ambedkar. She was the first woman writer from Mahar community who wrote her famous autobiography 'Jina Amuche' which was later translated by Maya Pandit in English with title 'the Prison we broke'. She was born in a Dalit family in 1929 that was follower of Dr. Ambedkar. Against the traditional culture to not give education to girls, her father sent all his children to school that became an inspiration for others. But during school times, she faced discrimination and humiliation. Along with other Dalit girls, she had to sit separately in class. After completing fourth standard at the age of 13, she got marriage to Kondiba Kamble and had ten children. However, Urmila Pawar is an educated woman with Masters in Marathi language. She is famous India writer, social activist who working for Dalits and women' welfare. She was awarded by Maharashtra Sahtya Parishad for her contribution in literature. She was born in 1945 in a Dalit family and was aware of her caste identity due to humiliation faced in school. She wrote her autobiography in Marathi titled 'Adidan' which was translated in English as '*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*'.

These Dalit women writers wrote their live experiences in their autobiographies. Baby Kamble was the first woman who wrote her autobiography and this kind of work became guidelines to others. In this work she described the pathetic condition of women who live a humiliated life because of high caste Hindus and even due to their own family members. Dalits were treated lowest by upper castes and restricted in daily life like not to travel on main roads but to travel by the road side. Dalits were punished as to face cursing and abusing if they did not obey their orders and even Dalit women's noses were chopped off. Kamble revealed this situation as:

"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 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 Mahars nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip pollution".⁹

Then again, she described the pitiable condition of Dalit women within their own families as '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-laws! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them'.¹⁰

On the other hand, though Pawar lived discriminatory life, she wanted to express her feelings in writing explicitly. She is well known Dalit writer and her writings received wide readership. She mentioned her own feelings of pain which she received from outside and from inside her home. In her own words she wrote, "As if I wasn't discriminated (against) enough by others outside, now (my) family too, has set rules for me". Pawar experienced her struggle as a Dalit and as a woman. She did not only write her autobiography but authors of two more books named *Vhay Mi Savitribai (Yes! I am Savitribai)*, and another book is *Amhihi Itihas Ghadvila (We Also Made History)* co-authored with Minakshi Moon. These books created immense impact on Dalits which narrates the feelings of Dalit women. The book also includes the experiences of Dalit women who participated in Ambedkar movement. As an activist, Pawar herself participated in anti-caste Dalit movement in Maharashtra for decades and through her writings she broke the barriers of caste and patriarchy in real manners.¹¹

Stories of Dalit Women Political Leaders

In the field of politics two names make their own unique place which cannot be underestimated. Meira Kumar and Mayawati, are two famous Dalit politicians who became the inspiration for other women to gain momentum and lead the world. Meira Kumar is an Indian diplomat, politician, lawyer and first woman speaker of Lok Sabha who was unopposed elected for this position. She was born in 1945 in Bihar. She is daughter of former Deputy Prime Minister Sh. Jagjivan Ram, a prominent Dalit leader, and served five

⁹ Kamble Baby (2009), '*Jina Amuche*' translated by Maya Pandit (2011), *The Prisons We Broke*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, p.56.

¹⁰Ibid: 87.

¹¹ Yogesh Maitreya (2018), 'How Urmila Pawar broke the barriers of caste and patriarchy armed with only words', firstpost.com

times as MP in Lok Sabha from Congress party and also nominee of President of India from UPA in 2017. After completing her education, she served as a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). After a decade of her IFS service, she entered in politics in 1985 and won election against Mayawati, first Dalit woman CM of an Indian state and Ram Vilas Pawan, both are well-known Dalit leaders. Though she was born in a well known family and lived her life in the shadow of Congress party, but her unique personality, well education, politeness and cooperative behaviour is an impressive motivation for others.

Mayawati's life story is different from Meira Kumar. Mayawati Das famously known as Mayawati is the first Dalit woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for four times and a prominent Dalit leader after Kanshi Ram and national president of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Once former Prime Minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao recognised Mayawati entry in politics as "miracle of democracy".¹² She was born in 1956 in a Dalit family. In her family, boys were preferred to private schools and girls were sent to low-performing government schools.¹³ She completed her education with law degree and prepared for IAS. Then one day Kanshi Ram went at her home and convinced her to join BSP as he said "I can make you such a big leader one day that not one but a whole row of IAS officers will line up for your orders."¹⁴ Then she joined politics and got ready to serve the cause of Dalits and marginalise people. She decided to not get married and work tirelessly for the mission of Dr. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram.

Though their life experiences are different from each other but no one can deny the fact that basic reality as a Dalit and as a woman is same. This feeling strikes Meira Kumar during her election as the President of India. Meira Kumar's entry describes women is due to her powerful impression given during the nomination as candidate for the President of India. A day before she filed her nomination papers for this post, she said "Many times in history, two high caste leaders have competed for the post of the President but there have not been any discussions on their caste. This time, when two Dalits are competing against each other, there is a lot of noise about it everywhere. I feel that caste should be buried in the deepest part of the earth and completely forgotten."¹⁵ She feels that caste is deepened in our society and every time a person is judged by his/her caste. During a response on her and Ram Nath Kovind's caste she said "Sad caste is a factor in election. This is the election for the highest post in the country. This is not a political war but a fight of ideologies. I am pained by discussion over my caste. Why doesn't the society rise above these divisions?" But she is always worried about Dalits' cause and shows her commitment towards Dalits' welfare. As she said "Some ideologies benefit the weaker sections of the society, some don't. We will not tolerate atrocities on Dalits and weaker sections. I want complete destruction of caste system." In another statement, she expressed her view that the post of President of India is "not symbolic" and that "capability and experience must always supersede" every other consideration while choosing the person for the post.¹⁶ Further she cleared her vision to serve the people of India without any discrimination and work for social justice, freedom of speech, inclusion of all section in mainstream. She again stated "Democratic values, social justice, transparency, freedom of speech, inclusiveness, destruction of caste system, end of poverty — these are part of the ideology which is close to my heart. For this very reason, on the plank of this ideology I will compete."¹⁷

Conversely, is the case of Mayawati, she became a Bahujan leader took front seat to carry forward the mission after the death of Kanshi Ram and has been working for Dalits' welfare. As Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh she has succeeded to change the condition of Dalits and they fearlessly live with dignity. As they regard her with name Behanji (sister) and sometimes gave supporting arguments for her. This has been proved during a rally where a Dalit woman supporter gave argument in support of her. When someone criticized Mayawati, a Dalit supporter named Padmawati defended her with these words, "So what if we cannot access Mayawati?, we can access the police and the government. Isn't that more important?"¹⁸ Again

¹²Anant Media (10 May 2008), 'A Miracle of Democracy', Tehelka Magazine.

¹³Ajoy Bose (2012). *Political Biography of Mayawati*, Penguin Publications, New Delhi.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵<https://www.firstpost.com/politics/presidential-election-2017-meira-kumar-says-caste-being-made-an-issue-for-the-first-time-in-polls-3750249.html>

¹⁶<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/presidential-election-meira-kumar-congress-ram-nath-kovind-bjp-984978-2017-06-27>

¹⁷<https://www.firstpost.com/politics/presidential-election-2017-meira-kumar-says-caste-being-made-an-issue-for-the-first-time-in-polls-3750249.html>

¹⁸Neha Dixit, (2017), *The Mission: Inside Mayawati's battle for Uttar Pradesh*, The caravan. pp.30-48.

she told, if Behanji has reached there, we will at least reach that place in our dreams. She has given us hope and dreams.”¹⁹ Mayawati always try to uplift Dalits with gaining political power as Dr. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram both believed that political power is a way for social transformation with equality in society. And to gain political power, sometimes she has to take steps which become controversial and people mislead the community. She took two important steps to achieve the mission. First- she used ‘Sarve Jan Sukhaye, Sarve Jan Hitaye policy’ to co-opt with upper castes. In this process, she appointed Satish Chandra Mishra, a Brahman lawyer, the party’s general secretary. And second, she has created statues of Dalit icons to promote Dalit identity. Both steps were criticised by people and political parties. Moreover sometimes Dalits too have criticised ‘Sarve Jan Sukhaye, Sarve Hitaye policy’.²⁰The statues of Dalit icons create a great impact on Dalits and studies described them as culture assertion in Dalits’ lives. She also intimated her decision to adopt Buddhism. She wrote two books *‘Mere Sangarshmai Jeevan Evam Bahujan Movement Ka Safarnama’* in Hindi and *‘A Travelogue of My Struggle-ridden Life and of Bahujan Samaj’* in English.

Concluding part:

The paper concludes that though these Dalit women are victimised in double manner, caste and patriarchy, but they have the spirit of activism and encouragement to fight against these hurdles. Importantly, they have received good response, love and support from their supporters worldwide. People from different sections especially Dalits and women get inspiration from them and carry forward their thinking and vision. In this regard, many marches and mass events have been organised by Dalit women across the world. Most recognised events are: ‘National Dalit woman’s Conference’(FEDO) organised a rally in Kathmandu where hundreds of Dalit women participated for Dalit women’s rights and second is ‘National Dalit Women’s movement’(AIDMAM) which travelled through Madhya Pradesh to march against caste and gender discrimination, gave support to Dalit women victims of violence and raise their voice for their equal rights.

¹⁹Ibid, 48.

²⁰Self conducted Field work during PhD.