

## The Dalit and Non-Dalit Women Autobiographies

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Woman from Maharashtra was introduced to education which was her path to literature. The Marathi Autobiographies translated to English are the examples of the two different perspectives of Upper caste women and Dalit women. The critical reading of 'I Follow After' (Laxmibai Tilak) and 'The Prisons We Broke' (Baby Kamble) focuses on the philosophy and way of life of the two streams. The religious conversion and domestic life are observed as theme. But both of them differ in their basic instinct to compose autobiography. The open and close access to their writing deals with feminist argument about masculine influence and the egalitarian principle.

For the upper caste woman her family is her world and for the Dalit woman her community is her family. The first argue for self-modification and the second for community upliftment. In short, the study of these two autobiographies is parallel to the individual liberalism and communitarianism.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a 19<sup>th</sup> c. social reformer who took initials to introduce education to women and downtrodden people in India. Once he had asked his students to write essay about their plight as if they were describing it to Queen Victoria. Mukta Salwe, a girl from Mang community has expressed her life experiences which may be considered the first dormant autobiography of Indian woman. No doubt, in the recent past Indian women used to express through the lyrics on the grinding stones in which the grief, emotion, passion, hopes and glorification of their day-to-day life peeped out. This type of autobiographical literature was the initiatives for the main stream autobiographies of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the independence when education reached to the humble huts of Dalit people, the Dalit women also started to express themselves in various literary forms. Marathi Dalit literature has the evidences of such type of writings but we have to wait up to 1980s to see the autobiographical work by these women. Women from Maharashtra are expressing various issues in the autobiographical form. Some exceptional life experiences on the part of the women have attracted the attention towards their autobiographies. Otherwise women's autobiographies have common aspects which revolve around their domestic life. The noteworthy fact is that though the domestic life is the major aspect of their writing; the autobiographies of the main stream women are different than the Dalit women's autobiographies. The basic reason is that the discourse in which they lived was different for both of these women. It affected the total colour of their literary composition. The rift of life pattern is visible in these two types of autobiographies. The grounds for life struggle, its philosophy, and their perspectives for life are totally different.

It is interesting to study an autobiography of a Brahmin lady, who got converted to Christianity following her husband in the contemporary conservative period, in comparison with an autobiography of a Dalit woman, who also got converted to Buddhism following the rational grounds of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Yes, I would like to look at Laximibai Tilak's autobiography *Smritichitre* in Marathi which has been translated in to English under the title *I Follow After* and Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* an English translation of *Jina Amucha*. Laxmibai Tilak was married to a whimsical poet Rv. Tilak. He got converted to Christianity out of the principles of humanity in it. But it becomes very difficult to a Brahmin wife to live the life of 'a wife' whose husband has converted to Christianity. She was sympathized as a widow and was offered with every kind of relief at the sake of her detachment

from her husband. She has to undergo terrible psychological crisis while taking the right decision and following the path of her husband. These life experiences and urge for expression made her autobiography interesting. At another hand Baby Kamble was born and grown up as a Mahar girl. She has witnessed and suffered to be a Mahar. Her life experiences are interesting because they are the sagas of sufferings and revolution when the untouchables changed the religion for emancipation. Her autobiography claims to be probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language.

These two autobiographies have difference in their intensions, inner arguments, and grounds for complexities. The aim of this paper is to compare these two totally different autobiographies. Let's see the difference in more elaborate way. These two women autobiographies from Maharashtra belong to the same century but the authors have completely different perspectives for their lives. The major difference is that the author of the former belongs to upper caste Brahmin family converted to Christianity whereas the author of the later belongs to Mahar caste family converted to Buddhism.

Laxmibai Tilak has followed her husband in his every adversity. She got married at age 12<sup>th</sup> with Rv. Tilak. He was intelligent as well as whimsical by nature. Her social condition was quiet problematic when she was treated in a different way by relatives after Rv. Tilak's conversion to Christianity. It is an interesting journey in her life up to the time when she herself realized the humanistic approach of Christian religion and got converted. But in this case the moral obligation of a Hindu wife i.e. to follow the husband has much in force. So after the death of her husband when she started to feel lonely, her son Devdatta asked her to write the biography of Rv. Tilak to memories the past. She composed those memories and they become the testimonials of her autobiography i.e. *I Follow After*. Baby Kamble is an activist of Ambedkar Movement. She is aware of the oppressions under which the Dalit community people have to suffer. She is proud of to be a Mahar community woman. She asserts herself as a real inhabitant of the land which is named after their caste i.e. land for Mahar is Maharashtra. But as true activist she is upset by the social condition of her community people, she wants to orient them, she wants to introduce the new generation with the life of Dalit during the last fifty years. This is her intension behind the autobiography so it is the history of her community people rather than the routine description of the author's family matters.

*"In one sense it is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography."*

We can say that Laxmibai Tilak has **different intension** to memories the past in the silent days of life for the sake of time pass. But on the contrary Baby Kamble, as an honest activist in the caste struggle wants the next generation should forget the legacy of sufferings through which their generations passed.

Another difference which stands for an aspect of orthodox society is that Devdatta himself gives **open access** to Laxmibai Tilak and encourages her to write though writing was a challenge for her. But Baby Kamble has **to hide** her composition for twenty years up to the time when it was published accidentally in *Stree*.

The next point of difference about *I Follow After* is that it is composed under the **masculine influence**. As it has been mentioned above that it was an effort of Laxmibai Tilak to write the biography of Rv. Tilak, so that she composed his memories. But those memories were none other than her entanglement with her husband to the extent that it becomes her autobiography. If Devdatta would have asked her to write of her autobiography then there would have been no different material than she had produced under the title *I Follow After*. She is always presented as meek, substitute and a true Hindu wife in each and every memorable

incident of her husband's life. She got converted as a Christian and proclaimed, '*I will not follow untouchability and caste distinction*', but the motive behind it is quiet ambiguous. Sometimes she becomes bold and takes decision but those never go beyond the circumference of her husband's authority. For example she decided to eat the food prepared by Aashamma bai at Mahabaleshwar. On her way at Pipurde, she sheltered a girl Nakushi and asked her to come along with them. She says that she was firm to the fact that her husband would have never restricted her from doing so, so that she declared it to her husband that she (Laxmibai) has taken her (Nakushi) with them. In the due course of adversities when she happened to travel for Karachi, she felt helpless in the absence of male supporter. She says,

*"We were at a side and Dattu at another. No male with us. Though we were in company of two males; they were mere useful for meals and not for support. One male was of two and half years old and another was one and half years old."*

Baby Kamble has lived in the same social structure of Hindu society in which woman is considered as subordinate to the husband. She was subjected for her husband's doubts and harsh beating. But her autobiography deals with grandparents, parents and her community people. The age old tradition like Rede jatra and certain religious conventions are the integral part of her autobiography. The tone of the autobiography is **egalitarian** and it is not influenced by masculinity. The adversity is an equal challenge for wife and husband. They started vegetable merchandise in their locality and added provisions like oil, salt and such other stuff. Her husband used to look after the business in the morning till she finished her household chores and once she came he left for the market to buy provisions. They played the role of business partner rather than one substitute to another. As far as the composition of autobiography is concerned, we find that Baby Kamble was not requested to compose it, on the other hand it was her inner inspiration which made her to express about her community people. If somebody would have asked her to write about her memories then she would have written the same that we read because she says,

*"The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community."*

The two autobiographies can be observed in respect of their **themes**. The people surrounded and religious complexities are the same line for them. After Rv. Tilak's conversion to Christianity, the relatives and family members developed a kind of aloofness from him. But as a true wife in Indian context, Laxmibai followed him with her all **religious complexities**. She found it trilling to describe how her perspectives changed when she drunk and omitted the water brought by a Muslim fellow. Her introspection on the occasion indicates how does she come out the religious complexities and foregrounds for the journey towards her conversion to Christianity. She introspected about the notion of castes among the human beings and its absence among the animals, the man made difference among men. She thought that Shudras' are not attributed with any kind of vulgarity and Brahmins are not decorated with any kind of holiness. There is difference only among men and women. And she decided to eat and drink from all without any caste based distinction. Such type of argument on the part of Laxmibai indicates herself as a Hindu lady becoming more secular to follow the path of Christian religion. Half of the autobiography deals with framing the ground i.e. Laxmibai as Hindu Brahmin and the remaining part of the autobiography is about how she excels in the Christian religious practices. She tried to maintain all the Hindu religious behavioral patterns after her conversion also. Kamalabai Deshpande quotes in the Introduction, '*She is Christian for the sake only! If we go to her home and communicate with her then we feel as if we are talking with a Brahmin from Kokan.*' In short, the autobiography becomes an instrument to reason the complexities regarding

her religious conversion and life after conversion. Baby Kamble handles the same issue of conversion. She describes an anecdote of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's speech at Jejuri. For Baby Kamble conversion is satisfying the **logical rationality** and winning the struggle of emancipation which was not possible for them in the circumference of Hindu religion. Hindu religion is bunch of ugly customs, exploitations, superstitions and detachment from education for the downtrodden. Buddhism has the potentials to give them recognition as human beings and rights of equality along with education.

*'Gradually, the wind of Ambedkar's thoughts turned into a whirlwind. Everybody began to understand, argue and consider. The dead cells in their blood were charged with a new life. Blood began to flow through their veins with new vigour.'*

Her autobiography deals with these two contradictory approaches for two religions in which the logical rationality, self-awareness and struggle for emancipation are important aspects. In short we can say that the basic difference between these two autobiographies is that the former finds romance and thrill in the conversion whereas the later deals with the utter need of conversion as means of emancipation for each and every type of adversity in the life of downtrodden.

Laxmibai Tilak's autobiography is titled as *Smritichitree* in Marathi. It means the pictures in the memory. She has come across some persons from her childhood. These are the family members, relatives, her husband, in-laws and the near and dear people of her husband. Her mother, Nana (her father), Bhikutai, Nanasaheb Pendase (Bhikutai's husband), Her Aunt, Govindrao Khamdote (her Aunt's husband), Narayanrao Tilak, Mahadeo, Dr. Balantain Saheb are the central figures. All other characters come occasionally and depart after playing their due roles. But the interesting fact is that Laxmibai's circle widens day-by-day regarding her acquaintances with the society to the extent that when she started to work as matron after the death of Rv. Tilak, she felt herself as responsible member in the family of Mumbai Mission. **Her family is her world** for which she sacrificed and reconciled throughout her life and she always remained dependent on her relatives, husband and son. No doubt the circle of the family got widen slowly. But in the case of Baby Kamble, **the whole community is her family**. At her mother's natal village Veergaon, there are sixteen families and all the heads of those families are just like maternal uncles for her. She was a member of the community more than her family. The adverse conditions of the neighbourhood families were shared by her grandmother when the women from those families group for meals and eat stale bhakris with onions. Her father Pandharinath Kakade always considered surviving the community members as his moral responsibility. The sufferings and agonies of the community members never remain their own but shared by everybody. *The Prisons We Broke* starts with this particular sense i.e. the community as a family and at the end we find Baby Kamble has given slight references of her own family because she finds it very difficult to think herself outside of her community but it does not mean that she is dependent on anybody. On the contrary she shares the earning source with her husband as a business partner. Even her marriage is not her personal matter; it can't be in Indian context. But it does not remain as a matter of two families rather it becomes an experiment of the community people to walk on the path of Dr. Ambedkar by arranging it in a different way.

In short, it is considered as the basic difference between the two autobiographies that the former stands for the self-modification and changed perspective due the self-modification on the part of the author. At the same time the later stands for the community upliftment rather than self-development. It is the difference like western modernity and eastern communitarianism.

As far as the language of these autobiographies is concerned we find that Laxmibai has used mild language of compromise which reflects her life style. But the language Baby Kamble used is quite bold and complaining about the age old agonies of her community people.

In this way we can say that though these two are women autobiographies from Maharashtra but they differ in the basic structure as per the need of the authors to express themselves in public. Their tone and matters satisfy the authors' urge to enclose their perspectives to the readers. These autobiographies are from two streams so they stand for two different arguments.

### Works Cited:

Mang is one of the untouchable castes in Maharashtra.

e. g. *Sangate Eka* by Hansa Wadkar and *Me, Durga Khote* (tr. I, Durga Khote) by Durga Khote. etc

Ranade Ramabai. *Amchya Ayushyatil Kahi Athavani* (Marathi), *Himself the Autobiography of a Hindu lady* by Ranade Ramabai. Longmans Green and Co, 1938

Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* published as a complete book in 1986 but presented to readers and television audiences in serial form through the early 1980s, is considered the first autobiographical narrative by Dalit woman writer. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shantabai\\_Kamble](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shantabai_Kamble)

Maya Pandit in the Introduction of *The Prisons We Broke* Pp. xiii

Laxmibai Tilak was taught by Rv. Tilak and she was always in trouble to spell the difficult words in Marathi.

Maxine Berntson, a sociologist happened to see the notes of Baby Kamble and she talked about it to Vidya Bal, an editor of the women's magazine *Stree*

In her introduction to *Smritichitree*, Kamalabai Deshpande says, '*It is very difficult to say that which the real force was whether self-realization or reconciliation with husband by following his wish*'.

Buffalo fair conducted during the festivities for the mother goddess

English translation of Marathi quotation, done by me.

Dr. Ambedkar has asked rational questions to the Dalit masses regarding God Khandoba and has asked them to follow the path of dignity.

Roti made from jowar flour

Baby Kamble. *The Prisons We Broke*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009

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