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**A STUDY OF BREAKING IMPOSED SILENCE IN SELECT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BY DALIT  
AUTHORS**

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**Abstract**

The present paper is an attempt to understand how Dalits break silence imposed on them since ages by taking up Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan (1998), Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke (1986), Faustina Bama's Karukku (1992) and Manohar Mauli Biswas' Surviving in My Word: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal (2013).

The aforementioned marginalised categories is a metaphor for their subjugation, inflicted on Dalits in India. Therefore, the silence imposed on Dalits is manifold; literal, operational and economic silence. This paper presents an analysis of breaking imposed autobiographies by Dalit authors

**Introduction**

Breaking silence has been an old phenomenon as far as liberation and rights of Dalits are concerned. Breaking silence has been a conscious attempt to get rid of suppressive religious forces. Counter arguments that challenged Hinduism build strong fundamentals of shattering hierarchical relationship among different sections in India.

Breaking of imposed silence on Dalits in India can be understood from the advent of Buddha and his preaching. Later, Bhakti movement came. In India, there have been voices of saints from depressed classes who rebuked the idea of caste, inferiority and superiority among human beings. But it was not an aggressive movement. Instead, it had a sense of awaking one's consciousness to see the ultimate reality. It preached humanity and

spirituality. Rekha Pandey in her essay talks about the bhakti movement as a product of brahminical dominance and injustices that prevailed in society. The bhakti movement saints mostly hailed from lower castes and were reformers. Whether Raidas, Kabir, Namdev, Tukaram, Nanak they all came from depressed class. Saint Ravidas or Raidas of the 15<sup>th</sup> century says, "Everyone is trapped in the caste-system/Ravidas, humanity is being eaten up by the disease called caste." He further preaches, "All are made from the same clay, from the same creator." Thus, the saint poet refuses caste but not very critical of Hinduism in his approach.

Another saint, Chokha Mela says, "Outcaste Mahar I am; Erstwhile borne as Neel; Slandered the Lord then; Hence reborn as Mahar; Chokha says pollution; Is the fruit of our past deeds." Here he questions the karma theory. In another couplet he says, "Outcaste that we are; What rights we have?"

Everyone shoos us; Far away." He further complains and critique god in the couplet Karma Mela, "You created our the basest; Don't You understand, O Lord? Whole Life spent eating leftovers; You don't feel ashamed of this."

Thus, Ambedkar does not see Bhakti movement as something radical phenomena. It only preaches faith in Supreme Being without indulging in any critical understanding of discriminatory nature of religion, especially brahmanical Hindu religion. According to Ambedkar the bhakti movement affected society in a negative way as it did not deal with any critical enquiry of religion that preached casteism.

Ambedkar does critique philosophy of Hinduism and questions "divine governance." Babasaheb writes critiquing Hinduism while he discuss equality in the aforementioned religion, "One striking feature of the caste system is that the different castes do not stand as a horizontal series all on the same plane. It is a system in which the different castes are placed in a vertical series one above the other." (vol. III, 21)

Periyar began the Self-Respect movement in 1925. Through the movement Periyar asks several questions pertinent to injustice in society. His attacked Hinduism that created divisions and hierarchy among human beings. He asks, "Is not Hinduism responsible for the so many divisions and differences? Is not Hinduism responsible for the creation of so many castes, that too some as high and some as low? The Vedas and Sastras prove that." (Periyar 54)

Political and social movements, along with literary movements helped in changing the scenario of existing Indian society. They helped in shaping Dalit consciousness. The Dalit Panther movement was an outcome Ambedkar's uncompromising efforts to bring a positive change in Dalits' lives. Babasaheb wrote Mooknayak, Bahishkrut Janata and Prabuddh Bharat. These were articles that analysed conditions of suppressed castes. Creative writings by Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar and Arjun Dangle constituted the Dalit Panther. The Dalit Panther movement began in Maharashtra. But its influence could be felt in other parts of the country

as Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts on society were spreading rapidly. However, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujrat and other states have their own political history of Dalit awakening and penning down their literature.

The consolidated result of all the above rebellious ideas and protest against caste are Dalits Rights are seen as Human Rights (1948) and Prohibition of Atrocities Scheduled Castes Act (1989) came in to being. With education inter-caste marriages started taking place.

Music and Movies also helped in raising Dalit consciousness. International organisations and commissions' indulgence provided the Dalit struggle and assertion a wider scope to bring a change in Dalits' everyday life by putting pressure on the Indian Government and others organisations. Today, Dalit literature has reached the entire globe. International organisations hold conferences on Dalit Studies and make sure that marginalised voice could be heard.

As far as Dalit autobiographies are concerned, Dalits either questioned mythological truth of discrimination or debunk Hindu religious customs and thus challenged power holders. Omprakash Valmiki writes, "In our community, widow remarriage was an accepted practice. Unlike the Hindus tradition, we did not see widow marriage negatively." (12) He remembers, "In the presence of relatives and villages elders, my deceased brother Sukhbir's father-in-law bethrothed his widowed daughter to Jasbir, the brother who was the next in line to Sukhbir." (Valmiki 12) Valmiki further reveals a discriminatory custom of 'salaam' and his anger over such an intolerant practice. "...I fired off angrily, Is it right to go for salaam?" (Valmiki 32) He furthers the description of his anger,

"Seeing me him quiet, the restlessness inside me began to pour out. 'The bridegroom goes from door-to-door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms of the higher castes don't have to do that... This bride will also go door-to-door after she arrives in Barla..." (Valmiki 32)

Both, conscious Valmiki and his father understand a sense of insult and inferiority attached

to the custom of salaam. Therefore, Valmiki's father breaks it in his house. His father says, "...We will now break this custom." (Valmiki 32) Valmiki remembers in his autobiography that his father on the occasion of two weddings in his house breaks this custom. "Pitaji had refused categorically, 'My son will not go salaaming.' At my sister's wedding also, we had not allowed our brother-in-law to go for salaam." (33) The father-son duo understood the implications of such customs. Valmiki was sensitive and critical of all such rituals.

"Although the basti people were Hindus in name, they did not worship any Hindu gods or goddesses. At Janmashami, it is not Lord Krishna but Jaharpir, another god, whom they worshipped. Or they worshipped the spirits. And not on the eighth day, the Ashtami, but on the morning of the ninth day of worship, the navmi." (Valmiki 40)

Valmiki further talks about female goddesses worshipped in his community. These goddesses are not found in Hindu mythologies, but Dalit communities do worship them. "In the same way, during Deepawali it is not the goddess Lakshmi but Mai Mardaran who is worshipped and offered a piglet." (Valmiki 40) Here Valmiki poses many questions and doubts his being a Hindu. Eventually, he distances himself from any religion. Simultaneously, he does not appreciate his own people's blind faith in spirits.

While narrating Hindu gods and goddesses' stories such as Barama and Satwai Baby Kamble repudiates them in her autobiography as being reductive and a set of unsaid discriminatory treatment of Dalits at hands of caste Hindus. She writes, "Thousands of our generations were sacrificed and their lives have been ruined. Millions perished but their essence of truth and morality did not. This endured, seeped into the soil, and enriched it. And then a small sapling grew out of this enriched soil. (Kamble 62) She further elaborates on Buddha who showed the path of enlightenment not to Dalits but the whole world. His thoughts on peace, silence and mediation are still relevant. Kamble records, "The tree transformed beasts into human being. This tree was that ideal human being, our very own Buddha...Our Bhimraja decided to awaken his

people who had sunk to the level of subhumans." (62)

Remembering Ambedkar's efforts that he put to awaken the consciousness of the Dalit. Kamble quotes Ambedkar thought on Mahars family deity Khandoba, "These stone steps in front of god's temple have been worn away by hapless people beating their heads against those steps in utter supplication" (64) Kamble further recollects Ambedkar's words, "Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance!" (64) She adds how Dalits started composing reformist songs on Hindu festival Ganeshotsav. "My brother had taught us yet another reformist trick. Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, he had started composing song...The boys in Harijan Boarding also started the festival. They took sixty long sticks, fitted bells at one end of those sticks, and took out a procession singing fiery songs of revolt through the town at night." (Kamble 110-111)

Manohar Mouli Biswas in his narrative recollects how Dalits break religious silence imposed on them. They refuse to believe in caste Hindu Gods and Goddesses, myths and rituals. He does not apprehend why in the Bhadra-Ashwin months with the arrival of Durga puja a black skinned man always gets killed. He writes,

"The dark-skinned naked man, whom mother Durga killed cruelly by ripping his chest with her three prolonged trishul, was but a child of this land. He was a human too! I did not find any difference between that dark-skinned naked person and those who danced with a chopper in one hand and a stick in the other in the procession of boats." (Biswas 70)

The Nama community discarded Hindu customs and laws. Biswas writes, "The widows of the Hindu home observed penance during ekadashi...They would not eat fish or meat but vegetarian. The widows of my community were accustomed to eating fish and meat." (51) Biswas further pens his memory down and shares his experience how a man from his own community regarded as a god. "A large section of namas considered Sri Sri Harichand Thakur as a god. Sri Sri Harichand was born within this community." (51)

Even his temple was built and he was worshipped. So here Biswas remembers how the nama community instead of worshipping idols they started worshipping Sri Sri Harichand. The nama community was far better than caste Hindu society. They did not have the dowry system. Biswas writes, "Rather the groom's father had to give a rupee to the bride's father-a silver coin. Smearing that coin with vermilion, it was pressed on a piece of paper. This acted as a deed of final agreement." (37)

Learning alphabets or going to formal school has been another way to break the intellectual silence forced on Dalits. Valmiki remembers when he was thrashed and insulted by non-Dalit children over his intelligence, "...Pitaji's face and words kept coming in before of me: 'You have to improve the caste by studying.'" (29) He further delineates on the matter of education by recollecting his father's belief in education. Unlike other people of his community, his father wanted him to get an education. He writes, "Pitaji had a different mindset. He wanted me to get an education." (59) His father as Valmiki says one idea in mind and that is to improve his caste through education. Valmiki's sister-in-law too supports him. She gives away her only jewellery when money is needed to pursue education.

Baby Kamble recollects in her autobiography that Ambedkar's emphasis on the importance of education in the gatherings of so called low caste people. She writes, "From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce them from god. Teach them good things" (Kamble 64) Kamble's father was influenced by this urge of Ambedkar and he educated Baby Kamble and her brother. "He was also greatly influenced by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He resolved to educate both of us, my brother and me, and came to Phaltan to enrol us in school." (106) She adds, "Young activists, under the influence of Babasaheb's ideas started enrolling their children in schools en masse." (106)

Biswas pens down his father's thoughts on education. His father believed that education would open up opportunities to get better occupational choices. He writes,

"My education started in the joint household of my baba and my jetha. It started amid this debate about the necessity of education. Baba believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives-there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation." (Biswas 4)

Talking about his grandfather whom Biswas used to call Thakuda remembers, "He used to say neutrally, I am illiterate, you are illiterate. You want to make your children illiterate too?" (5) Even his grandfather understands the significance of education in getting rid of the social structure where they were unequal to other groups of people. Biswas continues on his schooling along with chhordi. They used to write on palm leaves. He further recollects that once he appeared for a scholarship examination and succeeded in achieving it. That is how Biswas could change his educational scenario and broke the silence imposed on him in field of academics.

Dalit consciousness helped in getting education and through education Dalits broke economic and occupational silence. Suppressed groups began to question wages they received in return the work they did for the so called upper castes. Valmiki writes, "This time around, the basti folk had refused to work without being paid. We will go if you pay daily wages, they had said, and that had led to a row." (38)

Dalits adopted violence after independence or after 1960s. Dalits used counter-violence as a strategy to answer back and thus break the silence. In *Karukku*, there is a fight that goes between the Chaaliyar community and the Parayar people over the cemetery where the Parayar people buried their dead there. "On one evening there is an outcry that the Chaaliyar had stabbed Izhava's husband" (Bama, 30). The Chaaliyar also file a false case against the Parayar. Thus, the Parayar people plan to destroy the houses of the Chaaliyar. But the police come and arrest them. Some of them escaped from the site and hid themselves in woods.

### **Conclusion**

Dalits gradually began breaking imposed silence economically-occupationally, artistically, religiously, physically and literally. They revert back.

No more mere “shadows” in political. They are ‘being’ and in the process of ‘becoming’ what they already are and have been. Humans of free spirit and enthusiasm. Dalits have registered their strong presence. Though there is scope beyond one’s imagination to break imposed silence over and again in day-to-day dealings. The autobiographies analysed and discussed are an example of how Dalits began gradually became conscious of their ‘political’ position. Thus, Dalit consciousness is a prerequisite to break the systematic imposed silence.

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