

Dr. B.R Ambedkar's Influence That Illuminated the Path of Urmila Pawar as an Indispensable Dalit Woman Writer

Ajay S Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Karnatak University, Dharwad

ABSTRACT

Social reformers have trotted this land from many centuries in different time intervals and of varied capacities and only a few have created impact that can be felt even today. One among them is the 'Father of Modern India', Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He not only came as a messiah for the dalits and the downtrodden but as a beacon of equality and modernity for the society rid with superstition. The writings and ideas of Him became widely accepted among masses and his followers emerged not only in India but throughout the world. Many dalits, who listened his speeches and read his works, took him as inspiration and started to act accordingly. The quiet revolution was slowly budding in the kitchens of dalit household, which was as intense as the burning flame. The dalit women, who had no opportunity to express their feelings, now empowered through Ambedkar's message of equality, brokeout of the shackles and began writing. Their writings focused on the plight of dalit women which no men penned about. This created a ripple effect that inspired even more dalit women to write. This today has raisin to such heights that 'dalit feminism' is studied worldwide and its roots can be traced back to the Messiah of dalits, Dr B R Ambedkar. It is because of his constant speeches and writings on the liberation of dalit women and the message of equal right and opportunity for all the beings that liberated dalit women from the patriarchy and explore their potential. One of the recipient of this revolution is Urmila Pawar, a Marathi dalit writer who has drawn inspiration from Ambedkar. The paper shall dive into Urmila Pawar's autobiography and her other works and unfold how her literary path was illuminated by the 'Sun of Dalits', Dr. B R Ambedkar.

Keywords: caste oppression, dalit feminism, patriarchy, dalit memoir, Konkan

Urmila Pawar is a very prominent dalit women writer highly influenced by the radical views of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. She was born in 1945 in Adgaon village, in Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra state. She is a renowned Dalit creative author who vehemently spoke in favour of the rights of Dalit women. Hailing from the Mahar community she faced discrimination from higher castes. Her family embraced Buddhism when she was 12 years old due to caste-related oppression. Urmila Pawar's father served as a teacher at a school for the dalits and also functioned as a religious priest of their community. Her mother managed the household, as she was a bold and protective woman of the family. Pawar encountered numerous challenges due to her caste and gender during her upbringing. She endured frequent humiliation from peers and teachers alike due to her caste background. She also involved herself as a radical Marathi theatre actress and a playwright.

Through all the hardship thrown at her by the society, she was determined in pursuing her dreams and eventually rose to fame as a distinguished figure within the Dalit community. Holding a M.A. in Marathi literature, she also held a position in the public works department in Maharashtra. Her literary works encompass numerous short stories, with one of her notable pieces, 'Kavach,' being integrated into various university curricula.

With the publication of *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* in 2008, her popularity increased. Originally titled *Aaydan* in Marathi and translated into English by Dr. Maya Pandit. This semi-autobiography catapulted her reputation as a significant literary figure. Maya Pandit serves as the pro-vice chancellor at the English and Foreign Language University in Hyderabad. With expertise in translating women's literature from Marathi, she is actively involved in the women's movement and alternative theatre as an advocate. Later Pawar wrote many other works like *We Also Made History* (2008) and *Motherwit* (2013) which were originally written in Marathi and later translated to English.

Her magnum opus, *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is the English translation of *Aaydan* (2003), originally written in Marathi by Urmila Pawar and published by Granthali Publication in Mumbai. Translated by Maya Pandit and published

by Mandira Sen for *Stree* in Kolkata, the book describes Urmila Pawar's life and the struggles of Dalit women as they navigate social, economic, religious, and gender-based challenges. It captures her resilient journey toward becoming a successful writer and the vital role education played, despite the adverse conditions she faced. Through her work, she vividly portrays the harsh realities endured by Dalit women in the Konkan region, throwing light on the deeply rooted issues within the Mahar community, which grappled with poverty and lack of traditional means of livelihood.

Urmila Pawar's writing sheds light on various spheres like, pursuing education, managing household responsibilities, participating in social programs, writing stories and books, and engaging in literary gatherings. This makes her work not only a personal memoir but also an inspiring guide for marginalized women, encouraging them toward feminism and activism. As a Dalit woman writer, she infuses her narrative with Ambedkarite Dalit feminism, bringing this perspective to the forefront more strongly than other aspects of Ambedkar's philosophy. *The Weave of My Life* stands as a significant work in Ambedkarite feminism, highlighting the 'double-oppression' of women in the Mahar community at the intersections of caste and patriarchy.

Her parents gave emphasis on education which motivated her to pursue higher studies, making her the first woman from the Konkan region to earn a postgraduate degree. This family dedication to education reflects the Ambedkarite principle that sees education as a path to empowerment. Her memoir offers vivid portrayal of Konkan culture, particularly the experiences of the Mahar community after conversion. Through detailed accounts of events and personal experiences, her narrative conveys Ambedkarite perspectives, making it a powerful vehicle for the Ambedkarite movement.

In her writings, Urmila Pawar embodies Ambedkar's social philosophy of revolution, envisioning a society rooted in equality where no one faces ostracised for their cultural identity or behaviour. She argues that such mockery fosters discrimination, which in turn breeds hatred and contempt, ultimately damaging the fabric of society. This undermines the collective values of equality, fraternity, freedom, and justice, essential to a cohesive and inclusive society. Through her narrative, Urmila Pawar upholds Ambedkar's vision of a just society, urging the dismantling of practices that perpetuate social divisions. Pawar not only highlights these challenges but actively advocates for women's rights, both in her writing and through her involvement in women's movements. As a dalit writer, her commitment to Ambedkarite feminism forms the core of her narrative, shaping it into a powerful testament to resilience and social change.

The Ambedkar movement activists recognized Urmila Pawar's potential as a public speaker, noticing her ability to articulate ideas effectively in public settings. This led to her being invited to speak at the Ambedkar birth centenary celebrations. Urmila Pawar and her husband, Harishchandra, had already immersed themselves in Dr. Ambedkar's teachings, having read *Buddha and His Dhamma* and Dhananjay Keer's biography of Ambedkar while they lived in Ratnagiri. She was familiar with public speaking, having gained confidence through school events and theatre, as well as listening to local leaders like Nathuram Kamble, Bandy Chavekar, and Haribhau Aayre.

But, she was astonished by the commanding presence and sophistication of the speakers at the centenary celebration realizing a significant difference between her local leaders and the voices she was now hearing. At that moment, Dr. Ambedkar's words, "Leave the villages and go to the cities," took on a deeper meaning for her. This experience opened her eyes to the broader perspective and potential within the Ambedkar movement, revealing the importance of connecting with larger urban networks to gain new insights and strength for the Dalit cause.

Urmila Pawar recognized the importance of spreading Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideology to raise awareness among the oppressed about their rights and responsibilities. She understood that the issues women face could be addressed effectively only if men and women worked together, engaging in affirmative discourse. Dividing the struggle by focusing on separate platforms for men and women would only delay the resolution of real issues. Additionally, it was crucial to familiarize oneself with the thoughts of social reformers in order to tackle these issues effectively. She understood the necessity of embracing an Ambedkarite perspective, so she brought Ambedkarite literature into her home to explore the evolving trends of humanism and the root causes of women's struggles. It was only by comprehending these humanistic and rational ideas that one could stand before society with a clear and affirmative ideology.

She describes her gradual involvement in the Ambedkarite movement, Dalit literature, the women's movement, and women's literature. Yet, despite her active participation, she felt she hadn't yet developed a clear, personal stance on many issues. Her daily responsibilities, her job, household tasks, caring for her children, and her education, left her with little time to reflect deeply on her own beliefs.

Through her involvement in public events like Ambedkar Jayanti and Mahaparinirvan Din, held in slum areas, the narrator got a first-hand glimpse into the intense poverty and hardships endured by dalit community. Although she had some idea of slum life from visiting relatives, the conditions she witnessed in these particular areas were far worse. The slums consisted of tiny, cramped huts, just six by eight feet, lined up closely together with only makeshift cane

partitions between them. The roofs were low and made of tin, with only a few old cloths, rags, and a handful of pots and pans were the residents possessions.

The surrounding environment was even more alarming: open drains and gutters emitted foul odours, with clouds of flies and mosquitoes thickly clustered over them, as if defending their territory against human intrusion. Mice and bandicoots darted around, children relieved themselves in open spaces, pigs roamed among the waste, and people spat and disposed of dirty water freely. Amidst this chaos and squalor, bitter arguments were common, yet the people, despite their pale and exhausted faces, encouraged each other to hold onto hope for a better future. This glimpse revealed to her the severe daily struggles faced by her community and the resilience needed to endure such conditions. In her speeches, she often used powerful quotes from social reformer Jyothiba Phule, along with references to Dr. Ambedkar's work, like the 'Hindu Code Bill'. These quotes were particularly effective in drawing attention to gender inequalities and challenging traditional norms. In this speech, she began by highlighting one of Phule's provocative questions: "Jyothiba Phule used to say when a woman's husband dies, she is made to commit *sati*, therefore if a woman dies why doesn't a man commit *sati*? He also says that a man can marry a second wife and acquire a *savati* (Marathi for "co-wife") in the house. Then why can't a woman marry a second man and have a co-husband (*savata* in Marathi) in the house?"

Urmila Pawar utilized various tools such as books, education, presentations, movements, and ideologies efficiently to inspire societal change. She served as a consultant for the Dalit costumes in the film on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, directed by Dr. Jabbar Patel. One of her most notable works, co-authored with Meenakshi Moon, is *Aamhi hi Itihas Ghadwila* (*We Also Made History*), which chronicles the involvement of Dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement. *The Sixth Finger* is a collection of short stories, and she also edited the journal *Stree Uwacha*.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar always professed that education is a vital tool for leading a meaningful life, which is why he placed immense importance on it within his philosophy. Through his speeches, he emphasized the transformative power of education, inspiring thousands of Dalit families to pursue learning and improve their lives. This flowed in dalit minds which resulted in the generations to come being educated. One such dalit is Urmila Pawar, who not only become self-sufficient but also immersed in Ambedkarite movements to strengthen dalit emancipation, in turn striving to fulfil Ambedkar's dream of a *Prabuddha Bharatha*.

WORKS CITED

1. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. 1936.
2. Chalam, K.S. *Modernization and Dalit Education: Ambedkar's Vision*. Rawat Publications, 2005.
3. Kamble, Babytai. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient BlackSwan, 2011.
4. Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Literature and Criticism*. Orient Black Swan, 2019.
5. Omvedt, Gail. *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*. Penguin Books, 2004
6. Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life- (WML) a Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit. Stree, 2008.
7. Pawar, Urmila, and Meenakshi Moon. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Zubaan, 2014.
8. Tak, Atul Kumar, and Rashmi Bhatnagar. "Ambedkarite Movement: Its Influence On The Self Narrative Of Baby Kamble And Urmila Pawar." *Zenodo* (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research), Sept. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14190321>.