Chapter 4: Symbolic Caste Violence

Everyday millions are crushed and killed in spirit; ever so often some of them are killed physically as well.¹

Anand Teltumbde

So far the discussion on caste violence has focused mainly on the atrocities, massacres and burning dalits alive and so on which happen frequently and of which many go unreported and only a few would become part of media and academic discussions.² Caste violence is identified as merely an occasional eruption of already existing everyday violence that is generated by the caste system in society. But how does it kill the millions every day in spirit is the question that I would discuss in this chapter and how such symbolic violence also can be given the status of caste violence. In this chapter, I would present my understanding of non-physical forms of violence in the everyday lives of dalits such as humiliation springing from inferior social position, caste discrimination that marginalizes dalits in modern spaces such as educational institutions, hegemonic upper-caste cultural values that exclude dalits as inferior in the mainstream society and so on. I would look at various dalit women autobiographies to present my understanding of symbolic caste violence.

In order to discuss symbolic caste violence in various contexts, I have made three major divisions in the category of symbolic caste violence in this chapter: symbolic caste
violence against dalits at collective level, symbolic caste violence on individual dalits, symbolic intra-caste violence and dalit patriarchy.

**Caste and Everyday Violence**

Dilip Menon has argued that violence on dalits is mostly reported rather than theorized. While this is said with regard to physical violence, the situation is far worse as far as non-physical forms of violence are concerned, which by the very nature of things are not matter for reportage. It is also equally important to theorize the everyday killing of spirit in the society through symbolic caste violence.

Caste is the basic hierarchy that constitutes the society of not just the upper-caste Hindu communities but all the communities at large including dalits. Though we find caste hierarchy as the traditionally sanctioned system of Hindu religion at the doctrinal level, it entered all other religions in Indian society. Caste system is a significant factor in Indian society and its maintenance is seen as a stipulation for the continuation of power relations that also equally helps to fortify patriarchy. So any effort to debilitate such a system or hierarchical power structure leads to revolutionary changes in the power relations and thus it has become the concern of a few caste groups to maintain such hierarchy in society as a precondition for sustaining their own dominance. Caste is not a system that is maintained only by a few particular upper-castes but it is a system of rules that invades the minds of all castes and becomes a legitimate body. Irrespective of caste position all are obedient (in the state of lack of awareness) to caste hierarchy and work towards its maintenance.
In this chapter, I would look at non-physical forms of caste violence in a few cases that would not necessarily involve a caste group’s willful indulgence in such violence, where violence is more symbolic in character and plays an important role in shaping and maintaining the symbolic order of society.

B.R. Ambedkar argues that a slave is free once he is freed from the slave owner but an untouchable is not. Slavery is conscious and physical whereas untouchability is both conscious and involves unconscious belief that enslaves an untouchable both in mind and body and pervades the whole of social life. Since the caste system invaded all the minds, in a condition of lack of awareness to fight such system, one would definitely protect such a system or will not give way to the subversion of it. The reason is that the castes of mind had already set a few norms of the society which would work themselves as the agents of the symbolic violence that dalits or lower castes experience. Every caste will have to live up to the normative impositions of the caste system and any violation would lead to social boycott of that particular caste/family/person. Such social boycott is not necessarily a kind of banishment but branding of such attempt as “immoral”. Inferior or superior position of lower/upper castes is a predetermined factor that lies on the minds of all the communities including those who are lower castes and dalits. Such belief of being inferior is not just about the caste position but also about the cultural norm set up as well. The cultural norms that are set for upper-castes are different from dalit castes. Upper-caste cultural norms would confine dalits to be inferior on the one hand stigmatize them as inferior on the other hand.
According to the caste based division of labour, dalits are supposed to do the most menial jobs in the society. They are denied education, self-respect, religion and human dignity. The awareness on caste and other social movements helped dalits to enter the field of education. Till today not many dalits could negotiate their space in the fields such as media, education, literature and arts. Education is also important as a factor that helps to bring awareness on untouchability, inequality and caste system. Most importantly, it gives way to find the space for various communities in various rule governing bodies, influencing areas of social activity as literature, media and bureaucracy. So, such significant system would also bring the communities to level of confrontation. But whether this confrontation takes place on equal basis is another question. Such confrontation also leads to dalits confining themselves to an inferior position. The humiliation of dalits is sometimes caused by the upper-caste norms rather the people belong to upper-castes. The norms of virtue, marriage, merit, beauty, morality, lawfulness, ritual purity, qualities of social life are conditioned by the caste system which would by default support upper-castes since upper-castes’ norms are considered to be superior and worthy of imitating or living up to. The communities or people who would not approve of those norms would be considered to be inferior and thus humiliated.

Education has been not only monopolized by Brahmins but also dominated by Brahminism. Thus the system would push out the dalit students with its Brahminical approach, by imposition of its values and by judging/branding dalits inferior or unmeritorious. The same old difficulty that dalits faced in the inception of formal
education in India, continue to haunt dalits even today. Though a few dalits could enter the schools and acquired significant positions in various sectors, the education system has not changed or sensitized towards dalits or other marginalized sections. Even in the recent past during the Mandal Commission and anti-OBC reservation campaign, a few caste Hindus announced (through media) that 'the nation would collapse if these unmeritorious groups (SC/ST/OBC) enter certain significant fields such as medicine and engineering'. Even though dalits are part of the same education system, they have been taught to unlearn their culture to be part of the hegemonic culture. Hence, it privileges upper-castes students. Kancha Ilaiah says that the field of education carries the hegemonic culture and make dalits and other marginalized sections experience the pain of exclusion. Religion, morality, beauty, food habits, good and God everything that is taught in schools is different from what dalit or lower caste people learn in their community life.(12-18) Thus, education makes dalit culture inferior to the hegemonic culture. Not mentioning the caste and caste background (expect for the reservations that are implemented during admission) according to education system is being secular and caste free. But the very silence on caste leads to caste discrimination and insensibility towards dalits or other marginalized sections. For example, even today, dalit literature or any other piece of writing that mentions caste or that deals with caste system will find it hard to be found as part of the prescribed syllabus of any school/college or university (except for a very few institutions of today).

Due to the lack of caste sensitivity in the field of education, it would either make dalits excluded and thus be pushed out or it will make them imitate and try hard to be part of
the upper caste hegemonic culture. Teltumbde says such imitation might also lead to becoming subservient to the system either in bureaucracy or media or any other field. (112-113). Baby Kamble says that 'Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar' 9. Haiah says education acts as an agent that gives privilege to the upper-caste cultural norms and thus it makes everyone believe that upper-caste culture is something worthy of imitating. If education can bring about the change in the social systems or at least make the educated sensible towards the social issues, bureaucracy, law, literature and other fields which are linked to education would also become caste sensitive.

Symbolic caste violence is not reported as caste violence since it is not given the position of violence either in the law or in the general understanding of the people. However, such violence has been given an important place in dalit writing and dalit autobiographies. Dalit women autobiographies in particular do cover a wide range of issues such as dalit community facing caste discrimination in the village and urban situations and individual dalits who enter the upper-caste dominant spaces and also dalit patriarchy that marginalizes dalit women even within the families and community. I would discuss symbolic caste violence through its representation by dalit women autobiographies. Apart from the full pledged autobiographies written by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, I would also look at an extract from Kumud Pawde’s autobiography “Story of My Sanskrit” the only part of her autobiography available in English. Since her autobiography is written in Marathi and not translated yet into English.
Symbolic Caste violence on Dalits at Collective Level

Dalit autobiographies’ significant concern is to bring out the experiences of caste discrimination and humiliation dalits face in the society being untouchables. Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama and Kumud Pawde are the dalit women who had not only experienced the untouchability like any other dalit but they are the dalits who became conscious of their position within the caste and gender dynamics. The autobiographies represent the experiences of dalit women with awareness of caste and caste inequalities in the upper-caste dominant society. Sharan Kumar Limbale says in Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations, what qualifies dalit literature is the caste consciousness of the dalit writer. Dalit literature is written about dalits with the experience of being a dalit and with a consciousness of dalithood. Bama, the first dalit woman autobiographer in Tamil points out that, “only an untouchable would know the pain of being one. Other people can empathise/sympathise. But the agony is always personal and it cannot be the same as something that is reflected or reported about. I don’t think anyone other than a Dalit can expose all the brahmanical lies and insult heaped upon Dalits.” Due to this quality of caste consciousness, dalit autobiography portrays the authentic experience of dalits which can only be understood through caste consciousness. Such consciousness would bring out the pain and suffering of dalits which otherwise doesn’t gain any attention. This pain and suffering need not be visible and conspicuous like physical caste violence. I would present my understanding of symbolic caste violence experienced by dalits collectively and how such experiences of dalits are represented by insiders of the community in their autobiographies.
Baby Kamble’s autobiography *Prisons We broke* describes the constant symbolic caste violence that dalits are subjected to in the context of Mahar community life in '40s. Baby Kamble describes the ritualistic life of dalits and superstitious beliefs that generate symbolic caste violence. Lack of awareness among dalits is marked by various instances where dalits do not feel humiliated by these inhuman rituals but at times they even feel proud to be part of those religious rituals compelled by the religion that provides them with no human dignity.

Ashadh is the most important month in the community life of Mahars in Baby Kamble’s childhood days. In this month there is a ritualistic celebration that takes place in the entire village. Mahars do believe that this is the month that is meant for joy and festive mood among Mahars. Women do clean the houses and make bhakris and eagerly wait for some sweet pudding and rarely available upper-caste foods materialize in their meal. Baby Kamble says “Perhaps Ashadh was the provision that had been made to allow them a little food. Slaves needed this provision.”(12) Mahar women do polish the houses with cow dung and wash everything in the house. They also make an old clay pot ready for the month. The pot is damaged with holes on it. Mahar women cover them up with old rags and make it ready for the festival to beg for the leftovers from the upper-castes. Standing in the courtyard of the shopkeeper, Mahar women do beg the shopkeeper to sell her things they wanted.

“Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin?’ The shopkeeper’s
children would be trickling out into the courtyard for their morning ablutions. He would give the innocent children lessons in social behaviour. 'Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance.' Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, 'take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.' The shop keeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav, which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him!'(13-14)

Then the shikakai is ground by the daughter in law of the family and she would bathe the first born son first who is offered to the gods. His hair is never cut short as a symbol of him being offered to gods. A few mothers would tell each other that their first born son is suddenly possessed by the god while they give him a bath.(17) This first son is offered to god and made vaghya or potraja to the village god. He is supposed to participate in the rituals and beg food from the villagers the whole day and bring it for the family in the evening. This offering of the eldest son to god would also solve the problem of livelihood for dalit families to an extent. Though these rituals are part of Hindu religion, the rituals in which dalits have to take part are different from the rituals in which the upper-caste men and women participate. Baby Kamble points out that these rituals help the upper-caste to retain their power over dalits. The minds of the dalits were enslaved through these rituals who might otherwise revolt against the superiority and injustice of upper-
castes. These rituals also give a bit a relief to dalits’ terribly starving lives. Making the eldest child a potraja would be making provisions for generations of the family. Then the son is given training to become a potraja from the age of seven itself. He is made to smear kumkum and haldi over his body and wear brass anklets on his ankles and green bangles on his wrists with a frock on him. He has a rag hanging over his shoulder to collect the alms. (19) With this, the boy was made to dance in the procession around the village. There is no humiliating aspect that the Mahars do recognize in the whole episode in fact the parents of the boy in their ignorance are made to feel proud when the boy performs all this.

Then the women from Maharwada will become possessed by mothers or goddesses. Entire Maharwada would resound with commotion of these women’s cries. All the women who are possessed will dance around the village. They go completely unconscious of what they are wearing and where they are. Potraja also plays music to excite these women more. The women would not stop until they are completely exhausted and fall unconscious. (22-23) Women who are possessed by goddesses also do tell prophesies about the future of people in the Mahar community. The ordeal is not ended there. There is another ritual of sacrificing the buffalo. A buffalo which is chosen for the sacrifice to the goddess is brought to the place of sacrifice along with suwasinis who are the women from Mangs offered to the temple or goddess. Suwasini also goes through the humiliating rituals of smearing her body and face with kumkum and haldi and made to dance in the procession till the sacrifice of buffalo. (32)
Suwasinis also become possessed and they walk in the procession along with the buffalo. Finally the buffalo is sacrificed and the blood is sprinkled around the place. The Mahars would come forward and skin the buffalo and separate different parts of it and also make the provisions of meat for the families. (32-35)

The dalit women possessed by goddesses would say that there is going to be a protected life for them from all the natural calamities, evil spirits and epidemics. Baby Kamble says that these rituals are nothing but the superstitious beliefs of the Mahars assimilated into their community through caste system. Mahars have never been given a chance to step out their ignorance and become knowledgeable. They have done their faithful service to Hindu rituals in their ignorance. Such humiliation and harm to the bodies and minds in the name of god and religion would only remain as a belief of the community and individuals but there has been violence involved in every step of these rituals where dalits are humiliated and insulted. This symbolic violence of caste is generated through enslaving the minds of dalits and making them believe that they are at the lowest rank of caste system. Thus caste system is not only operated through the powerful upper-castes committing atrocities on them in cases of dalit revolt, caste system is preserved by making it as the “natural” legitimate part of the society and minds of all castes including dalits.

There are a few visible symbols of caste that Kamble mentions in her autobiography. Dalits are not supposed to walk in the regular road used by the upper-castes. If they see any upper-caste person in the opposite direction along the path, they will have to
immediately go into the shrubbery and walk in the bushes. If Mahar women see any upper-caste man on their way, they will have to fully cover themselves with pallav and say "The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master." This is the common chant of dalits everywhere they see the upper-castes.\(52\) In case of any new bride came to the in-laws' village newly (not knowing the person as the upper-caste man) not bowing before the upper-caste man, would lead to the upper-castes intimidating and threatening the whole Mahar community. Upper-caste man would shower his curses on dalits. "'No! You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn't it? But listen carefully. Next time, if anybody passes by me without bowing, you've had it! No mercy would be shown to you any longer. What do you take us for? Are we Mahars like you or do you take us for naïve children? Daring to pass by me without bowing! Think twice before doing any such thing again!'"\(53\)

When the upper-caste women get married in the village, it is the Mahar men who do all the filthy work in their households. Upper-caste women are not allowed to go out of the household. The whole house will be full of relatives and friends in the night before marriage.

"All lowly jobs, right from arranging fuel for cooking to make arrangements for Akka's ablutions, would be thrust on the Mahars. Akka was not allowed to go out to defecate after they had applied the ritualistic haldi on her, for fear of evil spirits. Instead, she would defecate in the garbage pit. And it was the Mahar who had to clean the shit. He had to sweep the house, clean all the shit of a houseful of
children, cut firewood and stack it neatly for cooking. All the dirty and laborious jobs were the privilege of the Mahar!"

(76)

For such labour and humiliating professions that dalits are made to perform, they are paid in terms of dead cows. Kamble points out that it not a payment to dalits but only part of their profession. Dalits are made to consume rotten cows and clean the courtyards of upper-castes smelling with the carcasses of the animals. Most of the times they are dead and rotten, but dalits would not hesitate to eat such food for they have been starved for days together. Sometimes there is nothing available for dalits to eat. They starve and sometimes eat cactus seeds. Sometimes Mahars do plan and poison the cattle in order to get some dead buffalo for dalits to eat. (83) During the epidemics, dalits get to eat food more often because many animals die in the courtyards of upper-castes. The carcass of these dead animals would rot and stink that nobody can even drink water in the household. But when the news of this comes to Mahars, they would be happy and gather with knives to bring the flesh of the dead animal to the Maharwada to eat. (85)

"The Mahars had to pull out the rotting carcasses and carry them to a deserted spot at a considerable distance from the village. Then they had to sweep the pens that were full of rotten flesh, maggots, droppings and the bloody secretions of dying animals. They had to wash the floor clean and drive out the flies. Once they had finished this task, they would go to the place where the others would be cutting open the carcasses. After one animal was cut, the meat was divided into portions and the women would immediately begin to transport the food. They would put their share of meat into the baskets and cover it with twigs and leaves."
The woman would balance the basket on her head with one hand, and with the other, she would continuously ward off flies and birds, all the while loudly chanting 'ghar, ghar, ghar'. The women started homewards, walking through the village, warding the birds off with their shouts. Their heads would be drenched with blood, puss and other putrid secretions oozing out of the meat.**(86)**

Though, without Mahars touching or sweating, there is nothing produced in the fields, and nothing reaches the upper-caste houses, Mahars are considered to be untouchables and their very shade can pollute the upper-castes. Mahars also do cremate the dead bodies. They are also used as the agents who do bring bad news because they are symbolically impure and bad omens. They bring the news of old people dying which would first invite terrible abuse from the upper-caste families. Thus they relieve their anger and anguish first on the dalit messenger after receiving the death news.**(79)**

In the time of labour for women or any epidemic there are so many superstitions prevail in Mahar community which would lead to deaths of many men and women. For example during the labour pain, there is no availability of medical and health care for women. They are not given food after the delivery. Many women die in the process. When people get any kind of diseases, the only remedy and treatment is the exorcism done by god man. He announces all the suffering of people with diseases as the possession of evil spirits. He would start exorcising by slapping him and kicking him repeatedly which would ultimately cause the death.**(80-81)**
Marriages in the dalit families are not solemnized by the Brahmin priests. But they do get their dakshina money. He would come to stand faraway from dalit marriage place and get his money, chana dal, rice wheat, jaggery as his rightful part. "A Brahmin priest would be invited to solemnise the marriage. He would stand at a distance for fear of pollution, but he would never make any compromise on his dakshina! That he took away without any fear of pollution. Apart from the dakshina money, he was also required to be given about two kilos of chana dal, one-and-a-half kilos of rice, three kilos of wheat and a huge plateful of jaggery. This was called the dry grocery."(89)

Dalits are symbolically treated inferior, but they are enslaved by the cultural and religious values so as to never question such violence in the state of ignorance. The religious rituals such as making dalit men potrajas and dalit women into Jogini or Baswini has symbolic value of sacrificing ritual. Potraja literally means a buffalo. In the sacrificing ritual, a buffalo is made ready to be sacrificed and a Mang suwasini is also made ready the same way. "The men would put garlands of kanher flowers around the buffalo's neck. Meanwhile, one of the Mang suwasinis would take the holy bath. She had to wear a green sari and a green blouse. They would rub haldi all over her body and smear her forehead with kumkum and place a coconut and some grain in her pallav."(31-32) Potraja will dance in the whole process of the ritual in the procession along with the buffalo. Dalit man potraja and suwasini are considered to be animals and it is believed if they are made to perform the rituals, the evil powers can be avoided from harming caste Hindus. This violence springs from the religion also pushes dalit women into religious prostitution. Pawar and Moon said Ambedkar addressed the issue of religious prostitution into which
Dalits carry the night soil on their heads and clean the filth of the upper-castes. If dalits become aware of the exploitation of their labour, the power of the upper-castes will be subverted. So caste hierarchy makes dalits believe that since they are untouchables they are supposed to perform the scavenging. There is hardly any escape from this though a few dalits do understand the exploitation and humiliation that is involved in these works. Poverty is one of the significant factors which makes dalits to conform to the caste status. It makes them helpless and struggle only for survival from starvation. Thus many dalits in state of poverty fail to question the caste discrimination. Poverty and exploitation of labour of dalits are deliberately done by the upper-castes in order to retain their power. Since their labour is not paid, their starvation leads to their acceptance of eating dead and rotten cows also.

"The only difference, however, was that the beasts could eat a bellyful and they could stay in their masters' courtyards. But our condition was far worse. Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste. That was where we lived, in our poor huts, amidst all the filth! We were
masters only of the dead animals thrown into those pits by the high castes. We had to fight with cats and dogs and kites and vultures to establish our right over the carcasses, to tear off the flesh from the dead bodies.” (49)

Education and caste awareness only could make dalits reject the humiliating ways in which they are treated. It was Ambedkar’s philosophy which brought such awareness on caste. Through his politics he could reach the common dalits which is described by Baby Kamble in her autobiography. This symbolic caste violence on dalits enslaves the dalits to continue to live the way that is imposed by the caste system. Ambedkar also suggests that the subversion of visible symbols of untouchability and slavery and rejection of Hinduism is a must to bring about the revolution. Though dalits are not slaves in the strict sense to anyone, untouchability and caste system enslave them in such a way that they would not able to get out of the system and also not have access to either religion or education. Ambedkar says that Hinduism is the religion of rituals. But the rituals in which dalits take part are humiliating when compared to the ritual of the upper-castes.

“Let all our women take this step. Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance. My poor dear brothers and sisters, do not eat carcass any more. Don’t clean the filth of the village. Let those who make the filth clean it up themselves. Let us teach them this lesson. This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution.” (65)
Visible symbols of untouchability and caste are meant to remind dalits constantly of their inferior status. They are made to live under the humiliating conditions because they are made to believe they are impure and inferior to the caste Hindus by imposing the practices such as bowing before the upper-caste men. Baby Kambie also tries to bring out the reality of economic and labour exploitation of dalits by upper-castes. Dalits perform the menial jobs and they are not paid. They don't have any share in the economy of the society; they are made to beg food and made to believe that they are getting free food due to benevolence of upper-castes. The dead animals offered to dalits by upper-castes not out of their benevolence or as a payment to the labour of dalits but only to get rid of the dead and rotten cows it is part of the dalits' profession of scavenging.

Urmila Pawar's autobiography The Weave of My Life describes various instances of symbolic caste violence that dalits are subjected to. Pawar's autobiography covers a wider dalit feminist perspective of various instances of caste violence. Her autobiography brings out the experiences of dalits and dalit women collectively facing untouchability and humiliation which prevents them from being part of human civilization and progress.

Urmila Pawar in her childhood lived in a small village and then her family moved to Ratnagiri, a town in the Konkan region of Maharashtra and then to Mumbai. When she gets married she goes to live in Mumbai with her husband. Since the autobiography is set against the backdrop of the Phule and Ambedkarite movements, we read about a few dalits who would feel utterly humiliated when the priest does not solemnize the dalit
marriage but still comes and stands faraway in order to escape from being polluted. "Then the priest would climb down, sprinkle holy water from his panchpatra -- a vessel with five compartments -- with a pali, a small ritual spoon, on the coins kept as his dakshina to wash away the pollution and make them clean, and push it into his waistband. He would also make it a point to take away all the offerings: rice, coconuts, and so on, as part his dakshina. He never carried these himself, of course! He had his servant for that task." (13)

In this time, education was given importance in dalit families due to the influence of Ambedkarite and post Ambedkarite dalit movement. Urmila Pawar's sisters and brothers had gone to school. But the dalit children in the school were made to sit outside the class room. Teachers used to treat them with contempt and they always examine their slates from a distance and severe punishments like hitting them with stones (so that they don't have to touch the dalit children) used to be meted out to dalit children in the school. This made many of Urmila Pawar's cousins leave the school. Thus they were deprived of the benefits of education. (17-18) In the situation where dalit education and their entry into schools was not so easy with the teachers carrying caste prejudice, dalit girl education was an even more difficult task. Many schools would not enrol dalit girls.

"Mahar children also went to school but they had to sit outside in the courtyard. The teachers taught them and examined their slates, from a distance. They would hit the children with stones if they made any mistakes. Naturally, our cousins lost all interest in learning and bunked school." (17)
Apart from this, dalits were kept away from the wells and water tanks to prevent the water getting polluted. Urmila Pawar's father is an educated Ambedkarite dalit. He got a well dug in front of his house for the use of dalit women who come to the town to sell fruits or vegetables. (23) These women could not get drinking water from any other place. Urmila Pawar got to know more about the women who come to drink water who would chat with Pawar's mother sitting in the shade after completing their work in the town. Urmila in her girlhood unaware of the situation of dalits used to feel embarrassed to acknowledge them as friends and relatives because of their poor condition.

Urmila Pawar recalls the memories of poor conditions of her community and family in her childhood. Poverty in dalit families is very common due to the lack of access to property, wages and education. Since the family lived near the sea, they had some access to seafood. The amount of rice or rotis they got to eat was very little. (45) Apart from poverty, dalits' lives are entwined with so many superstitions and rituals which marginalize them further. On the day of Holi, Marathas, Bhandaris and Kulwadis would start the worship by setting trees on fire. They pray to gods to divert the calamities onto the dalit community. Young dalit boys would consume liquor and get intoxicated. This gives them a bit of relief from everyday pain of labour, poverty and starvation. The upper-caste men would carry the palanquin of the God, whereas dalit boys were not even allowed to touch it or to come close to it. If any dalit boy would go to hold the palanquin, there would be quarrels between upper-castes and Mahars. (47-48) On the day of festival upper-caste women would make sweet chapatis, lentil and other food items, where as dalit women would go to the upper-castes’ doorsteps to beg festival food. It depends
upon luck of the dalit women whether they will be offered food by upper-caste women or not. A few might be offered food and a few might be denied entirely. Kulwadi women pour out all the food items like vegetable, kheer, rice everything mixed up into the baskets of dalit women. The dalit families survive on these leftovers for at least two days. In some houses the meat of dead animals would be eaten. Urmila Pawar’s father, being an Ambedkarite would not allow this in their house. He was also against dalit women begging food from upper-caste houses. (50-51)

Urmila Pawar’s family found itself destitute after the death her father who was a school teacher, of severe pain in the abdomen. (74) Her eldest brother Achyut also passed away due to typhoid when he was twelve years old. Though these disasters seem to be her personal tragedies, there is a suggestion that there is lack of health care for dalits.

Dalits buy things from the shopkeeper standing away from the thresholds of their houses. They are not supposed to touch anything in their courtyards. But Pawar was ready to defile and subvert the concept of ritual purity. Urmila Pawar describes this with a satiric tone. When Urmila Pawar goes to buy pickle from the ‘Pandit’ family, she shouts into the house for a small amount of pickle to be sold to her. The woman from inside comes in a few minutes because she never touches the pickle without taking bath and changing into a special sari meant for doing such things like taking out the pickles. Urmila Pawar’s brother always used to tell her to pollute the pickle by touching the jar before she comes, so that she would give away whole jar of pickle to her. “Before she comes dressed in her sowale sari, you might just go ahead and dip your entire hand into her pickle jar. You can
tell her, "Oh, you took so long! And I'm getting late. So I am helping myself." Since you would have polluted the jar, she would give away the entire jar to you!" (77-78)

Pawar describes the incident of Marathas of the village trying to provoke dalits. They muddied the water by washing their buffalos in the part of the river where dalits fetch drinking water. Though dalits were very upset about it, they were helpless to fight against this injustice. (85) Once, Urmila Pawar visited her elder sister's house after her sister got married. Her sister and brother-in-law used to help the poor people from dalit community. A man and his wife come from a neighboring village takes shelter in their verandah for shade. They find out that the man was a victim of a violent ritual followed in their village.

"The husband had wrapped a loincloth around his waist. There was a huge gaping wound on his bare back. His wife sat crying, wiping the tears with her torn sari. It seemed that in their village there was a ritual. An upper caste man would inflict a big wound on a Mahar man's back and his wife had to cover the wound with some cloth and go on walking around, howling! Quite a ritual, that one! Dada, Akka's husband, was telling them, 'You have to resist this custom! How can you tolerate it? This ritual is symbolic of some old sacrificial rites! The Mahar symbolizes the animal sacrificed! I tell you, get converted then this will automatically stop.'" (86)

Pawar's mother gave one of the rooms in their house on rent to a Muslim couple, who become very close to the family. Mohammad and Haseena lived in the house on rent,
later, two girls Baby and Saida came to join them and became friends with Urmila Pawar. But this did not last long. Once, Pawar was invited by Baby to go with them to her aunt’s house. They also made some food ready for their aunt. Pawar carried the parcel of food all through the way. When they got to their aunt’s house, Urmila Pawar was introduced as the landlady’s daughter. Their aunt gets annoyed at them and tells them clearly how shameful it is to live in a Mahar house. She did not allow Urmila inside the house. She asked her to sit outside the house and wait for Baby and her sister to come out. Urmila Pawar feels deeply humiliated. Embarrassed to be friends with Urmila Pawar, Baby and her sister stopped talking to her completely. They also did not touch the food container which had been carried by Pawar and polluted. The family vacated the house soon. “At the time of going back to Mumbai at the end of their holidays, they just said ‘Bye’ and left. How this hurt me! I wept bitterly.”(105)

Urmila Pawar’s autobiography talks about how the dalits in the villages and town are treated with contempt by upper-castes. On the one hand, the humiliation that she faced in the society in various contexts in the school, neighbourhood made her become aware of the caste system and untouchability that prevails in the society. On the other hand it left her deeply humiliated at every step of her life. Symbols of caste system help to make the people believe in the hierarchy and every caste is placed at a different level in the caste hierarchy. The only reason that dalits are allowed to take part in temple rituals is the belief of the caste Hindus that if an animal is sacrificed, gods will be pacified. Dalit men and women are symbolic of the animal that is sacrificed in the ritual. Potrajas and Joginis are also tortured like animals in these rituals. Even an older form of ritual described by
Urmila Pawar was torturing a dalit man and making a wound on his back as part of the ritual. Caste Hindus believe by doing such sacrificing rituals to gods, they would have good future and will have no threats from natural calamities and epidemics. Pawar’s brother showing the solution and escape from the torture to the couple (man who was wounded) was to convert. Conversion as suggested by Ambedkar has political significance in the context of dalits. Ignorance makes dalits blindly accept the superiority of the upper-caste. So conversion to Buddhism would make them reject the ignorance. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon point out in We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement, ‘that Ambedkar believed that such ignorance would only disappear with conversion. By converting to Buddhism, dalits would be able to give up superstitious beliefs, so they also become knowledgeable and aware of caste. (100-101)

The incident of upper-castes washing their cattle in the part of the river where dalits fetch drinking water was meant as provocation. Such acts are also meant to remind dalits of their inferior status especially when they seem to have been progressing beyond their “limits”. If there was any resistance from dalits in case of muddying their drinking water, the symbolic ways of humiliating dalits would have turned into atrocities on dalits as in case of Karamchedu. In this village in Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh, the upper-caste Kamma landlords similarly washed their cattle in the pond where dalits fetch drinking water. The resistance of dalits against the act led to mass killings.15

Pawar’s recollection of the school teachers and the humiliation that dalit children face has its political significance. Schools were open to dalits. But the school and curriculum and
teachers are still Brahminical. On the one hand dalit children due to the poor conditions of family, find it hard to get enrolled in the schools. On the other hand they are not privileged in the school like other upper-caste children. Caste prejudice in schools is deterrent for dalit education. Kancha Ilaiah in *Why I am not A Hindu?* describes how the upper-caste teachers used to discriminate against dalit bahujan students in the schools. Teachers used to even say that due to their misfortune they got to teach dalit bahujan students.

“If he was a Brahmin he hated us and told us to our faces that it was because of the evil time—because of Kaliyuga, that he was being forced to teach ‘Sudras’ like us”. (12)

Being an educated girl and also the one who started understanding the complexity of caste in every day life, Pawar also becomes someone who vehemently questions the concept of purity/pollution. One of the examples of such experiences, Pawar’s brother tells her to defile the pickle bottle when she goes to buy pickle in the Brahmin house. Her attempt to subvert the caste dominance of caste Hindu is visible in from her childhood days where the dalit community on the whole was undergoing change due to influence of post-Ambedkarite movement.

Bama’s autobiography *Karukku* is set in more modern times ('60s and '70s onwards) when compared to the period covered by Baby Kamble (Ambedkarite movement) and Urmila Pawar (post-Ambedkarite period). She depicts the instances of symbolic caste violence that dalits are collectively subjected to, in her autobiography. In her life too,
these experiences of untouchability play an important role in making her aware of the
caste differences in the society. These experiences are essentially marked by her caste
position. Bama lives in a beautiful village with green fields, mountains, woods and so on.
The fields are green because dalits do work in the field. The households of upper-castes
survive only on the labour of dalits who clean their filth everyday. The village is rich in
resources, but dalits have no share in that. Naickers, the upper-castes dominate over the
rest of the castes. Bama talks about many people within and outside the dalit community
in her autobiography. A few of her stories are satiric in tone. One such narrative is the
story of Bondan-Maama and his adventures. “His chief means of livelihood was stealing
limes, coconuts and mangoes from the landowning families’ gardens and groves and then
selling them.”(4) Once he stole a sack full of mangoes in the darkness of night from an
upper-caste man’s grove. When the caretaker tried to catch him he jumped into the well
along with the sack of mangoes. Unfortunately, there was a big snake in the well.
Somehow he escaped from that snake and the caretaker. Bondan-Maama’s stories
fascinated her. His ways of stealing appears not as criminality but as adventure for Bama
in her childhood.

Once when she was on her way back from school, she happened to see an elderly man of
their caste who acts as caste headman carrying a small packet of snacks. She bursts into
laughter on observing that he was holding it by the string wrapped around the packet. He
goes to the Naicker man and hands it over to him after bowing before him. Naicker man
opens the packet and starts eating the snacks. But Bama comes to know that by holding
the pack by its string, he was not trying to be funny but preventing the food from being
polluted. (12-13) Bama's father works in the army. Her mother carries firewood and works in the fields. Bama's brother is educated and he is keen on educating Bama also. In spite of Bama going to school she does go to work in fields sometime. Due to the awareness brought by the education, Bama wants to be treated equally and not get humiliated by everyday practices like dalits bowing before upper-castes and avoiding the path of upper-castes and so on. But she has to obey as long as she works in their fields. Her brother tells her that the only way to escape this humiliation is to study hard and become an educated person. But the field of education awaits to humiliate Bama equally as the villages does.

Both Bama's maternal grandmother and paternal grandmother worked in Naicker's households. The way they are addressed and dominated even by small children in upper-caste families made Bama understand how powerful caste hierarchies could be. Dalits used to address the upper-castes (including the upper-caste children) as masters. The practice of untouchability is very visible in the village. The confinement of dalits to the menial professions was total. After working in the households of upper-castes, they would bring home leftover food which the upper-castes are going to throw away. But this is the only way of survival for many people. As a small girl Bama would question and disagree with her grandmother about begging leftovers from the upper-castes houses. Her grandmother would say since they were untouchables, the only way of survival is to eat the leftovers offered to them kindheartedly by upper-castes.

"The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their
mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the left over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods. (14)

When Bama’s brother who is an educated boy goes to the library, on his way back he happens to meet a few Naicker men. They asked Bama’s brother in which street he is living with the idea to find out his caste identity. Furious with this question, Bama’s brother answered, “I am a Paraya from the Cheri street.” (15) This “arrogance” and lack of obedience of a dalit boy offended the Naicker men. Next morning when Bama’s Paatti goes to work in the Naicker’s house, Naicker pours out a shower of abuses on her.

Bama takes admission in a hostel. Though she doesn’t like to stay there for she feels ashamed of her condition of lack of proper clothing and food, she had to stay back for her education. Upper-castes do assert their caste superiority in the public spaces such as buses, hotels and cinema halls. When Bama travels by bus while coming back home for holidays from the hostel, an upper-caste woman sits next to her and enquires Bama where she is going. Bama answers that she is going to Cheri. Immediately Bama was asked by the lady to sit in another seat so as to prevent the upper-caste woman being polluted with her touch. However, being an educated and assertive dalit woman, Bama denied doing so. The upper-caste woman rather prefers to stand in the bus all through the journey but not ready to get polluted by the touch of an untouchable woman. “When I went home for
holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she'd immediately
ask me which place I was going to, what street. As soon as I said, the Cheri, she’d get up
and move off to another seat. Or she’d tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I’d
settle into my seat even more firmly. They’d prefer then to get up and stand all the way
rather than sit next to me or any other woman from the Cheri. They'd be polluted,
apparently.”(18) Bama wanted to escape this everyday violence which creates a
consciousness of caste on the mind. At the same time she wanted to work for the
upliftment of all the dalits by providing them education.

“In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of
humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference
does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you
take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into
a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and
progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left
to us”(23)

Another important aspect of dalit collective experience is the caste prejudice in the
schools. Everybody believes that dalit children are only good for the filthy works. They
are treated as “bad” and “unmeritorious” children. Bama says, “They always spoke in a
bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say
immediately, and without hesitation, “it must be one of the Cheri-children who did
it”(15) If this is the case in the village, even in schools run by Catholic Church, the
teachers are equally caste prejudiced. “Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were
contemptible. But they didn’t hesitate to use us for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher’s house; we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were need about the school.”(16)

Poor conditions of dalits also made Bama to fight against the exploitation of labour.(62) Her Narrative of Bondan Maama’s adventures question the exploitation of the dalits’ labour. It is Bondan Maama who appears as a robber who robs mangoes, coconuts from the upper-castes’ gardens. She suggests that the upper-caste Naickers who exploit their labour still do not give dalits a share in the production. So, Bondan Maama’s ways are described not unlawful but a way of asserting his right. Bama believes that poverty is the common feature of dalit community. They are deprived all the basic amenities of life. This basically prevents dalits from becoming assertive and fighting against the upper-castes. Immersed in poverty and absorbed in the everyday struggle for bread, dalits would not think about social equality. The description of food habits of dalits is also given importance in Bama’s autobiography. When Bama feels disgusted about the idea of eating leftover food that was brought by her grandmother from Naicker houses, her grandmother says that is the only way of survival for dalits. “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven’t we been lower-caste? Can we change this? (14)

Bama’s autobiography talks about dalit Christian community and the religious practices and their life under the influence of the Church. It is believed that Christianity offered a
better life and benefits for dalits. To what extent this is true is the question that Bama takes up in her autobiography. Dalits do become part of the Church, but many priests and church people (nuns) continue to treat dalits as untouchables in the Church also. Church plays an important role in dalits’ life. But the educational institutes run by Catholic Church are open to upper-castes but not to dalits. Though there is nominal enrolment of dalits into those schools, dalit children are made to do some filthy works in the convent. They are never treated equally with rich people’s children. The nuns and priests in the convent are so caste prejudiced that they think dalits are unmeritorious and they are good for only such menial jobs. Since there are other upper-castes who are converts, they are treated better and dalits are treated as untouchables in the Church.

Bama’s autobiography talks about untouchability in more recent times. Though not all the visible forms of untouchability had disappeared by then, caste operated mostly in symbolic forms. We find a few educated dalits in the village she lived. Bama’s brother is one such dalit boy with higher education. His way of not bowing before the upper-caste men is considered to be the arrogance of dalits by Naicker men. The atrocities like Chunduru took place because of this “arrogance” of educated dalits. In contemporary society, we see a few dalit educated people not ready to accept the visible symbols of caste. This makes upper-castes feel that their power over the lower castes of the society is being questioned or threatened. In Bama’s autobiography, her brother also had subverted the stereotypes of dalit condition by educating himself. He is no more a boy working in the fields of upper-caste landlords. When they found the boy well dressed and going to the library, they were curious to know who the boy was, since they believe he must be
from one of the caste Hindu families. By the very condition of being highly educated, he threatened the power of upper-castes and then by the way he speaks to them with assertiveness in tone. There is a modern way of caste behaviour that is described here by Bama. The upper-caste men do not ask the boy which caste he belongs to but they ask him which street he belongs to in the village so as to find which caste he belongs to. Such modern methods of investigating caste position have become common in contemporary society. It is believed to be barbaric/uncivilized to talk about caste though caste is very much part of the reality of everyday life. Since, mentioning caste names would be not being modern, urbane, people find out caste position in different way. Even in the towns and cities, dalits have separate localities in which they live.

According to Bama, dalits in a condition of ignorance would not be able to address the caste discrimination though they are victims of everyday violence in the society. In fact they resign themselves to their fate by justifying the caste system. One needs awareness to address the caste discrimination. Bama’s brother says education would alone give way to escape from the humiliation and inferiority of dalits. When Bama sees the situation of dalits in the educational institutions as an individual dalit woman, she begins to understand that education becomes the weapon in the hands of upper-castes to become more casteist.\(^\text{18}\)

**Symbolic Caste Violence on Individual Dalits**

The first category of symbolic caste violence concerns how dalits collectively face caste discrimination and untouchability in the villages where they are confined to their
"position" in the caste ladder. In the second category of symbolic caste violence against individual dalits, I would discuss the experiences of individual dalits who entered hitherto closed areas of life in the upper-caste dominant spaces such as educational institutions. Almost all the dalit women autobiographies I discuss talk about the unique experiences of individuals suffering symbolic caste violence.

Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke*, discusses her experiences of untouchability and caste discrimination being a dalit who stepped out of the conventional dalit position. Baby Kamble's family sent her to a school influenced by Ambedkarite movement. When Kamble enters the school at a time when the monopoly of Brahmins over education is more conspicuous, she had faced caste discrimination and untouchability in the school. Both schoolmates and teachers are equally caste prejudiced. Teachers found a solution for upper-caste girls’ troubles with the dalit girls who might touch them and pollute them. Teachers made them sit outside the class room. Mahar girls are also not supposed to touch drinking water pots. "They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose, mutter 'chee, chee', and run as if their lives were in mortal danger."(108) Gujar women who are on their way to temple would become very conscious that they might get polluted by the touch of the Mahar girls. Baby Kamble with other dalit girls in the school used to run to them from behind and touch them on purpose.(110) The autobiography talks about a dalit girl’s experience of untouchability in the school which is a space of upper-castes in the traditional society. Even in the contemporary times, the same monopoly of the upper-castes continues to exist.
Unlike Baby Kamble's autobiography that deals more with the experiences of Mahars' collective or community life, Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* focuses on the experiences of symbolic caste violence faced by the individual dalits who stepped out of the stereotypical dalit identity into a more radical position of a dalit. Maya Pandit in her introduction to Pawar's autobiography says, "It is a complex narrative of a *gendered* individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective. It captures effectively the transition of the Mahar community, rooted geographically in the agrarian and rural areas of the Konkan region, into a people relocated in urbanized spaces like Mumbai, with a more 'modern' sensibility."(xvii)

The transcending of the traditional caste position into an individual dalit self entering the 'modern' spaces of education, feminist movement, dalit movement and literary circles makes the autobiography important in the context how the symbolic caste violence is directed upon individual dalits in the society. Urmila Pawar had gone to school in a situation that created difficulties for dalit education and dalit girl education. She describes various instances where dalit children were treated with contempt by the teachers and the rest of the (upper-caste) children in the school. Teachers with caste prejudices used to create a humiliating situation for dalit students by making them sit outside the class room and treating them as the children whose duty should be cleaning the filth of the society.
Being a dalit girl who wanted to be treated equal with the upper-castes, Urmila Pawar feels humiliated with her poor conditions at home. What are the initial difficulties faced by Urmila Pawar in the school where there is majority of upper-caste children and very few dalit children is nothing but the very condition of being low in her social and economic status. She radically questions society as to why the dalit body is made to feel ashamed. The clothes dalits wear, the professions dalits are confined to, the food dalits eat, everything is different from the upper-castes. This very condition of being dalit is a constant violence on the mind of Urmila Pawar. The cultural values with which the society judges people do not favour dalits in any case. The process of exclusion among the hundreds of upper-castes in the schools is constant symbolic violence that she faces in the academia. Unique dalit status of being an educated along with the upper-caste students made her aware of the “difference” and exclusion of dalits from the rest of society.

Urmila Pawar feels ashamed of the relatives and her mother’s acquaintances after she begins going to school. Because she feels upper-caste women who are her school mates’ mothers are well dressed in silk saris and they also decorate themselves with gold ornaments. But the condition of dalit women is not the same. Urmila Pawar’s sister-in-law is working in their household when Pawar brings one of her upper-caste friends Shyamala home. When her friend enquires about her sister-in-law who she is, Pawar quickly replies that she is their maidservant so as to escape the humiliating situation. She feels embarrassed to acknowledge her as her sister-in-law. She also feels the same humiliation about her mother who is in poor condition when compared to the mothers of
the rest of the children. Though her sister-in-law just smiles at her insult and does not make an issue out of it, Pawar begins to feel guilty and she understands the pain of that insult and what made her to do so when she grows up.

“I always maintained a distance with her, so much so that when a classmate of mine, Shyamala Chavan, asked me ‘Who’s that woman in your house who looks like this?’ I replied, ‘Oh that woman? She’s our maidservant!’ when I ought to have told her that she was my sister-in-law.” (43)

Like most of the dalit children, Urmila Pawar also had to help her mother in the work she does. Pawar’s mother weaves wicker baskets, bags in order to earn her living. After Pawar’s father dies, weaving becomes the only means of livelihood for her family. Pawar’s mother used to send her with the wickers baskets to be delivered to the people whom she promised. She being a school girl is acquainted with the fact that upper-caste girls do feel ashamed to do such work not because she doesn’t want to work but because of the way they treat her when she goes to the upper-castes’ doorsteps. When she delivers the baskets, they would ask her to keep them on the ground, they would sprinkle some water to purify them. They would also throw the cash into her hands from high above to avoid the contact with her. This makes Urmila Pawar furious but still helpless. “If the house belonged to one of my classmates, the shame of it was killing. So I used to ignore Aaye’s calls, even when she called me repeatedly.” (65)

In her childhood, Pawar dint like to go to school for various reasons. One of the reasons is that she is treated by the teachers with contempt. Her school teacher Herlekar guruji
makes her clean the cow dung in the surroundings of the schools. Whenever it is the turn of her class to clean the mess around the school, class room and collect the dirt, she was forced to do it all alone, and sometimes even when it was not her turn.

One day Guruji asked me to clean the mess. It was not even the turn of our class. Still he told me to clean because I was late. It was so humiliating that I refused even to budge. Guruji ordered me to clean up once again. But I did not move from my place. My friends -- more foes than friends really! -- turned to look at me and laughed. Guruji got up. I could feel the heat waves of his anger. Aaye used to tell me that if one comes across a tiger or a python, one is paralysed with fear. I felt just the same. Guruji came close and slapped me hard. Then he told me to get out. Howling, I ran home.(67-68)

Her high school life makes her feel excluded all the time. Every moment of her being in the presence of the high caste girls reminds her of lowly position. The food that is made in her home is something of very poor quality when compared to the food brought by the upper-caste girls in the school. This makes her feel ashamed of her condition. She hardly gets to eat any good food or wear good clothes. “They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times when we went on excursions. They would also bring such food when they played with dolls. But I never asked myself the stupid question, ‘Why don’t we make such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and we had to live accordingly.'”(93) Pawar’s family could only afford to eat sea food which is not very expensive in the coastal area they were living in. They do not get all the types of fish but particularly the
small river fish cooked in oil and turmeric. Eating pomphret and halwa is a costly affair that never happened in Pawar's family. (100)

I would however, hate to carry such things in my tiffin box, either to school or on an excursion. Why, I would be ashamed of even talking about them. It made me feel terribly inferior to the other children at all times. (101)

In her school, there was a proposal from few class mates that all of them would cook their meal and eat. Every one should bring rice, lentil, and so on and make arrangement for cooking. When everyone brings something for the cooking, Pawar also gets excited about the idea of cooking and asked them what she should bring. They say that she should bring just some little amount of money. While the girls cooked, they did not allow Pawar to do anything. She ate the food along with the girl. She is not aware that the way she eats is disgusting for the upper-caste girls. Next day, she comes to know that the girls started gossiping about her eating manners. They told everyone that she ate like a monster. (102)

The question of merit and English education becomes another deterrent for Urmila Pawar in the school. Though she proves herself to be a good student through her active participation in extra-curricular activities such as acting on the stage, dance and other things, she is humiliated for her inability to do well in English class. Her teachers humiliate her in front of the class.

"This is English, the milk of a tigress; it is not easy, like acting in plays." He would humiliate me in front of the whole class and the other students laughed at me. So to me the period for English lessons was like facing a tiger. Naturally I
would bunk the class. And because I bunked classes, Nene would not allow me to sit in the next class. I could not speak about this at home. Aai was illiterate and my brother sided with Nene. The inevitable result was that I started regressing in English."(160)

As they grow up, all the children in Urmila Pawar’s family became well educated and settled down in different positions in bureaucracy. They had now entered a space where caste prejudice was rampant but still the discrimination was invisible and not easy to address. Her sister takes up a job in a mental hospital after her marriage. A mentally disturbed woman in the hospital abuses her and refuses to take food from her hands. (21) Another important incident for the present discussion depicted in her autobiography is about her elder brother’s death. Being a well educated dalit man, he takes a position in government sector. After a few years in the job, he commits suicide. Urmila Pawar finds out from his suicide notes that he was falsely accused of corruption in the department.(300)

The discrimination that dalits face in the schools is not very direct and conspicuous. It is difficult to address it because dalits are treated as inferior for outward reasons of lacking in merit or manners. Entering educational institutions for dalits is entering into a space over which the upper-castes do not want to lose their power. The related sectors such as bureaucracy, public sector, media, education and literature are equally Brahmin dominant. Urmila Pawar being humiliated as some one who is not “good” at English is also a political issue. Pawar is making two points here: one is she is not very comfortable
with the English language. Secondly, she has no cultural capital as other girls do have. She cannot talk about her difficulty in learning English with her mother who is a non-literate. English unlike Sanskrit is not the language of Brahmins. But the way that Brahmins speak English in writing (Indian writing in English was dominated by Brahmins in the colonial and post-colonial times) accent and pronunciation was made “standard” Indian English. Thus, dalits’ way of speaking English is considered to be “not good English”. The language in which a dalit child communicates at home with parents, friends at work place and at playtime is not the language of the school. In fact their own mother tongue becomes a cause for shame in school where the upper-castes speak same language differently. Language is the reflection of the culture of the society and is an essential part of its social life.19 But dalits are not part of same social life and culture of the upper-castes. Just as any other quality of lower/out castes is subjected to shame, the language that is spoken by them is also considered to be inferior.

Urmila Pawar’s brother, a dalit bureaucrat committing suicide has significance in her autobiography. He committed suicide because of the false accusation of corruption. Dalits occupying significant positions in bureaucracy and public sector would gain political power for dalits especially those with political awareness. Such people’s presence in the bureaucracy and public sectors itself threatens the power of upper-castes. False accusation of corruption on dalits is one form of symbolic violence on dalits. Dalits who are more assertive are more prone to such discrimination. As Sukhadeo Thorat, who has studied this phenomenon says,
"The Commissioner for Scheduled Castes reported about 11,469 complaints by Dalit government employees during the period from 2004 to 2010 that were linked to caste prejudice. Several thousand more complaints under the provisions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, such as giving "false or frivolous information to any public servant and thereby cause such public servant to use his lawful power to the injury or annoyance of member of SC/ST" are waiting for justice."\textsuperscript{20}

Such atrocities mentioned by dalit women autobiographies are not recognized as violence. Even in higher education, many dalit students committed suicide unable to deal with the caste prejudices and discrimination.\textsuperscript{21} But such violence is always justified by the charge that dalits are not meritorious, "disciplined" or that they are corrupt. Ambedkar says that the relationship between untouchables and touchables are predetermined by the caste order of the society. When any kind of relationship takes place between touchables and untouchables, inequality is immediately established. Dalits are invariably given inferior status. "The inferiority is embodied in the code of social conduct to which the untouchables must conform."\textsuperscript{22}

The inferiority of dalits springs from their poverty and social position. But the humiliation is more in case of those dalits who confront the upper-castes in schools and colleges like Urmila Pawar. A few of her experiences such as her feeling of embarrassment to acknowledge her relatives shows that exclusion is one form of caste violence that dalits undergo.
Barna’s autobiography talks of a dalit Christian woman entering the seminary to become a nun with the idea to work to uplift dalits. A conscious dalit woman Barna is educated in the Catholic schools. With all her experiences of untouchability, caste discrimination, she comes up with a strong motivation to work for the upliftment of dalits. Barna begins to believe that people occupying the better positions in the Church are upper-castes and thus not very keen on understanding the dalit question. When she enters the higher education and seminary, she subverts the traditional caste position of a dalit woman. The institutions such as school, colleges are anyway not caste free, thus Barna’s dreams of escaping caste discrimination scatters. Barna says, “If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste. It is impossible to describe the anguish that look causes. But along with the anguish, there is anger, too. What can our anger do to them though? It seems we have to swallow our anger and just carry on with our troubled lives.”(23-24)

The awareness brought by education would make individual dalits feel more humiliated than the dalits who are enslaved in their minds and conform to their caste position. Barna due to the economic conditions in the family had to work in the field along with other dalit labourers. The feudal practices of caste hierarchy are very common in the village. Dalits are supposed to bow before the upper-castes whenever they confront them.

Until the time that I was in the eighth class, I worked in my village in all these ways. All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their
goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do. They belonged to a higher caste. They had the money. We had to listen to what they said. However furious or resentful I felt in my heart, I have stepped aside for them, along with the other women of my community. (46)

After a few years, Bama joins the hostel for her further studies. She starts living with the upper-caste girls on everyday basis. Her inferior social and economic conditions make her feel excluded and ashamed of herself. Like Urmila Pawar, Bama begins to feel humiliated due to the lack of good clothes, food.

Both in the hostel and in the school, the children wore all sorts of fine clothes, and they kept nice things to eat in their rooms. So I thought they must all be upper-caste children. My mother too had given me some fried groundnuts and puffed rice. I had put this aside for myself. I wondered to myself how it was that children belonging to other communities always had fine clothes and good food. (63)

With the influence of her brother about the importance of education, Bama struggles to enter higher education. She wants to find a space that is caste free and where she can have equal opportunity. Education is the only way for her. When she is in her hostel during her college education, she was supposed to attend a college day celebration. But Bama feels ashamed to attend the party along with the women who have good clothes,
ornaments and so on. She has hardly any good clothes to wear for the party. This feeling of exclusion creates a deep inferiority complex.

"In my fourth year, the time neared for the College Day. College Day was always celebrated on a grand scale. All the final year students were invited to a party, which they attended dressed in silk saris and decked out in their best things. As for me I didn’t have a single decent sari to my name. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to borrow a sari from someone or the other and wear that. And on that particular day, I couldn’t take myself away elsewhere, nor would they have allowed me. So at last, I made up my mind and went and locked myself up in the bathroom. I wanted to weep and weep when I considered my plight. And I realised how deeply shamed one can be for the lack of a few rupees in one’s hand." (65)

After completing college education, Barna joins a seminary to become a nun. One of the most important reasons behind taking this decision is that her experiences made her believe that there are not many schools or hostels that accommodate dalit children. Since education plays an important role in lifting up dalits in various ways, Barna believes that creating a space for dalits to educate themselves is important. Many other educational institutes run by upper-caste are not open for dalits. Though she faced discrimination within the seminary, she believes if she can negotiate her space in the seminary/Church, she can vigorously work for dalit children. But having entered the seminary, she understands that Church is not caste free. Being a dalit woman she has no importance in decision making process. When the nuns go home for holidays they are supposed to bring gifts for the convent though the convent has good amount of funds. The respect that nuns
get in the convent depends upon how costly the gifts are and their caste position. She finds the convent as a space of rich people. She hardly finds the concept of service among the people in convent. Everybody gives importance to rich people. Even when there are schools opened for dalit children, a small group of dalit children in those school are treated with contempt by upper-caste and caste prejudiced nuns.

They ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed. They behaved as if they were the queens there, and everybody else was there only to run errands for them. A few nuns who were even slightly humane had a difficult time. And even amongst themselves there were caste divisions, divisions between the rich and the poor, and even divisions over the languages that they spoke.

Bama wants to search a job after completing her education. When she goes for an interview for the post of a teacher in a school, she finds that the school is run by Nadars.

"In any case I didn’t get that job. Why? Because I am a Dalit. It was a school that is governed and run by Nadars. It seems they only appoint Nadar women. I don’t know why, in that case, they make such a fuss about the interview, and invite us all to apply. If they had made it plain in the paper the job was available only to Nadars, why would I have gone for it?

So it seems that Nadar schools only admit Nadars, and Naicker schools only admit Naicker. And then, Aiyar schools will only teach Aiyar children. If it is all
like this, then heaven knows where all the Dalit children can go and break their heads. I don’t know if there is such a thing as a Dalit school.” (101-102)

The question of merit plays an important role in contemporary society. Dalits are treated as unmeritorious groups rather than untouchables which is a modern form of caste discrimination. Treating dalits as lacking in merit is one of the symbolic forms of untouchability. This judging dalits unmeritorious happens through the upper-caste norms of merit. Ilaiah says the communities which have built the society and on whose labour and skill the society is surviving are considered to be unmeritorious due to Brahminical concept of merit. Ilaiah also discussed famous argument of anti-Mandal agitation that dalits and lower castes should not be given reservations in engineering and medicine which are essential services of the society. Upper-castes also criticized that their bridges would collapse and people would die if unmeritorious groups enter such fields. Ilaiah points out that the skills of engineering are performed by the so called unmeritorious groups in our society till now. Bama points out when upper-caste groups are given jobs in the institutes run by the same caste people, the question of merit does not arise. Nadars’ schools admit Nadar’s children she says. When it comes to providing reservations for dalits, the question of merit becomes the issue. Bama says the reason that is shown by catholic schools for not admitting dalit children is that the educational standards of the institute would go down.

“Then, if Dalits accept that nobody else will take any notice of them, and ask for admission in the schools run by Catholic nuns and priests, they are told that if they take Dalit children, their standards will fall. They marginalize all of us Dalits
as being of poor quality. Amongst all this, it is a real dilemma where and how I can find a job and survive.” (102)

One of the important reasons behinds dalits being victims of caste prejudice in modern spaces such as educational institutes is that entry of dalits into education, media, literature is an act of dalit assertion which threatens the caste system. Bama believes that any dalit wants to live with dignity, they become the first victims of caste discrimination.

“Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do they lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don’t even possess human dignity. And if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect, they jump up and down as if something really outrageous is happening. They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward.” (24)

One of the important aspects of Bama’s autobiography is her descriptions of community’s pain felt deeply by an individual due to her awareness of caste. Working with other villagers in the fields, she understands the pain of being slavish in the feudal society. Her experiences in the college and seminary are also important because they bring out the experiences of a dalit women and exclusion and difference she realizes when she enters the college and seminary. She feels humiliated to be a poor dalit
deprived of basic amenities of life. This humiliation is more in case where she has to interact with people who are privileged than herself due to their caste dominance. Bama is a dalit woman who is not just seeking some comforts in the seminary. She has aspirations to work for the larger concerns of dalit community which far more difficult to be accepted by upper-castes. Ambedkar believed that the conversion would change the condition of dalits. Bama critiques this idea with her experiences of conversion with the backdrop of Christianity. When the same stock of population enters another religious fold, the old cultural norms would not disappear. By converting, dalits could not become equals with the upper-caste converts. Caste is more rigid than religion that the catholic schools are open to Hindu upper-castes but not to dalit Christians.

Poverty and the identification and association with other dalits in the village make Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar aware of caste system and hierarchy in the society. In case of Kumud Pawde, she believed that the days are changing and dalits like herself have almost stepped out of the caste oppression. “Story of My Sanskrit”, an extract from Kumud Pawde’s autobiography Antasphot “describes her difficulty in becoming a Sanskrit professor and the caste discrimination in the field of education in spite of being meritorious and no way inferior visibly when compared to upper-castes.²⁴ No doubt that Pawde undergoes caste discrimination like any other dalit woman. But here, the feeling of exclusion is only created by the deliberate acts of upper-castes constantly reminding her of her position and not because of her inferiority other than caste position. Pawde is discriminated more bitterly and deliberately than anyone else for “not” fitting into the normative strands of dalithood created by caste dynamics. In most cases dalits are

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considered to be unmeritorious but here Kumud Pawde is more meritorious than she is expected to be. Her radical dalit position is marked by her entry into the field of Sanskrit which is not a so called secular space but a Brahmin-dominated area of study.

Kumud Pawde's identity as a dalit girl makes her a prey to caste discrimination in society as well as in schools and colleges. "Be careful! Don't touch her. Stay away from her. And don't play with her. Or I won't let you in the house again." Those so-called educated, civilized mothers were probably unconscious of the effect of this on my young mind. The reason for untouchability is not her poverty, her lacking in merit. It also doesn't spring from condition of inferiority depicted by Bama and Urmila Pawar about their clothes and food. She feels deeply humiliated when the people from her village treat her with contempt.

"Every day, I bathed myself clean with pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair, and plaied it neatly. My clothes were well-washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance. For my father himself was fond of toiletries. So there was always a variety of oils, soaps and perfumes in the house. The other girls in my class (except for those who lived near my ghetto) also liked to sit next to me. So why should these women have talked like that?" 

Kumud Pawde's family is well aware of the concept of hygiene, education in the tradition of Ambedkarite dalits. Their house is always kept very clean. Everything in the house is
washed everyday. Their food habits do not include eating beef or leftover food from the upper-caste houses. Her parents are well aware of the importance of education for dalits.

“What’s more, if one were to compare houses, our house was cleaner than theirs. My mother daily smeared the floor with fresh cowdung. The white-powder borders were delicately drawn. The courtyard was well-sprinkled, and decorated with *rangoli* designs. Almost every fortnight, on the occasion of a festival, the house was whitewashed from top to bottom. Every scrap of cloth was boiled in a solution of soda bicarb before it was washed. The metal vessels were scrubbed to gleaming. On the other hand, one could see water stains and a greasy film on even the drinking-vessels those girls had. In fact, it was I who didn’t like to sit next to those girls. For, from my childhood, my sense-organs had been sharp and vigorous. My sense of smell, in particular, had sharpened beyond limit. Though, of course, the nose that conveyed it was broad and misshapen. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn’t bear the smell of *shikakai* mixed with the smell of their hair.”(99-100)

Kumud Pawde decides to learn Sanskrit the language of the Vedas. Her fascination to learn Sanskrit creates a mismatch between her social position and the area of education. She has been constantly taunted by high caste Hindus due to her not being a “dalit”. According to the normative strands of caste system, dalits are supposed to be inferior, unmeritorious, poor and subservient. But Kumud Pawde’s humiliation begins with her condition of being equally or more meritorious than upper-castes. Though her school teacher Gokhale Guruhi, an orthodox Brahmin man encourages her to do Sanskrit in
higher education, she is constantly discriminated and humiliated by her professor in M.A. The head of the department is a reputed professor in Sanskrit. He is a modern and liberated person. Yet his caste prejudice is far worse than the so-called orthodox caste Hindus. (104) "He did not like my learning of Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn’t. And he took a malicious delight in doing so. The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I have developed a terror of this great pundit. His manner of speaking was honeyed and reasonable, but filled with venom." (104) 

After the completion of her M.A in Sanskrit, it became difficult for her to get a position as teacher. The administration, interviewers believe that there is something amiss in Kumud Pawde teaching Sanskrit being an untouchable. There is a lot of criticism from the upper-castes about the government scholarships and reservations that bring "unmeritorious" dalits into the education. Caste prejudice appears not in direct way but in a symbolic way. People used the phrases like ‘government Brahmins’ and ‘government favourite sons-in-law’ to insult Pawde, the terms used derogatorily for dalits since, it is believed that dalits were freely given seats in educational institutes and jobs without they really deserving it.

This open criticism came not from the uneducated village upper castes but the so-called progressive reformers of society who worked for anti-Brahmin ideology. (105) Of course she never got a job as a dalit woman in Sanskrit departments. After she gets married to a Brahmin and when her surname changes as Kumud Somkuwar, she not only becomes a lecturer in Sanskrit, there was surprise among the interviewers, administration how come...
a gold medalist and outstanding meritorious students like her could not get job for two years.

The concept of ritual purity makes the practice of untouchability not only rigid but never ending. As Mahatma Gandhi pointed out if untouchability was only a matter of hygiene, then by giving up eating beef and consuming liquor, he would becomes a touchable. But since it is all about ritual purity, it will never allow a born untouchable to be touchable. One can convert to another religion or change the standards and culture of life, but the fact of untouchability is as eternal as caste is. Since the caste and caste system is not eradicated, untouchability will continues to exist. Untouchability is not always about the physical touch. It is about exclusion and identifying a person with his/her caste and branding them as someone inferior. In different periods, the forms of untouchability change into different ways. There are modern ways preventing dalits from entering into education described by Kumud Pawde. "The Hindus from the high-caste taunt me. 'Even these wretched outcastes are giving themselves airs these days -- studying in colleges.'"(103)

Kumud Pawde's autobiography describes the uncommon dalit experience of symbolic caste violence by someone who transcended her caste position and achieved individual selfhood, and deliberately chose to enter a field exclusive to Brahmins. Her idea of stepping into Sanskrit education is almost like a dalit entering the temple during the Ambedkarite movement as described by Baby Kamble.(126) But dalits entering the temple is only to subvert the concept of ritual purity. But Pawde was negotiating a space
for a dalit woman in the Brahminical space. It is going into the middle of the Brahmin domination. In this, Pawde is not discriminated on the basis of her lacking in merit. But since she speaks like a Brahmin, she is meritorious like a Brahmin, it is a threat to the power of Brahmins on the one hand and also she is reminded of dalithood even if she no more fits into that position. Her not conforming to the normative ideas of dalithood is also the reason for being discriminated. Kumud Pawde is praised everywhere when she speaks Sanskrit and Pawde says she feels humiliated by the praises of the people. By praising her she is constantly reminded of her lower or inferior caste position. "Now if you want to know why I am praised -- well, it's not for my knowledge of Sanskrit, my ability to learn it and to teach it. Doesn't anyone ever learn Sanskrit? That's not the point. The point is that Sanskrit and the social group I come from, don't go together in Indian mind." (96) The cultural norms of the upper-caste would set a norm to which every caste should stick. Those norms are meant to make a few lower and inferior and where as a few dominant. If the inferior caste people like dalits try to subvert these norms, it brings nothing but a strong resistance from the socially privileged caste Hindus. The norms of the dalit castes are considered inferior even though they are the products of same caste system which created those norms.

Kumud Pawde's experiences of being discriminated in the university by the so called progressive and modern people also show that the minds of the people are not liberated from caste by education. Education does not offer to liberate the minds of the people, Ambedkar says that caste Hindus with their education as a powerful tool become more casteist and serve their caste's superiority in different ways.26
Another significant point that Pawde is raising is about the language politics in our society. Urmila Pawar could not learn English because English which is not a native Indian language also is dominated by Brahmins and upper-castes. The standardization of the English language also takes place by considering the Brahminical English as the hegemonic expression. Language is a serious political factor that gives power over many modern fields such as education, literature, and media and so on which are the most significant areas in bringing power to particular communities in the contemporary period. Dalit women’s ability to express themselves is nothing but the power to articulate their position, asserting the authenticity of experiences which subvert not only the caste dominance but also the casteist patriarchy. Language and expression of dalits has been considered inferior thus not fit into the so called literary language. Gogu Shyamala points out that early dalit women writing has been criticized by the mainstream literary critics as literature without beauty of language, structure, rhyme, figures of speech and mainstream “Indian” idiom.(33) Language also gives the power of self-representation. This threatens the traditionally sanctioned power of upper-castes when dalits show their ability to use the language. Wandana Sonalkar in introduction to We Also Made History points out,

“According to a report, she “described the irony of mastering a language associated with Brahmin supremacy -- a language that was not supposed to be heard by Dalits because it was the language of the holy scriptures”. Kumud Pawde faced a lot of criticism when she took up the study of Sanskrit, and later was appointed lecturer in that subject. A young woman lecturer in Maharashtra stated in a meeting held a few years ago that one of her colleagues patronizingly
remarked to her: “Oh, you speak Marathi very well!” When even the dalit woman’s use of her native language in the role of college teacher is an occasion for surprise (and disparagement), the act of using language is itself a political assertion.”(12)

In case of Pawde, learning the language of Vedas also has a connotation of achieving access to the scripture and religion. On the one hand, the untouchables are traditionally denied access to religion. Their access to Sanskrit would violate this restriction. On the other hand, monopoly of Brahmins over religion took place because of Sanskrit accessed exclusively by themselves. Hence, dalits’ access to the language and religion would bring out the dalit viewpoint of religion that has been oppressive for centuries. This would automatically threaten the Brahmin/upper-caste dominance.

Her critique of the so-called progressive people and their caste prejudice brings forth the important aspect of Brahminical modernity. A Brahmin teacher who is orthodox encourages her study of Sanskrit whereas a progressive teacher discriminates her on the basis of caste. In spite of being progressive, people might not come out of Brahminism that becomes part of their conscience. It is also difficult for dalits to either address or fight caste discrimination especially when it is to prove that a progressive person/arena is caste prejudiced.
Symbolic Intra-Caste Violence and Dalit Patriarchy

Violence to which dalit women are subjected takes space on various levels. At one level, dalit women being untouchables face caste discriminated by both men and women of upper-castes. At this level they are vulnerable to the casteist patriarchal violence such as rape and sexual exploitation by the upper-caste men. Dalit women are also the victims of the dalit patriarchy that generates violence over their bodies and minds. In this third category of symbolic intra-caste violence I would also discuss how the cultural values of the upper-castes, humiliation and gender discrimination within the families and within the society invite casteist/gendered violence on the minds of dalit women. I mentioned this as symbolic intra-caste violence because the violence within the families and communities of dalits also is assimilated through the caste and gender structures.

I would discuss how the symbolic intra-caste violence on dalit women is described by dalit women writers. Baby Kamble discusses how the restrictions on women in dalit families used to be quite visible during the 1940s. Whether those gender biased structures have been assimilated by upper-caste values or dalits have imitated them, dalit women were not free from the shackles of patriarchy. These restrictions do make them slaves of the men of the family. “In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house.” (5)

Baby Kamble’s mother goes through the same symbolic casteist patriarchal violence. She never was allowed to go out of the house or make any living for herself. She hardly has
any say in dealing with the earnings within the family. Kamble says that “My aai must have felt so oppressed, so suffocated! And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others.” (6) Baby Kamble’s memories of her parents’ relationship would bring out the symbolic violence to which the Mahar women are subjected. Though Kamble’s father is a dalit man with strong interests in helping the community, his treatment of his wife is very patriarchal. Whenever he earns money he would spend everything on helping the dalits. But same person is extremely oppressive when it comes to his relationship with his wife. Though Baby Kamble describes her mother many times as a ‘cruel woman’ and a ‘nagging wife’, she is well aware of the fact that she has been oppressed by her father. Her father who spends all his money for the community is insensitive towards starvation and poverty that his wife undergoes. He does not allow her to work outside the family for a living. He would not give her the basic rights like food and clothing. Throughout her autobiography Ambedkar’s speeches, and his influential philosophy over Mahar community sets up the background for Kamble’s experiences. Ambedkar’s philosophy and movement made many young dalits participate in his movement; assert their self-respect by giving up eating dead animals, scavenging, and entering the temples. Kamble’s father and her brother also become the followers of Baba. But this has not helped them to turn gender sensitive or give any comfortable or equal rights to women in the family.

“My father could not think of anything else except Baba. He gave up his work and we often had to go hungry. Yet, he forbade my aai to go out and work. My brother was also mesmerized by Baba. This ended in huge fights between my father and aai. My aai drove my father up the wall. She would nag him constantly. Then my
father would lose his temper. Bolting the door from inside, he used to give Aai a terrible thrashing. This was almost a daily routine. We began to live in a perpetual state of hunger." (107)

Mahar women under constant oppression due to untouchability, poverty in the community, lack of food and health care become possessed by the goddesses occasionally on the festive days. Dalit women are thrown into religious prostitution by dedicating them to temples. It was hardly possible for dalit women to fight against their ignorance and enslavement to religion. (22) Possessed Mahar women do take part in the ritual procession till they fall unconscious. The little attention that Mahar women can expect from the community and family only happens when they are possessed by goddesses. Otherwise, they are constantly under the caste and patriarchal violence which make their life almost difficult to live. Kamble says this ritual of possession by goddesses is also a psychological relief for them from the constant oppression. (27)

The symbolic patriarchal violence makes dalit women also believe that the man is the master of the family. Baby Kamble also recalls how women believed the kumkum they smeared was more precious than their lives. Baby Kamble says, "We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her" (41) Baby Kamble make it clear that the visible symbols of the patriarchy and religion should be rejected (as we reject the caste symbols) if they are going to enslave dalits. Kumkum and haldi have to be given up if they are going to enslave the minds of the women. "Then I said, 'Come on, why bother about the haldi and
kumkum? Remember those Christian women who come to teach us every Sunday? They never wear any kumkum and haldi! Are they widows? No, their husbands are alive. I will die but never again will I think about this horrid god. I will stay away from him forever. I swear. Otherwise, I will change my name. I won’t be called baby anymore.”(132)

Baby Kamble talks about lack of health care as one of the manifestations of violence on dalit women. Delivering the baby is nothing but violent ritual. Without any health care, with the prevalence of superstitions and lack of knowledge about woman’s body, villagers torture the woman’s body during the delivery. Most women die in the process.(58) Baby Kamble says, “A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause. Perhaps, this became possible because of the inner strength that she had. That is probably why Mahar women could withstand all calamities. Hardly a few of the babies would survive. Many a time, these too were given away in the service of the village. But somehow the cycle of birth and death would go on.”(82)

Child marriage is another form of symbolic violence in dalit women. Young girls who are hardly eight years old are married off in dalit families. Some girls can not even remember this. Baby Kamble says the whole ritual of marriage brings a slave home to the in-laws. (85) Baby Kamble recalls the memories of child marriages. She says that for a girl marriage is nothing but calamity. The abuses in the in-laws’ family is the most common symbolic violence. Girls are made to do a lot of work and their childhood is completely ruined in the name of marriage. Mahar women are treated so violently in the families that these women internalize the patriarchal values and violence as legitimate values of
family. Mothers-in-law who had undergone such patriarchal violence in the families, become insensitive towards their daughters-in-law. “God! We did not even dare to speak to the dog and hen in our in-laws house disrespectfully. Even when we had to shoo them away, we had to address them with respect. We did not get food to eat for four days at a stretch. We had to stealthily pluck some leafy vegetable from the fields, cook them and gobble them down without any salt. Even these would be difficult to get. We had to suffer so much! Oh, how we suffered! Just like Sita suffered during her exile.” (100) The constant fear of physical violence such as being brutally beaten up husband is also a constant everyday violence on dalit women springs from the internal patriarchy of dalit families. (93)

Mahar women are enslaved in their minds by the caste and patriarchal structures. Baby Kamble talks about how dalit women within the caste face brutal physical and psychological violence. “The life of the women in the lower castes was thus shaped by the fire of calamities. This made their bodies strong, but their minds cried out against this oppression. A woman is satwa and sheel incarnate. She can put even her creator to shame. Just as the chaturvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since.” (102)

Baby Kamble begins to actively participate in Ambedkarite movement. In the initial times, there were many upper-caste and Brahmin women in Ambedkarite movement. Her father also actively participated in the meetings. Dalit women due to the lack of education
and awareness, participated in a very minimal number. Kamble's father being an Ambedkarite never allowed her mother to these meetings. However Baby Kamble goes to attend the meetings. A good number of Brahmin women in white saris with Ambedkar's photograph pinned in front used to participate in the meetings. In the meeting, they all sit in the chairs and they do not allow dalit women to sit with them or sit in the chairs. Mahar women had to fight against this discrimination. (133)

Baby Kamble's autobiography is a radical expression of both physical and symbolic casteist patriarchal violence directed against dalit women from within and outside the community. Baby Kamble is critical about the gender discrimination within the Ambedkarite movement. The reason that dalit women's oppression within the families arises not just from patriarchal structures but also from caste is because dalit men's idea of gender sensitivity only applied in the case of upper-caste and Brahmin women in the movement. Dalit women's question does not arise at all in this context. The idea of women is conceived to be only upper-caste women. Thus there is also a misleading concept of dalit women not being the oppressed in dalit community. Upper-caste women being participants of Ambedkarite movement were not ready to sit with dalit women since they are untouchables. When it comes to the idea of dalit, dalit women become invisible.

Secondly, Kamble mentioning her father's treatment of her mother is important. When her father becomes active in Ambedkarite movement, he gives up his job completely. It left his wife and children in destitution and starvation. Most commonly dalit women are
the bread winners in the dalit families. But her father is not ready to give any freedom to her mother to go out and earn her living. This patriarchal control on the mobility of women in public is considered to be honour to his ‘masculinity’. But the basic needs such as food become an issue in the house. Her father is insensitive to it. It is not possible for her mother to deal with children’s starvation at home. Her father never allowed her mother to attend the Ambedkar’s meetings also. But even if there is freedom for dalit women to participate in the meetings, it would have been hardly possible because of their struggle for basic needs. This difficulty of poverty is not present in upper-caste families. So, it is only about negotiating their freedom which would decide their participation in either women’s or Ambedkarite movement. Neglecting these factors of suffering and starvation, dalit women are perceived to be more free within their families by progressive movement since dalit women do participate in public labour.

According to the upper-caste norms of gender, motherhood is considered to be precious. But in case of dalit women, motherhood is a torture. Her children are given away to the temples, in the service of villages. Kamble points out that dalit women’s motherhood is swinging between life and death. Superstitious beliefs with which dalit culture is entwined would generate constant violence on dalit women. Dalit women are tortured to death during delivery. Kamble’s usage of language in talking about the woman’s body, delivery and sexuality is also radical and subversive.

Child marriage among dalit caste is also a common quality. Young girls of eight or nine are married off in dalit communities as in case of upper-caste girls. They are constantly
living under violent conditions. Dalit women have to labour all the day in the house hold. Taking care of the children in the house, cooking, serving the in-laws become part of her life.

“If the bhakris weren’t perfect, her sasu would examine the kneaded flour and slap the girl on the face with the unbaked bhakris, pinch her cheeks, and shower a million abuses on her, ‘What’s your aai really? Tell me! Is she a good married woman at all?”(94)

It is also a deterrent factor for girls’ education. Child marriages take place in upper-castes for the belief in the concept of “purity”. Pranjali Bandhu says it happens in dalit families for economic reasons and the fear of upper-caste men sexually exploiting dalit girls. But it is difficult to say whether dalit men or families do not believe in the question of “purity” when it comes to dalit woman’s “sexual morality”.

Another point involved in dalit child marriages that Pranjali Bandhu points out is the fear of sexual exploitation at the hands of upper-castes and fear of inter-caste or inter-community marriage. As pointed out by Bama, dalit girls being victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of upper-caste is also common in our society.27 But the fear of inter-caste marriage for a dalit girl is not very common in the villages. The power structures of caste and gender justify the upper-caste male’s “access” to dalit women in our society. Dalit women are considered to be subservient to upper-caste males in this case. But this sexual exploitation of dalit women is never acknowledged in public as a legitimate relationship between upper-caste man and dalit woman. Even if the girl who is
sexually exploited by upper-caste man is unmarried, it hardly leads to marriage between them. Dalit women suffer the stigma being “sexually immoral” in the society. Their caste position is also one of the reasons that make them inferior in both caste and gender dynamics, where as upper-caste women are considered to be more “pure” and protected from the public visibility. Goga Shaymala points out dalit women getting married to upper-caste men takes place more in case of educated urban dalit women who are active participants of progressive movements. She also points out that those dalit women who enter the upper-caste families suffer both caste and gender discrimination by husbands and in-laws. She says most of the upper-caste men who marry dalit women would marry another woman from upper-caste for the public acknowledgement. Dalit women only become concubines.²⁸ A dalit woman writer Chandrasri also describes the similar experiences of dalit women in inter-caste marriages. A dalit woman who gets married to an upper-caste man is treated just as an untouchable even within the family. In-laws torture her due to her caste position and they would want to bring an upper-caste woman as his wife to bring back the honour to their family.²⁹ Even if an inter-caste marriage takes place, both the people carry their caste position into the family and caste continue to exist in different manifestations within the families also.

The significant and remarkable factor that Urmila Pawar deals with in her autobiography is that patriarchal dominance and caste and gender discrimination are rooted not only in everyday life but also within the dalit and feminist movements. Most of dalit/women writers are the active participants of literary and dalit movement. In spite of using literature as a weapon to fight against upper-caste cultural values that marginalize dalits,
Dalit male writers have criticized Pawar's autobiography for her expression of her "private" life and female sexuality. The very lack of freedom for the expression of Dalit women's issues considering their literature and language as inferior both by mainstream and Dalit writers is a constant symbolic violence. (xxix)

Urmila Pawar believes that Dalit families have also equally enslaved women by inculcating the gender-biased cultural values on the minds of the Dalit women. Pawar's father's rejection of supporting women substantiates this fact. Unlike Baby Kamble's father, according to Pawar's father, women can be educated, can work outside the family but at any cost, women should live with the husband and in-laws and they should not have any freedom to separate from them no matter how violent the situation is. (33)

In the Dalit marriages, the games and rituals performed are symbolic of control over the women in the family. This enslaves the women to patriarchal control in the family.

"There was a game which taught the groom how to deal with his wife. The bride would be given a pot to carry water on her head and also a small jug and sent away with four or five karavalis or girl attendants to some distance. Then the groom would be made to sit on the threshold at the backdoor of the house, with a stick in his hand. They would teach him the lines he would have to tell the wife when she returned. When the bride came back with the water, he would strike the ground with the stick and demand an explanation, 'why are you so late?' The women would help the bride to come up with answers such as, 'I was late because the cows had muddied the water, so I had to wait till the water cleared,' or 'The
rope fell into the well and I had to wait till it could be brought out,' and so on.

Then they would make her swear that she would never be late again. (62)

Though in most cases, the question of property does not arise in dalit families, when there is a little property in the dalit families, it is difficult for dalit women to save without having the male figure in the family. Urmila Pawar's father had a piece of land that he left for his family after his death. A relative of Urmila Pawar's family, Govindadada plots to grab the land from her mother. Dalit women without the support of the man become victim to the violence of the community. (108)

The family notions of dalit community generates violence on dalit women. A Mahar woman who comes to take shelter from her husband when he was beating her with a stick in Urmila Pawar's house explains the situation to her mother. She tells her that she fought with her mother-in-law because she accused her of stealing food in the house. (155)

Urmila Pawar also talks about how a dalit woman is treated in marriage. Dalit women are not excluded from the internal patriarchal violence in both physical and symbolic forms. In a few cases like her elder sister, Bhikiakka, the brutal physical violence occurs where as in families like her own, there is symbolic way in which dalit women are treated inferior. Dalit woman's entry into education, living in the urban space, working outside the family with relative more economic independence and active participation in women's movement, becoming a writer is viewed as a threat to patriarchal power.
The very freedom that Urmila Pawar exercised in writing about the subtle discriminatory practices in her family, and her relationship with her husband, her male friends itself became the point of criticism from dalit male writers. When she started writing, her husband also become more conscious of her public life. Pawar uses first person’s narrative in her short story ‘Shalya’, story of a woman who continuously gives birth to six girl children. The woman character in the story is abused by in-laws and husband for not giving birth to male child. Since she used first person’s narrative, Mr.Pawar tells her to bring their son along when they go to Vikroli. Her husband doesn’t want the people to think that ‘Shalya’ is her own personal story.

Since Urmila Pawar has male friends, many people do try to judge her character. Pawar writes about these experiences of symbolic patriarchal/caste violence in the society and everyday life.

‘You know, his wife does not live with him. And yet you go to his house every day! What must people be saying! I was simply aghast! How we women nurture and protect patriarchy, like a baby in the cradle! A woman’s character is always on display! Always suspect! Anybody can come, gaze at us with their eyes on our flesh, drool and lick their fingers!(240)

The response of her family and the public to her writings is one of the important aspects of Pawar’s story. Dalit women’s entry into the field of education, literature and having male friends is judged according the same old traditional norms of the society. Women are also burdened with carrying out the cultural duties imposed by patriarchy and caste.
Though the symbols of casteist patriarchy might become inconspicuous but the notions continue to exist. A Dalit writer like Limbale has expressed objections to Urmila Pawar’s writing saying that it cannot be given status of dalit writing because there is no Ambedkarite philosophy in it. Another group of dalit male writers say that dalit women questioning the patriarchal violence in dalit communities is giving upper-castes a reason to ignore the dalit question.

Urmila Pawar’s rejection of upper-caste hegemonic cultural values is another radical viewpoint. Pawar says that literature and society are dominated by the hegemonic norms of beauty, virtue and morality. Talking about Urmila Pawar’s rejection of Laxmibai Tilak Award offered to her autobiography, Maya Pandit points out, “Urmila believed that Marathi literature could not be the monopoly of any particular religion, caste or creed. Then why did it attempt to project only the symbols of one particular religion? According to these conventions, she says, only that which is convenient to Brahminism gets privileged as Truth. Even the principle of Beauty rejects black people, ugly people, as unholy. She refused to accept this value system which the awards glorify and enshrine in the literary and cultural discourse.” (xxvii)

Bama writes about the symbolic casteist patriarchal violence that marginalizes dalit women. Dalit women are treated with contempt by upper-castes in the modern spaces and the norms of control on them in families generate symbolic violence on them. In case of dalit women entering the modern spaces, they are judged as inferior and humiliated by upper-caste values infused by traditional caste and gender norms. Norms of beauty such
as being fair is also one of the upper-caste norms. A few dalits might fit into this but most of the dalit do not come under this category of beauty. Whether such notions were present in the dalit community or not, they have entered into it now. Dalit women might feel excluded for the very reason that their body might not fit into the norms of beauty set by upper-caste notions. They are made to feel excluded and humiliated. This feeling of exclusion leads to symbolic violence which nothing but slavery to Brahminism.

In discussing the upper-caste norms of beauty, language, morality, virtue, I believe there are two contradictory positions involved in it. Firstly caste system assimilates a particular set of cultural norms to form the superior normative strands of the society. The same set of cultural norms are not applicable for all the castes. There are another set of cultural norms for untouchables. For example, women are not supposed to be visible in public. This is the notion of upper-caste gender, where as dalit women are forced to participate in public labour due to conditions created by the caste system. Dalit women’s poverty and exploitation of labour creates a need to participate in public labour. This need is created by caste hierarchy. Since the dalit women can be exploited by upper-castes according the same norms of gender and caste, dalit women are viewed as women lacking in “virtue”. Upper-caste women do have the privilege to uphold or forced to be protective of their “chastity” and dalit women do not have the same choice. Sharmila Rege points out, “In case of the lower caste women the fact that their labour outside the family is crucial for the survival of the family, leads to the lack of stringent controls on their labour, mobility and sexuality, and this renders them ‘impure’ or ‘lacking in virtue’.” 31
But dalit women are treated as inferior or ‘lacking in virtue’ is not only because of the lack of control over their mobility or sexuality, because one can not consider dalit women’s visibility in the public as her freedom and her sexual exploitation as sexual freedom. There is also an ‘inability’ created for dalit community by caste system to let dalit women become visible in public. In case of educated women like Urmila Pawar, the question of feudal exploitation does not occur. But, even in such cases, dalit women are stigmatized due to their caste position. Firstly they are “impure” due to their caste position and secondly traditional societies have sanctioned the power for upper-caste males to exploit her sexuality. Thus she is still viewed as “lacking in virtue”. Bama makes an important point in this context. Bama talks about the multi level oppression that dalit women suffer in the society. The whole episode of Mariamma in Sangati being victim of upper-caste exploitation also shows the symbolic casteist patriarchal violence directed against dalit women. An upper-caste man tries to molest Mariamma when she is on her way home from the field. Though she escapes from him, the upper-caste man accuses Mariamma of having an affair with another dalit boy at the Panchayat. The Panchayat verdict comes against Mariamma in favour of the upper-caste man. Mariamma was disgraced in public by dalits and also the upper-caste elders. Though she constantly denies the charges, she is punished with fine in the Panchayat. Many other dalit women do abuse her for her disgraceful ways of having pre-marital affairs. Women turning against women of same caste happened for the patriarchy becomes legitimate face of the society that invades all minds irrespective of gender and more in case of women so as to control them not just physically and psychologically as well. Sangari says, “that
patriarchies are not the rule of men over women but systemic structures” proves to be true in case of all the communities.(22-27)

In *Karukku*, Bama discusses patriarchal control over dalit women. In case of villagers going to watch cinema in the theater, dalit community has taken a decision never to allow dalit women to go to cinema hall for fear of upper-caste men molesting dalit women.(50) In *Sangati* also, Bama discusses the restrictions on dalit women in the dalit families. Dalit women are not allowed to go to cinema hall for the same fear of upper-caste men’s advances. Paatti says that while dalit men never touch the upper-caste women when they come to cinema hall, upper-caste men have no respect for dalit women.(105) This shows only the helplessness of dalit men when it comes to “protecting” dalit women from upper-caste men. It appears as if there is no patriarchal control over dalit women by dalit men in case of dalit women falling prey to upper-caste men’s sexual exploitation. In another case in *Sagati*, when a Paraya girl falls in love with a Palla boy, the dalit men in the family violently opposes it.

“That girl was beaten up in her house everyday by her father and her brother. And they weren’t light slaps that she was given, either. For all this, mind you, she was an educated girl who worked for her living.

The younger brother hit her on the ear so severely that her earring was smashed to smithereens. Another time he pulled her so hard by the chain she wore around her neck that it came apart in pieces that he threw away like bits of string.” (106)
Control on women’s sexuality is not unusual in dalit community. But there is an inability created by the power of upper-castes on dalit men. So they can not “control” or “protect” them from upper-caste men. But the same lack of “stringent control” on dalit woman’s sexuality does not appear in all cases. Bama says, “Even though they are male, because they are Dalits they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children.”(65) When it comes to controlling the dalit woman establishing relationship with another dalit sub-caste man, dalit woman was severely beaten up and controlled. But in case of upper-castes, such control is not exercised because in that case, dalit women do exercise their choice but merely sexually exploited by upper-castes males. Even if out of their own choice dalit women do have a relationship with an upper-caste man, it is difficult for dalit men to fight against the upper-caste men. For this reason dalit women are controlled to go cinema hall in the village as Bama describes. Dalit women’s inability to protest upper-caste males’ exploitation perceived to be lack of “control” over dalit women and their freedom of sexuality.

I made an attempt to look at the symbolic caste violence in this chapter which is the significant part of my project. Dalit women autobiographies became central to my work to present my understanding of symbolic caste violence.
End Notes


2 Caste atrocities are reported only in a few contexts. In many cases, caste violence is not even reported by media due to its caste prejudice. NCDHR reports that every 14 minutes, a crime against dalits is committed. See http://www.ncdhr.org.in/esdi/2-dalit-houses-are-destroyed

3 Dilip Menon, 2006.p.4

4 Though Hindu religion provided basis, justification and legitimization of untouchability through caste system, other religions such as Jain, Parsi, Islam, Christianity and so on also adapted the same practice of untouchability. Untouchables of Hindu community are untouchables to other religious communities also. Notably, most of the other religions such as Islam and Christianity pronounce equality at the doctrinal level. See Ambedkar, B.R. Autobiographical Notes.2003.


7 Kancha Ilaiyah, 2004.p.197

8 Kancha Ilaiyah, 1996.

9 Baby Kamble mentioning of educated dalits being ashamed of dalithood has a different context. But I would like see another angle to the educated dalits' attitude to their caste position. Citied in Maya Pandit's Introduction to The Prisons We Broke.(xiii)

10 Limbale, Sharan Kumar, 2004.

12Baby Kamble, 2008


14Urmila Pawar, 2008


17See chapter 1 for details.


19Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 1986.


25Vijay Prasad 1992.p.68


27Bama, 2005.


32 Bama, 2005.