

## Dalit Autobiography and Education: An Analytical Study

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The history of the evolution of mankind shows that from the ancient times, human beings have preferred to live in groups for one or the other reason. This attachment to one's group made it possible and easier for the members to survive in the hostile circumstances. As the group provided its members a sense of security and togetherness, gradually its importance went on increasing and it became an indispensable part of the members' lives. It is seen that various rites, rituals, customs and traditions of the group influence its members. The actions and behaviour of the members are largely controlled by their group. While living as a member of any particular society, a human being has to give more importance to the social customs and traditions rather than his individual likes and dislikes. It is so because of his numerous needs and aspirations which can only be fulfilled in a collective, collaborative manner with the help of certain social resources.

However, it doesn't mean that only the human being is dependent on society: the society also depends upon the human being. In other words the relationship between the society and its members is reciprocal. Both influence each other and in turn are influenced by each other and go on changing accordingly. As the personality of a human being is shaped by the society and its institutions like marriage, family, education, law, etc. similarly the individuals also play a vital role in shaping and developing these institutions.

Writers, being very important and active members of the society, considerably influence and in turn are influenced by the society and its institutions. And so the social institutions and their impact on the lives of its members has become a very sought-after area in social, cultural and literary studies. As the study of various social institutions and their influence on the personality development of human beings requires a large canvas, this article limits itself only to the study of the institution of education and its influence on the personalities of the protagonists of *Athavaninche Pakshi* and *Baluta*, the epoch-making Dalit autobiographies in Marathi, written respectively by P.I. Sonkamble and Daya Pawar. Such a study, the investigator believes, will add to our knowledge in understanding the importance of education in human life in general and in the lives of Dalits in particular.

It is universally accepted that education, both formal and informal, plays a vital role in the development of human beings. It helps the learners to grow in their personal as well as social life. The history of mankind itself is a proof of this fact. From the ancient Sanskrit literature, we come to know that princes and other members of the royal families were being sent to the *ashrams* to get education. The same is also seen in ancient literatures of the West. However, the same history shows that human society has been a place of inequalities at many levels from its very beginning. There have been proofs that every society had and still today has a hierarchical structure. In such a society, a group of individuals is always dominant than the other groups. And the dominant group almost invariably exploits the weaker groups of that society. This dominant group considers it superior to the others and forms the upper strata of the social structure and exploits the lower strata. Such an oppressive system is found to be present in almost all the ages and all the places. And it is because of this fact that the members of lower strata are forced to lead miserable lives.

Dalits formed the lower strata in Indian social structure. Hence, they were denied each and every opportunity by the upper caste Hindus. All the efforts of Dalits for getting education were strongly and unanimously opposed by the upper castes for social and political

reasons. The upper castes were afraid that if the lower castes are allowed to get education, they will ask for their share in power. That is what R. Manjhi says:

“The caste formed the basis for a high degree of polarization in access to knowledge and means of production....The instrument used for perpetuation of socio-economic differentials was the separation of work from knowledge and power. The working class was denied the access to education as it was considered a privilege of few upper castes. The denial of education was essential to prevent them from acquiring rights in productive assets...”

(Manjhi)

The severe punishment meted out to Eklavya and Shambuka for their efforts in getting education exemplifies the attitude of the upper castes towards the lower castes. And it is because of the lack of education that Dalits remained far away from the development and consequently led miserable lives. Actually, the caste Hindus were not ready to treat Dalits as human beings at all. For them, Dalits were not better than animals. The following remark made by Leibowitz in connection with Blacks in America is equally applicable to Dalits in India. He opines that the Whites did not consider Blacks:

“... scarcely more than chattel or animals, to be taunted, manipulated, humiliated at will, and kept in their place at the bottom of society. Crossing the colour line was an offence seldom tolerated and often severely punished.”(Leibowitz 1993: P.43)

But once Dalits became aware of the importance of education in their lives, they started to educate their children and it helped them to climb the ladder of success. The credit of changing the psyche of Dalits and making them aware of the importance of education undoubtedly goes to the Herculean efforts of the social reformers and educationists like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Maharshi V.R. Shinde, Chh. Shahu and others. These reformers worked for the abolition of untouchability and tried to uplift the down-troddens by making them aware of the horrible conditions of their lives. However, it was with the rise of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in Indian social and political affairs that Dalits really became aware of their sad plight. The efforts of these visionaries were supplemented by the country's political independence from the British rule and the spread of education that brought a sea-change in the outlook of Dalits in India.

P.I. Sonkamble's *Athavaninche Pakshi* is a narrative that speaks about Pralhad, a parentless child belonging to a backward 'Mahar' community and his struggle to live a meaningful human life. Similarly, Daya Pawar's 'Baluta' speaks about various incidents from the life of Dagadu, also a member Mahar community. Both these autobiographies speak about the endless efforts of their writers to survive in the hostile, inhuman social circumstances. While dealing with the ups and downs in the lives of Dalits, they throw a flood-light on the importance of education in human life in general and in the lives of Pralhad and Dagadu in particular.

A close analysis of '*Athavaninche Pakshi*' and '*Baluta*' shows that Pralhad and Dagadu had realized the importance of education at a very early stage in their lives. Education was regarded so important that P.I. Sonkamble begins his autobiography with a chapter entitled '*Goshta Pati-Pustakachi*' (A Story of Slate and Book). In this chapter, Pralhad tells the readers how his sister bought a slate and a revision book from the weekly market and admitted him to a government-run school. He writes:

“मला बहिणीनं गावातल्या मंगळवारच्या बाजारातून एक पाटी व चारेक आण्याचं उजळणीच एक छोटसं पुस्तक घेऊन समदयाचं बघून तिच्या गावाच्या सरकारी शाळेत टाकलं.” (Following other villagers, my sister brought a writing slate and a small Revision book costing four annas from

the Tuesday-market and got me admitted in a government-run school of the village.) (Sonkamble, 1979: P.43)

For Pralhad and Dagadu, putting in school was so remarkable because in those days thousands of Dalit children were deprived of education due to apathy, poverty and ignorance of their parents.

We are told that as a child, Pralhad was very much interested in attending the school and getting knowledge. But as he had lost his parents he was living with his elder sister in a small village. His sister was married to a poor farm-labourer and was compelled to work hard to support her family. Though India was politically free with her own Constitution proclaiming liberty, equality and fraternity, it was very difficult for backward castes to lead their lives peacefully, particularly in villages. Caste Hindus were not mentally and emotionally prepared to accept Dalits on equal terms. An inhuman and evil custom of untouchability was practiced. A touch or even a shadow of a Dalit was considered to be contaminating.

In such hostile social circumstances Pralhad and Dagadu had determined to get education and give some meaning to their lives. They firmly believed in the power of education in transforming human life. But getting education for Dalit children was not an easy job because of adverse social, familial and economical conditions. Though there were government-run schools where Dalit children could get free education, they were compelled to work hard to support other expenses of the school. Not only the hostile social circumstances deprived Dalit children of their education, but there were also their own people who did not want them to be educated. 'Baluta' narrates an incident in which Dagadu's close relatives advise his mother not to send him to school. Their contention was that instead of sending Dagadu to school, if he is made to work, it will bring home some money for his widowed mother to support the household expenses. Daya Pawar writes:

“सखू, कह्याला पोराला साळंत धाडतेस? आपण का वानीबामण हावोत? फिरल गलोगली आन खाईल डलीडुल्ली. न्हाई तर जाईल गुच्हांकड. तेवढीच राखुळी यील. व्हईल तुला मीठमिरचीला! ” (Sakhu, why are you sending this boy to school? Are we Wanis or Brahmins? He will wander in the village lanes and eat whatever he gets... or will look after somebody's cattle. It will also help you financially.) (Pawar, 1978: P.37)

Similarly in *Athavaninche Pakshi*, we are told that after passing 4<sup>th</sup> Standard, Pralhad's education was discontinued because his second brother-in-law took Pralhad with him on the pretext of helping him open a shop. But soon Pralhad realized the falseness of his promise. Thanks to the timely support of Vinayak, Pralhad's teacher and his own strong will-power that Pralhad succeeded to get admission in 5<sup>th</sup> Standard and his educational career was saved. Pralhad studied very hard and passed the exam. He tells the readers that without knowing English alphabet and attending the school for only one month in the first term, he was the only student from his village, except Prabhakar, who passed the examination by scoring 187 marks. Actually, it was a surprise for him as well as for others. While speaking about this incident, P.I. Sonkamble writes:

“बरं वाटलं. टोटलात पास हाव म्हणून. जे चेच्याचे पोर पावसाळ्यात पेरणीपासून शाळंत जात व्हेते ते कोणीच पास झाले नाहीत. फक्त भटाच्या प्रबाकरला सोडून. सगळ्यांना नवल वाटलं. एक तर बिनइंग्रजी बाराखडीच धडा वाचण्याचा व दुसरे म्हणजे एका महिन्यात १८७ का व्हईना मार्क्स घेऊन पास व्हायचं. वार्षिकलाबी पास झालो व रुळ सोडून गेलेली गाडी रुळावर आली.” (I was pleased as I had passed in aggregate. The students of Chere, who were regularly attending the school since the sowing in rainy season<sup>1</sup>, had all failed in the examination, except Prabhakar, a Brahmin. All

were surprised for my reading the lesson from English textbook without knowing its alphabet and passing the examination by getting at least 187 marks. I also passed the annual examination and my life-wagon came back on the right track from where it had derailed for some time.) (Sonkamble P.I.: 1979: P.59-60)

By facing such attitudes of their relatives and community members, Pralhad and Dagadu continued their education. Pralhad was required to walk five miles whereas Dagadu used to walk three miles daily to reach to the school. The economic condition of their house was very poor. The monster of poverty was a permanent member of their household. To overcome this monster, they were forced to do all kinds of works. Pralhad used to sell the bark of babul tree to the tanners, collect bones of dead animals, collect clay for the potters and remove the carcasses of the animals. While narrating such incident, Pralhad says that it had become his routine to collect the bones and sell them to the vendors after the school. He felt disgusting to do such works but there was no any other alternative for him. He writes:

“लागलो मीही जनावराचे हडं गोळा करायला जिथून जमतील तिथून साऱ्यासारखे. शाळा नसली व असली व दुपारी सुटी झाली की तोच माझा धंदा व्हवून बसला...

” (I started to collect bones of dead animals from wherever I could find them. Whenever there was holiday or half-day at school, collecting bones became my sole profession.) (1979:P.67)

Another inhuman work Pralhad used to do was throwing away the carcasses of the dead animals. In fact, it was an ancestral work of Dalits in India. It was horrible to do. But Pralhad, Dagadu and many others from their community had no choice but to do that work. In *Athavaninche Pakshi* Pralhad narrates an incident of throwing away a dead dog. At the beginning he was pleased to get the work as the old woman had promised him a piece of bread. But when he lifted the dog with its tail, it gave way as it was decomposed. It had a stinking smell. He writes:

“मन काबूत ठेवलो नि त्या कुऱ्याच्या शेपटाला धरलो. धरलो तसंच शेपटाचा शेवटचा भाग माझ्या हातातच आला. कारण तो होता सडका. मला वास येत व्हता पण लालूचही व्हती, चतकोर का व्हईना मिळण्याची.” (Somehow I controlled my mind and held the tail of the dead dog. As it was completely decomposed, that part of the tail gave way and came into my hand. Though it had a stinking smell, I continued with the job as I had a craving for a small piece of bread which I hoped to get after finishing it.) (1979:P.87)

Here both of the above incidents show that the lives of Pralhad and Dagadu were similar to the lives of other four-footed animals with which Dalits were usually compared. They were made to do all kinds of chores just for a piece of bread. But the most important thing about these experiences is that they throw a light on the personality of Pralhad and Dagadu. These incidents, in fact, strengthen their will-power to get education and defeat their circumstances.

During their school-days, both Pralhad and Dagadu stayed in government-aided boarding meant for backward class students. Dagadu speaks about his stay in one of such boarding. His mother used to work as a cook in the same boarding house. She was required to cook for 50-60 inmates of the hostel. It was a tiresome job. But there was no choice for her. She worked there without complaint as she could have the company of her children. But other students of the boarding accused her of showing undue favours to her son during the meals. Dagadu was disturbed to listen to such accusations. But he was emotionally devastated when the students refused to have dinner because Dagadu's mother had prepared it during her menstrual period. In traditional Indian society a woman is forced to keep her away from the touch of others during her menstrual period. Dagadu's mother had informed about her period

to the concerned authority. But she was asked to prepare the meal for the students. Daya Pawar writes: ...

“...कुणी जेवावयास तयार नाही. काय झालंय, हे मला कळत नाही... मी ताटावरून उठतो आणि आईकडे काय प्रकार झालाय याची चौकशी करतो. ती झालेला प्रकार सांगते. धरणी दुर्भंगावी आणि आम्हा मायलेकाला तिनं आत घ्यावं, असं वाटलं. समाज ज्यांचा विटाळ मानत होता, त्यांनीच स्त्री.देहाचा विटाळ करावा... ” (Nobody was ready to have his meal. I didn't understand what actually had happened there... I got up from my plate and enquired with my mother about the matter. She told me about it. After listening to her, I felt so humiliated that I wished my mother and me cease to be. The people to whom the society considered to be polluting, themselves were humiliating a woman for her natural menstrual cycle.) (Pawar, 1978: P. 108)

Though the boarding was funded by the government, majority of the trustees and other office bearers used to be caste Hindus. So in many cases, they were not taking proper care about the essential facilities provided in the boarding. The living conditions used to be far below the expected standards. The students of the boarding were not allowed to voice their displeasure. And if somebody tried to protest, then he was punished. Actually, the mentality of the caste Hindus was not changed. They used to think that the backward students were unnecessarily entertained by the government and so they were spoilt:

“अरे तुम्ही सारे सरकारचे जावई! उगीच गपचिप जे दिलं ते खाण्यापेक्षा कीरकीर का करायचं? तुम्हाला सरकारनं सारं दिलंय आता फक्त पोरी देयाच्या राहिल्यात.” (Hey! All of you are the favorites of the government! Instead of eating whatever is served to you, why you are making fuss of it? The government has provided everything to you free of cost... still you are expecting more.) (Sonkamble, 1979: P.177)

But Dagadu and Pralhad had no time to think about such things. They had vowed to move forward in their lives by getting education. Whatever knowledge they had acquired from books, had taught them to think differently. This change in their attitude had made them self-conscious. They could understand that the sufferings of their lives were based on the false concept of superiority. But it was not easy in those days to speak or to act against the traditions. The fear of upper-caste Hindus was deeply rooted in Dalit psyche. Dalits thought of themselves to be toothless snakes which can be poked even by children. Their dependence on society had made them helpless. That is what Daya Pawar says:

“सिंहालं, आपण एवढे भित्रे कसे? ही भिती आपल्याला कुणी दिली? एखादं रस्त्यात सरपटणारं जिवणू असावं आणि येताजाता पोरंनी त्याला काठीनं डिवचावं, जिवणूनं साधा फुत्कारही टाकू नये, असं आयुष्य होतं. कधीकधी वाटायचं, घासभर गोळयासाठी आपण किती लाचार!...” (What a coward I am? Who made me such a coward? My life was similar to that of any crawling object in the street which even cannot hiss at the children who poke at it with a stick. Sometimes I used to feel that I have lost all my self-respect just for a morsel of food.) (Pawar, 1978: P. 72)

It was possible for both Pralhad and Dagadu to get the job of teacher after passing Matriculation. But they opted for higher education. In those days, getting higher education was not an easy task for Dalit children. But they did not give up their efforts. Education had instilled self-confidence in them. Finally, Pralhad got admission in Milind College, Aurangabad. Here he came in contact with many good teachers and was impressed by their knowledge. He thought if he could become like them. Now education had taught him to dream of a better life. It had enabled him to climb a ladder of social hierarchy. Even gradually the attitude of the people was also being changed. The people of his community

had also become aware of the value and power of education. They knew that education is going to change Pralhad's life. Pralhad speaks about this changed attitude of his people in the following incident:

“चेच्यातच लहानाचा मोठा झाल्यामुळ व परदिसा व परगावचा असल्यामुळ व साऱ्यांनाच बापूमाय म्हणून लावून घेऊन लवून चौपून वागल्यामुळ सारेच जण मला ख्यालीखुशाली विचारायचे व म्हणायचे अन् कवा आलाईच ये माय...एवढं मातर खरं की माझ्यावर व म्होरं शिकलेले कोणीबी औरंगाबादला कॉलेजला जाऊन आलं नसल्यामुळ तितल्या तमाम लोकांना मोठा आचंबा पडून नवल करतासत.” ( As I was brought up in Chere and was an outsider, and also behaved respectfully with all and sundry, whenever I used to visit my village, all villagers enquire about my well-being. It was true that all the villagers were amazed as there was nobody except me who had been to college at Aurangabad. ) (Sonkamble, 1979: P.140)

It is seen that education had also brought some change in the attitude of Savarna Hindus. They had started to treat educated Dalits a little differently than illiterate Dalits. Both Dagadu and Pralhad speak about such a changed attitude of the upper-caste people. In *Athavaninche Pakshi*, Pralhad tells the readers that once he had come back to his village from Aurangabad during the Diwali vacation. At that time Bhimraobapu, a caste Hindu, sent Pralhad with his son, Yankat, to bring his daughter, Putalabai for the festival. When Pralhad reached her house, he noticed a positive change in the behaviour of Putalabai and her family members. As Pralhad and Putalabai had learnt in the same class and now as he was taking his higher education, she treated him cordially. He writes:

“जे असेल ते अगदी पंगतीला परपंच न करता मला जेवण वाढण्यात आले...माझं पोट भरावं तसं त्या पुतळाबाईला वाटत होतं. तसं तिच्या वाढण्यावरून मला जाणवत होतं. कारण गरीब असूनही कॉलेज शिकतोय याचं तिला निश्चितच काही तरी वाटून व आपल्या घरी आपल्या भावावरं बोळाई म्हणून आलाय तर दोन घास जास्त घातले त्याला बिचान्याला खायला तर काय बिघडले.” (Without making any distinction I was served all the items of the meal. Putalabai was serving me plentifully as she wanted me to eat to my full satisfaction as (she might have thought), I was studying at college though I was poor and had accompanied her brother to take her to her parents' home. So there was nothing wrong if she served a little more food to the poor fellow like me.) (Sonkamble, 1979: P.143-44)

But it doesn't mean that educated Dalits were treated on equal terms by the Savarnas. On the contrary, many people were not ready to change their age-old orthodox way of thinking. For them Dalits, either educated or not, were the same. Though by their hard work, Dalits had achieved some success in their lives, the caste Hindus had not completely changed their attitudes towards them. The knowledge which Dagadu and Pralhad had acquired from their education had made them aware of the fact that their oppressors were not ready to give up the battle easily. They wanted to rule over their victims permanently. A critic speaks about this attitude of the oppressors in following in following words:

“(The oppressors were always cautious)...to keep (the oppressed) in his place; to restrict his freedom of movement, discourage his ambition, and banish him forever to the nether regions of subordination and inferiority..”( Bone, 1969: P.14.)

Naturally, such a vitiating attitude of the caste Hindus does not allow their victims to have a normal growth of their personality. But Dalits continued their efforts with the hope that someday their oppressors will change their attitudes.

In '*Baluta*' and '*Athavaninche Pakshi*', there are many incidents in which the readers come across an orthodox attitude of the caste Hindus. Dagadu speaks about one such incident

in which Vithoba, a member of Maratha community did not allow him in his house in Mumbai. He was served his lunch outside the house. Even he knew that Vithoba's wife will purify the plate in which he had eaten his meal. (Pawar, 1978: P. 84)

The incident with Pralhad is more thought-provoking. He tells us how a man belonging to Mali community expresses his displeasure for Pralhad's sitting with others. Actually, Pralhad was invited by his upper-caste friends. As his friends insisted, Pralhad sat with them. But the Mali expressed his displeasure for Pralhad's sitting with upper-castes on the equal footing. P.I. Sonkamble writes about this incident in following words:

“सारे कसं का होईना विनवतात म्हणून गेलो घोंगड्याच्या काटावर जसे की सारे बसले होते. तर झालं काय त्या माळ्याने जे अगोदरच नाक मुरडणं सुरु केलं होत त्यात भर पडून तो डोळे वटारून कोणास न कळत माझ्याकडे बघायचा व नाक इतका मुरडायचा की जणू त्याच्या नाकाला फणसी वगैरे झालती. सगळं झाल्यावर मध्येच तो म्हणाला, दिवंजीसाहेब तुम्ही काही म्हणा हा परल्या काई शिकला तर उतीम लोकांच्यावर पंगतीला बसणं बर नाही. त्याला हे घातक है कारण त्याने आपल्या पायरीनेच वागावं.” (As all were requesting me to sit on the woolen mat I sat on its edge. However, the Mali, whose aversion to me could already be seen by his facial expressions, started to look at me angrily, taking care that it is not noticed by others. His behavior was such that it seemed to me that my sitting there had made him sick. During the conversation, he interfered by saying, “My Lord, you may not agree but this Parlya, though he is highly educated, should not consider himself to be equal with the higher castes and so should avoid sitting on equal footing with them. If he does not recognize his social status, it will be dangerous for him.) (Sonkamble, 1979: P.147-48)

Such kinds of people were everywhere. They were not ready to forget the customs easily. Even Mahatma Gandhi believed that caste Hindus will take more time to forget the age-old tradition of untouchability. Dr. Shriram Nikam speaks about Mahatma Gandhi's belief in following words:

“He (Mahatma Gandhi) conceived the process of assimilation of the Depressed Classes in the Hindu-fold to be gradual due to prevalent social customs and beliefs of the majority community. They cannot be expected to shed all the long cherished beliefs and customs overnight. Moreover in the matters of faith and social custom use of force was out of question. It could prove counterproductive.” (Nikam, 1988: P.142)

Mr. Gandhi seems to be correct in his observation. It was but natural that the caste Hindus will try to enjoy the benefits of the old social custom as long as possible and to keep it intact, they will stand united against all those forces that will try to abolish the system. However, it should be noted that though it is against their will, with the passing of time the caste Hindus have started to accept the change. And for this attitudinal change, education is one of the important reasons.

Until now Dalits had considered the atrocities against them to be the outcome of their ill-fate. But now education had taught them to think rationally. They had realized that their sufferings were the consequence not of their previous sins but that of cruel social customs. Education had brought the light of knowledge to their dark ghettos. The teachings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had made them aware of inhuman conditions of their lives and instilled the ideas of equality and freedom in them. Now they were not ready to tolerate the atrocities of the upper-castes. They had made up their minds to protest against all those social traditions which had exploited them for centuries. Daya Pawar writes about this change in the attitudes

of Dalits. During his school-days at a tahsil place, he had realized the true identity of his personality. He had come to know that there is no need to feel inferior to the upper caste students as he can show his talent in studies and overcome them. He writes:

“तालुक्याच्या शाळेतच मला माझ्या खऱ्या व्यक्तिमत्त्वाची ओळख झाली. आपल्यात काही कमी नाही, गावच्या कोंडवाड्यातून बाहेर पडलंच पाहिजे! ह्याकरता शिकायला हवं! शहरातील वाण्याबामणाच्या पोरानाही आपण अभ्यासात मागं टाकू शकतो, हा शोध अचंबा करणारा वाटत असतो.” (I realized my true personality at a school in Tahsil place. We are devoid of any weakness. We have to break free from the bondages of the village. For that, we have to get education. After coming into the town, it was surprising to know that I can easily overcome the high caste students in studies.) (Pawar, 1978: P. 52)

By bringing in such a change in their attitudes, Pralhad and Dagadu succeeded in their lives. Pralhad, a parentless child belonging to the *Shudra* community, entered into a teaching field and became a lecturer in a college and could achieve social status. Similarly, Dagadu, who had lost his father at a very early age, defeated the antagonistic social forces and became a famous writer and social and political activist. Actually, it was the transformation in the lives of these Dalit boys. And this transformation was the result of education. It should be noted here that there were so many boys and girls both in *Shudra* and *Savarna* communities, however, only those could get some success in life who had treaded on the path of knowledge, who had taken some kind of education. Pralhad and Dagadu did the same and could climb the ladder of success in their personal and social lives and also showed the path of success to the others.

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