



Labouring at the Intersections: Caste, Gender and Survival in Dalit Women's Life Writing

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ABSTRACT

The position of Dalit women is one of the most vulnerable in the labour hierarchy in India, where the intersection of caste, gender, and class creates conditions of vulnerability. Their labour is largely restricted to stigmatized, informal, and physically demanding work, making it both socially necessary and devalued. The vulnerability of women workers, therefore, cannot be understood without considering the caste organization of labor and the gender division of work that structure the lives of Dalit women.

This paper will analyze the intersection of caste, gender, and labor through a close reading of Bama's *Sangati* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, which are two important works of Dalit women's life writing. Based on the concepts of intersectionality and Dalit feminism, it contends that these stories serve as a testimonial archive of the hard work and survival that happens in everyday life. Instead of depicting labour as a process of empowerment, these stories portray it as a necessity that is driven by the absence of caste inclusion, economic marginalization, and patriarchal domination. However, these stories also highlight the importance of resilience that happens through collective power, communal unity, and educational ambition, which give insights into the lived experiences of marginalized Dalit women workers in contemporary India. These stories also point towards the need for policy intervention and labor rights in marginalized communities in contemporary India.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Caste, Labour, Life Writing, Vulnerability, Dalit Feminism

Introduction

Labour in India is not only an economic construct; it is also historically defined in terms of the caste system. The structure of employment is defined by a system of social stratification in which certain communities are allocated to certain occupations. In this context, the Dalit communities have been assigned to discredited,

menial, and hard physical labour. For Dalit women, their marginalization in terms of occupation is compounded by gender and economic marginalization. The labour of Dalit women is both necessary to society and devalued. The vulnerability of women workers in India must therefore be understood in terms of gender, class, and caste.



The critique of caste by B.R. Ambedkar offers a vital perspective through which the issue of labour can be understood in this regard. Ambedkar draws a distinction between the simple division of labour and what he terms as the division of labourers. According to him, “caste is not merely a division of labor but a division of labourers” (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 51), wherein the caste system does not merely allocate labour on the basis of functionality but also allocates laborers to predetermined occupational roles on the basis of their hereditary status. This ensures that labour is not merely a choice but a prescription of society, which is also ranked in a hierarchical manner. This ensures that the Dalit communities are also tied to predetermined forms of labour, which are often associated with the concepts of impurity and pollution. For the Dalit women, this predetermined occupational immobility is further reinforced by patriarchal domination.

Dalit women are mainly engaged in the informal economy in the form of agricultural wage work, domestic work, sanitation, and artisanal production. The informal economy is marked by low wages, insecurity of employment, absence of social protection, and vulnerability to social humiliation. Alongside their wage work, the Dalit women also have unpaid domestic work, thus having a double or triple burden of work. Despite their important contribution to the economy, their work is socially invisible and politically marginalized. Work, in this context, is less a source of empowerment and more a necessity arising from structural inequality. In the last few decades, Dalit literature has become a significant platform for expressing these experiences. The life writing of Dalit women, in particular, holds a unique place in the Indian literary tradition. Unlike sociological explanations, autobiographical stories emphasize lived experience, humiliation, struggle, and resilience. These stories, told in the first person, convert individual memory into collective history. They record not only the conditions of labour but also the emotional and social aspects of being marginalized on the basis of caste. They resist the dominant narratives that either romanticize labor or ignore the significance of caste as a primary organizing principle of labor.

This paper will examine Bama's *Sangati* (1994) later translated in 2005 and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), two important works of Dalit women's

life writing that emphasize the importance of labor to women's lives. Although these works come from different regional settings, they demonstrate how caste defines work and how gender exacerbates economic exploitation. They also demonstrate ways in which resilience is built on collective solidarity, education, and awareness. This paper contends that the life writings of Dalit women disclose labour not only as an economic practice but also as a condition of the caste order that is exacerbated by gender in the informal economy. By contextualizing the literary analysis within the larger debates about the plight of vulnerable women workers and the need for labor justice, this paper shows how these texts serve as social evidence and alternative archives of labour history.

Review of Literature

Tanvir Likhari (2007), in the article “Dalit feminism: a perspective on Bama's *Sangati*,” explores the specific cultural and religious context of Bama's narrative, noting how the intersection of caste and gender is further complicated by the Christian identity of the community. Likhari highlights that the survival of these women is characterized by a “vibrant energy” and a refusal to remain silent, where the act of narrating their life stories serves as a political tool to reclaim their identity from the margins of history.

Smriti Singh (2014), in her article “Narrating a subaltern consciousness: Bama's *Sangati*,” argues that Bama's work transcends the boundaries of a traditional autobiography by becoming a collective “biography of the community”. Singh explains that Bama portrays the Dalit woman as being “thrice alienated” by caste, by class, and by gender where survival is not just an individual feat but a shared communal endurance rooted in the “subaltern consciousness” of Tamil Paraiya women.

V.K. Navya (2014), in the article “Caste, Gender and Resistance,” discusses how both Bama and Urmila Pawar foreground the “triple burden” of labour — domestic work, wage labour, and caste-based servitude — as a central site of both oppression and agency. Navya emphasizes that in *Sangati*, the labour of Dalit women is a continuous struggle against a “double patriarchy” (both from within their own community and from the upper castes), yet this very labour



becomes the material basis for their resilience and survival.

In the study “Contextualising Dalit women's voices: A study of Urmila Pawar and Bama's autobiographies,” Praveshika Mishra (2021) compares the two texts to show how survival strategies are culturally situated. The article states that while Bama uses the “communal voice” to resist the systemic violence of the Tamil landscape, Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* uses “individual memory” to reconstruct the labour heritage of the Marathi Dalit community, using the metaphor of “weaving” (Aaydan) to represent the intergenerational survival of Dalit women.

Finally, in the article “Gender Constructions and Patterns of Resistance in Contemporary Dalit Women Writers: A Study of Bama's *Sangati*,” R. Praveen Raj (2023) notes that the portrayal of labor in these texts is not merely about physical work but about the “embodied resistance” of women. The author asserts that by documenting the “unskilled” and “devalued” labor that sustains the Dalit household, Bama and Pawar challenge traditional gender constructions and highlight how survival is negotiated through daily, mundane acts of defiance.

Although the existing literature has explored the subaltern consciousness, triple burden, and Dalit feminist resistance in the writings of Bama and Pawar, the structural relationship between the caste-based occupational confinement and the contemporary labour vulnerability in the context of labour reforms has not received due attention. This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the labour as an intersectional site of caste, gender, and survival.

Methodology

The proposed research will follow a qualitative research approach that is text and theme-based. Since the main aim of the research paper is to analyze the intersection of caste, gender, and labor in the life writings of Dalit women, the research methodology will focus on a close reading and interpretation of selected life writings. Instead of using empirical research, the proposed research will use literary texts as socio-cultural texts that represent lived experiences of labor and survival.

Research Design

The nature of the research is exploratory and interpretive. The study focuses on literary texts as a space where structural inequality is constructed and mediated through narratives. Autobiographical narratives are considered not only as personal narratives but as socio-political narratives that record the material conditions of marginalized groups. The themes of occupational limitation, wage labor, informal economy, gendered exploitation, and collective resistance are explored through qualitative analysis in relation to theoretical constructs.

Selection of Primary Texts

The two important works of Dalit women's life writing that this study centers on are Bama's *Sangati* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Both are autobiographical texts written by Dalit women, which ensures that the portrayal of labor is not from an observing position but from a lived experience. To compare, both the texts are from different regions of India — Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, respectively — which will enable a comparative analysis of labor practices based on caste in different regions. Moreover, both the narratives highlight labour as an important aspect of women's lives. *Sangati* provides perspective on agricultural wage labor in rural areas and the role of Dalit women within caste-bound village societies. *The Weave of My Life*, on the other hand, provides perspective on artisanal labor, informal labor, migration, and the role of education in bringing about change. Both works provide the opportunity to explore the role of caste and gender in occupational immobility.

Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical approach that draws on intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Marxist feminism, and subaltern studies. Intersectionality is the primary theoretical framework, enabling the study to investigate the intersection of caste, gender, and class, rather than their independent operation. Dalit feminism ensures that caste is at the forefront of the study of gendered subjugation. Marxist feminism helps to illuminate the exploitation of labor and material deprivation, especially in the context of unpaid domestic labor and informal wage labor. Subaltern studies inform the reading of life writing as a practice of voice and



resistance against structural silencing. These frameworks are not used in a disconnected manner but in an integrated fashion. The paper will analyze how the labor practices, as described in the texts, embody the structural arrangements of caste, how gender exacerbates economic risk, and how the narrative voice is a manifestation of epistemic resistance.

The methodology will allow the reader to understand the Dalit women's life writing as a literary practice and a social archive by using textual analysis and socio-theoretical interpretation. This will make it possible to connect literary research with debates on labour risk and social work interventions.

Labour, Caste and Gender: A Textual Analysis

This section will conduct a thematic analysis of Bama's *Sangati* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, with a focus on the themes of representation of labor, occupational restriction by caste, and gendered burdens of survival. Both the narratives represent labour as being intricately intertwined with the caste system. In *Sangati*, agricultural labor shapes the lives of Dalit women. Women and girls are involved in arduous agricultural labor. The text reveals that labour is not a choice but a legacy. As Bama notes,

"We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children...Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very [bodies] shrivel" (Bama, 2005, p. 6–7).

Labour is represented as an extension of the caste system without question. The women in Bama's story do not have the freedom to choose their occupations. They are restricted to agricultural work, manual labor, and other physically demanding jobs as per their caste location. Even when other opportunities for employment arise, the women are not able to move out due to the stigma of their caste.

Likewise, in *The Weave of My Life*, basket weaving is portrayed by Pawar as a major source of livelihood for her community. This is a skill that is practiced from generation to generation, which depicts the occupational stratification based on heredity, as Pawar writes, "My mother used to weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are

organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us" (Pawar, 2008, p. 10).

While this skill is important for the economic survival of the family, it also maintains the caste divisions. The implication here is that occupational roles are predetermined by society, and therefore there is no possibility of mobility. In both the narratives, work cannot be separated from the caste identity of the characters. The characters do not participate in the labor market as independent agents; instead, they live in a world where the labor market is organized based on their social location.

One of the common themes in both texts is the gendered experience of labour. The Dalit women are not only earning members of their families but also the primary caregivers. In *Sangati*, women are agricultural laborers during the day and return home to cook, clean, and take care of their children. The text emphasizes how the responsibility of taking care of the household is not questioned and is not shared, even when the economic conditions are strained. The young girls are brought up to be laborers from a young age. They help with household chores and agricultural labour, which shows how the gendered experience of labor is imbibed in them from a young age. The responsibility of taking care of both the household and the wage labour rests with the women. In Pawar's text, the same trends are witnessed. Women are engaged in basket weaving alongside handling household chores. The importance of economic conditions is highlighted, indicating that women's contribution is essential for the survival of the family. Yet, their contribution does not lead to any recognition in society or a reprieve in household chores. The net result is a double or triple burden of caste-based occupational restriction, wage labor, and domestic labour.

Both texts emphasize the informal nature of labour as the prevailing economic reality for Dalit women. Agricultural wage labour in *Sangati* is marked by low wages, seasonal work, and dependence on powerful caste landlords. There is no emphasis on formal employment, job security, or institutional support. Likewise, basket weaving in Pawar's story is conducted in the informal economy. Pawar notes, "Someone had laboured in the fields, woven baskets of various shapes and sizes for them. They would ask to



be compensated for their work” (Pawar, 2008, p. 64). This stresses the caste hierarchy of how Dalits are treated. Incomes are irregular, and the family survives on the uncertainties of the market. The informal economy provides sustenance but not security.

Vulnerability in the economic domain is not only material but also social. In Sangati, women experience humiliation in their employment with dominant caste employers. The domain of labour becomes a site where the hierarchy of caste is reiterated. In Pawar's narrative, poverty and stigma combine to restrict opportunities for educational and professional mobility. Labour, therefore, becomes a site of survival as well as vulnerability. Labour in these stories is not an equal one; it is characterized by humiliation and stigma. In Sangati, the humiliation and discriminatory treatment are linked to caste. Women's bodies are reduced to labouring bodies; that is, bodies that are useful for their productivity but are otherwise degraded. The physical toll of working in the fields is further exacerbated by symbolic violence. Pawar also illustrates how women's caste identity influences their social experience. Even when women are skilled and economically productive, they are still marked by stigma. The connection between caste and “impure” labour further cements social exclusion. These texts make it clear that labour is an embodied experience. Women's bodies are reduced to the site where caste hierarchy is inscribed and naturalized.

Despite the structural limitations, both the texts convey the message of resilience and collective power. In Sangati, women share their experiences, humor, and solidarity. The community networks are a source of emotional support and a feeling of collective struggle. Collective power becomes a means of survival. In *The Weave of My Life*, education is presented as a potential for change. Pawar's desire for education marks a departure from hereditary occupational bondage. While economic struggles continue, education provides a symbolic and material means of mobility. The strategies of survival do not negate vulnerability but contest the notion of its inevitability. The stories convey the message of resilience as a collective power that is shaped by community.

Both texts are testimonial narratives. By means of autobiographic voice, experiences of labor are documented and remembered. The everyday work,

which is normally overlooked in the official history of labor, becomes the focus of narrative memory. The descriptions of agricultural work, weaving, and household activities turn personal experience into a collective archive. The narratives give priority to voices that are normally overlooked in economic discourse. Labour in these narratives is not abstract but lived, narrated, and historicized.

Discussion and Key Findings

From the preceding analysis, it is clear that the labour in Sangati and *The Weave of My Life* is not only economic but also a socially mediated condition of existence, which is determined by the caste system and gender roles. When the testimonies are read through the prisms of intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Marxist feminism and subaltern studies they disclose complex patterns of vulnerability and collective resilience.

Intersectionality is the primary framework of analysis for understanding the interplay of caste, gender, and economic marginalization in the lives of Dalit women. Crenshaw argues that “where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge ... intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246). This framework highlights how Dalit women's labour vulnerability emerges from the three hierarchies in India. Agricultural labor in Sangati and weaving in *The Weave of My Life* are examples of how occupation is predetermined by location within the caste system. Nevertheless, women's experiences with occupation are exacerbated by patriarchal demands that place them squarely at the center of household labor. Thus, vulnerability is not a simple category of oppression but a complex one. The labour of Dalit women is conditioned by the restriction imposed by caste, economic marginalization, and gendered oppression. Both texts reveal that labor exploitation cannot be explained by a class analysis or a gender analysis but by the intersection of the caste system and patriarchal society.

Dalit feminism provides a crucial perspective for understanding the vulnerability of caste-gendered labor in Sangati and *The Weave of My Life*. In contrast to mainstream feminism, which tends to universalize women's oppression, Dalit feminism places the



significance of caste at the heart of Dalit women's experiences. According to Sharmila Rege, "Dalit women's narratives question the homogenization implicit in dominant feminist discourse" (Rege, 2006, p. 4). In these texts, labor is not only a gendered but a caste-determined obligation. Hereditary occupations and informal sector work are characterized by a 'double patriarchy' in which the dominant caste patriarchy and the internal hierarchies of the community combine to further oppress women.

The material aspect of labor exploitation is emphasized by the Marxist feminist critique. As Heidi Hartmann argues, "The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men's control over women's labor power" (Hartmann, 1979, p. 11). In both texts, women are shown to be involved in wage labor as well as unpaid domestic work. This juxtaposition points to the invisible nature of reproductive labour. However, the addition of caste analysis to the mix makes it difficult to provide a purely class analysis. In a caste-organized society, economic exploitation is linked with ritual hierarchy. In the case of informal labour, which is marked by low wages and a lack of legal protection, Dalit women are particularly affected. The lack of institutional protection makes them even more vulnerable to exploitation.

Subaltern theory emphasizes the politics of voice and representation. As Gayatri Spivak puts forth, "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p. 308), giving attention to the structural conditions that silence the marginalized groups. The life writing of Dalit women is a counter-discursive practice that resists the dominant discourse of labor as well as the silencing. Through autobiographical narratives, Bama and Pawar represent experiences that are often subordinated in the dominant economic discourse. These testimonies can be seen as examples of alternative knowledge production. Through the documentation of agricultural labor, weaving, household chores, and humiliation, these narratives produce what can be called living archives of labour based on caste. In this way, the life writing of Dalit women transcends the boundaries of personal biography to become a collective testimony.

Although the texts expose vulnerability, they also emphasize resilience. In *Sangati*, the solidarity of women with each other appears as a strategy of survival. Shared stories, humor, and solidarity cushion

the psychological blows of exploitation. In Pawar's narrative, education appears as a liberating potential, offering a partial escape from hereditary occupational bondage. The resilience in these stories is not idealized. Structural inequality is still a constant. However, strategies of survival indicate agency exercised under constraint. Group survival defies the inexorability of subordination, even when structural transformation seems remote.

As illustrated in this discussion, the life writings of Dalit women provide a complex perspective on labor as both structural oppression and lived experience. Through the integration of literary analysis and socio-theoretical perspectives, this research has emphasized the continued salience of caste in defining vulnerability to labor and the need for intersectional analysis in addressing structural inequality.

Implications

Analysis of *Sangati* and *The Weave of My Life* shows that the vulnerability of Dalit women to labour is structurally generated through the intersection of caste hierarchy, gender roles, and informal economy. Labour in these stories is more than a site of economic engagement; it is a historically layered process of caste reproduction. Occupational segregation, hereditary labor systems, and the normalization of gendered domesticity index the role of caste as an organizing principle of labor relations. From a Social Work standpoint, these results require a move away from gender-blind or class-reductive approaches to the study of labor vulnerability to a caste-aware and intersectional framework. Gender-blind approaches to women's empowerment as a homogeneous group erase the differences between Dalit women's experiences of marginalization, which are embedded in ritual and occupational segregation.

While legislative efforts such as the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act (2008) and the Code on Social Security (2020) aim to extend the reach of social security to informal workers, the narratives indicate that formal inclusion does not necessarily lead to the erosion of caste-based exclusion. Social location, literacy, and institutionalized discrimination continue to condition access. Finally, this research confirms the epistemic value of Dalit women's testimonial narratives. Life writing as an alternative archive seeks



to record the history of labor that has been erased from the economic discourse. For scholars and practitioners, the narratives offer a grounded understanding of how vulnerability is embodied, normalized, and resisted.

Conclusion

This paper has posited that the life writing of Dalit women transforms the concept of labor into a significant site where the intersections of caste, gender, and survival are marked. In *Sangati* and *The Weave of My Life*, labor is depicted as both material need and social construct — an embodied act that reinscribes the hierarchy of caste. The testimonies indicate that informal labor is what sustains the family even as it cements the condition of precarity. The economic value of women's labor is what is structurally undervalued even as they bear the weight of wage

labor, domestic labor, and the restriction of caste-based occupation.

However, the texts also emphasize resilience as a form of collective negotiation rather than romantic endurance. Education, solidarity, and narrative testimony emerge as a strategy through which Dalit women resist the notion of the inevitability of caste-based labor identities. Through the documentation of everyday labor, these narratives create an alternative history of labor that has hitherto been excluded from the economic discourse. To comprehend the vulnerability of labor in the contemporary Indian context, it is necessary to transcend economic approaches to labor and recognize the structuring role of caste. The life writing of Dalit women, therefore, provides a methodological and epistemological shift.

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