Chapter 3: Caste Violence

So far, I discussed dalit feminism and its critique on mainstream feminism to suggest that I would look at physical and symbolic caste violence from dalit feminist perspective and gender and caste politics are crucial to my work. In this chapter, I would like to discuss caste violence in India. Due to inadequacy of the available information, theorization and reportage (in a few cases) on caste violence, I use the reports on caste violence from newspapers, online resources and in particular the academic discussions on major cases of caste violence brought to light in recent times.

I would discuss physical forms of caste violence which can be divided into three broad categories: caste violence/atrocities against dalits at collective level, caste violence/atrocities against individual dalits and intra-caste physical violence against dalit women.

Dalits are subjected to caste violence in several contexts. The reason that I divided it into three types is to present my argument on caste violence that is generated with different backgrounds. But whatever may be the context or background, caste violence springs from traditional caste system and hierarchy. In the first category, I would look at how dalits being part of community are subjected to violence in villages. Village is the space of grassroots level dalits. Within this space, dalits are confined to the caste position according to caste dynamics. In this category both dalit men and dalit women are
confined to live up to the norms of caste position. Apart from the constant violence that they are subjected to for centuries with this confinement (to menial jobs, untouchability, economic exploitation and so on) in various contexts, atrocities on dalits like killings, burning them alive and rape on dalit women also take place. Another important feature of this category of violence is that it is only addressed in the context of growing awareness among dalits and media and some progressive or dalit organization's interventions. Dalits being boycotted by the entire village, dalits being killed for demanding increment in wages, or dalits defiling the upper-caste spaces such as water tanks and wells can be considered as physical caste violence. The justification for these atrocities has always been brought either by attributing criminality to the dalits's act of any kind of revolt or due to the subversion of the traditional caste order of the society.

A member of dalit community individually targeted by upper-caste animosity in cases of one or a few dalits subverting the "order" of the society that is structured according to the traditional caste system comes under the category of violence against individual dalits. Though the earlier category where dalits collectively experience caste violence also springs from reasons such as subversion of upper-caste power or caste symbols, in a few cases dalits are targeted even without much awareness of such subversion. For example dalits are killed for stealing a little amount of grain; and inadvertently entering upper-caste space without any ill intent can lead to atrocities on the whole community. But cases of dalits individually revolting to subvert the caste symbols arise out of rising awareness and upward mobility of the dalits. Even though the atrocities are committed against individual dalits, it happens because the particular member is part of the dalit
community. So, the individuality in case of caste violence cannot be well defined nor can any clear distinction be drawn. Even this kind of violence cannot be addressed without much political and social understanding of caste dynamics mediated through morals and values of the society. This sort of violence is always justified in advance as a punishment to some “crime”. Dalits who don’t conform to their traditional caste position are killed in the name of black magic, in cases of illegal relationship with upper-caste women or eve-teasing of upper-caste women or asserting rights of dalits in educational institutions, questioning the police brutality, or for building up leadership for dalit movement or dalit political assertion.

Another important distinction I made in the category of physical caste violence is the intra-caste violence that dalit women are subjected to, which is an important part of my thesis. Dalit women do face the atrocities such as rape, molestation by upper-caste for both being part of dalit community and individually for any kind of revolt against the power of upper-caste. This caste violence doesn’t end there for dalit women. It also occurs within the family and from the dalit community. Since dalit communities are integral part of caste system, patriarchy operates within the dalit family structure. Caste and gender dynamics make upper-caste women “belong” to upper-caste men which make them socially dependent on them. The same casteist patriarchy makes dalit women also inferior and “accessible” to the upper-caste males. This does not imply that dalit women are free from the dominance of dalit men. The gender discrimination appears within dalit families as well. Dalit women’s labour is exploited even in the families; they are also subjected to brutal physical violence. In my understanding this category of caste violence
is generally not considered as caste violence. Many incidents of this intra-caste violence are not reported or discussed. These incidents came to the discussion with the emergence of dalit women writing and dalit women autobiographies. I would discuss dalit women writing to discuss intra-caste violence against dalit women.

**Dalit Women Autobiographies**

Dalit literature has been a significant tool in fighting the violence that is generated on the dalits in the society. Dalit literature has emerged into a significant genre in various states significantly Maharstra. Arjun Dangle, a literary critic and dalit activist says that dalit literature is one significant wing of dalit struggle and movement.

"Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality."\(^2\)

Dalit literature has been significantly marked by a distinct style, genre, language and values and thus could not find its space in mainstream literary circles. For long, it was not very easy for dalits to publish their writings due to the hegemony of the upper-castes over culture, language, literature, and print media. Just as dalit society and culture is considered inferior, the expression and their language are also considered inferior. But a few assertive dalits have made distinction in their style and language in their and asserted the dalithood in their writing. They have subverted the normative strands of the society and its culture and literature. For example, Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography *The Out Caste (Akkarmashi)*\(^3\) and Babu Rao Bagul’s short story *Mother*\(^4\) have depicted the
uninterrupted revolutionary dalit point of view of society, morals and culture. (xi-xv) They not only portrayed the distinct dalit culture with a strong assertion of self-respect but also the alternative cultures that are dwelling in the outskirts of the villages which are never considered to be "Indian". Nevertheless they also reveal experiences of Ambedkarite movement, social history of dalit castes. Dalit writing is subversive in understanding the social value system which has been significantly dominated by Brahmanism and caste system in India. Dalit writing also practiced its distinct style, idiom and values.

In the stories 'Gold from the Grave', 'Mother' and 'Livelihood' is depicted fierce battle for life in an urban slum, and a world surviving beyond the pale of so-called 'cultural values'. (xiii)

Autobiography is one of the significant forms of dalit literature in documenting the authentic experiences of dalits and their expression. Ambedkar's autobiographical notes can be considered as one of the early examples of dalit autobiography. ⁵ Though it is not a fully pledged autobiography, it has a political significance in making the invisible caste discrimination visible. Although Ambedkar states that his idea behind writing these autobiographical notes is to enable the foreigners to understand the actuality of the experiences of untouchability, I believe that the expression of these experiences of untouchability is also vital to dalit politics in contemporary India where caste has become more invisible and more symbolic than real.

Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realise how oppressive it is in its actuality.
It is difficult for them to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village consisting of a large number of Hindus, go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth, and to carry the errands of all and sundry, collect food at the doors of the Hindus, buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania, from a distance, regard the village in every way as their home, and yet never touch nor be touched by anyone belonging to the village. (4)

Ambedkar's autobiographical notes are an important document to study caste discrimination in the context of the community and individuals subverting the society's view of an untouchable. Set in pre-independent India, the autobiographical experiences of Ambedkar show the different instances of experiences of an untouchable at the grassroots level and also as a dalit who achieved the most superior qualifications and positions in education and politics. He begins with the childhood experience as an untouchable boy who could not access to common water tanks, hotels and so on. When he returns to India from Columbia University, unable to find shelter in any caste Hindu's hotels, or friends' houses, he lives in a Parsi inn without revealing his caste identity still thinking that since Parsis are not part of Hinduism, they do not practice untouchability. But when Parsis find out that an untouchable man polluted their inn, they do not hesitate to even physically abuse Ambedkar. But Ambedkar's helpless condition and his defenseless attitude help him to escape physical abuse. (13-19) Another experience of Ambedkar substantiates how Muslims protested an untouchable polluting their water tank. (23-25) In another instance where Ambedkar's wife is on death bed, a caste Hindu doctor was not ready to touch an
untouchable woman rather he clings to the inhumanity and brutality. (26-27) These autobiographical notes are the documents to substantiate untouchability and its manifestation in the society. Most importantly what is the expected response from the audience or the readers of dalit autobiographies or other literary forms that are autobiographical in tone is not to empathize but to recognize the struggle which has been stressed by Ambedkar, "Though my condition was pitiable, I did not like to be pitied."(18)

Dalit autobiographies have depicted the experiences of untouchability in the society and distinct social values and cultures whereas dalit women autobiographies have revealed the multiple oppression of being an untouchable, dalit woman. They also have depicted the patriarchal oppression in dalit communities and movement.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) is the first dalit woman's autobiography in India that appeared in *Stree* in Marathi language in 1982. Life and experiences that are depicted in the autobiography date back to 1940s. Kamble's autobiography was published twenty years after it was actually written. Kamble says "I used to be scared of both my son and my husband, scared of their reaction. My husband always called me an ignorant woman! I was afraid of his response. So I kept everything hidden away from their eyes for almost twenty years." (147) The autobiography seriously engages with the experiences of dalit community and poverty stricken life of dalits due to the untouchability and traditional caste system. Experiences of dalits who have to beg food from the upper caste houses where they do scavenging and other related professions is one larger part of this
autobiography. Her autobiography is also a significant document on how the ideology of Ambedkar influenced the dalits of the period and the history of Ambedkarite movement. Nevertheless, Baby Kamble critically engaged herself in describing dalit patriarchy and the violence that is experienced by dalit women in families. This part of dalit women questioning the dalit patriarchy has changed the very face of dalit writing and dalit movement which praises dalit culture as free from patriarchy that promises “more” freedom and less violent life to dalit women when compared to upper-caste women. Baby Kamble also subverted the norms of autobiography in the tradition of dalit autobiography. Autobiographies deal with the individual’s experiences where as dalit autobiography engages with community’s experiences. Almost a huge part of the autobiography is a general description of features of Mahar community in which the reader cannot locate the writer and her position if not as part of the Mahar community. The writer’s personal details are almost never mentioned when she talks about the common oppression of dalit women that is depicted in the autobiography. The writer’s individual identity appears only when she begins to describe the community in the context of Ambedkarite movement and her active participation in the movement. To put it in Baby Kamble’s own words,

“The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore Jina Amucha was the autobiography of my own community.”

Baby Kamble’s autobiography begins with the different experiences of Mahar caste under the strong caste system. Mahars were treated worse than animals by upper-castes
and their poor standards of life are marked by the starvation for everyday meal and begging food from the households of upper-castes. The only food that is available for Mahars was the dead cattle and sometimes the rotten dead cows offered by the upper-castes of the village. (12) Food habits of untouchables have been described in detail. Dalits do not take part in the economy of the society though they do labour for the society. Their labour is exploited and never paid. It is only paid in the form of dead cows which are to be removed from the premises. Manual scavenging is the profession of untouchables and begging food in spite of putting their labour is the very striking quality of their life. Unlike Kancha Ilaiah, she does not celebrate the culture or food habits of dalits but she underlines that the so called dalit culture is only an imposed culture by upper-castes. She describes various superstitious beliefs involved in child birth and in case of deceases in Mahar community. (80-82) Mahars are completely deprived of medical and health facilities. In case of childbirth, women are almost tortured to death by ignorant people with their superstitious beliefs. The survival rate of women is very low. Many people who suffer from diseases are mistaken for being possessed by evil spirits. The godman of the village does exorcize and kills the people by torturous methods such as beating them and strangling them. These deaths are perceived to be the murders committed by the evil spirits. (80) She also describes the temple rituals in which dalits have to act as Potrajas as part of the violence generated through Hindu religion. (18-21)

Kamble describes the pain of dalit women in the society and as well as in families. Dalit women are victims of untouchability, poverty and the patriarchy of the dalit families.
“Everyday the maharwada would resound with the cries of hapless women in some house or the other. Husbands, flogging their wives, as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious.(89)

She criticizes the way in which dalit women are treated in Mahar families. Dalit women do not have any freedom to choose the husband for they are married off before they reach the age of eight. They do suffer the physical violence and they do not have any freedom to divorce. An abandoned or mutilated wife is considered to be bad/ immoral and will not have any shelter anywhere.(89-102) All the circumstances are described in the background of Ambedkarite movement and influence of Ambedkar’s philosophy over dalits. She appears as a dalit girl sent to school in the context of Ambedkar proclaiming the importance of education for dalits. She also describes the temple entry movement where a few young dalit boys try to pollute the temple as called on by Ambedkar. Temple entry is not seen as trying to assert the space for dalits in Hinduism but to offend the concept of ritual purity. Dalits on the one hand rejected Hindu religion and on the other hand they have subverted it and refuted the purity pollution concept. (126)

Urmila Pawar’s autobiography The Weave of My Life (2008) appeared in Marathi language in 2003. Unlike many dalit autobiographies that only proclaim the significance of dalit education in the context of Ambedkarite philosophy and dalit movement, she deals with the difficulties experienced in the educational system that has been
Brahminical for centuries. She writes about her experiences of inferiority associated with her caste position. Her autobiography also critically engages in describing dalit patriarchy. Sharmila Reges says,

"Thus as a self-consciously dalit feminist testimonio positioned against the brahminical and neo-liberal practices of the state, *The Weave of My Life* violates both bourgeois individualism and communitarian notions of the singular dalit community, thus becoming a milestone in the archive of resources for practicing dalit studies as critical and inclusive social science." (325)

Unlike Baby Kamble’s autobiography where the voice of the narrator is not an individual but the Mahar community, Urmila Pawar’s autobiography has more detailed saga of her life from childhood memories to the recent personal tragedies. Set up in Ratnagiri of Konkan region of Maharastra, her childhood starts in the middle of the beautiful nature, mangoes, jackfruits and sea food the only affordable food item for cooking. She begins the narration with her innocent childhood memories and girlhood fancies, friends, school, schoolmates and teachers who discriminate her on the basis of caste. She had hardly any awareness at this stage about caste and untouchability. Her childhood details can never be considered as personal because though they sound personal in tone they are very much part of caste experiences of a dalit girl. The image of Urmila Pawar’s mother weaving the bamboo baskets (to earn a living) through out her life in her youth, old age, though pain, suffering and personal loss sets the background to the narration. The title *The Weave of My Life* reminds the reader of this same image throughout the writing.
Pawar is the youngest child in a dalit family. Her father is an educated and workaholic man who believes in the importance of education for dalits. He aims to see all his children educated including the girl children. He has a very good understanding and awareness of caste and caste discrimination in the society of his time. Once after moving to the town Ratnagiri, he always does as much help as he can do to all those dalits who come from the village. Since water is not offered to dalits from caste Hindu houses, he got a well dug in front of his house and kept a bucket and rope outside for the dalit women vendors to drink water who come from villages around to the town. He wanted all his nephews to get education. Pawar’s mother takes up the same duty of educating her children after he dies. Pawar describes how dalits children are treated in schools and how they are also excluded by the schoolmates in various instances. Nonetheless, she becomes very active in studies and extra-curricular activities soon after passing the fourth standard. Her sister is also educated and gets a job in mental hospital. Through her marriage, Pawar understands the patriarchal violence in dalit women’s lives.

Though Pawar’s father has good awareness of caste, he never supports the idea of married women taking shelter at natal houses due to violence in in-laws families. Pawar tries to understand this dichotomy. She introduces us to various men who torture their wives at the slightest pretext including her brother-in-law (elder sister’s husband). A few men among them are working in the dalit movement. She also describes her education, marriage, motherhood. She describes her life tragedies such as she lost her father, brother, her son and she also lost her husband.
Her experiences show the dalit life setup in the background of post Ambedkarite dalit movement. All the siblings become well educated but all of them do feel extremely humiliated in the society. Her poverty is one the humiliating factors for her to confront with the people of upper-castes in school, college and workplace. The subtle ways of humiliating untouchables in the urban society and symbolic untouchability that prevails in the educational institutions make the autobiography a significant milestone in dalit studies.

Dalit women writing also engages itself critically with caste and as well as patriarchy. In Maharastra, dalit women writers like Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Urmila Pawar used the literature as a weapon to express their struggle against caste and patriarchy. They also narrated the experiences of dalit women who actively participated in Ambedkarite movement and yet not recognized due to patriarchal tendencies of dalit movement itself. Dalit women writers do disagree with the assumption that the dalit families are “less patriarchal” or “democratically patriarchal” while constantly engaging themselves with the critique of mainstream feminism that marginalize dalit women. Their expression, language, societal values and morals depicted by dalit women writers are also revolutionary in tone when compared to dalit writing in general.

There are a few dalit woman autobiographies in Tamil language engages with different aspects of dalit life. *Karukku* (2000), Bama’s autobiography first appeared in Tamil language in 1992 deals with the life of dalit Christians in Tamilnadu during 60s and 70s. *Karukku* is the first dalit woman autobiography in Tamil language. *Karukku* literally
means the palm tree leaves with sharpness on both sides. The title also indicates how
the dalit literature can be as sharp as the leaf to fight against the caste discrimination,
inequality and subjugation. Bama deals with the serious political questions such as ‘Can
the conversion solve the caste question?’ ‘Are the other religions in India are free from
caste system?’. The autobiography has its significance especially in the context of mass
conversions and the conversion as an ideology developed by Ambedkar. Her experiences
of being a dalit woman are an important part in this autobiography. Though she gets the
opportunity to enter educational institutions through Catholic church, she finds the church
as a space where there is upper-caste domination which marginalizes dalits further. She
enters seminary with the idea to become a nun to serve dalits. But all her dreams come to
an end when she understands catholic mission is not going to solve the caste question.
Unable to cope with the caste discrimination at the seminary, she leaves it and becomes
just a school teacher. She also believes that the church is spoiling the revolutionary self of
dalits. Voice of her autobiography transcends the individual self into the community’s
voice. M.S.S. Pandian says Bama’s autobiography brings out the history of a village from
another angle. He says, “The act of violating genre boundaries is where Bama’s
narrative, even as it verbalizes her own life story, depletes rather effortlessly the
autobiographical ‘I’, an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaces it with the
collectivity of the dalit community.”(130)

Bama’s *Sangati* (2005) is perceived to be a novel rather than an autobiography. But the
work is autobiographical in tone. However Bama agrees it is another record of
experiences of being a dalit woman and nothing written in this is unreal. It is entirely a
unique dalit woman writing that deals with internal patriarchy in comparison with the caste dynamics operated through gender. It deals with the hypocritical normative standards of the society. She describes the life of dalit women in a feudal society where dalit women's sexual exploitation is almost legitimized by the caste system by the upper-caste landlords. She also deals with how the injustice done to dalit women is made more legitimate by upper-caste and male dominant village Panchayats. One striking feature of Sangati is also the language used with dalit idiom and using the language of dalits at the grassroots. Bama's autobiography shocks the reader with the descriptions of brutal intra-caste violence that is experienced by dalit women in the families. She almost considers them as atrocities committed on dalit women. She refutes the assumption that the upper-caste women are more prone to violence in the name of caste and religion and dalit women are under less restraint. Dalit women in her village face violence in the families and many dalit women are killed when they are badly battered by husband. Such brutal violence goes unrecognized and unreported.

Unlike the situation in Maharastra, Telugu literary scene has yet to witness a full pledged dalit woman autobiography. A collection of Telugu dalit women writing appeared in 2003. Many decades later, women writing and dalit writing emerged into Telugu literary scene, there appeared the first anthology of dalit women writing in 2003. Nallapoddu an anthology of dalit women writing has been brought out by Gogu Shyamala that includes the writings of dalit women who were left unpublished from 1900.
At one level the anthology emerges out of, and builds on, the feminist and dalit critiques that began to question the existing patriarchy and caste inequalities in society. Though there was dalit women writing during all the phases, there was not much interest in dalit women’s writing or space for their issues in hegemonic mainstream literature. In her introduction to Nallapoddu, Shyamala Gogu emphasizes the literary marginalization of Dalit women: there was no space for dalit women’s writing either in the feminist critiques or in the dalit literary movement during the '80s. Dalit women faced multiple forms of oppression along the lines of gender, caste, language, poverty and rural location, yet they had little space for the expression of their experiences. The literature and criticism produced by (male) dalit scholars and activists exposed the oppressiveness and/or limitations of Brahmical modernity and classical Marxism, and was powerful enough to transform the face of the Telugu literary sphere, but there was not much in these debates to inspire dalit women’s writing or to theorize their life experiences.

Similarly, but perhaps not very surprisingly, feminists in Andhra Pradesh broke new ground in their search for women’s writing, (Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present, V: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century) and women’s history (“Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra”, published in English as “We Were Making History”)—yet these important books, which were even critically allied with the dalit movement, did not highlight the experiences and contributions of dalit women.

Caste Violence (Atrocities) Against Dalits at Collective Level

The existing power relations between castes in the society of India also provided basis for a few castes acquiring political power (due to various reasons I mentioned in the
Introduction such as Zamindari system, due to Brahmins' monopoly over education and so on) in contemporary society. The revolt of dalits against such inequalities also invited violence against dalits in various instances. In ancient times, caste inequalities and the violence that is generated through caste is more conspicuous. People have started believing that the contemporary society has effaced such visible practices of untouchability and caste inequalities. But contemporary India has witnessed various outbursts of caste violence. Keelavenmani, Chunduru and Khairlanji are only a few examples of such occasional outburst of caste violence. I would like to provide my understanding of these incidents and discuss caste violence in the context of these incidents and also discuss how such incidents are represented by dalit women autobiographies.

On 25\textsuperscript{th} December, 1968, dalits who were protesting for an increment in their wages were burnt alive by the upper-caste landlords in Keelavenmani of Tamilnadu. Before the incident took place, a group of agricultural labourers started agitating for increment in wages from the administration. There had been a severe continuous drought since 1967 in this region which made the lives of the labourers difficult. The workers, the landless peasants, particularly those who belong to the \textit{Pallar} caste organized themselves to protest against the landlords. One day before the Keelavenmani atrocity, a landowner was assaulted and allegedly killed by the group of peasants who organized to agitate for the increase of wages. On the very next day 25\textsuperscript{th} December, 1968, a group of armed upper-caste landlords went to the dalitwada to attack landless labourers. Fearing that they were going to be attacked, the landless dalit peasants went to take refuge in a barn along with
their wives and children. Landlords burnt down the building, killing 44 men, women and
8 children. The police men became mute spectators. No case had been registered against
the crime. 1 Keelavenamani incident though not the first of its kind, it is one of the early
incidents that has been reported and brought out into the discussions of caste violence.

Incidents like Keelavenmani takes place almost every day in India. But the way to
understand this incident is that caste prejudices continue to follow these incidents when
the victims approach the court for justice. At first the case was not booked by the police
and later, courts were not ready to take the caste identity of the victims into
consideration. Though the caste relations of the village are palpable, police and courts are
not ready to take action or to consider it as caste violence. Caste angle of these village
clashes is important especially in cases where they lead to the atrocities on dalits. Such
cases are manipulated as petty clashes for lands. Above all, the political influences give
more power to the upper-castes (in case of Keelavenmani OBCs) 12 to get away with such
crimes without getting punished. It is important to understand that within the village
system, Panchayat politics, caste inequalities and powerful castes continue to dominate
and turn unjust toward dalits who are weaker sections. Incident also gained importance
within the frame work of Dravidian movement and dalit politics. Dravidian movement
which is anti-brahmin movement has not looked into the caste atrocities within non-
brahmin caste i.e between dalits and OBCs.

Village Panchayats are considered to be ideal for providing justice for citizens according
to Gandhi. B.R. Ambedkar did not accept the village as the basic unit of justice. Village
Panchayats become upper-caste dominant and in fact become dangerous to dalits. One of the important reasons why atrocity cases becomes difficult to book under SC/ST (Prevention of) Atrocities Act, was in most cases, it is not just one or two people who are involved in the crime. It is either a huge group of people without leaving the trace of leadership or almost all the villagers. The same way, if the village Panchayats has to act as legitimate structures to provide justice, the upper-caste of the village dominate and they also make the crime a legitimate decision of the village. In many villages, dalits were burnt alive, killed, dalit women were molested as a punishment to the “crimes” they have committed.

On Aug 6th 1991, in a village Chunduru (Guntur district) in Andhra Pradesh, dalit men were warned by the police to run into the fields because upper-caste men were going to attack their homes. Leaving the homes, dalit men run into the fields where a huge mob of Reddy men were awaiting to kill dalits with weapons. Thirteen dalit men were brutally killed and their bodies were thrown into the canal. The context for the atrocity was that a few weeks before, a young educated dalit boy Ravi went to the cinema hall in the village Chunduru and sat in the balcony class. His feet by mistake touched a Reddy man. Generally, dalits of the village do not enter the balcony of the hall which is informally considered to be the space only for upper-castes. So, a few people present in the cinema hall have beaten up the boy and made the police to register a case of eve-teasing on the boy. Parents of the boy were also life threatened by the upper-caste landlords. Later, the dalits of the village decided to stand by the side of the family of the boy. Knowing this fact, the upper-caste villagers socially boycotted the dalits. For a few weeks some dalit
families suffered due to deprivation of income since dalits depend on daily wages for livelihood. They work in the upper-castes' lands to earn their living and thus lost their livelihood. Incident after incident led to the atrocity of massacre of a huge number of dalits in the village with the help and support of the police.¹⁴

Dalits of Chunduru are assertive and most of them are educated. The same assertion of dalits took place in the case of the young boy who was beaten up in the cinema hall incident. Dalits of the village standing by the boy’s family significantly substantiates the dalit solidarity and thus questioned the power of upper-castes. Chunduru is a Mandal headquarters and there is police station but the police in this case far from being mute spectators, actively helped the attackers. Such involvement of police into the atrocity made it difficult for dalits to register the cases against the upper-caste men. But the persistence of dalits and their refusal to accept any kind of compensation by the state or the upper-caste villagers resulted into a dalit mass movement under the leadership of Katti Padma Rao.

The Chunduru carnage also led to the upper-caste consolidation in the post Mandal era. Under the banner of Sarva Janabhyyudaya Porata Samiti, upper-castes also have started a movement against “oppression” that the upper-castes were facing at the hands of dalits as in the case of Mandal. According to them dalits, in the traditional caste system should live submissive to all the other upper-castes.(4) One of the slogans of the Samiti was, “Those who beg every morsel should not be arrogant!” The statement asserts that the dalits who are landless labourers and are economically backward should always be
subservient to the system and live at the mercy of the upper-castes. Any kind of protest or rebellion by dalits will not be tolerated. The upper castes believe that dalits should confine themselves to the caste position which would not allow them to have any kind of equality with caste Hindus. But at the visible level, they mourned the “oppression” of the upper-castes in giving dalits more state benefits and by not protecting them from dalits. Another important angle of the upper caste consolidation in post Chunduru incident is the gender factor. There was a strong justification brought by the upper-caste women by alleging that they have been sexually harassed by dalit men. Reddy women of the village complained that they have been sexually harassed by dalit women an incident which evoked the questions on caste in gender and feminist politics.15

The Chunduru atrocity took place with the help of the police. Police, who are supposed to protect the citizens, have joined hands with the Reddy villagers to help them to massacre dalits in the fields. A few policemen from the Chunduru Mandal police station have gone to dalitwada and announced that caste Hindus are going to attack dalit homes. Mislead by the preplanned announcement made by the police, almost all dalit men have ran to the fields located in the outskirts of the village where the upper-caste men were already waiting to butcher them with weapons. Here, there is no question of dalits taking protection from the police or law since the crime is directly committed by the police.

Instead of expressing solidarity towards the victimized dalits and their families, a few educated upper-castes have celebrated the atrocity as a victory over dalits, their enemies. When a few dalits of Chunduru were found to be educated and getting into significant
positions in the public services and society, the roots of the caste system have been put on the verge of destruction. When the caste system is at stake, it is the duty of every one especially of them whose position in the caste ladder is more comfortable to bring back the order into the society and protect the caste system. It is substantiated through the cold blooded pre-planned act of the atrocity and also the defense made by the upper-caste under the banner of Sarva Janabhuyadayya Porata Samiti.

Dalits of Chunduru fought for a special court set up in dalitwada of the village itself. Sixteen years after the massacre in 2007, the special court convicted 21 of the accused to life imprisonment under SC/ST (Prevention of) Atrocities Act. What is important in this case of Chunduru is that this massacre has gained the nationwide attention from different groups. Dalits of Chunduru were keen on leading a mass movement against caste violence rather than just getting compensated for the loss. Even if the case is prosecuted as a murder, the caste angle of the atrocity or violence would have gone unrecognized. Caste angle is important in providing justice to dalits in this case because caste is one of the factors which became more symbolic in form in contemporary society.

Bama's *Karukku* describes the similar experience of caste violence in the village of Tamilnadu where she lived in her childhood (25-41). Though the details of the places and her own personal details are not revealed, her experiences shows that there have been various instances of caste violence that takes place in different parts of the country which are not brought out by the media. They are also not considered important either by the society or by the law.
In Barna's village, caste violence broke out suddenly when a Paraya caste man was stabbed by the Chaaliyar caste men when he was walking home alone. The context for the violence is that there has been a conflict going between Parayas and Chaaliyars about the cemetery. There are separate graveyards for dalit Christians and upper-caste Christians. The conflict started when Chaaliyars who are lower castes claimed the present cemetery where dalit Christians are burying the bodies originally belongs to Chaaliyars. Parayas also try to protest this injustice. Since a man from Paraya community is killed, they expected more attacks from Chaaliyars. Parayas went to the police station to get protection from them and to file a case against those involved in stabbing Paraya man. But by the time they reach the police station they found out that Chaaliyars already filed a complaint that Parayas have vandalized their houses, school and temple. They also have robbed their houses and dishonored their women (28). One morning, there was chaos at the cemetery. There was a clash again between the two castes. The police have chased Parayas and beat everyone whom they could catch. Many of them have run into the fields to hide themselves. Some have been hidden by women in the houses and some of the men have gone to hide themselves in the church. All those who were hiding in the church were caught by the police. Police have searched all the houses and caught a few Paraya men and arrested them. Women lived in the constant fear that night. They got news of a few men being beaten up almost to death. A few men were tortured by the police. There was a sad and tragic situation in Paraya houses. They also got the news that the police have been invited from Shivakasi and bribed with money, liquor and food by Chaaliyars. So, the police have manipulated the case in favour of Chaaliyars. Parayas suffer for
everyday meal, so they can not afford to even bear the expenses of court fees. Many dalit men were beaten up and arrested. They were also sent to jail. Parayas do not have any money to spend in the court or bear travel expenses to get out of the cases. During the same time a Paraya boy died in the village. They had to bury the body in the burial ground which is already in dispute. All the Parayas had gone together in the darkness to complete the funeral. Father of the boy was already hiding himself from the cops. But he had to attend the funeral of his son. He came in the disguise of a woman avoiding escaping the police eyes. In this situation of poverty, Parayas thought the only support they might get would be from the church. But they found out that it was the Church priest who informed the police about the Paraya men who hid themselves in the church. In spite of that Paraya women went to the priest for some financial support to bring their men back from the jail. But he denied this help.

The episode of caste violence in *Karukku* reminds us of the Chunduru incident where the police have helped the upper-castes to kill dalits and refused to register cases against upper-castes. Though the immediate context for the atrocity is the issue of graveyard, they have used the women to defend their act of atrocity. Chaaliyar women have supported and defended the atrocity even at the cost of losing their "honour" in the public. It is a disgrace to publicly claim about the sexual harassment according to the upper-caste notions of gender. But here, since it is the dalit men who were accused of such molestation, there is a casteist patriarchy that operates here to restrict dalit men from either having relationships or getting involved in any kind of sexual harassment. Since
such acts are going to pollute the whole caste, the immediate action or response even in the form of atrocity is justified.

State played an important role in case of the caste violence described in *Karukku*. Bama says that Parayas were poor and struggle for everyday meal, so they can not afford to either bribe the police or afford the court fees. But in my understanding, the police who are the visible form of the state available to the citizen are the individuals of different castes. Ambedkar says that India consists of not individuals but innumerous castes and sub-castes. So the police and the members on bureaucracy are equally burdened with the caste on their minds. Though there are a few pro-dalit laws, they are to be implemented by the people who are not caste free. Such people in the government do carry their caste prejudice and help their own castes. Though space for dalits in the police department and other parts of bureaucracy has recently been provided through reservation, the number of dalits in these sectors is low. Even if there are dalits, they should be politically and morally strong enough not to yield to the power of upper-castes who have been dominating the scene for decades. Many dalits do not have political awareness of caste and caste politics. The education system is not shaped in a way to bring caste consciousness among dalits to fight for their rights.

Another significant point that Bama raises in her autobiography and in the context of the caste atrocities is about conversion. The question whether conversion can solve the caste question is central to her autobiography. During the atrocity on dalits committed by the Chaaliyars and the police/state, it was also the catholic priest who supported Chaaliyar
against dalits. Though the religious conversion has offered a few benefits to dalits, none of the religions other than Hindu could give equal treatment to dalits. Christianity in particular is a religion into which dalit mass conversions have taken place in various states across India. But in states like Tamilnadu where the conversions into Christianity took place across the castes, we find equal number of upper-castes and middles castes in Christianity. Whatever may be the number of those upper/middle-castes, the dominance over dalits springs from their caste position but not from the religion. Dalits in the church are treated as untouchables and inferior to upper-castes. Apart from that the priestly class in Catholic Church in Bama’s village is not a dalit but an upper-caste. Hence he does not support dalits. Though religions other than Hinduism are free from caste system at the doctrinal level, since the people enter that religion do carry caste prejudice on their minds, those religions also imbibe caste inequalities. Ambedkar’s autobiographical notes also substantiate that all other religions in India are equally casteist like Hinduism. He says, “I gave one instance to show that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi. This will show that person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan.”

Baby Kamble’s autobiography has descriptions of caste violence in various forms. For her the very rituals of Hinduism such as dalits taking part in consumption of liquor, sacrificing the animals and finally left with the only option to beg food from caste Hindus was the constant violence under which Mahars live. The basic human dignity is denied to dalits. In spite all this they were made to believe that the only way to keep people of the community alive is to participate in such rituals. (9-14). There is a certain progress in the
political understanding of Mahars which is very visible in her lifespan under the influence of Ambedkarite dalit movement. Mahars were influenced by Ambedkar’s philosophy and accepted Buddhism. They have become part of dalit movement and rigorously questioned the upper-caste dominance in many ways. In the context of Ambedkarite struggle, the educated youth who are working for the movement received a telegram from Ambedkar to protest against the visible caste symbols by seeking entry into the temples and hotels. Educated Mahar youth made plans overnight to enter the Viththal temple. The news has reached the Brahmins and they also wanted to stop this attempt. But the Mahar youth somehow managed to enter the temple and touch the idol. This made Brahmins very upset and they chased them with lathis. Of course dalit boys escaped this violence. But the priests have announced that dalits have polluted idol and the temple, due to which God is very upset. Only after the constant worship and ritual purification for one and a half month they claimed to restore the purity of the temple.

Dalits collectively face such violence in the society from upper-castes when they become assertive. Here, dalits have not only subverted the norms of caste system which made them untouchables they have also subverted the power of Brahmins over the religion. Brahmins have monopolized the religion that when a Brahmin announces that the idol is defiled, every other caste including lower-castes believed and wanted to work towards purification. Dalits attempting to enter temples is not to take part in Hinduism but to subvert the caste system. Even the ignorant attempt of an untouchable would have made upper-castes rage against him/her and lead to caste violence. Subversive practices of dalits and stepping out of caste position through education, self-respect and economic
prosperity would directly refute the power of upper-castes which would lead to their animosity towards dalits.

**Atrocities on Individual Dalits**

Khairlanji caste violence is one of the examples of brutal physical violence experienced by individual dalits. There could be various reasons behind such violence. In most cases, it is the individual dalit who subverts norms of caste system or patriarchy which would invite caste violence. The assertion of dalits also leads to such violence. In case of Khairlanji, many such factors are involved in the violence.

On 29th September 2006, four members of a dalit family were killed after being tortured by the villagers of Khairlanji in Bhandara district of Maharastra. After 8 days, the news has been reported by Mumbai based daily NDA. First there was the atrocity of Khairlanji, then the injustice of delay or no action or reaction from the State, the news was not brought out by the media, followed by the suppression of dalit protests in Vidarbha against the murders in the village Khairlanji.

Bhaiyalal Bhotmange was living with his wife Surekha (40), his sons Sudhir (21), Roshan (19), and his daughter Priyanka (17) in the village Khairlanji. Bhaiyalal Bhotmange got a few acres of land as inheritance from his mother. The Bhotmanges shifted to the village Khairlanji in order to cultivate the land for their living. The family had to face caste discrimination for the access to drinking water, building a house and so on where the OBCs have more dominance in the village. In spite of all the difficulties, the
family firmly stood for the children’s education and upbringing. (27-32) Being an Ambedkarite woman Surekha who was schooled up to 9th standard had internalized the value of education and educated all her children. Her eldest son Sudhir studied up to B.A., Roshan was learning computers and Priyanka, the youngest child was in class 12 at the time of the incident.

Ambilal Khurpe and Ishwar Athilkar who are land owning caste Hindus from the same village wanted to make a passage to their land through Bhotmange’s land which would deprive the Bhotmange’s of the little piece of land they had. Surekha Bhotmange had even gone to the Taluk court to protect their land from the villagers. (30-35) In the whole episode of the land dispute Siddharth Gajbhiye, Surekha’s cousin helped the Bhotmanges family to retain the piece of land. That added to the animosity of the villagers towards Siddharth Gajbhiye and Bhotmange’s family as well. A few caste Hindu villagers had beaten up Gajbhiye till he was hospitalized with wounds. Gajbhiye then made a police complaint against a few villagers who were arrested and kept in police custody. Villagers’ anger is increased by the police complaint made by the family for which they retaliated later. On the day of the atrocity, nearly seventy villagers of Khairlanji in tractors reached the house of Bhotmanges in a drunken state to begin the attack. A few women pulled Priyanka and Surekha out of the hut and started beating them severely. Later, they pulled their clothes off and made them naked. Priyanka and Surekha were allegedly raped by many men of the village. Surekha’s sons were also beaten up and killed. Men of the village raped even the corpses of Surekha and her daughter Priyanka.
Caste Hindu pride has been hurt by the assertiveness of Bhotmanges, their upward mobility in education added to the upper-caste antagonism towards the family. (10-19)

When the dispute started growing worse, Surekha, Bhotmange's wife stood against all those caste Hindu families who had been harassing them for the land. Surekha and Bhotmange have dalit consciousness. Lack of numerical strength of dalit families in the village also gave strength to the caste Hindu families of the village over dalits. On 29th September 2009, a huge number of the caste Hindu mob came at once assaulted the family and killed all the family members except for Mr. Bhotmange who was not present at home that time. Mother and all the three children were tortured and killed by the villagers and later, their bodies were dumped in a canal. All the villagers took an oath to bury the secret of the atrocity within themselves.

The police cases that were booked on the atrocity, did not invoke the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and other laws which are important for the crime. Even the postmortem was done by a non-experienced professional. The doctor who conducted the postmortem did not preserve the few body parts of the women, generally done when there is a suspicion of rape on the person. Finally it took almost one month for the reporters to cover the news in the newspapers. This shows that the state is not responding to caste violence in the way it should. Even before the atrocity took place Surekha Bhotmange went to the police station against the two villagers who were trying to grab their land. Even though depriving of a dalit of his/her land comes under the Prevention of Atrocities Act, the police did not register the FIR under the act. (44)
The common feature of all the atrocities on dalits in contemporary India is that they take place either with the help of police or in the presence of them\textsuperscript{20}. The negligence of police in registering the cases and investigation also gives way to the thought of victory of upper-castes and the lack of political power for dalits. The fact that many dalits were denied justice by the courts in the context of caste violence also leads to the fearlessness among upper-caste in committing crimes against dalits.

But how does the state become brutal perpetrator of atrocities on dalits is the question to think of. Most importantly, it is not just adequate to have a good number of dalits to bring dalit consciousness and justice for dalits. Khairlanji atrocity took place in the era of media revolution where television channels and print media bring out the news in a few seconds to the people from anywhere around the world. But the same media is indifferent to the atrocity on dalits since media is equally prejudiced. Mumbai based DNA brought out the news after eight days of the atrocity happened. Even then, the people who expressed their solidarity are none other than dalits. Many reports have defended the caste Hindus of the village. In order to defend caste Hindus' act, media reported that the immorality of a (dalit) woman has been punished by the innocent villagers who can not tolerate any sort of sexual immorality.\textsuperscript{(103)}

Significantly, education system itself could not introduce any changes to make the people pro-dalit. As long as the education system does not change, any other system such as bureaucracy which is more rigid in nature would not change. Though a few dalits have
negotiated their space in education system through reservations and other facilitators, for long there has been no significant attempt to change the education system that brings out more caste consciousness among dalits or others. Education has always been upper-casteiest which according to the government is “secular”. Being upper-casteist it is always synonymous with “secular” where as dalit politics are considered to be casteist and ill-mannered since open recognition of caste has always been non-modern and “backward” behaviour. So, a few number of dalits in public services may not able to help the dalit community.

Gender factor is also important in Khairlanji atrocity. Patriarchy is operated through caste system that controls women in each caste. Caste system is protected in such a way that the patriarchal control over women also protects the caste form being polluted or defiled. Such patriarchy leads to exercise of control over not only the women of the family but on the women of the whole caste as well. Though the women of caste Hindus are only subservient to the men of the same caste due their withdrawal from the labour in public sphere, dalit women are subservient to the upper-castes as well in the given traditional caste hierarchy which can also be called casteist patriarchy. The honour of each caste or community is based on its hold and control over its women folk.

In case of Chunduru atrocity and of Khairlanji, gender factor is something that can not be neglected. Dalit women live in such complex category which is entwined by caste on one hand, patriarchy and casteist patriarchy on the other hand. In Khairlanji, a dalit
family is tortured to death after the rape and abuse of the women which again shows that
dalit women face multiple oppression of caste and patriarchy.

The atrocities and sexual assaults on dalit women often occur for a reason to teach lesson
to the whole community. In fact, most reportage (available) would try to bring out the
“impure/immoral” status of dalit women in order to defend the atrocities on dalits. In case
of Chunduru, dalit women who must have faced such sexual exploitation could never
expect justice or protection from the state against upper-caste women whose honour has
been protected by upper-caste men especially from dalit men by killing dalit men.21 In
case of Khairlanji where a dalit woman Surekha Bhotmange and her minor daughter
Priyanka are battered by caste Hindu women and raped by a huge number of caste Hindu
men until they died is also justified by various (women) journalists as an act of
punishment for the “sexual immorality” of Surekha Bhotmange. (102-105) Sarita
Koushik, reported in Hindustan Times, 27th November 2006, that Surekha has illicit
relationship with Siddhartha Gajbhiye which made the village women object to such
immorality.

“According to the original version, Siddhartha Gajbhiye, residing in the village,
had illicit relations with Surekha. The women from the village are said to have
objected to this, resulting in a series of incidents that culminated in the
killings.”(103)

In my understanding what Koushik reports is just to deflect the caste angle of the atrocity
and also to defend the Brahmincal idea of purity associated with gender ideologies.
Secondly, it also helps to defend the atrocity on dalits by upper-castes. One important factor is that dalit women due to their caste position are assumed to be impure in various contexts. In the famous Mathura’s case also proved that similar prejudice against dalit women which has brought justification to the atrocity by the law and courts. This angle of bringing out “sexual morality” would help the people to support the atrocity due to the patriarchal norms of the society.

In spite of various social conditions that made dalits to be less powerful groups to fight the atrocities or injustice done to them, those who govern the law have been still prejudiced and caste biased towards dalits. One of the important aspects of the atrocities is how they have been represented or reported in the media or whether they have appeared in media at all. If the atrocities are not reported, it does not mean that there is no caste atrocities happened in those areas. In most cases, atrocities in those areas are reported where dalits have caste awareness, whereas many atrocity incidents go unreported and unrecognized. Media is also reluctant to report the news related to dalits and it even manipulates the news for the purpose of serving the caste system and Brahmanism. In many cases in modern times, it is the media which manipulates or constructs the “virtue” and “evil” in the society. In many reports, where dalits are massacred or dalit women are molested, media represents dalit women as “immoral” and dalits in general as “violent” or “unlawful” in order to protect the caste Hindus from the being punished by the law.
Though the case of Khairlanji came to the court and the judgment was announced in August 2008, the case was not prosecuted under SC/ST (Prevention of) Atrocities Act thus making the whole caste question invisible.23 A dalit family being tortured to death by caste Hindus of the village is only considered as a criminal act. The difficulty is bringing justice for dalits in cases of atrocities on individual dalits is that there is legitimacy brought to the crime since almost all the caste Hindus take part in the decision of committing atrocity and its execution. Precisely because of this reason, the caste angle of the atrocity is buried.

These atrocities such as Khairlanji raise question of authenticity of Panchayats' decisions in the villages. The atrocity is almost a crime committed by Panchayat of the village because almost all men and women took part in killing the dalit family for reasons such as Surekha being “sexually immoral” or having illicit relationship with her cousin. The question of “morality” of the woman made the villagers rage against the family. In case of dalit women it is more intense since dalit women suffer the stigma of being “immoral” though they have only been exploited by caste Hindu men. Similar cases which are not reported take place in many villages in order to suppress dalits. Panchayats have been known to take formal decision of killing dalits when there was any protest from them.

Khairlanji atrocity, though not brought out by the media at first, lately it was reported and came into the light. But the descriptions of experiences of Bama and Urmila Pawar show many such atrocities committed by the villagers are not even recognized as violence. In case of Mariamma, it was the upper-castes who accused the dalit girl of “immorality” and
made her own caste women execute the task of punishing her by abusing in the public. According to the normative standards of caste and gender, it is acceptable to accuse dalit woman of “sexual immorality” whereas upper-caste notions of gender do not accept such open accusation but those women are punished within the families itself. Pawar’s description of brutal violence generated by village Panchayats on women is also made legitimate by bringing the question of “morality” of women. Women have executed the task of killing women publicly. In Khairlanji also, caste Hindu women are made to believe that Surekha is “immoral” and it is the responsibility of the villagers to protect the honour of the village. Gabriele Dietrich points out, “(…) control over the women of a community is an integral part of establishing superiority.” Dalit men are no exception to this. Upper-caste women also are under the same control. Such control is not done only through restricting the mobility of women but also through enslaving their minds through patriarchal notions of “purity”, “honour” and “sexual morality”. Thus women (both upper-castes and dalits) do not protest the atrocities and even take active part in it. On top of it, in case of Khairlanji, upper-caste women who are socially subservient to the upper-caste men, would have just obeyed the decision of the men rather. The question of Surekha’s “morality” is just a tool that would bring justification to the atrocity.

Casteist Patriarchy, Violence Against Dalit Women

Almost all the dalit women testimonials do discuss the dalit patriarchy and violence generated by caste and gender dynamics in dalit families. The expression of dalit women experiences of family violence is important in the context of dalit movement being
patriarchal and blind to the patriarchal violence within dalit castes. Dalit women are perceived to be enjoying more freedom in the society. At one level, dalit women suffer the untouchability and sexual exploitation by upper-caste men. At another level, dalit women are treated inferior by the community and the family.

Baby Kamble’s autobiography turns into the discussion on dalit patriarchy from the constant violent struggle of all dalits for survival in caste prejudiced society. She is not ready to celebrate dalit culture, since it is full of superstitions, rituals imposed by upper-castes and imposed food habits of eating dead animals. It is something that needs to be rebelled against. Similarly she would point out the violence within the families of Mahars against their women. Apart from the poverty stricken life, superstitious beliefs, lack of medical care at the time of deliveries, she has to endure severe physical violence by husband and in-laws.(87-104)

Abusing daughter-in-law is very common in dalit families. Controlling women is not exceptional in dalit families. Masculinity is associated with the patriarchal power. “Keep her under your thumb. Otherwise you will be disgraced in public.”(96). Those were the most common expressions in dalit families. For dalit families, dalit women were the easy victims available to take their frustration. Father-in-law, brother-in-law, mother-in-law and husband, anybody can do anything with the daughter-in-law. Girls who are tortured have no place to runaway. A few girls would runaway from the in-laws’ house to natal house are disgraced by father and brother and beaten up by them and will be sent back to the in-laws’ house. There is no right to divorce the oppressive husband in dalit societies.
Second marriage is not a question at all in their lives. In fact the women who were mutilated or thrown out the in-laws' houses are considered to be bad omen and they find no shelter anywhere else. (98-103) Thus Baby Kamble says that the assumption that Hindu Code bill (102) is more helpful for upper-caste women is not entirely true. It is important for dalit women also who are bound to the shackles of marriage. But dalit women who are not educated and well aware their rights are not able access such rights even today.

Among many upper-castes, child marriage was a common practice. The reason is shown that if a girl is married off before reaching the age of eight, the probability of getting a “virgin” to marry is more. Pranjali Bandhu points out that the early marriages take place in dalit families also for different reasons. “Early marriage between the ages of 14 and 16 prevails due to the girl’s vulnerability to sexual oppression by upper-caste men, or the fear of an inter-caste or inter-community marriage. If an older son is being married it is economical to marry off a much younger daughter at the same time.” (111).

Child marriage is violence against the childhood of girls which confine them to patriarchal oppression forever in life. Baby Kamble says that Mahar women who runaway from the husband’s house are perceived to be sexually immoral and the only remedy is to get rid of them.

“She would whisper into his ears, 'Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair. You are her husband, but obviously the bitch prefers someone else. I suspect that
this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us. No, no! I don’t want such a slut in my house. She wants to ruin your life. Don’t let her off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip of her nose; only then will my mother’s heart breathe easy! Don’t bring shame on your father’s name.” (99-100)

Such atrocities of mutilating, killing dalit women were very common incidents as described by Baby Kamble. It is difficult to say the question of honour and sexual morality is not present in dalit communities which perpetrated atrocities on dalit women. The imitation of upper-caste culture also could have been one reason behind child marriages in dalit communities. The formation of caste did not happen suddenly. Castes and communities do undergo lot of influences and changes with the passage of time. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon point out, “In the formation of caste, according to Ambedkar, the Brahmins bound themselves first of all and created a caste for themselves, the rest of society imitated them and so other castes came into being. It is possible that the concept of female chastity in the tying of the marriage bond, and the practice of child marriage, came to the untouchables from the upper-castes through imitation of this kind.”(104)

The belief that dalit women are treated as slaves in the families is not very extensively discussed idea in dalit movement or dalit male writing. One reason could be that dalit male writers would want to celebrate dalit culture in order to bring self-respect for dalits. I believe what is important for dalit politics is to bring self-respect for the individual
dalits but not to the caste because dalit is the category that fights against the caste and advocates the caste free society. The category dalit needs not celebrate any of untouchable caste's culture which is only an imposed culture by the caste system. Whether there is more equality or not (compared to upper-castes), castes in their basic form are oppressive and individuals have not formed its norms to make it more liberal. The qualities of every caste is decided by the caste system in larger framework. Hence, it is not helpful or necessary to celebrate caste culture. It is the category dalit that struggles to establish a new society where there is social justice, equal opportunity for all (among sub-castes as well) irrespective of caste. Scholars like Kancha Ilaiah celebrate dalit caste cultures as free from gender oppression. Dalit women writers have stood against the celebration of dalit culture. They have described more about the rituals, superstitious beliefs and enslavement of women as the qualities prevalent in dalit families for the reason that untouchable castes are also part of the caste system. Baby Kamble describes many atrocities committed against dalit women. These atrocities are no different from the Brahminical way of humiliating dalits.25

Then both father and son would make a plan for chopping off the girl's nose. The sasra would go to her mother's place and with sweet words, bring her back. Meanwhile, the son would keep ready a razor sharpened to an edge. At night, he would sit on her chest and taking his own time, cut off her nose. Then they would drive the poor girl out of the house, with blood pouring out from mutilation. (101)
The atrocities such as Sati and restrictions on the mobility of upper-caste women in the public which are more visible forms of violence gain more attention than the atrocities that are committed in dalit families. Dalit women writing brings out such atrocities committed on dalit women which were less visible due to the lack of dalit women's representation in education and politics. Baby Kamble also describes the incident in which another dalit woman who was axed down being enticed by her husband into the forest for the reason of smiling at his cousin once. Masculinity is shaped in dalit families also by the strength of dominating women in the family and community. Just as how caste system keeps each caste either superior or inferior to another caste, gender dynamics continue to exists in all the castes. Dalit men who lack the power within the society would dominate dalit women who are next in order. The need for dalit women's political organizations is stressed in the dalit women's autobiographies.

Right to divorce does not seem to be a common practice among dalit families as described in Prisons We Broke. Though dalit women are not completely economically dependent on dalit men, they are socially bound to the concept of marriage. Bama says that the family and marriage are not everything in the lives of dalit women who struggle for everyday survival. They struggle for food and there not much economic support from their men in the families. Dalit women have their deliveries at home and many of them die due to lack of proper diet but they are not left with the option of going to hospital due to poverty. Due to this poverty and struggle for everyday survival, there is not much scope for dalit women to observe the visible practices of married women as in case of upper-caste women who follow all the rituals of marriage even in their day to day life.
This does not imply dalit women have more freedom when compared to upper-caste women.

“If a man dies, there is no rule that says his wife must immediately go into white saris nor that she must behave in such and such manner. She will carry on in her usual way. And this is because, even when her husband is alive, it isn’t compulsory that a woman must bear a pottu on her forehead, nor bangles and other jewelry about her person, nor smear herself with turmeric. Where does she have the jewelry in the first place? And where does she have the time to smear herself with turmeric, have a bath, and dress herself up with pottu and flowers? She runs to work at dawn and comes home after sunset. So whether her husband is alive or dead, she will follow the same routine. She might, perhaps, remove her tali. On the other hand, some women never wear a tali, though they marry and live with their husbands. Talis are not that important among us.”(90)

As Bama describes, symbols of marriage like padapuja, kumkum, flowers and ornaments play a very less important role dalit women lives due to their poor conditions of life. Dalit communities are perceived to be free from patriarchal violence by critics such as Gabriele Dietrich and Kancha Ilaiah due to absence of visible practices of patriarchy like performing rituals of married woman such as padapuja, observance rules of widowhood and so on. This struggle for survival could be another reason that dalit castes do not have more restrictions on divorce as well. But many women who live under the constant patriarchal violence described by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and Bama do not find divorce as a solution for their lives. Since there might be not find much relief in taking
divorce. Even caste Panchayats are male dominated that they might recognize wife battering as common practice and not provide any justice to dalit women.

Urmila Pawar describes many instances of brutal physical violence that dalit women endure in families. Urmila’s cousin Susheela is married to a drunkard man. Her mother-in-law and her husband beat her up at the slightest pretext. She comes back to her natal houses in the nights completely bruised and bleeding. Pawar’s father never supported her against such inhuman treatment. He firmly believes that women should live in their in-laws house at any cost. Though he is an educated man who believes in dalit education, he has no gender sensitivity in case of dalit women. Another such dalit woman appears in her autobiography is Bhikiakka. Bhikiakka is married to a man and begot two children. He got married again and brought her co-wife home. She begot five or six children. All the children, both the wives and husband were living a small house in a chawl in Bombay. He also tortures Bhikiakka for small reasons almost everyday.

At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her. The other wife abused her with dirty words. She did not survive, though for long.

“Everybody called Bhikiakka’s husband ‘Jobber’ or ‘Mirjolekar’. When he visited the village, he invariably came to visit us. My mother hated the very sight of this man. ‘The bastard has ruined my niece! It’s because of his beatings that she has lost all her teeth!’ She used to bitterly complain behind his back. But she spoke to
him civilly, fearing he would use it as a pretext for beating Bhikiakka in case she
did not.” (112-113)

Several other women in maharwada run around the houses when the torture by their husbands crosses limits. This is almost a common phenomenon in dalitwadas. Pawar’s sister is one of the victims of such brutal violence. Her elder sister is an educated dalit woman married off to an educated dalit man. He passed B.A. But he used to torture his wife everyday. He used to kick her in her stomach even when she was carrying. Urmila Pawar says, “Dalit men fight for humanity, but what is humanity, even they do not know because they do not have humanity towards their wives.” (13)

Bama’s Karukku and Sangati describes a few instances of physical violence and dalit patriarchy. In Karukku Bama describes her experiences of untouchability and caste discrimination. A few instances also substantiate that dalit families are not free from patriarchal violence directed against dalit women. “In the past, there used to be a man in our parts, called Uudan, blower. I don’t know what his real name was. There wasn’t a single person in the village who didn’t know him, because every day he’d drag his wife by the hair to the community hall and beat her up as if she were an animal, with his belt. Everyone came to watch. But nobody could go near and separate them. Every day, for one reason or another, there would be a quarrel between them. It always came to blows.
In Sangati, there is more importance given to the discussion on dalit patriarchy. Thaayi is the fair-skinned dalit woman who lives under constant physical torture by her husband. Not a single day passes without she being battered, flogged and whipped by her husband.

"Thaayi's husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn't even have a chappai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals.(42)

Raakkamma is another dalit woman appears in Sangati who verbally abuses her husband in public while she was physically abused by him. Another woman who is heavily pregnant is chased by her husband with firewood in his hand. She runs around for help though she is caught and dragged by her husband on the road. She was dragged to the house and locked and beaten up more. Many such incidents were common in dalitwada. Liquor consumption is one of the issues between men and wives in the families. Both the husband and wife return from the work, men do go to liquor shops whereas women have to do a lot of household work and make some meal ready for children. (61-62).

Bama wonders if dalit men who are subservient to every other caste people in the society exert their male pride and dominate dalit women. All that violence dalit women experience at their hands seems to be an outlet for their anger. (65). Baby Kamble expresses a similar idea about the physical violence that dalit women face in the dalit community. "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-law!"
If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them.” (87) Bama says that dalit women are worst sufferers when compared to caste Hindu women since the oppression comes from various dimensions of caste and gender structures. Her claims directly contradict with many dalit male writers and upper-caste women writers who claim that dalit women are not bound to systematic violence such as Sati and widowhood.

“Thinking about it, I have to say that even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers. It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands.

Besides all this, upper-caste women show us no pity or kindness either, if only as women to women, but treat us with contempt, as if we are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of honour or self-respect.” (65-66)

Bama also points out that upper-caste women never seem to have shouted at their husbands because of their invisibility in the public. She also believes since upper-caste women are economically completely dependent on the property of their husbands, they seem to be more subservient to their husbands. Public quarrels between husband and wife happen more in case of dalit families. Dalit women do take part in the public labour. So, the visibility of dalit woman in the public spear is the common feature of dalit society. The question of property does not arise in dalit families. That is one reason why dalit woman might protest with verbal abuse when she is physically tortured by husbands. Apart from that Bama also says that dalit women are not economically dependent on their husbands unlike upper-caste women. Though it could be true to an extent, dalit women
are not completely economically strong because their labour is an integral part of nation’s economy but their labour is exploited both by the upper-castes and by the dalit men in the families. Many dalit women live in poor economic conditions when compared to upper-caste women. Wage discrimination, physical harassment do subjugate dalit women even though they participate in the public labour.(87)

Dalit women experiences of physical caste and patriarchal violence within dalit society became one of the important reasons for dalit women’s independent struggle against caste and gender oppression. The invisibility of dalit women in dalit movement as opposed to their marginalization in feminist movement brought the necessity of dalit women fighting for themselves. Violence question is one of the important points for dalit feminism. Violence is the weapon that establishes and preserves the power structures of caste and gender dynamics of the society.

Though physical violence is more visible in the category of gender and caste, symbolic violence which is non-physical and invisible is more difficult to address. In the next chapter I would look at how the symbolic caste violence is represented in dalit women’s autobiographies. Symbolic violence plays even more pivotal role in preserving the power structures through the normative strands of caste and gender.
End Notes

1Chunduru caste violence is one the significant examples of caste violence. Such examples can be drawn from various reports of news papers every day. Dalits are killed for demanding more wages, defiling the temples, public water tanks and wells. See http://www.hindustantimes.com/Dalit-killed-for-digging-own-well/Article1-220288.aspx accessed on 1 August 2011.


4Baburao Bagul, 1992. pp.183-190


8Bama, 2000.


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15. See chapter 1 for details.


